

# ***INCEPTION***



## **SUBJUGATION 6** BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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# Chapter 1

*Kaista, 30 Demaa, 4401 Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 22 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaista, 30 Demaa, 440, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

He was starting to hate reports with a passion bordering on holy.

Sighing, the Grand Duke Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne, ruler of the recently separated House of Karinne, leaned back in his chair with his elbow on the armrest and his chin on his fist, slouching as he advanced to the next report the old fashioned way, with his other hand tapping a holographic key on a projected keyboard in front of his monitor. He'd felt a bit of nostalgia today and had had his desk project out the holographic keyboard, and he'd found a curious comfort in feeling those slightly warm keys under his fingers, the warmth created by the hardening of air molecules to produce the illusion of solidity. It reminded him of simpler times, before he and Jyslin had developed the interface program that allowed them to completely abandon any form of input-output device save the interface itself.

Simpler times...sometimes he wondered just what he'd gotten himself into when he declared independence from the Imperium. It had to be done, there was no doubt about that, but nobody had come even remotely close to predicting the drastic increase in paperwork that filled his inbox on nearly an hourly schedule now that he didn't answer to anyone else. The increased workload wasn't coming from the planet. They'd governed themselves since returning to Karis, with virtually no input from the Imperium, and the planet more or less ran itself with very little interference from him or anyone else...just the way he'd set it up. The exponential increase in reports

came from outside, from three sources: the Academy, the Confederation, and everyone else. The Academy was sending far more reports than normal now because there was a hell of a lot going on over there now that Terra was neutral, and the neutrality of the Academy was beyond any reproach. Kim was funneling a lot of reports to Jason through the Academy, a secure way he could pass on important information without anyone else in the Confederation intercepting it, keeping him abreast of the realignment of the planet from a political standpoint now that it was officially a neutral planet granted protectorate status by both the Imperium *and* the Confederation. The Confederation had mirrored Dahnai's move and declared Terra a neutral planet granted military protection by all empires part of the Confederation, and the hub world around which all Confederate business would revolve. Terra had become the impromptu capitol of the Confederation, where all the cooperative offices were being built. And the irony was, the planet was neutral and not *officially* part of the military alliance. They were building their "capitol" on a planet not considered an actual member of the Confederation.

But that was what neutrality was all about, and it did make sense from both a political and logistical standpoint. Terra was neutral ground where no emperor held sway, and where all power players, be her legal or illegal, stood on equal footing. Logistically, Terra was the nexus of all Confederate supply lines even if the planet itself was fairly far from the astrographic "center" of Confederate territory. But the Stargates made Terra the center of everything...or they would.

Kiaari was sending him her own reports, since her job got *really* busy since the Confederate Council had made that decision four days ago. They weren't only building the new Confederate Combined Military Headquarters on Terra, they were taking over office buildings in New York City to serve as the bureaucratic headquarters of several new agencies created to help foster cooperation within the Confederation. Agencies to help trade flow between the empires, logistical offices to get everything everyone needed where it was supposed to go in a quick and orderly manner—an office already all but dominated by Kizzik, Makati, and Beryans—offices of cultural exchange, offices of military recruitment, offices of hiring and employment, offices of business coordination and cooperation, even offices of tourism, travel, and citizen assistance for

Confederate civilians traveling to Terra or through Terra to other empires, they were setting up shop on Terra in ways Jason could approve. The rulers that made up the council were demonstrating they were serious about making the Confederation work, at least while they needed it, and with the addition of the Verutans and the Grimja, setting up official agencies and offices that were part of no empire but served all empires was a smart move. The establishment of a pseudo-capitol for the Confederation on Terra meant that Kiaari would have so much information to gather and sift through, she probably wouldn't be sleeping for about ten years. She'd already petitioned her parents for more Kimdori to work on Terra.

The rest of this avalanche of reports came from the Confederation itself. For some reason, they were sending him all kinds of reports and messages that he had virtually nothing to do with, what he considered to be *ruler business*, the kind of stuff he'd just blown off before the Karinnes split from the Imperium. That was half of it. The other half was a flood of proposals for trade, scientific research, and consulting services. With the Karinnes now independent, every empire in the Confederation wanted to break Yila and Dahnai's stranglehold on Karinne trade, something the two women had almost unconsciously teamed up to prevent.

There were quite a few agreements already made. Every empire in the Confederation had signed his right of passage agreements for the PR sector within 14 hours of receiving the official treaty. It was only a two page treaty, for it was simple yet ironclad, spelling out exactly what the others could and could not do if they wanted access to the PR sector, and the P quadrant as a whole. He'd already released his sensor sweeps and surveys of the systems around PR-371 so they could identify systems they might want to colonize...and that was what one of the new agencies on Terra would be about, letting the empires lay claim to those systems in an orderly manner to prevent fighting over them, be it verbal or physical. The Agency of Exploration and Annexation would be the trading floor of sorts for the uninhabited systems in the P quadrant, where agents of the rulers would haggle over systems that more than one empire wanted to claim, and also where any empire had to make an official file of claim before moving on said system. The Karinnes would have an agent in that office to ensure that the system met the stringent "no sentient species" clause of their treaties. If

more than one empire filed a claim on the same system, then the negotiators would meet and haggle an agreement over it.

Three of the empires had formally accepted his Stargate trade hub idea. The Shio, the Jobodi, and the Nine Colonies had signed the treaty to allow a Stargate into their territory linked back to Terra, and to allow a Karinne logistical team to go to their empire to help organize supply lines and freighter schedules. There was no real need for the interdictors now, not with the Consortium all but crushed in their galaxy, but *nobody* had asked him to take an interdictor down yet, and the Shio and Colonists wanted that easy access to Terra from their capitol systems, Shio and Exeven. The Jobodi were really easy since they only had two star systems of their own and they were side by side in an astrographic sense, only 3.1 light years apart.

The bigger empires were still studying the idea—well, all of them but the Imperium, who didn't really need it. But Jason was confident they'd come around, especially when they saw how much it increased the trade profits of the empires that had agreed to it.

He resorted to his gestalt to bring up a real-time holo of Terran space, where the ships were starting to gather. In two days, the Confederation would be going to the PR sector with both military vessels and exploration vessels, preparing to invade the Imxi and start surveying more distant star systems. They'd already made their plans for the invasion, plans which would not involve the Karinnes, where the Confederation as a whole would conquer the Imxi and then the individual empires would take over administration of the separate systems. Once they consolidated their hold on Imxi territory and got more ships repaired and off the docks, the KMS and the Kimdori would join them in the PR sector to destroy the remaining Consortium ships trapped in the nebula.

And they would include the Verutans and the Grimja. Both had pledged ships to the effort to eradicate the last of the Consortium in their galaxy.

That...had been amusing. Much as Jason suspected, Shakizarr had *really* tried to get Lorna out of her position as overall commander of the Confederate Combined Military and replaced with his own military officer, Emperor's Admiral Hezivarr. But he ran into a stone wall on that one. Lorna had proven to all of them that she was the best, and even Assaba had

been quick to defend Lorna even over his own flag officer, Frazzil. Lorna had earned the respect of everyone in the CCM and the trust of the rulers that appointed her, and Shakizarr showed some wisdom by letting the matter drop after about two days of trying. Lorna, the CCM would follow into hell, where they would not show Hezivarr the same loyalty.

Jason had suspected that the addition of Shakizarr and Kreel to the council would make it far more entertaining, and he had not been wrong. Shakizarr had surprised Jason with a willingness to be less formal, even show a sense of humor, where Kreel was exactly what everyone expected him to be. He was of a mind to tell bawdy jokes, banter with Dahnai and Magran, and subtly tease the more serious rulers like Sk'Vrae and Assaba to fill the dead space between reports and witnesses. Jason had liked him almost immediately when he met him at Karis, and his mind had not changed. Kreel was irreverent, self-deprecating, and had a knack for taking the stuffier members of the council down a peg or two with his observations, but he was also highly intelligent, observant, and seemed far more attuned to the nuances of inter-council politics than Jason would attribute to someone who had only been on the council for seven days. Jason had formed the opinion that the High Councilor Kreel was far more dangerous than the other members of the council believed, his political skill and exceptional intelligence masked behind an informal, deceptive façade.

He finally found a report that he was interested in. The Karinne Expeditionary Service had finally finished their detailed survey mission of the QME sector, and they'd found 14 different planets of great interest to the Karinnes. There were four life-sustaining planets within Terran and Faey tolerance, and one of them was a tropical water planet with low gravity that might be of great interest to the Menoda. It was within Menodan gravity tolerance, 81 degrees *shuki* average mean temperature—about 74 degrees Fahrenheit mean average temperature, fairly warm for Terrans—about .68 atmospheric pressure and .71 standard gravity. The planet was 94% water by surface area, with only one small continent and a series of small islands dotted along tectonic plates through the rest of the planet's surface. The planet had very poor heavy mineral reserves, not uncommon for low-gravity planets, but it did have uncommonly large and widespread gold deposits.



At that moment, Meya and Myra were leading a large expedition into the R quadrant to check out a star system that Karinne history suggested was perfect to become their first outpost in the R quadrant. The system was RG-118, sitting right on the edge of the galactic rim and orbiting an average-sized star not too much unlike the Terran sun in age, mass, and energy output. The star was about a billion years younger than the Terran sun, and the thousand-year removed data they had on it was that it was held three life-sustaining planets in fairly close orbits in the star's "life zone", and one of those was one of the rarest of all galactic phenomena, a double-planet system. One of those planets was a Gaia-class planet which was 19.7% larger than the smaller planet, with very poor heavy metal deposits but perfect conditions for the support of life—of quite a few versions of life, due to its thick atmosphere seeded with large numbers of gases in addition to the relatively common nitrogen/oxygen/carbon dioxide compositions present on many terrestrial worlds. In some ways, RG118-3A was like Terra, which was classified as very, very poor in mineral deposits when it came to useful heavy metal resources. The smaller planet was classified as a temperate arid terrestrial planet with a slightly colder climate due to its atmospheric composition, and was also almost ridiculously rich in heavy metal deposits, so much so that the planet was only 8.01% lighter in mass than its larger twin in the system despite being 19.7% smaller. The two planets orbited one another around a fixed imaginary point between them rather than one orbiting the other, which was what made the phenomenon so exceedingly rare. Systems like that became unstable very quickly in the measuring of time in astronomy, where the instability would cause the planets to either fly out of their orbits or crash into one another. In fact, a thousand years ago, the astrocartography mission that had surveyed the system had predicted that the system would become unstable and cause the smaller planet to become captured into an orbit around the larger planet in 4.6 million years. The gravitational pull of the larger planet was slowing the smaller planet down in its orbit, and when it reached a critical point, the orbit of the two planets around their imaginary fixed point would become unstable, the larger planet would become fixed within its orbit, and the smaller planet would be captured by the larger planet and become a very large moon. That, or the smaller planet would crash into the larger planet. The survey ran the models and showed that the planets were only 83,000 kathra apart upon their formation, but they were separating as they slowed

down in their dual orbit, to where they were now 590,000 kathra apart. It had taken the two planets some 2.9 billion years to separate to that distance. And in 4.6 million years, the two would finally get so far apart that the gravitational pull holding them in their dual orbits would break down and cause the double planet system to turn into a standard planet-moon system.

A blink of the eyes in the lifespan of the universe, but a hell of a long time for the puny mortals living within it. But, even back then, the Karinnes had the technology to stabilize the system and maintain it.

The planets certainly had an interesting day cycle. They had almost exactly identical 22.8 hour day cycles and had the same angular tilt of 21 degrees, which were close to Terra's own statistics, which meant that the larger planet had a faster rotational orbit speed than the smaller planet, yet the planets had only a .000013156 difference between their rotational velocities. The planets orbited each other on the same plane as their orbit around the star, and they were in direct line. The two planets orbited each other in a cycle of about 13 days, and in that cycle the planets eclipsed one another from the star during the cycle. This created a "night" during the cycle that lasted 13.4 hours on the larger planet and 18.7 hours on the smaller one, a night that lasted more than a day every 13 days. It also caused the sky to be dominated by the other planet, given how close they were to each other. The two planets were closer to each other than Terra was to its moon.

There was one other planet in the system that was life-sustaining. It was planet 2, and to a Shio, it would be *perfect*. It was closer to the star and thus had a fairly hot climate, was very wet, and was dominated by jungles on the three continents on the surface. However, planet 2 held a sentient reptilian race still in its stone age, and because of that, Jason would quarantine off the planet if the species was still there.

Jason checked the location of the *Scimitar* and its seven supporting vessels and was glad to see that they'd arrive at RG-118 in about two hours. Knowing the twins, they would have an advance scientific post set up within an hour of getting into orbit, as sensor dropships spread out to scan the planet's surface. They were supposed to survey both the twin planets, Meya commanding one exploration detail and Myra the other.

He already had a standard interdicator and a colonization team ready to ship out on a jump freighter with the destroyer *Tikanne* escorting, only recently off the repair docks. That was a two-day trip from Karis due to the distance involved, but he could afford to take one destroyer off the board for four days. As soon as Meya and Myra gave them their initial survey reports, they'd move to claim the system. By the time the interdicator was in logarithmic mode, they'd probably have the outpost secured and advance farming and mining teams en route, and a Stargate shipped out as soon as they had one. They'd set it up exactly like Exile, a "commute colony" where the workers there would come back to Karis when they were off work.

The Stargates probably wouldn't be a problem from here out. Dellin had finished the ten Stargate docks Jason had ordered him to build, and they were now constructing ten of their *own* Stargates. It would take about a month to complete them, due to the size and complexity, and it would take a hefty chunk of credits as well. Stargates were *expensive* to build, and they'd have to train the Stargate operational and maintenance crews that staffed them—Stargates usually had around 200 operational and maintenance personnel inside them on the average, keeping the unit in a state of constant operation, and they also usually had around 200 Marines or Tarks aboard as well to serve as security and defense, should someone try to board a Stargate and attempt to take control of it from the inside. But it was still cheaper than buying them from the Imperium, and besides, they wouldn't have to explain to anyone what they were doing with their own Stargates.

Cybi had tweaked the standard Stargate design a little for their own version, making them more efficient on top of the only having one size. Stargates came in a variety of sizes, capable of allowing ships of different sizes to pass through, but the Karinnes would *only* build Stargates large enough to allow their capitol ships to pass through, but it would cost them about the same to build a capitol Stargate as it took one of the Imperium companies to build a Class III Stargate, large enough to allow a tactical battleship to pass through. The smaller Stargates were used mainly for freighter and commercial traffic, where the big ones were primarily for military ships. Due to the distance involved and why the Karinnes would be using their Stargates, it was decided that only one version would be designed and built, so they could always get a capitol ship to the other side.

Karinne Stargates would be cheaper to build, require less energy to operate, and have fewer components and systems than standard Stargates, which would reduce maintenance costs.

*Finally*, he managed to get to the bottom of his inbox, which only took about three hours. He leaned back in his chair and stretched a little, then turned and looked out the window. It was a really nice day in Karsa today, warm and sunny, and looking just as it always did. Bunvar had finished all the repairs to the city, leaving it looking exactly as it had before the attack. The White House sat on a hill with megabuildings all around it, blocking his view of most of the rest of Karsa, but he could see a few things. The Karsa Sports Complex was just barely visible several kathra to the south, across the low hills of south-central Karsa upon which no megabuildings could be constructed, with its oval of metal spires stretching out over the stands that held the emitters for the airskin shield activated for baseball and *shizuki* games, but not for batchi or soccer games. Those games were always played in current natural weather. The stands, on the other hand, had airskin protection to keep the spectators dry while the athletes got wet. Jyslin was over there right now, or at least in the building beside it, along with Frinia as the two of them prepared for the upcoming IBL season. The Grand Avenue that ran from the White House all the way out to the coast to the east gave him a tiny sliver of a view of the ocean, at least theoretically. The Avenue was one of the major transport arteries through Karsa, nearly half a kathra wide and with mass transit train lines on the edges as hovercars soared through the gaps between them, and grassy parks and lawns on the ground below. It continued to the west, going all the way out to the edge of the city, and a similar major thoroughfare ran from north to south called the Grand Boulevard with the White House in the center. The White House had originally held the Ducal palace of the Grand Duchess Karinne, at least until Jason converted it into the current seat, so it was, in its way, the heart of the city.

It was just too damn beautiful to be at work, but he had too much going on. The council would be meeting in about an hour, which was too close to let him get involved in much of anything, and he had a scheduled cabinet meeting afterwards. He also had a meeting with the Land Use Authority to go over opening Teria City, and an official meeting with Zaa to go over her clan taking over the city of Jaxtra, which was in seven hours. Another day

wasted thanks to reports, paperwork, and people who just loved to talk... sometimes he hated this job.

But that was just too damn bad. The job chose *him*, and he would do it to the best of his ability.

At least he was making headway in the *make Aya less of a bitch* department. After nearly two days of discussion, badgering, cajoling, and even an attempt at outright bribery, he had *finally* gotten her to lift a few of the restrictions she had on him. They were still in place for the rest of his family, but if they wanted more freedom, they could fight Aya the same way he had. He was now allowed to move about the entire White House without armor, at the cost of increasing the guard presence inside the building, and she'd agreed to allow him to travel to Exile next week to make an official visit to the Exiles living there. He hadn't seen them for a while, and he wanted to see how they were doing.

There were other trips on the docket, trips for which Aya was preparing. After the Consortium was eradicated from their galaxy, Jason had agreed to travel to the Verutan sector and visit the Verutan and Haumda empires and the Imbiri system, something of a tour of their neighbors along the edge of the sector. The idea of taking a tour of the Verutan sector appealed to him very much, but Aya wouldn't permit it as long as the Consortium existed in their galaxy. Dahnai was getting in on it as well, demanding that he attend court as an observer at least once a takir, and Kreel had invited him to the Grimja Union for a state visit...which would involve a lot of drinking in the numerous pubs in Grimjaki, their capitol city.

There was one trip before all of those plans, however, and one he was *really* looking forward to taking. In 12 days, he, Jyslin, and his children would be going to Kimdori Prime to visit Zaa and Grun, visiting the Hearth and some of the main sites on the planet. Kimdori Prime was one of the most secluded and exotic locales in the quadrant, visited by only a handful due to the secrecy of the Kimdori and the exceptionally hostile environment of the planet to most forms of life. They'd visit for four days. Jyslin and his guards would have to wear radiation-resistant E-suits or armor during their stay, but Jason and his children would have no problems staying there without protection for four days. They'd have to decontaminate afterwards,

but that was mainly so the latent radiation built up in their bodies didn't pose a threat to *others*.

One of the few actual advantages of being a Generation...radiation resistance.

After all the trials and tribulations of the last year, getting the chance to go to Kimdori Prime and visit Zaa in *her* home almost made up for it.

At least tonight would be fun. Aura had managed to corral him and arrange a date, and he fully meant to enjoy both socializing with Aura over dinner and the sex in the pool house afterwards. Jyslin had already made arrangements to stay overnight with Tim and Symone.

Thinking of Aura made him think of Dahnai, and that made him bring up a holo of Hiyaivi Island, which was where a small army of Makati were hard at work building Dahnai's summer palace. They'd started only two days ago and already had the foundations of all the buildings laid, three of the smaller buildings half-constructed, and most of the major landscaping completed to turn the island into a private, secluded paradise of gardens and woods and lawns for the Empress, a luxurious palace where she and her family could relax and not have to worry about much of anything. The price tag attached to that project wasn't anything to sneeze at, mainly since the Karinnes were paying for the construction, but it was worth it in his eyes. He was obligated to build her that palace in their treaty, and besides, it was for Dahnai, so he wanted her to be happy there. The island itself was almost perfectly located, only about 230 kathra from the equator about in the center of the north edge of Karga on the map, but along a natural current that kept the mean temperatures there comfortable. The temperature rarely went below 81 *shuki* or above 101 *shuki*—below 73F or above 92F, the temperature regulated by seasonal wind patterns and water currents to produce almost perfect consistency through all seasons. The closest comparison he'd found to its unique weather pattern was Hawaii back on Terra, an island chain where there was virtually no seasonal deviance from the average mean high and low temperatures. The island was about six square kathra in area, large enough for a small village, with a compound of the main palace and 14 supporting buildings, from facilities and support infrastructure to barracks for the Imperial Guard. There would even be a small marina there for boats, and all just for Dahnai and her family. Red

Horn estimated completion of the project in 32 days, and he had no doubt it would be done before that deadline. Makati always went long on their estimates to take unforeseen delays into account.

Leaning back in his chair a little, he closed his eyes and merged up into the biogenic relay servicing his office through his gestalt, and he cast his consciousness into the network. He'd been practicing this unique aspect of the Generations, the ability to merge to biogenic computers and, in a way, send his mind into the machine, to where he was now fairly proficient at it. It required a pretty unique set of skills with which Karinne genetic instinct had no experience. Generations instinctively knew how to commune but learning how to merge with biogenic units and make use of the merge was a skill that required practice. He navigated the biogenic network around the planet and found what he was looking for, the camera pod Cybi used to keep an eye on the kids when they were at school. He pushed his awareness into that pod and accessed its camera, getting a good view of the 16 students in the class, virtually all of which were strip kids. Rann, Shya, Kyri, Sora, Aran, Danelle, and Zachary all sat together at one of the three circular tables in the room, his kids all in their armor, them all looking at a special kind of hologram in the center that had no facing; everyone at the table saw the same image, as if it were oriented towards them. It was a series of basic algebra problems as the teacher explained the concept behind it.

Algebra. Faey were so far ahead of Terrans in that regard. Where Terran kids learned that two plus two equals four, Faey kids learned that "X plus two" could also equal four, and the objective of the problem was to find the value of X. Faey taught algebra along with standard math and they started in kindergarten, and Jason had to admit that their system *worked*. Given the mind-boggling complexity of Faey calculus, Faey students *had* to start on the basics of it as early as possible. And the basics of calculus had their roots in algebra.

Kyri glanced at the camera pod repeatedly as they listened to their teacher, then she gave it a slight smile. [*I know you're in there, Daddy,*] she declared, communing directly with the camera pod's biogenic circuitry. Jason wasn't surprised. Kyri was far more sensitive than her siblings. She was the only child that could sense another Generation merged to a nearby device, a trick that only Jason and Myleena had mastered thus far. Kyri

wanted to learn how to merge with the biogenic network herself, but there were blocks on the entire network that kept the kids out of it. The same reason they wouldn't give the kids actual gestalts was what also kept them from being able to merge with anything but approved devices, like toys and other isolated devices. The toys taught them *how* to merge, but they weren't allowed to access the planetary biogenic network until they were older and had the wisdom and discipline to not cause problems. A Generation had access to most of the planet's computer networks while merged and could cause untold havoc if they weren't careful...and six-year-olds weren't exactly known for their self-control. *[What are you doing?]*

*[Just seeing how class was going,]* he answered.

*[Boooooor-riiiiing,]* she complained, putting her hand on her cheek and leaning on it. Jason could see that none of his kids had their gauntlets on. He couldn't blame them for that. *[I hate math.]*

*[Welcome to growing up, pippy. The older you get, the more things you have to do that you don't like.]*

*[Then why does anyone ever grow up?]* she asked.

*[Because we don't have much of a choice in the matter,]* he replied. *[I'm clearly distracting you, and Miss Rekali's giving you a hard look, so get your mind back in class and I'll leave you alone. See you tonight, pippy.]*

*[Kay.]*

His children suitably checked, Jason disengaged himself from the network and found himself literally nose to nose with Miaari. The Kimdori was kneeling on his desk, leaning over to the point where she was right in his face. He flinched a tiny bit, then smacked her irritably on the shoulder as she laughed. "You could be dead right now," she said with a toothy grin.

"Riiiiiight," he replied blandly as she stepped down off his desk. "You're in a playful mood," he observed when she sat in the chair opposite his desk.

"I'm not so old that I can't enjoy myself," she replied primly.

"I figured you woulda lost your playfulness at ten thousand years old," he shot back with a sly smile. "What brings you by?"



“A few reports,” she replied, pointing at one of the secure handpanels her department used for such things. Those kinds of reports were never transmitted, they were *only* placed on dedicated secure devices that were hand-delivered to the recipient. “It’s the full analysis and report of the data pulled off the captured Consortium battleship, as well as the current analysis and projections of the last of the data we stole from the Consortium command center in the nebula.”

“Will I have time to read these before the council meeting in an hour?”

She shook her head. “Those are the *complete* reports. They are quite lengthy.”

“Well, there went the rest of my free time for the next two days,” he sighed.

“Jason, it might be time for you to consider delegating more responsibility,” she said seriously. “You’ve spent almost twenty hours a day in this office for the last takir.”

“I know, but I just can’t see delegating some of this,” he said, waving his hand at his panel. “It’s just too important. But I have put a lot of the council workload in Yeri. I’m sure she wants to kill me now,” he chuckled.

“That is her *job*, Jason, and she will be fine with it,” she said calmly. “In truth, you should give most of what work the house has gained from the separation to Yeri. Let her sort through things and only bring to your attention what is truly important. She can field the offers and screen the missives.”

“It would reduce my workload a whole lot,” he said with a grunt, leaning back in his chair. “We’re being drowned in diplomatic offers. Trade, research, exploration, consultation, you name it, and not just from governments. I have a stack of offers from mega-corps tall enough to reach the ceiling. And I can’t count how many requests I’ve gotten for official embassies to be allowed to be placed on Karis. What part of *closed system* do these people not understand? They have their embassies on Terra, that *is* having an embassy with the Karinnes. It’s going to get on my desk.”

“Because Terra is not Karis, and this is where they want their spies,” she said lightly. “I think you can trust Yeri to know what should be brought to you and what should be rejected without wasting your time.”

“I suppose,” he said with another sigh.

“Have you eaten lunch yet? There should be time before the meeting, and I doubt you’ll want to face that on an empty stomach,” she offered.

He chuckled, then stood up. “That’s a good idea.”

Shen and Suri escorted him and Miaari down to the cafeteria, where he enjoyed being able to sit at a table and eat without armor. The armor wasn’t that uncomfortable, thanks to the gel backing inside it and the power assist to help when he didn’t feel like moving it around himself, but it wasn’t as comfortable as good old jeans and a tee shirt, which was by far his preferred attire. He was wearing a Karsa Paladins tee that day, one of the new ones that had started being sold on Karis, the front of the tee dominated by the mascot, a stylized Faey woman in gleaming silver armor and brandishing a two-handed sword. The team had identical twins who wore a replica of that armor to serve as their on-pitch mascot, who took turns playing the role for games and also for publicity appearances. Jason had seen that armor, and it made him glad he wore Crusader armor. It wasn’t designed to protect, but it was faithful to the original ideals in that it was made of steel and inlaid with a chrome-like alloy that made it so shiny, it had no power assist anywhere in it, and it was *heavy*. The suit weighed around 26 *konn*, which was around 27 kilograms or about 60 pounds or so. That was even heavier than Crusader armor, which only weighed 18 *konn* due to the metal used in its construction. In Terran measures, that was about 19 kilograms, or around 43 pounds. The sword itself weighed 10 *konn*, which was about 10.5 kilograms or 24 pounds. Not only that, it was also very hot in that armor, so hot that the mascots did cheat with an enviro-suit that also served as padding to keep them from having heat stroke as they ran around down on the pitch. IBL teams even took their mascots seriously, where the mascots had as close to “real” as they could get in their costumes. That armor was a faithful reproduction of the real armor Faey warriors wore back in their Iron Age, with only a few cosmetic alterations to make it more flashy and give the wearer flexibility. Jason had almost expected the sword to be sharpened, but it wasn’t...and it didn’t really need to be. A sword that big could do some major damage if it was used as a weapon without *needing* to be sharp.

Frinia had almost burned a hole through his head with her glare when he suggested replacing the three suits of armor, the primary suits and a backup

suit, with something much lighter, like crystallized titanium or iso-aluminum brushed over with a coating of reflective alloy, almost insulted that he would dare suggest such a thing.

Jason had put his foot down when they designed the armor for the mascot of the newly formed Karsa Warriors, their new D league team. The armor that mascot wore was a fully functional suit of Crusader armor brushed over with a molecular layer of Carbidium to give it a golden sheen. The mascot had an “away game” suit that was only for show, but it only weighed 12 *konn* because it was made of iso-aluminum, one of the lightest metals known to Karinne science that was also fairly sturdy and chemically stable. Jason wouldn’t let a suit of Crusader armor out for someone to try to steal.

Navii sat down beside him with a tray holding a large salad, and he nodded to her. “Things must be settling down if you left the command center,” he noted lightly.

She chuckled in her raspy voice. “We just got the Dreamer off the repair dock and back on the board,” she replied. “Everything else is still on schedule. Dellin hasn’t made any major updates.”

“That’s good to hear. How about promotions?” he asked, a bit hesitantly. He’d lost four ship captains in the attack on Karis, and those chairs had to be filled with new captains.

“We’ve decided that Commander Rola Karinne from the tactical cruiser *Revenge* will take over the *Jefferson*,” she replied with a sober voice. She’d been personal friends with Drae and losing her had been hard for the venerable woman. “Since the other ships were decommissioned, we don’t have to worry much about replacing their captains.”

“I think Drae would have liked that choice, Navii,” he said, patting her gnarled hand fondly. Drae’s death was almost avoidable. Her ship, the *Jefferson*, had been heavily damaged in the attack at the nebula and was still on the repair dock when the Consortium attacked Karis, so she’d taken command of one of the cruisers that had just come off the docks rather than sit out the battle. She hadn’t been forced to do it, she’d volunteered...and had been killed for her patriotism and sense of duty. Of the ships whose captains were killed, only the *Jefferson* had survived enough to be repaired,

but the names of the other three ships that had been destroyed would live on, assigned to new ships coming off the docks when the time came. Given how many ships were beyond any hope of salvage, Jason was honestly surprised that he only lost four ship captains, but that was due to the design of the ships. The bridge and the captain's quarters were in the deepest part of the ship, the most heavily protected, so it had to be something absolutely cataclysmic to kill a ship captain. He'd had several other captains get injured, which was testament to the ferocity of the battle.

"I think so too. Rola is a very capable ship captain," she replied with a wan smile.

After a big cheese steak and some potato wedges, Jason returned to his office and checked on the repair schedules, consulting the board he still had synced to Dellin's main board in his ops center, and he saw that everything was still on schedule. The *Aegis* and *Iyaneri* were still undergoing repairs, but they had three battleships back on the board, all the tactical battleships, and four heavy cruisers. Both carriers were also back on the board, which meant that they had enough ships now to form two task forces if necessary. He switched over to the construction docks and saw that everything there was also on schedule. They'd pared way back on building new ships, shifting manpower to repairing damaged ships, but there was still some activity on that side. The eighth battleship was about two takirs from completion, and there were six more tactical battleships in various stages of assembly. They'd shifted the ship roles a little since the introduction of the tactical battleships. The regular battleships would serve as flagships for task force commanders, the commanding ship in the formation if there was no capitol ship present, where the tactical battleships would be doing most of the in-your-face fighting. And because of that delineation, they were discussing doing a redesign of the main battleship to make it bigger and carry more firepower. They wanted to increase the mass of a battleship by about 60% and pack some more firepower on it, but they also wanted to continue production of the current battleship design to serve as support for the task force, mainly as carrier defense and long-range weapon support, carrying weapons 3D was kicking around developing, high-energy weapons that had far more range than the currently used weapons. The new battleship class, the Mark II, would then be the flagship for the formation. They were also discussing the possibility of creating an even larger

command ship class vessel, some 40% larger than the current design, a monstrosity that would be so huge and complicated to build that they might only finish one in the three years they had.

Jason knew why they were doing that. They knew what was coming, and they knew that even a Karinne battleship was the size of a toy compared to some of the Syndicate vessels. Creating a larger class of battleship put more big ships on the line to combat the titanic behemoths the Syndicate had in their fleet. Their strategy wasn't going to revolve around those huge ships, it was actually doing to revolve around cruisers and destroyers, but really big ships would have both strategic and tactical worth in the war to come.

He had just enough time to read the report that Myleena had dropped off that morning before heading to Kosigi, a status report of what was going on in 3D, and the news was that there was little news. Jenny and Eraen were still working on the diffuser and hadn't made any major progress thus far. The cyberjack program was in a holding pattern, mainly because they were waiting to see how Justin Taggart responded to the jack they implanted just two days ago. Songa had decided to implant the jack before performing the brain surgery to replace the damaged sections of Justin's brain to reduce the shock to his system, and also to discern if a jack implantation on an uninjured talent would damage their telepathic abilities. She did have a point, he'd realized, when she told him of the change. If the injuries to Justin were *why* a jack implantation procedure didn't damage his talent, then they wouldn't know until another telepath volunteered and subsequently had her talent damaged by the surgery. By implanting the jack now, they'd know for certain if the procedure did any damage to Justin's talent by baselining his abilities before the surgery compared to after. The fact that his talent was already damaged would have no bearing on that result, for a further degradation of his telepathic abilities would mean that the jack implantation procedure was the cause. Supposedly, she'd have a preliminary report for him about how it went sometime tonight, after they brought Justin out of his induced coma and gave him the initial exam. Of course, they wouldn't have ironclad results until after Justin's brain was repaired. If he got his full talent back at his original strength, then they'd have no doubt that the jack implantation procedure would pose no threat to a talented brain.

The jack program was now up to 15,500 participants. They'd increased the trial pool yet again, and the results were *highly* promising. They'd finished their training programs to learn how to use and control the jack, and whatever the jack was plugged into, and they showed as much ability as a Generation merged to a biogenic computer. They still couldn't utilize telepathy like that, which was what the Generation program had been about, but they could do just about everything else. The riggers they'd fitted with jacks were giving Kyva some competition, relatively speaking. She could still kick their asses, but a jacked rigger lasted a lot longer against her than an unjacked rigger, because of increased response time and the ability to assimilate the sensor data fed to them quickly. After the last trial group finished, a group consisting of more than just Terrans, then they were planning on offering cyberjack implantation to any member of the house who so wished it, but they had to pay the C430 cost of implantation themselves. This last trial group held every race currently members of the House of Karinne except for Faey, and it would ensure that Songa's procedures were safe and effective. She'd mapped out how to implant a jack into every race of the house, but it still required an actual volunteer and a trial to make sure what Songa worked out on paper matched the real world.

Jason mused again at how the Faey near-phobia about doing anything to, with, or anywhere near the brain had created a void in both their medical knowledge and their technological capability. They'd had the technology to invent their own cyberjacks for some 400 years, but they'd never even *considered* wiring a Faey brain so it could interface with a computer. And the Faey were the only race in the sector cluster with both the medical and technological knowledge to do it. Of the other civilizations, the Colonists and the Alliance were the only ones even close to the level the Faey had with cybernetics, machines that were implanted into and worked with a biological organism. Colonial and Alliance medicine could replace limbs with cybernetic prosthetics, but they weren't nearly as good. They could connect a machine to a nerve ending to allow the user to control the limb, but they lacked the technology to allow the user to *feel* through the limb, they still hadn't cracked that level of cybernetic technology. That was the main difference between Faey cybernetic technology and the technology of other civilizations. Most other civilizations hadn't fully explored cybernetic technology the way the Faey had, for various reasons. The Urumi and Skaa

didn't need to, since they could regrow lost limbs over time naturally. The Shio and the Jobodi had developed cloned replacement medicine long before cybernetic medicine, so for them it was a somewhat useless branch of medical technology. Only the Faey had explored cybernetic technology to that level, part of their endlessly inquisitive natures that made them good at science...and also a pain in the neck.

His alarm beeped warning him he had two minutes, so he put away the reports, made sure the three handpanels couldn't be seen by anyone, and activated his side of the conference program. Two holograms winked in immediately, Sk'Vrae and Kim, who were chatting with each other amiably; Sk'Vrae and Kim had a personal friendship, he'd come to learn. Sk'Vrae nodded to him when his hologram appeared to her, probably in her office back on Uruma. "Jason," Kim said with a smile. "How goes things today?"

"Buried up to my eyeballs in paperwork," he grunted in reply, which made Kim chuckle.

"I know that feeling. It seems I can never clear my inbox since the planet was granted protectorate status," he replied. "Many of the things we simply sent up the chain of command now stop with me."

"That sums up my position almost perfectly," Jason said without much humor.

"It sounds like it is time for both of you to increase your staffs to take some of the load off of you," Sk'Vrae declared. "I have a large staff that helps organize and manage the paperwork that comes with rule."

"Yeah, more than one person is pushing me to do that," Jason nodded. "But I'm not sure. I don't like the idea of being out of the loop."

"The house is growing too large for you to micro-manage every detail, Jason," Sk'Vrae chided gently. "Imagine what your workload will be like in a year if you don't reorganize your executive office."

He nearly groaned, just as another hologram winked on, that of Magran. He gave Jason a curious look, no doubt over his expression, which made Kim laugh lightly.

Jason usually drifted through council meetings, because little of it ever really concerned him, but the addition of Shakizarr and Kreel had made him

much more attentive since they were added to the council. Part of it was that they were discussing matters that did concern him, and part of it was so he could observe the two rulers. Not everyone was in attendance today, however. Dahnai was making a rare no-show, one of her advisors sitting in for her, and Zaa was also not in attendance, which wasn't quite as unusual. Because of the jockeying between Dahnai and Assaba, she rarely if ever missed a council meeting. He did pay some attention when Lorna delivered a report on fleet readiness, and more attention when she gave a very basic overview of the attack on the nebula. "Given we know exactly how many enemy ships there are and where they are, we're planning a fairly straightforward operation," she said as she pointed to an image of the nebula. "To minimize risk to our own ships, we will begin the operation by taking out Consortium long-range sensor pods spread around and through the nebula to give them advance warning using corvettes and fighters, which can move more swiftly within the nebula than line ships. Using fighters also only allows the Consortium to see the *fighters* before the pods are destroyed, hiding the full size and makeup of our fleet. This part of the operation will consist of a single KMS ship jumping in and launching fighters, and then immediately jumping back out out of range of the sensor pods outside the nebula. We've selected the *Dreamer* for this operation, and the attacking fighters will be from the KMS Ghost Squadron and the Alliance Navy War Talon squadron, two of the best fighter squadrons in the Confederate Combined Military. These fighters will be able to outrun any Consortium vessels within the nebula, their size will make them extremely hard to see inside, and the nebula's disruption of automated targeting and sensor systems will make it very difficult for any automated defenses to destroy them. They will destroy the Consortium sensor network pod by pod, creating a blind zone for our incoming fleet. Once the pods are destroyed, our fleet will jump in, and we'll begin the attack by sending in some of the automated weaponry developed by the Karinnes to weaken their defenses and create confusion, while our fleet enters the nebula and gets into position outside of their sensor range. This will also force them to draw in their ships to defend the remains of their base, which they have been trying to salvage and repair. The other main objective of this automated attack is to knock out their primary command and control center, which Kimdori reconnaissance places in the remains of the base that was partially destroyed in the Karinne attack. Once their com-con is eliminated, our fleet will attack from all sides,



striking swiftly from the concealment of the nebula, and destroy them to the last ship. This tactic should minimize damage to our own ships.”

*“Simple and straightforward, but also tactically sound given the environmental conditions,”* Grran’s vocoder intoned monotonously as his fingers danced before him.

“Yes, Field Marshall,” Lorna nodded. “The nebula can be used against them when approached properly, and we intend to do just that, primarily through the use of fighters to knock out the sensor pod network they have set up within the nebula. Without their sensor network, they’ll have no idea where we are, and the limited visibility within the nebula will allow our ships to get right on top of them before they can respond.”

“It sounds like a viable strategy, General,” Shakizarr nodded, his black hair bobbing a little. “We have our ships in position and ready to be moved to Terra. When will the Stargate arrive at Veruta Prime?”

“They haven’t finished building it yet, Grand Imperial Majesty,” the aide for Dahnai spoke up. “It’s scheduled for completion in three days, but then it has to be thoroughly tested before it can be put in service. At this time, we simply have no more Stargates to spare. Every operational gate in the Imperium is in use, and every corporation capable of building Stargates has their factories at double manpower to meet the demand.”

“We’re also capable of building Stargates, and we’re working on them in Kosigi,” Jason added. “Our first ones won’t be ready for at least a month, though.”

“The Stargate slated for Veruta Prime is scheduled for delivery and activation in nine days,” Lorna continued. “The Stargate for Grimdi is scheduled for delivery and activation in twelve days.”

“That gives us time to pull in our fleet from the other side of our territory,” Kreel said in his usual easygoing voice. “We should have 470 ships at Grimdi by the time the Stargate arrives.”

“Added to the 1400 from the Verutans, that should give us more than enough to sweep the Consortium out of that nebula and out of our galaxy,” Shakizarr declared.

Dellin presented the next report, and that was the one both Shakizarr and Kreel wanted to hear. Dellin's handsome face appeared in a hologram that showed his control center behind him. He saluted crisply as he introduced himself, then went to the board behind him. "We've completed our schedule and dock allocation preparations for the Verutans and the Grimja to begin shipbuilding operations within Kosigi," he called. "The respective empires will have to bring their own equipment, proprietary technology, docks and workers, but everything else will be provided within Kosigi, at set zero-profit rates for materials. What you pay for these materials is exactly what it cost to produce them. Karinne transports will be made available to tow dock facilities to Karis, and also remember that all workers coming to Kosigi will have to pass a security screening. We'll have technological consultants from the Academy on hand and at the service of your engineers to help integrate standard Confederate technology into these ships if you so wish it. We utilize a number of universal mount pieces of equipment," he explained at Shakizarr's curious look. "A single piece that can be installed into any Confederate ship. Don't worry, your Majesty, it doesn't require that your Navy reveal its classified engineering specs. It only requires a basic knowledge of your power system and computer architecture so your ships can power and control the modules. Installation of these pieces of equipment is purely optional and voluntary, and probably mainly unnecessary for now, since the majority of our universal mount equipment are Torsion cannons, which we won't be using against the Syndicate."

"There is one piece of Confederate technology that will require at least giving the Karinnes the specs of your engines, and that's if you want them refitted to be capable of jumping outbound from an interdicator," Jason cut in. "We have to analyze your engine capability and power generation to see if they're capable of it, and if so, what upgrades it'll require. But that information is released *only* to the Karinnes. The other Confederate members do not have access to the specs."

"Yes, I've already released that data to your Duchess Myleena Karinne," Shakizarr nodded. "She is to give her report on the matter to my Naval engineering department later today."

"Yup, so did we, and she already sent back a refit report that tells us what we need to do," Kreel added. "She also sent us the interdiction

algorithm for our jump computer.”

“Guess I’m out of the loop, then,” Jason chuckled.

“So, esteemed rulers, as soon as your governments submit a schedule to me and to Miaari to start screening your inbound workers, we can get your allocated space within Kosigi up and running,” Dellin continued. “We’ll have everything ready for you on our side by the time your teams arrive.”

“If I might add, several Moridon financial institutions will be on site within Kosigi to serve the workers,” Brayrak Kruu injected. “These are fully staffed satellite branch offices of authorized Moridon banks, capable of making transactions with internal Verutan and Grimja banks and will offer these financial services at no charge to the workers. So rest easy that your workers will have access to their pay and the expertise of Moridon financial planners on how best to manage it.”

“Those pubs up in Kosigi I toured when I was there is about all my workers will need to be happy,” Kreel smiled.

“We should have the initial schedules on your desk by the end of the standard day, Admiral,” Shakizarr declared.

“We’re not quite finished yet, it should be there sometime tomorrow,” Kreel added.

The council wrapped up after Dellin gave his report, and Jason went from that meeting directly to another one, his regularly scheduled cabinet meeting. Everyone but Kumi was there, who was on Moridon, but Temika was sitting in for her. Temika was now second in command in Kumi’s office and had proved to have a knack for the job. They quieted down when he walked in. “We’re all busy, so let’s get this done,” he said crisply as he took his seat, Shen and Suri standing by the door to the cabinet meeting room. “I think we can dispense with most of the old business, so if anyone has anything new, put it on the table.”

*“The updated logistic schedules for the change in Karinne supply schedules for the Shio and the Colonies is in effect,” Jrz’kii’s translator called in its monotone. “It has reduced our workload by 18% overall. I have included scheduled holidays for our freighter crews so they can take an extended break after working nonstop for nearly two months.”*

“Good thinking,” Jason nodded.

*“The test farms on PR-371 have produced their second yield, with the predicted results after our first yield,” Grik’zzk continued. “The planet can grow every common Karis crop within the affected area of the gravity inducers, and can grow 55% of our current crops outside of it, mainly the crops that do not have long stalks that can be affected by the gravity. We will begin large-scale farming operations both inside and outside of the gravity inducer areas in two days, as soon as the equipment arrives. We have also expanded the operating farmland around New Karsa on Exile by 21% to meet projected demand as the house population increases.”*

“Excellent, I want to keep our food production at least twice our consumption. Food always exports,” Jason nodded.

*“Of note that should be passed along is that the farming details are having increased frequency of contact with the Gruug,” she continued. “The contacts thus far have not been violent. The Gruug flee whenever a vehicle approaches.”*

Jason frowned a little bit. “That is a little unusual. If you could, please, send that on to Kovann so he can find out what’s going on.” Kovann Heralle was the management executive in charge of New Karsa, the farm production manager and governor rolled into one. He answered to both Grik’zzk and Jason in his two roles.

*“He is aware of it. I have already informed him. A report of the findings of his expeditionary team should reach us within the day.”*

“Good.”

“I’ve gotten the construction timetables for the new projects organized and on the schedule,” Bunvar called. “I’ve added it to the overall planned work schedules for the next two takirs. Included on the queue is the new IBL practice facility and a new sports complex being built in Teria City for organized sports teams. We’ll be using the generic layout plan so it can host any of the commonly played sports.”

“Speaking of Teria City, I have a work order request ready to be sent to you, Bunvar,” Rund said, looking over at her. “We have the broadcast power node equipment already on the way, we just need the installation up.”

“I have a team ready to go in there and do it, as soon as I get the official work request,” she answered.

“It’ll be on your panel ten minutes after I get back to my office.”

“How far along is Teria City, anyway?” Yeri asked.

“It’s almost finished,” Jason replied, since the Land Use Authority fell under his office. “And speaking of the Land Use Authority, I’ve decided to promote it to an independent agency with a cabinet member,” he told them. “The Authority director, Lirren Karinne, will be joining the cabinet as soon as I get all the details ironed out, probably in two or three days. His department will be called Interior, and won’t have any extra duties.”

“It’s about time you started reducing your own workload, Jason,” Yeri told him, a touch sternly.

“What are you doing behind my back that makes you want me to look the other way more, Yeri?” he challenged with a slight smile, which made her laugh.

“In all honesty, Jason, you should promote the Resident Services to its own department as well. You still have control of that agency.” Resident Services was the “human resources” offices for the planet, managing such things as hovercar licenses, marriage licenses, inscription management (the house still utilized inscription, but as a Planetary Guard operation where the members only served part time), population census, education, and coordinated with Songa and the Medical Service for resident health and welfare. Their workload had reduced significantly when Terra gained independence, them taking control of their own services, but they still coordinated with the Urumi Brood Princesses to help provide Karinne services for the four systems the Karinnes administered.

“The Moridon finished the last of their Karsa branch offices, and it should be open tomorrow,” Temika called, looking at her panel. She was wearing her hair much more severely than usual, a tight ponytail, but she was wearing a very flattering low-cut blouse that showed off a peek of her impressive cleavage.

“Any issues integrating them into the house banking system?” Jason asked.

“Nope, and believe it or not, we’ll make even more money off our own banks with Moridon banks here competing against them,” she replied with a chuckle. “The satellite office of First Bank of Moridon opened yesterday, and all y’all have invitations to open accounts at reduced fees,” she added. “One of the perks of being on the cabinet.”

“I’d take it if I were you,” Jason suggested. “Those kinds of accounts are worth it, mainly for the access to Moridon financial experts. Them, you can trust not to swindle you. You don’t get that kind of assurance when you’re dealing with Kumi.”

They all laughed, even the Kizzik, and Temika just gave Jason an amusedly cool look. “That’s my boss you’re talking about, Jayce.”

“Am I lying?”

“Well, no, but still,” she replied, which made Yeri laugh even louder.

Jason finished up the cabinet meeting after about another twenty minutes, since there was little new business to go over...everyone was still very busy with old business, the business of getting Karis back to normal operation after the battle. He had 37 different reports in his in-box when he got back, making him glad that Chirk couldn’t hear after he muttered a few unfriendly things about her once back at his desk. 37 reports had piled up in the few hours that he’d been busy with other things. Shen and Suri lounged in his private apartment off his office as he went over the reports, making sure to secure the door so only they could open it when they weren’t guarding it. They often had long stretches of boring inactivity when they were with him, the hours he spent in his office where they had little to do, but weren’t allowed to stray far from him given how prone he was to wandering off without telling them if they weren’t *right there* to keep an eye on him. Ever since his AWOL episode a few weeks ago, Aya had dictated that they lock the door when not at post mainly to keep him *in*, not to keep others *out*, where before they’d leave the door unlocked if they weren’t in his office. Inside the White House, anyone that got to his door was screened at least three times by the Ducal Guard to get that far. Aya wasn’t about to let him get where one of her guards couldn’t keep track of him, not since he escaped from them.

A holo of Yila popped on in front of his desk. Today, she had opted for conservative, wearing a red poncho-like top that ended just under her attractive breasts adorned with the Trefani crest, a waist chain, and while he couldn't see anything below her navel due to the hologram, he rather doubted there was anything south of that other than shoes of some kind. "Good morning, Jason. Why is the door locked?" she asked.

"Because you don't own that door, woman," he answered cheekily, which made her give him a challenging smile. "What are you doing on Karis? Kumi's on Moridon."

"I know, we just got back from Moridon about ten minutes ago," she replied. "Kumi's over at her office taking care of a few things."

"Then why are you bugging me?"

She laughed. "Just open the door, you silly man."

"Give it a minute," he said. "Shen or Suri have to open the door. They lock me in when they're not at the door."

"That sounds slightly scandalous," she teased.

Jason laughed. "Yes, it's a scandal that my guards lock me in my office like a misbehaving child when they're not here to keep watch over the door," he agreed. *Can one of you come open the door? Yila's here*, he sent to the next room.

*I'll be right there*, Shen replied.

He was right about Yila's wardrobe. When Shen opened the door and took position beside it, Yila almost strutted in. She only had on a pair of high thigh boots, covering the vast majority of her legs. She smiled when she came in and went around the desk and stood beside him, looking down. *What?* he asked.

*I was just seeing if there was someone under there giving you a blowjob*, she replied in a bantering mindset loaded with sexual innuendo. Yila was a very, very salty woman, as many Grand Duchesses were. Sometimes he thought that the Grand Duchesses of the *Siann* were ten times worse than the players in the locker room back in his days playing football for Michigan. *Kumi's told me how modest you are when it comes to having sex in public*

*That's not modesty, that's regard for my neighbors, he replied lightly. Besides, Tim and Symone are the exhibitionists, not me.*

*I know, they always put on a good show, she replied with a bandy nuance.*

*I'm sure you're not here to gossip with me like a schoolgirl, Yila, he pressed.*

*You're just no fun today, Jason.*

*I have a lot of work to do, so getting to the point is best for both of us.*

*She chuckled audibly and sat on the edge of his desk, as Cybi often did, leaning on her hand. We concluded those negotiations with the Moridon. They accepted both of our offers, she relayed. We've also got in the first profits from the expanded laminated titanium sales to the Verutans and the Haumda.*

*You came all the way over here just to tell me that?*

*Kumi has more to talk to you about, but that's your business, she replied easily. I'm here discuss that second D league team you formed.*

*Jason laughed. You're talking to the wrong Karinne. Jyslin manages the team, not me. I have nothing to do with it at all. You wanna fight about it, you fight with her.*

*Oh, so she's the one trying to cut me out.*

*We're not disbanding the Jerama D league team, nit, he teased. Karis could use a D league team, and it would have been too hard to move the Jerama team, so Jyslin decided that a second team was the best option.*

*Well, then, I guess it won't be that hard to get my cut, since I'll be discussing it with Jyslin.*

*Jason laughed. I'll let you make that discovery yourself, he sent easily. Now, if that's all, you need to wiggle your cute butt back outside so I can finish this shit and get home before dark, he said, pointing at his panel.*

*I can do that, as long as I can come over for dinner tonight, she replied teasingly. And I get to bring Dara.*

*Why don't you just move that poor girl over here, he accused.*



*I'm trying, she replied with a grin. And given how happy Zach is to see her every time she comes over, I won't have to try much longer.*

*Sheesh, he sounded, which made her laugh. Out, you treacherous bitch. I have to finish this before my meeting in two hours.*

Yila did in fact wiggle her way out of the office, making sure to give Jason quite the look at her bare blue butt, but he was too distracted to appreciate both the view and her trying to show it off. He was determined to get home at a reasonable time today, so he had Chirk call Zaa and see if they could move their meeting up a couple of hours, so he could go straight from the Land Use Authority meeting to Zaa's meeting. He pored through the reports, then called Kovann for a detailed personal report on what was going on over on Exile. Kovann was a very, very handsome Faey man, almost as handsome as Jann Wilson, but his hair was snowy white instead of Jann's coal black. Kovann was like Dellin, a born administrator and manager, and he ran New Karsa with exacting precision since taking it over some three months ago. "It's definitely an unusual pattern," Kovann told him. "There have been two very large tribes of *Gruug* that live on the coast that have moved north and inland for no apparent reason. They're right on the eastern edge of the expanded farmland."

"No unusual wildlife activity? Nothing that would make them switch from fishing to hunting?"

"Nothing I've seen in any of the local reports, your Grace," he replied. "I have a survey team over at the eastern coast right now conducting sensor sweeps. We asked the Exiles on the island what might cause this, and they said that the *Gruug* sometimes leave a perfectly good territory for no logical reason. It might be spiritual or religious in nature, but I have people making sure it's not environmental."

"Good. You think we might need a fence?"

"At this moment, I don't think so, but we'll have to see. If the *Gruug* get more invasive or violent, a fence might be in order."

"Talk to Bunvar, have her draw up the plans for a fence, and I'll make sure she can deploy a team to build it at a moment's notice. In the meantime, I want anyone working within 20 kathra of confirmed *Gruug*

sightings in armor, Kovann. They are *very* good at throwing spears, and we don't have diplomatic contact with the *Gruug* on the continent."

"It might be necessary, your Grace."

"I know, and I'll leave it up to you. When you think it's necessary, you handle it. Read up on our report on how we talked with the *Gruug* on the island, but don't make any assumptions. They're a very unpredictable species."

"I'll take care of it, your Grace. I'll send you priority reports."

"Good man."

After getting through that, he had just enough time to get a quick bite to eat in the cafeteria before going up a floor to the Land Use Authority main office. It took up a fairly big chunk of the White House's second floor, since it managed all government and private land use, managed the parks and preserves, and was the governing office when new sections of the planet were opened to inhabitation. The authority's managing director was a middle-aged Faey man, Lirren Karinne. He was one of the first non-Generation Faey that had moved to Karis and had been a virtual godsend. He'd worked for 30 years at Merrane Macrotechnology as a manager, so he had excellent organizational skills that made him perfect for the difficult and complex work that came with managing the planet's land and its usage. Though Jason was the ultimate head of the department, Lirren was the one that actually ran it. Lirren also had something of a crush on Shen, so Jason gave him that moment of slightly awkward adjustment, then they got to the core of the matter. Jason went over Lirren's role as the newest member of the cabinet, which wasn't much since he already ran everything, mainly going over how his role was going to change with the promotion and going over how inter-cabinet politics operated. Lirren already interacted a great deal with Grik'zzk, Rund, and Bunvar, but he didn't have much contact with the other cabinet members. They spent nearly three hours discussing things, then he left Lirren to finish up his work for the day and headed back to his office to meet with Zaa.

That meeting only lasted about an hour. Zaa submitted a request for a timetable of Kimdori moving to the city, Jason accepted it without even looking at it, then they spent the rest of the time discussing the Haumda and

the Prakarikai. Both were on the cusp of applying for admission into the Confederation, and while Jason was glad to hear that Gau was leaning that way, he wasn't quite so enthusiastic about the Prakarikai. They were stiff, formal, easily offended, hard to amuse, held grudges, and were stuffy, and that made them and the Grimja stay at each other's throats almost constantly. The Grimja thought the Prakarikai took themselves *way* too seriously—which they did—where the Prakarikai thought the Grimja were uncouth, undisciplined boors whose only value was to remain in financial thrall to them to buy their excess food. The Prakarikai had a very unusual governing system, where the King and Queen ruled jointly, each having control of certain spheres of their empire's operations. The King was the one in command of internal matters, meting out law, managing security and the military, and governing their 23 systems, where the Queen was in command of exterior matters, such as diplomacy, trade, exploration, and intelligence. The Prakarikai as a race had a much higher than average number of people with telepathic or empathic ability, approaching 14%, so they were major players in the intelligence and espionage game in their sector. If the Prakarikai joined the Confederation, it was the Queen that they'd have to deal with in council meetings...which *sucked*. She was, by far, the more annoying of the two of them. The King Jason could almost like because he was polite, but the Queen was an arrogant little *bitch*.

*Little* being the operative word. Much like the Makati and the Beryans, the Prakarikai were a very, very diminutive race. The average Prakarikai was only about three shakra tall, or about three and a half feet or a bit over a meter, thin and very human-like in appearance, almost like the hobbits from the old *Lord of the Rings* stories with delicate four-fingered hands and very large eyes for the size of their faces. They didn't have large, hairy feet, however, but they did have pointed ears, like the Faey, and bronzed brown skin, like a human with a deep tan. They were very beautiful as a Faey or Terran would reckon such things, much more *elf-like* than the Faey due to their small size and pointed ears, but size was no indication of how dangerous those bastards could be. For one, Prakarikai were all ceremony and stuffiness on the outside, but on the inside, they had a nearly genetic need to take others down, to display their power and superiority in any way possible. Jason often thought that the Prakarikai suffered from the biggest case of racial inferiority complex ever witnessed in an organized society, for they were gaudy, flamboyant, and almost obnoxious in their demonstrations

of social, financial, or physical power. There was no such thing as *too much* in Prakarikai society. For another, Prakarika was a very heavy gravity planet, 3.28 standard, so while the Prakarikai may look slender and delicate, they were exceptionally tough and inhumanly strong little bastards. Their small size was a direct result of the extremely heavy gravity of their home planet. It was a standard in exobiology that the heavier the gravity, the shorter and smaller the life upon that planet tended to be to reduce the stress that gravity placed on the organism. It wasn't absolute, the Faey—a tall heavy gravity species—and the Beryans—a short lower gravity species, their home planet had .88 standard gravity—were a good example of that, but it was something of a predictable standard.

The last thing that made them very distasteful to many was that slavery was legal in their empire. It was used as a form of punishment for criminals, who served their sentences as slaves to prominent or wealthy individuals or groups. But they didn't practice slavery outside their own race, which was the only reason they were tolerated by their neighbors. One had to go all the way to Chezaa to find a society where slavery was legal and commonplace, which was a small independent planet on the very edge of the Grimja sector that served the slave needs of the next sector over, known to Karinne astrocartography as the Jirunji Sector.

After the meeting, Jason put his armor back on and headed home on the Marine corvette *Kovira*, stepping out onto the wharf in a fairly heavy downpour, a local shower not uncommon in the afternoon heat. It was out to sea by the time he got inside and got his armor off. Rann, Shya, and Aran burst into his room as he finished taking it off, sending excitedly to one another as they climbed up onto the bed, then Zachary followed. All four of them were bare-ass naked, probably having just finished taking off their armor, and Aran and Zachary were a little damp from coming over at the tail end of the rain *Hey boys, hey Shya*, Jason sent fondly as he started putting his armor on its stand without bothering to dress first. *What's going on?*

*Oh, not much, Daddy*, Rann replied. *We just got home from school a little bit ago.*

*I know, I was trying to get home around the same time*, he nodded. *Yila and Dara are coming over tonight*, he warned.

*I like Dara, she's funny, Aran sent with a giggle as he and Rann started jumping on the bed. Isn't Miss Aura coming too?*

*Yup, she's having dinner with us too.*

*And breakfast, Shya added innocently, which made Jason chuckle.*

*And breakfast, he agreed mildly.*

*That's good too, I really like Miss Aura, Aran added. She's really nice.*

*I know, that's why I enjoy having her come visit. Where are your sisters, and Danelle?*

*Dunno, probably over at Kyri's house, Aran replied. Doing girl stuff.*

*Silly, at your age, there's not much difference between girl stuff and boy stuff, Jason chided playfully as he closed the armory, causing the stand to retract back into the wall and the doors close.*

*Hey, I'm a girl, you know, Shya protested, looking at Aran and pointing at the part of her anatomy that obviously proved her declaration.*

*You're married to Rann and you're always with him, you're just like a boy.*

Shya looked decidedly insulted at that declaration, putting her hands on her hips and giving Aran a dirty look.

*Leave it alone, little missy, Jason sent privately, which made her glance at him. Since you're all here, we can go down to the beach. I need to relax a little after all the work I've been doing.*

He was quite content to just sit back on a lounge on the beach and relax a while as he watched his sons and Shya frolic a little bit, but it was also one of those pointed and nearly harsh lessons that he didn't live in Terran society anymore. His three sons and daughter-in-law frolicked around nude, which was normal for the strip, but about 100 katha down the beach, Tim was engaging in one of his favorite activities, torrid sex with the girls on the strip. He had Sheleese in his clutches on a beach blanket, and while they were pretty far away, it was also abundantly clear what they were doing. His children had seen that way too many times to take much interest in it, and since they were on private property, what they were doing was entirely legal under Imperium—and Karinne—law. The laws concerning sex in

public places focused mainly on such activities hindering or slowing the orderly flow of traffic or causing an undue disturbance of the peace, not that they were doing anything *indecent*. After all, one could see that in much better detail on any number of viddy channels just by surfing.

He got another lesson in that when some of the others got to the beach. Zora appeared with Sora, both of them nude, and Zora rather boldly sat in his lap rather than take a chair of her own, leaning back against him, and sending rather impishly, *this is much more comfortable than usual*.

*Someone wants to work a double shift tomorrow*, he threatened, smacking her playfully on the hip.

*Oh come on, stop being such a prude*, she protested. *Besides, get used to this, cause you're coming over to my house tomorrow. We're going to be spending quite a lot of time with me on top of you*, she added with a naughty tilt to her thought.

*Can't, me and Jys are double-dating with Tim and Symone tomorrow night. But the day after is fine*.

*Then it's a date*, she declared eagerly. *Sora, be careful, the waves are very high right now*.

'Kay Mommy, she answered as she waded into the surf, then was promptly knocked down by a powerful wave. She laughed aloud when she surfaced, then turned and ran back for shore when another wave approached. Jason wrapped his arms around Zora's waist rather than make her move, and she told him about her day up in Kosigi. She'd been very busy moving ships that day, mainly moving repaired ships off the docks and parking them in the void inside the moon, returning to a much safer job after serving as the navigator on a line vessel...and losing her arm. Jason did almost unconsciously run his hand up and down her right arm, which looked completely normal and no different than it had before, but now there was about C280,000 worth of highly advanced Karinne cybernetic technology under that soft, warm flesh, including a highly advanced biogenic command minicomputer than managed the interface between Zora's nerve endings and the machinery lurking within. *Does it feel the same?* she asked him.

*Almost. What feels like bones are a little, well, more pronounced, he replied. But it feels just like natural muscles and flesh otherwise. How does it feel on your side?*

*Like nothing at all is different, she replied, clenching her right hand into a fist. Jason could feel the artificial muscles under her flesh shift and ripple; they were placed almost exactly as the old muscles had been. It wasn't as efficient as a purely cybernetic arm, but it made it almost impossible to tell that she had an endolimb under that soft blue skin. At least until I pick something up. The onboard computer inside restricts the hand to my normal strength most of the time, but I can override it and use the full cyber strength if I have to. It's already come in handy.*

*How so?*

*I can open any jar in the fridge without effort, she replied playfully, which made him laugh. Outside of that, it's exactly the same, or at least that's how it feels. I have the same sensation, and it feels to me like it has the same weight as my old arm. Songa said that it's a prototype, she noted. That they're testing biogenic tech in cyber replacements.*

*Yup, you've got a biogenic crystal in that arm, so don't ever think you're leaving this house, woman, he declared, hugging her around her lower belly with his other arm.*

*So, I'm a half-Generation now? she asked teasingly.*

*Actually, something like that, he answered. That crystal is directly connected to your nervous system, and it can actually access more than just what your brain is telling your arm to do.*

*Really? Like what?*

*Well, Cybi said that she can't hear your thoughts, but she can get a very general sense of a strong emotional state through the crystal. It wasn't expected, but it is a rather interesting development. She and Songa are discussing implanting a biogenic crystal into the brain of a host and seeing what happens.*

*Isn't that just a little, I dunno, monstrous?*

*That's why they're not actually gonna do it, they're just discussing what might happen, he replied. Biogenic crystals can't interface with a non-*

*Generation like that or the Karinnes would have just done that rather than develop the Generations. But it is rather interesting that Cybi can sense more from you than just commands to your arm with your nervous system connected to that crystal.* That wasn't exactly a surprise to Jason, given it was based on Kimdori DNA, and he knew exactly what Kimdori could do. But it was a surprise that the crystals were exhibiting capability beyond established Karinne science and knowledge. The biogenic crystals in interfaces weren't *directly* connected to people implanted with a cyberjack, it connected to a micro-processor within the jack itself that acted as the input/output device between brain and computer, where Zora's biogenic control unit was what was directly connected to her nerve endings, connecting the biogenic crystal directly to her nervous system. The Karinnes had never explored directly interfacing a host with a crystal because even the Karinnes were very reluctant to alter the brain for fear that talent would be damaged, but they *did* have very advanced cybernetic technology. But they'd never used biogenics in their cybernetic prosthetics, they'd only used cybertronic computer technology, upon which biogenic computer architecture was based, and was considered obsolete in the modern age of moleculartronic computer technology.

*So, Cybi's spying inside my head, is she?* Zora chuckled.

*Of course not, you goof. She can just feel it when you express strong emotion, and she has a pretty good idea what emotion it is.*

*It proves she's not just a computer, since she can tell one emotion from another.*

*Exactly,* he agreed. *No computer could ever do that.*

*Mmm, Jason, just a little lower,* she sent purringly, patting the hand he had on her lower belly, just above her pubic hair.

*Stop flirting with me, woman,* he commanded as he smacked her where his hand was resting, which made her laugh brightly.

*Only if you give me a kiss,* she retorted, turning her head and sliding aside a little bit. He chuckled softly and did pay her fee.

*Hey now, you're gonna pay me for that, Zora,* Jyslin declared with feigned outrage as she and Symone came down onto the beach.



*Hey love, I didn't know you were home, Jason sent.*

*I can see that, dallying with Zora and keeping you from sensing me come home, she grinned.*

*How was your day?*

*Not bad. Me and Frinia lined up the first ten games for the Warriors next D league season, and Red Horn has the plans done for their practice facility and satellite offices. They're gonna build them in southeast Karsa, out near Lake Grinavi.*

*That's some pretty terrain out there, Jason sent with an approving nod. They're still playing in the Jeyalle, right?*

*Yah, we didn't change that. It's actually a really nice stadium, I took a tour of it the other day. Not as big as the KSC, but pretty damn nice.*

*And did Yila threaten to tear your hair out?*

*Jyslin laughed raucously. She tried, but she doesn't have big enough tits to tangle with me, she replied, a bit smugly. She wasn't happy, though.*

*She's missing out on money, of course she's unhappy, Jason observed nonchalantly.*

*I can't wait to see the Paladins play, Zora sent eagerly. I already have my season tickets!*

*I can't leave my girls hangin', Jyslin told her with a smile. That wasn't exactly the words she used, but that was how Jason's brain translated Jyslin's intent. He often tended to do that if she didn't frame her thought into a specific language, his own mind translating the intent of her thought into an English slang idiom. We should have everything set up for the opening of training camp on 10 Keda, then the first match is on Midsummer's Day. We're playing the Jerama Star Runners. Our first home match is the next takir, we're playing the Rigel Hammers.*

*And the money starts rolling in, Jason added.*

*We might make back what we paid for the team in about ten years, Jyslin laughed.*

*We will, that makes it a good investment, if you're looking long term,* Jason nodded.

*This seems completely unfair to me,* Jyslin mused, looking down at them with a finger on her chin. *I see the problem.*

*What?* Zora asked.

*I'm the one standing here while you're the one getting pawed,* she replied with a sly smile. *Up, that's my husband you're sitting on.*

*Push off, bitch, you get to sleep with him almost every night. I don't get pawed by him half as much as I'd like,* she protested, reaching back over her head and running her fingers through his hair. *Are you and Jason going to the first game on Jerama?*

*If I can get Aya to let me go,* Jason answered.

*So whipped,* Zora teased.

*I don't see you walking around off the strip without your armor either, bitch,* Jason retorted, which made her laugh.

Temika wandered into view with her two kids, Latoiya and Jack Junior, who joined Jason's kids and Shya in the packed sand where the waves were lapping the beach. Temika had been worn down by the others to the point where she would now go nude on the beach, but she still wouldn't dally with other men and wouldn't let Mike dally with any other woman, so in that respect she held very firmly to her Terran views. That fact was a bitter pill for a few men who lived around the strip, particularly Eraen, who had a huge crush on Temika. He thought she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen...and that was a pretty fair opinion. Temika was a very beautiful woman, her mixed heritage combining in her face and body in the most pleasing manner. Even her thick, frizzy hair was exotically beautiful, and since it was black, Faey men naturally went crazy over it. *Hey Mika,* Jyslin sent warmly. *Where have you been the last few days?*

*It's really busy in the office right now,* she answered, shrugging her shoulders and causing her generous breasts to bounce a little. Every girl on the strip secretly envied Temika because of those breasts, which Jyslin often remarked were entirely too perfect. It wasn't their size that Jyslin envied, it was their *shape*. Men admired their size, but Faey women admired their

ideal curves that complemented Temika's muscular, athletic frame to utter perfection. *And Mike's been just as busy at work, so we've been real tired when we get home here lately.*

*Kumi back home yet?*

*Nah, she and Yila are at the office,* she replied with an audible chuckle, then she altered her sending so only the three of them could hear her. *They're molesting Jalen, Kumi's secretary. Kumi does it all the time, but she's giving Yila a turn with him. Sometimes I wonder how that girl gets any work done. And how Jalen walks at the end of every day.*

*The only thing that she loves more than sex is making money, and when she's having sex in her office, she gets to do both,* Jason noted, which made all three women laugh.

*The only reason she hired him was what he could do for her when she closes the office door,* Temika nearly accused.

*Kumi probably doesn't bother to close her door,* Jason noted, which made Temika laugh in a slightly embarrassed way.

*That's the truth. She's both an exhibitionist and a slut.*

*You send that word like it's a bad thing,* Zora teased lightly.

*The whole lot of you Faey bitches are nothing but sluts,* she accused with a smile.

*And proud of it!* Zora retorted, which made Jason laugh.

*That's the beauty of being the dominant gender in our society, Mika, we get to chase the boys to our hearts' content,* Jyslin sent with a grin. *Now we just have to finish converting you to the dark side. We've got you halfway there. We'll unleash your inner slut, you mark my words.*

*Like hell you will,* Temika replied with another audible laugh.

About two hours later, spent with good company on the beach, Dara arrived from Tamiri and Yila joined them for dinner. Aura had already called to warn that she was running a little late, so they started without her. They ate in the dining room, and Dara was a tiny bit irked that Zachary wasn't there. He was eating dinner at home with Ilia. Yila complained about Jyslin's new D league team for a good ten minutes before she finally let it

go, just in time for Aura to come in, wearing an Exile short robe. She looked very happy. *I'm so sorry I'm late*, she apologized as she took a seat and accepted a glass of wine with a nod from Surin.

*It happens*, Jyslin smiled in reply. *So, what's got you so happy, Aura?*

She smiled beatifically. *I guess I can tell you*, she answered. *I'm pregnant.*

*That's fantastic!* Jyslin almost jumped out of her chair answering.

*Congratulations, Aura*, Yila added while Jason gave Aura a surprised look.

*I know, it was completely unexpected*, she said, giving him a demure smile. *I certainly wasn't trying. I realized I missed my period today, and I went to the local clinic to get tested. I'm carrying twins, two boys.* That was very rare in Faey biology. Identical twins weren't as uncommon among Faey as they were among Terrans, some 10% of all births, due to a quirk in Faey biology that caused the initial cell division in a *female* fertilized egg to completely separate, forming identical twins. Male eggs, on the other hand, were much less apt to completely separate, which caused a large disparity between female twins and male twins. The only thing rarer was fraternal twins, because Faey women virtually never released two eggs during a cycle. That made Raisha and Miyai *exceptionally* rare, and even more so in that they had different fathers. That was almost one in a million.

*So, is Jason the father?*

*He has to be, he's the only man I've slept with for the last month*, she replied. *I haven't had medical confirmation, they didn't do that, but it really couldn't be anyone else.*

*And two more closer to the goal!* Jyslin laughed brightly, then she opened her sending to nearly maximum power...and that was some *impressive* power. *Everyone, Aura is pregnant, and Jason's the father. Twin boys!* she announced, honest elation laced through her thought. Aura blushed a little as the response came back, people she didn't even know congratulating her via sending.

*I hope you're happy, Jason*, she sent privately.

*That's a really silly question, Aura, he replied. Of course I'm happy! We'll just have to have a talk about it after dinner. There are some things that'll change now, but not too many.*

*That's fine. Obviously, the first discussion will be about names.*

*I name one, you name one, he replied with a gentle smile.*

*That sounds completely fair to me.*

Jyslin acted almost silly during and after dinner, on the edge of embarrassing Aura with her exuberance, but she and the others gave Jason and Aura space when they sat out on the pool deck and discussed the pregnancy, and how her carrying his children was going to change her life a little bit. She would still have her job and very little would change concerning her position in his life as a friend and mistress—not uncommon in Faey society. Aya did involve herself, coming out to warn Aura that she was now part of the Ducal family by virtue of the fact that she was carrying Jason's sons, but mainly it was just him and her sitting on one of the benches on the side of the pool, holding hands as they discussed the change in both of their lives, and Aura's quiet joy that she was pregnant again. After losing her own child and her husband to a pestilence that struck the Exiled years before they rejoined the house, she was overjoyed that she had a chance to at least partially refill that hole in her heart, to have two more children to love and nurture. Nothing could entirely replace her lost child but having children with a man she admired deeply and considered a deep, true friend did much for her. As for Jason, he couldn't be happier that Aura was pregnant, that he wasn't just having one more child, but two. It didn't change her position in his life any more than it did the girls in the squad after they bore his other children, but it did make him feel closer to her through their shared blessing.

*The main thing is that you're completely sealed to the house, and to me, hon, Jason warned. You can never go back to Exile, at least not with our children. They have to stay here. They'll be in far too much danger as Generations anywhere but on Karis.*

*I don't want to move back to Exile, Jason. I enjoy living on Karis and I like my job, and I have you to keep me content until I find a husband, so I have a very good life here. I'll be training on the KS-27 passenger carrier*

*starting next takir, she announced proudly. What is there for me back on Exile? Doing almost nothing back in my old home? Flying a Stick for the farm on the mainland? I can do that here if I wanted to.*

*Good, but it's only fair that you understand that you're stuck with me now, woman, he smiled, which made her laugh aloud.*

*That sits fine with me, you silly man, she replied.*

*Now, as for my name, I think I'll name one of them Kevin, Jason sent, a hand on her cheek and his forehead against hers. It's always been one of my favorite Terran names.*

*Then I'll name the other Kaelan, which was one of the most famous and respected philosophers of the house, Aura replied. Do you like it?*

*I think it's a fine name, he answered, then he gave her a tender kiss. But don't think this news of yours is keeping you out of the pool house tonight.*

*She laughed abruptly, then pulled back enough to give him a darling smile. That thought never crossed my mind, silly, she replied. What better way to celebrate my blessing than in the arms of the man who gave it to me?*

*Then let's get right to that celebrating, he declared, which made her smile in anticipation as he stood up and then pulled her up by her hand. We'll talk more about it tomorrow.*

# Chapter 2

*Kaira, 31 Demaa, 4401 Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 23 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 31 Demaa, 4401, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

It was almost an eerie parallel to his own youth...just with what he would have considered a fantastical spin when he was that age.

Jason wasn't surprised very much that it was Zachary that was expressing an interest in sports before any of his other children. In many ways, his raven-haired son was most like he'd been when he was a kid, for he was sober and reserved even as a young child, mainly due to the fact that they'd moved around so much. Life on a military base was very different than civilian life, even for the families of the military servicemen. Everyone was from a different place, people came and went regularly, and it was hard to form friendships when everyone knew that odds were someone would be gone in six months. Sports were huge for military brats on bases, giving a sense of continuity, something that *didn't* change even where everything else might, the game being the same whether it was being played in Korea, Japan, Germany, or Alaska. Jason had played a lot of baseball and football on base, had played soccer off base with his friends when he was older, and his father had gotten him started on sports when he was five years old. He'd played his first tee ball game the day after his 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, six being the minimum age for tee ball in the base league. He'd play catch with his father when he was back from his sorties, then go inside to practice piano while his mother made dinner.

It was a warm and glorious afternoon on the beach. Jason had blown off work after 48 new reports landed in his in-box after lunch, making him just

bail from everything to take the rest of the day off...which he spent reading Miaari's final intelligence reports with his back against his tree in the back yard. The Parri *shaman* was right in how it made him feel when he was out there with it. The tree had a palpable effect on him, calming him down, relaxing him, making him feel...happy. It was *his* tree, after all, there to see to his needs according to the *shaman*, and all it asked in return was a little love and attention. He'd also asked it not to grow so big, maybe a little self-consciously, but there were no indications yet that the tree was listening. It already completely covered his, Myleena's, and Tim's houses with its canopy and covered half of the barracks, Maya's, and Yana's houses, providing almost constant dappled shade that was actually quite pleasant. The canopy of the tree was very wide, but not very thick, allowing sunshine to slip through the many small gaps between the golden leaves. He'd gotten through most of the first report, about Consortium activity and future plans revolving around the colonization force, when the kids all got home from the strip. He'd given up on the report to hang out with his kids and some of the other kids on the strip, spending some actual time just relaxing and having fun.

Kids were very good at it, and good for it, and he was so lucky to be blessed with the kids he had, and more to come.

They were developing much as he'd expected when they were younger, watching their personalities emerge. Aran was *definitely* going to be a scientist, he was extremely smart, and here lately he'd started expressing interest in learning. That had been his problem before, a lack of desire or motivation, but that was understandable in such a young child. He had more important things to do than wonder *what if*. Sora was just getting more and more beautiful, but she was also demonstrating her own intelligence. She was smarter than she looked, smarter than she acted, and it was starting to become apparent. Kyri was still a little smug and overbearing, but that had toned down a little thank goodness. But despite that, she was a very loving and affectionate girl, and she did love her brothers and sisters even if she did tease them more than a little, more than she should. And Zachary was turning into quite the calm and confident little man, Ilia's teachings deeply ingrained into him. He was also the most athletic of the children—as long as riding hoverboards and such didn't count—which just might be why he liked Dara so much. Both of them had some shared interests. Zachary loved



baseball, football, soccer, batchi, and had started watching *shiziki* now that it was being played on planet. He may not understand all the rules of the games, but he liked to watch them.

And that led to this, Zachary's first milestone of growing up, playing catch with his Dad. They were out on the beach as Jason taught Zachary how to throw a baseball, and after several initial clumsy attempts, Zachary resorted to his power, picked up the ball from the sand, and hurled it at Jason with surprising force. Zachary's telekinetic abilities were slightly stronger than Kyri's, the strongest of the three kids that had expressed them so far. Jason had to laugh as he caught the ball, giving Zachary an amused look. *[Stop cheating, little man. You won't learn how to throw it if you're using your talent.]*

*[But it's easier.]*

*[You can't do everything with your talent, silly. And if you ever want to play real baseball, you'd better learn how to play by their rules. TK isn't allowed to be used in a baseball game. It's cheating.]*

That was a real rule, instituted into Major League Baseball last year when those two Faey women had managed to get onto the teams. Since some Faey were telekinetic, and there were some, not many but some, who had enough telekinetic strength to affect the trajectory of the ball, they put that rule in to make sure a secret TK wasn't cheating using her power. They also had strict anti-telepathy rules, in almost every major sport on Terra, and they employed Imperial listeners at rather stiff fees to be there on the field to make sure nobody was using their talent to get the upper hand. That had been a big scandal in the NFL, when the New York Jets secretly hired Faey "fans" to eavesdrop on the surface thoughts of opposing coaches and warn the Jets coaches what they intended to do. The commissioner threw the book at the Jets, suspending the entire coaching staff for two years and imposing a massive fine on the owner. No Terran sport allowed its athletes to communicate telepathically, to preserve the purity of the game as it was originally envisioned. The IBL also employed listeners, but mainly to make sure the batchi players didn't attack each other with talent. That was a white flag offense, which was like a red card in soccer or an ejection in most other sports. Batchi players were allowed to communicate with one another and

their coaches using talent, but they weren't allowed to use it against their opponents.

After nearly an hour of Zachary learning how to throw with his arm, Jason did play some TK catch with him, letting him practice in a structured environment...and that was how it was so much different from his own childhood. If he'd been using his mind to toss a baseball around with his dad back when he was a kid, he'd wake up from the dream not long after that. *[You're getting pretty good at this, pips,]* Jason complemented as he caused the baseball to orbit his body several times, maybe a little gaudily, then lobbed it back at his son. Zachary caught it with his power and did the same thing, causing the ball to circle around him a few times without slowing down before he sent it back.

*[Mommy makes me practice an hour a day,]* he answered. *[On top of the practice I get with Miss Ayuma after lunch at school every day.]*

*[Well, it's certainly paying off,]* he communed with approval shivering through his thought.

*[Throwing a baseball was harder than I thought it'd be. I thought it'd be as easy as tossing a ball with a batchi stick like me and Dara do.]*

*[That's an entirely different set of mechanics,]* Jason chuckled. *[The batchi stick does most of the work.]*

*[Hey, can anyone get in on this game or what?]* Myleena asked as she bounced down the stairs and onto the beach. She was wearing a pair of workout shorts and a halter, and unlike Jyslin, her pregnancy had yet to start showing.

*[Hey Myli, nice to see you actually took a break from work,]* Jason smiled.

She laughed aloud. *[I'm playing hooky, same as you are,]* she replied with a wink. *[Just got back from the annex for a scheduled exam. My pregnancy is right on schedule, everything's just fine. I go back in two takirs for the next one. I think I'll start showing by then,]* she predicted, patting her flat blue belly lightly. *[Yana home yet?]*

Jason glanced out to sea when he saw a flash of light, then realized it was a boat far offshore reflecting sunlight. *[She's still at work,]* he

answered.

*[Okay. I need to catch her as soon as she gets home, we have some things to talk about.]*

*[Like?]* he asked as Zachary lobbed the ball in Myleena's direction when she reached them. She held out her hand and caused it to slow to a stop directly over it, smiled, then launched it at Jason with some speed by pushing her hand forward.

*[Like all the special things she had to do when she was carrying Kyri, since Kyri was expressed in the womb,]* she answered.

*[You've been sensing something already?]* he asked in surprise.

*[Not yet, but I don't have any doubt that I will,]* she replied with a slightly smug smile as she put a very gentle hand on her stomach, almost unconsciously. *[I'm way stronger than Yana, and Kyri's a good example of what we should expect from Siyara. Just stronger,]* she communed victoriously.

*[So competitive,]* he accused, then he chuckled ruefully as he sent the ball to Zachary.

*[You're pretty good at this, Zach,]* Myleena communed approvingly as he sent the ball to her.

*[Thanks, Aunt Myleena. Mommy makes sure I practice it.]*

*[Any movement on the Danelle front?]* Jason asked.

*She's still trying, but no luck yet,* Myleena switched to sending, glancing over at Zora and Min as they came down onto the beach with their kids. Sora and Zara were best friends among the kids on the strip *Hey guys.*

*Hey. Jason, can I talk to you a minute?* Zora asked, her sending sober.

*Sure thing, Zora. Min, take over for me, just watch out. Myli cheats.*

*I do not!* she protested.

Zora took his hand and walked with him towards Dahnai's guest house on the edge of the strip. *I may need your help with something.*

*What?*

*Oren*, she sent with disgust. *Oren...he was proof that it was technically correct to say that Faey almost never divorced. Oren was Zora's husband, who lived on Draconis with their son, and the two of them had something of a volatile relationship. They were proof that even a telepathic pair bond could decay over time if not renewed, for that was almost exactly what happened to them. They married just after Zora began her conscription, but after they'd had their son, mainly a marriage of convenience to give Oren and her son Tenn access to Marine services. When Zora entered the house and moved to Karis, Oren had refused to come, wanting to stay in his very good job on Draconis. Zora had acquiesced and continued to help support Tenn by sending him to the best schools—Tenn was exceptionally intelligent and showed promise—but the time and distance between Zora and Oren had decayed their relationship. They still liked each other, and could probably repair their relationship if they compromised a little, but the simple fact that Zora was dedicated to the house and Oren was dedicated to his career as a young executive at 2M had caused them to drift apart. Oren was a nice fellow, smart and friendly, but he was devoted to his promising career. To hear Zora send his name with abject disgust laced through it meant that things had gone south in a hurry.*

*What happened?*

*He's finally asked to conclude the marriage*, she replied, squeezing his hand a little. In Faey society, that *was* a divorce.

*He still won't budge?*

*Not a tikra*, she frowned. *He just can't get it through his head that he'd have a much better career if he just moved here.*

*That's not much of a surprise.* The Kimdori kept an eye on Oren since he was connected to Zora, and that fit everything he already knew. Oren was a minor executive in their accounting division, and he had aspirations to finish his career on the board. While it was a good thing to have a goal and have some loyalty to one's job and employer, Oren had repeatedly turned down offers by Jason himself to bring him over to Karinne Spatial Technologies, the Karinne house-owned corporation that built all their engines and spatial devices. Kimdori had touched him to find out why, and it was because he had an irrational prejudice against the Karinnes. He was fanatically loyal to the concepts of the Imperium and had seen them as a

renegade house with which he would not associate. Now that they'd split from the Imperium, Jason had a feeling that Oren didn't even want to be *married* to a woman he felt was a traitor to his Empress. Zora didn't know that Jason knew that much about her personal life, and he wasn't about to tell her. That was her private business, and while it had the potential to affect the security of the house, he could be discreet about what he did know. *What about Tenn?*

*That's where I might need your help. I'll give in on concluding the marriage, but Oren wants to sever all my rights to Tenn's welfare.*

*Good luck with that, you're the woman,* Jason sent soberly. Women had a major advantage in the very rare custody cases that came up. A child was considered the *woman's* child in all legal matters, where fathers had very few rights.

*Yes, but Tenn's been living with his father at least on paper for the last five years. Dracora Polytechnical is only about 20 kathra from Oren's apartment, and he stays with his father on weekends.*

*What does Tenn want to do?*

*Exactly what he's been doing,* she answered. *He wants to finish at DPA and then get into the Imperial Primary Institute. He's got the scores, and he knows you can get him the recommendation.*

*Easily,* he nodded. The Imperial Primary Institute was one of the most elite primary schools in the Imperium, where being a noble wasn't enough to get a student in. Like the Xerian Telepathic Academy, it was *ability* that got one into the IPI, but it did take at least a couple of connections. Since the school was so elite, competition to get in was fierce, and candidates who had the academic scores and passed the entrance interview often needed a recommendation from someone with political connections with the Imperial government.

*I'll talk to Dahnai about it the next time I have her on a private comm,* he promised. *I'll also tell her that you're alright with the conclusion, but Oren's not cutting you out. So, are you really okay with the conclusion?*

*I'll get over it,* she replied, giving him a wan smile. *We haven't seen each other face to face in five years, Jason. I guess it's time for me to stop hoping he'll come home and move on.*

*People sometimes drift apart, Zora, and there's nobody to blame. It does just happen sometimes, he told her compassionately. Especially in long distance relationships.*

*I know. Ever since I moved here, he's just gotten more and more distant. At first, he hated the fact that I couldn't really tell him much, you know, house secrecy. Then when you started offering him jobs, he got really defensive about staying on Draconis. The last few months, he's been actively hostile to me when we talk, and now he drops this on me.*

*Well, look at it this way, hon. Your life won't change much after the marriage is concluded, he told her. And I'll make sure Tenn has what he needs to fulfill his dream. It's Oren that's the one that's missing out. Not you, not Tenn. Just him. If he wants to be that way, then so be it. Not everyone has what it takes to live on Karis, Zora. You do, but this more or less proves that Oren doesn't.*

*She gave him a grateful look. Thanks, babes. You're always so good to us.*

*You're one of my best friends and the mother of my daughter, Zora. Of course I'm gonna be good to you, he told her, then he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek before they turned around and started back. Now, it's going to be a thousand credits an hour, that's my basic fee for fixing a friend's problems, he sent urbanely, which made her snap a surprised look at him. Then there's travel expenses, meals, bribes, he added, ticking off his fingers as she began to laugh.*

*Dream on, you silly man you, she grinned. You start charging me for that, I'll start charging you for the food you eat when you come over to my house.*

*Don't get into a charging war with me, woman. I have an accounting department.*

*She laughed brightly.*

*He squeezed her hand again. And the last thing you're doing tonight is moping around the strip. I'll come over and babysit Sora tonight, and you go track down a few friends and go out tonight. Go to bars, go to clubs, get totally smashed, do things you'd never do sober, and wake up in some dark*

*alley tomorrow morning with no idea how you got there or why you're naked.*

She burst out into uncontrollable laughter, then gave him a bright smile. *You know what, babes? That's a damn good idea*, she agreed, then she turned her head. *Hey Min, you busy tonight?*

*Not particularly.*

*Cool. Go round up the girls, we're all going out tonight and getting very, very drunk.*

*Now that sounds like a good way to spend the evening*, she replied impishly.

Zora and Min hurried off as soon as they got back to the kids, leaving Sora and Zara with Jason. They got tired of watching Zachary play catch and dragged him off to go swimming, leaving him and Myleena to sit on some loungers and keep a passive eye on them. *[What was that all about?]*

*[Personal business for Zora. Forgive me if I don't go into it.]*

*[Enough said. Now that you're in more of a working mood, I do have some info to pass along.]*

*[Shoot.]*

*[I've got word from my old contacts back in Black Ops that the Imperial R&D department has almost reverse engineered Consortium engines,]* she told him. Since those engines were Consortium technology, Jason hadn't throttled releasing that data to the Academy. *[They've already developed an augmentation to their power plants to power the engines enough to remove the relativity delay. Consortium striated isn't much stronger than current Imperium metaphased power plants.]*

*[They figured it out faster than I expected,]* he answered with a grunt, rubbing his chin with his finger as he thought. *[If they break the relativity barrier so much faster than anyone else, it might upset the balance of power in the Confederation.]*

*[I'll leave the political shit to you, Jayce. Griza told me that they're about two takirs from testing a prototype engine and power upgrade that'll let them jump in real time.]*

He leaned back, his mind working through what that would mean. With the Imperium able to jump in real time, it would give them a major advantage in exploration and annexation over in the P quadrant. It would also make the Imperium a viable threat to the most distant empires in the sector cluster...which might actually motivate some of them to join the Confederation. But the main issue was going to be exploration. If the Imperium could jump their scout ships in real time, they'd be able to beat everyone else when it came to exploring the tracts of space around their holdings in the P quadrant.

The Imperium wasn't the only one trying to reverse engineer Consortium technology to break the relativity barrier. Every empire in the Confederation was doing the same thing, and in the case of the Shio and the Colonists, they were engaged in a cooperative effort, their scientists joined together and the two governments sharing the expense of research to give the two smaller empires the same resources as the larger ones. Jason had estimated that it would take another year for any of them to manage to do it, but the Faey scientists over at R&D had exceeded his expectations. Then again, Faey technology was the most closely related to Consortium technology, so it wasn't too much of a shock that they'd managed to do it.

An Imperium armed with warships that could jump in real time would definitely do one thing...make interdictors *very* popular, and perhaps even motivate the other empires into accepting Jason's Stargate proposal. Jumping in real time would do the Imperium no good as a means to execute a surprise attack if every populated system in the sector cluster was interdicted.

From a purely military perspective, Jason figured that he might have to put a hand in. The war with the Consortium had been primarily defensive, where they hadn't *needed* ships that jump in real time, but the upcoming conflict with the Syndicate would be *offensive*, taking place away from their territory. Maybe...maybe it was time for the Karinnes to help the other empires along in their research. After all, other empires being able to jump in real time was no real threat to the Karinnes, even more so since Consortium technology was unable to overcome the interdictors to jump in. Unless the Karinnes wanted to tow everyone else's ships everywhere, they might have to start thinking of helping the others develop the engines.



At least up to a point. He could let them do it on their own for about two years, but at that point, he might have to surreptitiously give them some help to finish so they'd have time to refit their ships with the new engines. The Karinnes had to move subtly in this new order, where it couldn't appear that they were showing any favoritism, but Jason also had to keep the peace between the empires in the Confederation and beyond. He was now playing the same game as the Kimdori, doing what he could to mitigate the aggressive tendencies of the various empires in the sector cluster, to create a lasting peace that would stretch well into the time when the Consortium and the Syndicate were just footnotes in the galactic history book.

He wasn't the only one doing that, thank God. The Colonies were part of the Confederation, but they were very much a moderating influence on the more expansionistic members, like Dahnai and Assaba. The Grand Master and Magran were a voice of peace among the rulers, always advocating the most non-violent path possible...but also knowing when the mantle of peace had to be laid down and an iso-neutron rifle picked up. And Jason was hopeful that Kreel would bring the same voice to the council, since the Grimja were of a similar mindset. They weren't aggressive or expansionistic, but they also weren't afraid to fight when the need was there.

*[I'll have to talk to Zaa about that,]* he communed. *[We'll have to handle that carefully.]*

*[Like I said, I'll leave the political shit to you, Jayce,]* she told him with a sly smile.

*[I should make you sit in my chair for a few days,]* he threatened.

*[Good luck with that,]* she communed with an audible laugh. *[You're even busier than I am now.]*

*[Yeah, and I'll have to do something about it. It's literally become too much work for me to do alone,]* he admitted. *[I might actually cry when I see my inbox in the morning, given I blew off the entire afternoon to study those final reports Miaari gave me.]*

*[Anything important in them?]*

*[Not from your perspective. It's mostly that political shit you want to avoid,]* he teased. *[She said she sent you the technology report.]*

*[Yeah, she's pretty good for a desk jockey when it comes to analyzing how the change in the technology curve will affect the sector cluster,] she told him. [And if the Kimdori are right about Syndicate technology, it looks good for us.]*

*[Only if we can build enough ships to take away their overwhelming fleet size advantage, and in both ways. Size and numbers,] he noted. [That reminds me, I need to check on the latest Gladiator results.]*

*[I got 'em just before I left work, they look good. They finished the refit to accommodate a jacked rigger, so now it'll just be installed with the next scheduled maintenance on the rotation. You planning ahead?]*

*[You saw the results for those jacked rigger tests,] he nodded. [I can see what's coming. Jacked riggers and fighter pilots are going to become standard in the KMS. It's only a small step below a merge. And it'll go even beyond that. When the house members see just what a jack can do, I can see a whole lot of them having it implanted just for the convenience of it.]*

*[I wonder if Kyva will do it.]*

*[The instant she's sure the jack won't damage her talent, yes,] he predicted. [If it makes her a better rigger, she'll do it in a heartbeat.]*

*[That's true,] Myleena agreed with a nod.*

*[I could see it on her face when she got out of her rig after going against those jacked riggers. She didn't expect them to give her that much trouble.]*

*[They barely lasted ten seconds.]*

*[Which is about five seconds longer than any other rigger not in the KBB or the Red Warriors has lasted against her in a wargame,] Jason communed, pride for Kyva bleeding into his thought. [She could see how it helped those riggers, taking away that tiny delay between seeing and acting. When it comes to rigger combat, it's like fighter combat. Life and death can be measured in how many milliseconds it took the pilot to react. Faster is faster, and in that world, speed is life.]*

*[Yeah, I know. I've had my combat training, Jayce, and I've seen real action,] she grinned. [If you don't recall, I was leading that combat team that pulled your ass out of Scotland.]*

*[You're right, I don't remember.]*

*[Oh yeah,] she mused mentally. [Songa said that wasn't unusual, to suffer memory loss of events before and after a traumatic brain injury. Guess we can blame that head injury on you being such a dinkus now,] she winked.*

*[I pay your salary, woman,] he warned, which made her laugh.*

*[Jason,] Songa's voice called over the biogenic network. [Jason, are you there?]*

*[I'm here, what's going on, Songa?] he replied, casting his thought into the network. For her to be using that, it had to be important. Songa, like other high-ranking members of the house, had a biogenic relay in their comm that would let them use the network to get in touch with him. Hers was installed in her office vidlink, telling him that she was at the annex.*

*[Commander Taggart is awake and responsive, and we're running the initial tests now. You wanted me to tell you.]*

*[Outstanding. I'll be right over. I want to see him.] Aya, get someone to the dock, I'm going to the Medical Annex. And the kids are going to need someone to watch them, they're swimming. Captain Bori, warm up the corvette.*

*At once, your Grace, Captain Bori answered.*

*[Wanna come?] he asked Myleena.*

*[Nah, I'll just read the report,] she replied. [Besides, I wanna be here when Danelle gets home. I wanna surprise her.]*

*[She shouldn't be much longer, Maya has her and they're in town shopping.]*

*[I know, so go ahead and go. Say hi to Songa for me.]*

After getting his armor on, he met Aya and Shen at the dock, and they boarded the Marine corvette *Eluri* for the five-minute trip over to the Medical Annex. They always landed on the roof of the building, and the size of the corvette required a pilot with some actual skill, since there was virtually no extra room up there. Karinne translation engines made that fairly easy, and the corvette's pilot proved to be up to the challenge,

disembarking the Grand Duke and his two guards with the corvette's skids right on the corvette landing lines at the very edges of the platform, then taking off to hover just above and to the east of the building to clear the platform in case an emergency medical dropship had to land. Songa met him at the elevator, carrying a handpanel and wearing her medical coat, which was a pleasing shade of blue. "How is he?"

"Complaining already," she replied with a gentle smile as they entered the elevator, which was big enough to hold two patient gurneys side by side. The roof was often used for emergency patient reception. "They've finished the jack viability test, and the jack is fully operational. They're giving him the Baelin-Anarin test now." The Baelin-Anarin test, named for its creators, was a test that measured basic telepathic power. It was administered by a psychologist, a Faey doctor that specialized in neurology as it pertained to telepathic and psionic power. Psychologists were medical doctors who studied telepathy the way other scientists studied geology, or biology, or any other major scientific field, studying the mechanics of psychic powers and the beings that possessed them.

Songa led them to a private hospital room with bright colors and a large window, on one of the upper floors of the annex. Commander Justin Taggart was propped up on a comfortable bed, his eyes closed and being attended by a middle-aged Faey man wearing the pattern blue medical coat. The Faey man had reddish-gold hair with a streak of blue in it over his left ear, premature graying for a Faey. The man was fairly handsome, and he had his hand on the side of Justin's face. Justin had a cloth cap over his head, which was shaved, and the shiny metal rim of the cyberjack was prominent behind his left ear, anchored to the bone and about halfway between the bottom and top edges of Justin's ear. Justin's interface would fit over that jack, would plug into it actually, the interface serving as the primary control computer where a tiny computer inside the jack itself would serve as the basic input/output controller. Justin's right arm was in a sling, since it was effectively paralyzed by his brain damage, and his right leg was covered over by a blanket. In the corner was a hoverchair for Justin to use, since his right leg was also paralyzed. They were quiet as the doctor conducted his examination, which took about five more minutes. The Faey man opened his eyes, which were a red color not far from Myleena's, and smiled "I'm finished, Commander, you can lean back," he said.

“What’s the prognosis, doctor?” Songa asked.

“He has lost no telepathic power at all, Commander,” he replied with a smile. “And I can find no trace that his subconscious defenses have weakened in any way. It’s my opinion that the jack did no harm to his talent.”

“I’d like a formal report as soon as you can write it,” Songa said. “Along with your data.”

“I have my data compiled already, doctor, so I’ll have the report ready for you in a couple of hours.”

“That’s a relief,” Justin said with a sigh, flopping his head back onto the pillow.

Jason chuckled and advanced over, leaning over the bed as the doctor on the other side stood up, then quietly left the room after a reassuring pat on Justin’s shoulder and smiled down at him. “I think I’m going to put you in for a medal, Justin. It took some bravery to volunteer for the jack implantation.”

“I didn’t have all that much to lose, your Grace,” he replied with a slight smile. “The operation is what’s going to really count.”

“We’re on schedule for that, Justin,” Songa called. “In four days, we’ll be ready to perform the operation.”

“That will give you some time to get some jack assimilation training under your belt,” Jason told him. “It does take some training to use that fancy body jewelry you have now.”

Justin chuckled. “I can feel it, like little fingers touching the edge of my mind,” he said, reaching up and touching the small rim of the jack.

“That’s the controller chip in the jack initializing,” Songa told him as she came over. “It’s conducting its handshake protocol with your mind, so it can build a basic map of your brain that it uploads to any interface that plugs to your jack, sort of like your mental fingerprint that computers plugged to your jack will need to know how best to talk to you. That’s one of the main functions of the processor in the jack. The sensation will pass when it finishes.”

“Something like a gestalt imprinting,” Jason mused, looking at her.

She nodded. “Some of the computer to brain communication protocols we used for the jacks comes from the research the Karinnes conducted on gestalts. The controller in the jack is adapting itself to Commander Taggart’s unique brain architecture, to maximize data transfer and interface ability, so it can communicate with the subject without causing confusion or sensory echoes.”

“Won’t that change when the operation is over?” Justin asked.

“Very perceptive, Justin. Yes, it will, a little bit, and the jack will have to re-initialize once the damaged areas of your brain are repaired. That’s why we’re going to turn it off and reset it before the tissue transplant operation. But what you learn in jack assimilation training before the operation won’t change.”

“Huh. Does it need batteries?”

Jason chuckled. “Actually, the jack’s processor chip runs off the bio-electricity your own body generates,” Jason answered. “So no batteries.”

“And I’ll be using this in my fighter?”

“We’ve already refitted your fighter to run with a jack,” Jason told him. “So most of what you see on your screens will be fed directly into your mind. That’s where the jacks are different from interface control, Justin. Interface is one way, from you to the fighter. The jack allows two-way communication.”

“That’ll give me an edge, your Grace,” he mused after a moment. “I’ll be able to react faster.”

“We think it will, but we’re not mandating jack implantation for our pilots. That’s too personal a decision for us to force it on them,” he said.

“Anyone who does this job and takes it seriously will do it, your Grace,” he declared. “An edge is an edge, and that might be what saves your ass out there in a dogfight.”

“We’ll let the pilots make that decision. Now, I think you need to rest a bit after coming out of that coma, so I’ll be back in a little while. I know I do every time I come out of one.”

“Then stop putting yourself in positions where we have to induce them,” Songa chided.

“I’ve had that done to me three times. Three,” he said, holding three fingers up at her.

Up in Songa’s office, he did knock out a bit of work he had, which was talking with her about the upcoming trip to Kimdori Prime and the radiation protocols she’d generated for those going, both those who had resistance and those who didn’t. Jason would have to decontaminate before they left Kosigi after coming back so he didn’t pose a hazard to others, and they’d have a lot of radiation they’d have to clean up from the ship that went there. Dellin would handle ship decontamination, he already had a dock ready for it, but the Medical Service would be the ones to handle decontamination and post-visit physicals for everyone who went to make sure they were healthy. Visiting a place like Kimdori Prime was not as simple as jumping over, having tea, and jumping back. The deadly radiation in the system required extensive preparations before the trip and procedures to follow afterward.

He visited with Justin again for about an hour, then he headed home. The kids were all engaged in other activities, and he had a meeting of the Confederate Council in about an hour anyway, so he gritted his teeth and worked through his inbox in the time he had, mainly just picking through the 109 items sitting there waiting for him for the interesting ones. Two of the interesting ones he went through, both from Red Horn Construction, and both concerned his life personally. The first was the confirmation that the renovation of his house would begin literally the minute he got on the corvette to head to Kosigi for his trip to Kimdori Prime. They promised they could get it done in five days, so he would leave the house as it was and come back to his larger three story house, which would add 4 bedrooms to accommodate his current and future children. They would take off the roof, build a third floor, move his office, his bedroom, and Rann and Shya’s bedrooms to the third floor, then renovate the second floor.

The second annoyed Dahnai a little bit, but that was her problem. With her getting her new private island retreat on Karis, Jason decided that her house on the strip was just too prime of real estate to sit virtually unused. Red Horn was going to pick up the entire house and move it to the island as

a “pool house” of sorts, seating it on a new foundation, and the land up by the edge of the fence would be repurposed. He would offer the land to Aura, since she was going to be the mother of two of his children—more like Aya all but demanded it—to put his children within the strip and inside the protection of the fence. Aura didn’t know about it yet, he wanted to surprise her with it, and surprise her with the option to have her new house built to *her* specifications, so long as it fit on the parcel. The pool and other amenities they’d built for Dahnai would still be there, but Aura wouldn’t have exclusive rights to some of it. The huge pool they built for her would be made a communal pool, since not every girl on the strip had a pool, but the large garden behind the house would be Aura’s. Dahnai was the kind that considered what was hers *hers*, and thus she was not happy when Jason told her about his intentions. She seemed to forget that Jason never gave her that house to keep, but had it built for her to *use*. The land and the house were still his.

He was about to call Aura when he received an incoming message. Meya’s lovely face appeared on a holo in front of his desk. She was sitting in the command chair of a scout ship, probably the *Scimitar*, leaning back with her legs crossed demurely. “Hey babe,” she said with a smile. “We got some news.”

“You have good timing, I was about to call someone else. What’s up?”

“We’ve finished the initial installation at RG-118-3A,” she told him. “We’ve got the modular buildings down and the perimeter shield up, and I’ve already gotten back the initial sensor sweeps.”

“And?”

“And this planet is like *perfect*,” she said seriously. “Every scan we get back shows the same thing, almost everywhere. Perfect climate, perfect soil chemical composition, perfect ecosystem, perfect atmospheric composition. This planet will make Exile look like a fuckin’ barren rock once we get farms going,” she said with a slight smile. “Is the colonizing convoy still on schedule?”

“Last I heard,” he replied. “How’s Myra’s side of it going?”

“Slower, since her team has to do more detailed sensor scans of the ore deposits,” she replied. “She’ll probably have the initial results finished in



five or six hours. But I know she's got her advance outpost up and running. She's probably waiting to check in until she has sensor logs to upload. Want me to go ahead and check planet two?"

"Yeah, and since Myra's slow and lazy, she gets to run the orbital sweeps of the outer planets. You can get planet one after you finish at planet two."

She grinned. "Sounds like a plan to me, babe," she replied. "How do you want me to handle the sentient race on planet two?"

"Avoid all contact, and that means run your sensor sweeps at night over their territory, so they don't see the sensor dropships," he replied. "And put some surveillance on them so we can study them from a distance, mainly for the xeno-sociology department."

"Can do. The passives we put on the Rakarri were a big help." The Rakarri were the canoid species native to QMC-202-2, which looked vaguely like bipedal coyotes. They'd observed them from a distance using cameras before sending in a telepath who lifted their language from a lone traveler, and it was Meya herself who had done the initial contact. She had met with the king of their largest nation, explained a few things to them, then offered to trade period-quality textiles and raw materials, like smelted iron, for their foodstuffs. The king had taken almost two weeks to make a decision and had agreed. Rakarri vegetables were still being analyzed by the agriculture department to determine the ecological impact they may pose to the ecosystems of other planets, should they start growing wild outside of the farm areas, but the initial reports he'd gotten on them was that they were compatible with all species within the house, and were quite tasty for that matter.

The Rakarri themselves were highly intriguing. They were very much like the Terrans without being human, for they were creative, resourceful, highly curious, very social, but they weren't unified. They were still in their monarch age, for every organized nation on their planet was a monarchy, and there were some wars on their planet between kings that didn't like each other. But their culture and their history and their science demonstrated that they were *extremely* intelligent. For one, Dahnai had been right that their arrival had been noticed by several hundred Rakarri astronomers who had telescopes powerful enough to see the Merrane ships

in orbit around planet 3. And many of them had correctly discerned that those ships were not natural, that they were *built*, that there was someone out there with such technological sophistication that they had built iron boats capable of moving through space. They knew what space was, for that matter, and they had highly advanced mathematicians and physical scientists, clustered primarily in the largest kingdom on their planet. Their society was just at the beginning of its industrial age, they were like Terra in the 1820's, but they also had scientists that were conducting research into atomic theory. Their physicists were closer to the Terran science of the 1930's, they just hadn't made the same technological advances that the Terrans had.

The Rakarri were a race that Jason would like to see in the house, but he would adhere to the same rules he'd set for Dahnai. He would leave them alone to develop on their own without interference, despite how much their natural intelligence would be an asset to the house.

"Get it done, hon," Jason told her. "Just hold up at RG-118 after you and Myra finish until we have new orders for you."

"No problem, I'll check out RG-119 and RG-120 while we're here, do some sweeps."

"Long as you don't wander too far, that's fine," he told her.

"What's the ETA on getting a Stargate over here?"

"Soon as we get two built, that system has priority," he replied. "Maybe a month or so. Until then, the advance force will just have to tough it out on planet."

"That's why we pack party buildings," she grinned. "And we make sure we have enough hunky scientists to keep us happy 'til we can get back home."

"Think with the big brain, Meya," he chided, which made her laugh.

"Don't talk to me about thinking with the big brain, you whore you," she retorted. "I heard you got *another* girl pregnant. Grats, by the way."

"Thank you, and we weren't exactly trying," he replied.

"So, what does that make it, fifty kids?"

“Oh ha, ha, ha,” he drawled, which made her grin. “And where is *your* contribution to the house, Meya?”

“I’m too busy to raise a brat,” she replied lightly. “And that’s what the kids on the strip are, a bunch of brats.”

“*You* are a brat,” Jason accused.

“But I’m an entertaining brat,” she replied with a wink. “Now to avoid you trying to get *me* pregnant, I’ll go get things moving.”

“You’d spread your legs in a heartbeat, you hussy.”

“For you, anytime,” she said as she blew him a kiss, then her hologram vanished.

Jason had to chuckle a bit, then he went back to his report.

The meeting of the council was actually fairly important, so Jason paid much more attention than usual. Everyone was in attendance as Lorna went over the military deployment that would happen tomorrow, when the Confederation would conquer the Imxi. Shakizarr and Kreel just listened, since they had no real part of it—they hadn’t fought the Imxi, they had no real claim on any of their systems—as Lorna laid out a detailed plan of sweeping through the Imxi empire in one fell swoop, conquering the entire empire in a single day due to the fact that the Imxi’s military had been decimated by the attack on Karis and they had no real means of fending off the Confederation. Gaining actual control of the planets would take weeks, months, but the initial military takeover would only take a single day. The KMS and the Kimdori wouldn’t be participating in the attack, but they’d have ships at PR-371, mainly early staging for the attack on the nebula stronghold of the Consortium.

“We should finish the military operation in 27 hours maximum,” Lorna told them as the holo map of the Imxi systems showed how it would look when they were done. “The ships will jump from PR-371 on a schedule that will make all of them arrive at their destination systems at the same time, so we can carry out the initial attack to clear out their space-based defenses. The primary focus of the operation will be the Imxi’s capitol, to capture their king alive and use mindbenders to dominate him and force him to order an unconditional surrender. However, in case the Imxi try to continue to resist, we will destroy all space-based defenses around every system and

have sufficient ground forces with each fleet to take the inhabited planets if it becomes needful. After that, each member empire takes over for ground occupation and assimilation of the local resources and population into their respective empires. Interdiction won't be in place due to the need to utilize Imxi ships and shuttles for their local population, but it won't really be necessary in the short term."

*"An efficient deployment,"* Grran's vocoder intoned, his fingers dancing in front of him. *"What of the nebula attack? Is that operation on schedule?"*

"At this time, Field Marshall, yes," she nodded. "The ships the Verutan and Grimja empires have devoted to the operation are en route by normal hyperspace. Since the operation won't begin until our fleets are sufficiently repaired, they have time to reach the Entry Station by standard hyperspace."

"They're jumping in short bursts so they can come out of hyperspace every 51 standard hours and receive communications, in case those orders change," Shakizarr relayed. "If there's a need for Karinne or Kimdori ships to go out and tow them to Terra in real time, they can hold position and wait for them to arrive. If not, they should start arriving in 18 days."

"We're doing the same thing, but on a 46-hour rotation," Kreel added, leaning on his elbow on his desk in Grimjaka. "Our fleet should start arriving at Terra in 21 days."

"We're basing our deployment schedule on those fleet movements. By then, we should have enough Confederate warships back in service for the operation against the Consortium," Lorna finished. "After the Consortium presence in our galaxy is wiped out, we can begin preparing for the Syndicate."

"That's when things get interesting," Dahnai mused. She was wearing something almost scandalous for sitting in on the council, wearing only a dressing robe that was so loosely belted in front that most of her breasts were falling out of it. Jason checked the time and saw that it was 27:50 in Dracora, so for her this was a very late-night meeting. But she'd gotten more familiar with her fellow rulers, enough for her to feel comfortable wearing something like that in a council meeting. After all, she'd paraded around topless in front of them on Jason's deck at the end of the summit, so

wearing a cleavage-revealing robe wasn't much of stretch. "Is everything on schedule in Kosigi?"

"Yes, your Majesty," Lorna replied. "Admiral Dellin has already met the increased production schedules. When the new docks and workers arrive, they'll immediately go to work."

Zaa looked to the side, and a Kimdori's arm reached into the hologram and gave her a handpanel. She perused it, then one of her furry brows rose. "I have some news to pass along," she said. "My children on Prakarika just sent word back that the King and Queen have decided to petition the Confederation for entry."

"Sooner than anticipated," Magran mused. "Any word from the Haumda?"

"None as of yet. High Archon Gau will thoroughly consider the matter before moving, Speaker. That is the way of the Haumda."

"And it can be a good one sometimes," Shakizarr said candidly. "Though it works against them at other times. They are often slow to react to events that move quickly."

"Well, we'd better consider the addition of the Prakarikai," Dahnai said, a little sourly.

"We don't have to *like* them to *need* them, Empress," Magran said sagely. "And we will need them as much as they need us."

"I dunno, I kinda like how Queen Anavan goes ballistic every time I tell a joke during our meetings," Kreel said with a malicious smile. "But King Anivor is kinda cool. I actually sorta like the little popinjay. I've actually seen him smile once or twice."

"Smiling is overrated," Assaba said with a sober look, which caused Jason and Dahnai to splutter out a laugh. Assaba *did* have a sense of humor, but it was very subtle.

"What about the other empires in those sectors, Denmother? Any word?" Vizzie asked.

"All are actively considering," she replied. "And all are leaning towards it, as per my last reports from my children. But no decisions have yet been

made.”

“We should extend invitations to their rulers to sit in on council meetings,” Vizzie offered. “Even if they don’t join, they do need to know what’s going on. We should continue what we started with the summit.”

“Some of it, yes, I agree,” Magran nodded. “But they should not be privy to military or classified financial information that moves through this council.”

“That goes without saying,” Vizzie said.

They discussed the idea of it a while, but then the council meeting ended, and Jason lingered in his office, looking out over the beach. Tim and Symone were home from work, lounging down on the beach, and Rann was with them, talking to Tim over something from the looks of it. Shya and Danelle were with Myleena in the surf zone, playing in the water, and Aran was out with Maya and Vell. He pondered going down there for a moment, but he had things to do now, and among them was call Aura. He turned back to his desk and was about to call her again, but once again, he was interrupted. The lovely green face of Ensign Mikano Strongblade appeared as a hologram over his desk, and he saw almost immediately that she was sitting at one of the comm stations in the command center. In fact, she was in Shey’s usual seat. “Mikano, what are you doing in the command center?”

“They’re rotating us through the ground posts while our ships are under repair, your Grace,” she said, blushing a tiny bit. “We had orders to contact you when there was important news.”

“Well?”

She flushed again. “There was an incident on Exile. A large band of natives attacked a robotic planter unit tilling new farmland.”

Jason snapped a glance up. “Any injuries?”

“Just a few minor injuries among the natives from the planter itself,” she replied. “Governor Kovann is going to attempt contact with the natives to negotiate a peaceful solution.”

“That’s what I told him to do,” Jason grunted, leaning back. What could have motivated the *Gruug* to attack the fence? Thus far, the mainland *Gruug* hadn’t really even had any contact with their operations, since they

stayed on the coast and their farming operations were inland. He had the planetary observation system bring up a time-elapse graphic of *Gruug* movement over the last year, and he saw in that animation that they *were* moving both north and inland at a steady pace. The *Gruug* weren't a nomadic species normally, when they found a good place to live they put down roots, but two very large tribes of *Gruug* had been on the move for several months, settling in an area just for a couple of weeks and then moving on.

He very nearly called Kovann to see what was going on, but he took a breath and leaned back in his chair, as Mikano looked on quietly. No. He'd told Kovann what to do, and he had to trust that he'd get it done. He couldn't micro-manage absolutely everything, it was why he had so much work as it was.

"Alright, thanks, Mikano," he said. "I'll keep an eye on things from here and we'll see what happens. Was there anything else?"

"No, your Grace," she replied.

"Alright. Have a good evening."

"You too, your Grace," she said, then her hologram winked out.

Though he wasn't going to get involved, he did put a holo of the area up to the side of his desk, showing a Stick flying out to pick up the planter. It had a few scratches on its paint, but no real damage. The *Gruug* had attacked it with stone clubs, and the injuries they sustained were probably from falling off after trying to climb it. The unit was programmed to stop operation and shut itself off if anyone got too close to it, to prevent injury, and it had done its job.

He blew out his breath and moved to call Aura again, and this time nobody interrupted him. She was at home, appearing without wearing a shirt or bra, her lovely breasts exposed as she dried her hair. "Hello, Jason," she smiled.

"Hey hon," he replied. "Nice shirt."

She laughed. "I knew it was you calling, so why get dressed?" she winked. "What's going on? Are you calling for a date? I thought you were going out tonight with Zora."

“I still am, sort of, but I still needed to talk to you,” he replied. “How would you like to move onto the strip?”

“Me? On the strip?” she asked, a slightly surprised look on her face. “How?”

“Dahnai’s getting her private island, so I’m taking her house on the strip,” he replied. “She doesn’t need *both*.”

She laughed. “She’s going to smack you.”

“She’s already made a couple of snide comments,” he drawled, which made her grin. “I’m letting her keep the house itself, but the Makati are going to move it to her island and build a new house on the foundation. And hon, I’d like that house to be *your* house, if you want it.”

“What a silly thing to say! Of course I’ll move there!” she replied immediately. “I’ll miss this house, but this is a chance to live right on the beach. Being just a few doors down from you, well, I *guess* that’s a benefit,” she said playfully, which made him laugh.

“You just saved yourself a personal visit from Aya. She’s the one that wants you here, so she can keep my children all under her eye.”

“I’m not surprised, and I’m not complaining,” she smiled.

“Alright, I’ll send you a vidlink number for Red Horn. You talk to them about the house you want built, just remember that it has to fit on the original foundation,” he chuckled.

“That’s far too big for me, even with our children coming,” she said with a cluck of her tongue. “I’m not quite so extravagant.”

“Which is just another reason why I like you so much,” he told her.

She gave him a sweet smile. “Alright, Jason dear. Let me get dressed, and I’ll call Red Horn. Perhaps they can simply move *this* house to the strip,” she mused, looking around. “I am quite fond of this house.”

“Or they could build an exact duplicate,” Jason offered.

That taken care of, Jason decided to work through some of the reports he’d put off, then gave up after a couple of hours, when Jyslin came home. She sent her greeting as she always did when she was in range, some couple



of minutes before her corvette landed off the beach, then she went straight up to the room as she told him about how the day's work went with the team. She ambled into his office a moment later wearing a Paladins tee shirt and a baseball cap of all things with the Paladins crest embroidered upon it, and nothing else.

"Rowr," Jason called, which made her grin impishly.

*I was halfway into getting ready to take a shower and realized it's too lonely in there,* she sent, holding her hands out to him.

*Since when can I say no to the loveliest woman on Karis?*

*You'd better not say no, buster,* she winked.

So, Jason was pulled away from work and was actually pampered a tiny bit. He sat on the stool in the shower area as Jyslin stood behind him washing his hair, and she continued telling him about practice, how their coaches were discussing which free agents to pursue with the front office staff, and how they had all settled in. They'd passed Miaari's screening with flying colors, and the team members currently on the roster had passed Miaari's alternate screening. They were handling the players a little differently, since they were more or less temporary. They weren't receiving the same scrutiny as people who joined the house, but Miaari was also going to keep all of the players under heavy surveillance while they lived on the planet. If any of them were somehow convinced to try to steal Karinne technology, the Kimdori watching them would know. Six of the players had already moved into the luxurious apartments Jason had arranged for them, but they wouldn't be allowed to buy or be assigned a house. They lived where the house told them to live, but they had little reason to complain, since they were getting ultra-luxury penthouse style apartments and they were rent-free. The rest of the players already on the roster were scheduled to arrive over the next ten days, to move into their seasonal apartments.

*They should have the practice facility done before pre-season training camp,* Jyslin told him as she rinsed his hair then massaged his shoulders. *We should have everything ready.*

*So, how many free agents were you talking about going after?*

*Several, she replied. There's some good talent available this year. We're going to focus on our defensive positions, since that was our weakest showing last season. Uera Miyalle is on the market, she's one of the best center defenders in the game. And I think we can lure her away from the Menos Predators, rumor is she's not happy with the coaching staff there.*

*Center...that's the one that controls the robotic goalie, right?*

*One of them, yes, love, she replied. There are two center defenders and two flanking defenders. The center position is split between strong-side and weak-side center defenders, with the strong-side defender being the one that controls the goalie drone. And outside of them, you have the left flanking defender and right flanking defender. Uera's not as good with the drone as most center defenders, so she usually plays weak-side center. You have seven other players, and it's up to the coach how they deploy. The most common configuration is three midfielders and four forwards, she continued.*

*I know all that, he protested. I just don't know all the technical crap.*

*She laughed and leaned over, looking down at him impishly. I'll make a fan out of you yet, love, she told him.*

*I like batchi well enough, I just don't study it, he told her.*

*You mean you like watching the women bouncing around in their halters.*

*Well, that is a major selling point for the sport, he replied shamelessly, which made her laugh.*

*I'm sure they'd be very flattered that you and many other Terran men like watching their tits and asses more than what they're doing, she grinned.*

*It's eye candy, he sent expansively, leaning back against her belly and looking up at her. Much like this view I'm getting is pure eye candy.*

*She laughed. My, we're getting a little frisky. Too bad you're going to Zora's tonight.*

*That may not go much of anywhere. She's probably out getting drunk right now with some of the girls.*

After Jason explained what was going on, Jyslin sighed and leaned down and put her arms around him from behind. *I guess I'm not too surprised*, she sent somberly. *And it'll be a good thing that you'll be there waiting for her when she comes home. That'll make her feel wanted.*

*Until then, it's just personal time with Sora, so it's win-win*, Jason added.

That personal time started right after dinner. Jason took Sora back to her house and they spent most of the evening together, personal time with her that he did his best to mirror with all of his children. Rann was lucky that he lived with his father, but his other children got something of the short shrift in that regard. But he did his best to spend quality personal time with each of his children as much as he could. That personal time also went to their mothers, keeping his relationships with the mothers of his children strong. He couldn't deny that he enjoyed sleeping with them—all of them but Maya—but it wasn't so much about the sex. That was just something of a bonus. It was about keeping his friendships with the girls healthy and strong, and since they were Faey girls, they expected a little more out of him than a Terran girl would.

Not all of the girls had the same needs, however. His friendship with Maya was purely platonic, neither of them had the particularly urge or need to take it any further, where Yana was still working through the crush she'd developed for him more or less since the day they came to Karis. Ilia and Zora liked a good romp in the bedroom, but they weren't all that pushy about it. Jyslin and Symone were very understanding about it, but they didn't have too much to complain about. Out of every ten days, Jason maybe spent three at someone else's house, not counting nights spent in the pool house with Aura, and also spent quite a few afternoons with his children one on one to give them personal attention. Jyslin didn't mind, because those days he was sleeping over, she was either over at Tim and Symone's, or she was doing a little of her own oat-sowing. Jyslin enjoyed a little extra-marital action as much as Jason did, and she did so with his blessing. After all, she let him sleep around, and he both wasn't a hypocrite and also completely trusted Jyslin the way she trusted him. She was just very discreet about it, unlike Symone. She dallied with her boyfriends away from the strip in clandestine meetings usually during the day, or on evenings when Jason was sleeping over at another house, which was what

excited Jyslin. Evenings were devoted to husband and family, but in the daytime and when Jason was otherwise engaged, that was when the naughty Jyslin came out to play. Symone was even bandier than Jyslin, and Tim, that slut, he egged her on. It turned him on that his wife was so wanton, as much as it turned her on that Tim was such a little manwhore.

Tim had *definitely* embraced the Faey lifestyle.

Zora didn't come back until nearly midnight, long after Sora went to bed, staggering through the door with her shirt missing and a dark stain of some sort on the left hip of her slacks. Jason regarded her with a little surprise as he used the time waiting up for her to work through more reports. She had dark smudges on her bare breasts, as if she'd fallen into some dirt somewhere. And there was little doubt she'd fell down, because she was completely smashed. "Hi—hi—hiiii," she slurred as she staggered into the living room. Jason rushed over and caught her before she fell down, leaning heavily against him and looking up at him with glazed eyes as he put his arm around her to hold her up. "Wha—wha' you doing in the bar, Jayce?"

"Bringing drunk little bad girls home so they can sleep it off," he chuckled. "What happened to your blouse?"

"Wha' blouse? Wha', I'm naked? Cooooool," she slurred. "Wanna—wanna go back in the bedroom and make me squeal like a chabi?"

"As drunk as you are, hon, I think you'd throw up if I did that," he chuckled. "And you certainly take orders well," he added as he half-carried her towards the bedroom.

*Chiira, 32 Demaa, 4401 Orthodox Calendar*

*Thursday, 24 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 32 Demaa, 4401, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

The Imxi knew what was coming, but there was simply nothing they could do about it.

Jason didn't particularly need to be in the military command center for this, but he did at least want to observe the initial movements. The Karinnes weren't involved in the attacks in any way, they weren't even towing ships, but what happened there did involve them in that the Imxi would soon be a part of the Confederation...just as a conquered empire chopped up into pieces by the conquering force. Every original member of the Confederation would have Imxi in it after today.

Myri had a big hologram up of the entire Imxi empire, showing the location of inbound Confederation ships, moving through hyperspace and staggered so they'd all drop out and into their target systems within 10 seconds of each other. The others had more or less browbeaten Jason into allowing Karinne tugs to tow the ships so they could jump in real time, which was the extent of Karinne involvement in the operation. But that also limited the number of ships that could participate in the attack to the number of ships Jason had available that could tow large warships in real time through hyperspace, and also predicated having the ships jump in a great distance from the planets so his tugs could jump back out without coming under fire. Even that almost seemed too much, a violation of his oaths, but if the Imxi saw them coming via regular hyperspace, they might stiffen their defenses even more and cost even more both Confederate and Imxi lives. In the interests of making it as gentle as possible, Jason had reluctantly agreed to help get the ships there, and that was *it*. He had 130 tugs available to tow that many ships to the 27 systems of the Imxi empire, which were all located in a very tightly packed area of stars only 47 light years in diameter at its widest point, which was an elliptical area. The area was an astronomical phenomenon known as a star cluster, where a group of stars were very close to one another, and it was fairly common. But, the number of stars in the Imxi cluster did make it a little unusual.

The Imxi stood no chance. None. They'd lost their entire fleet in the attack on Karis, so all they had were space stations, orbital weapon platforms, and whatever ships they could scrape up. Every Imxi system showed the same thing, their military scrambling to get as many defenses in place as possible, able-bodied civilians being drafted into defense militias to repel the inevitable ground attacks they knew were coming. But they had no

chance, because the Confederation was testing out their strategy against the Benga in this attack. Faey Imperial Marines were interspersed into every Confederate infantry unit, telepaths there to subdue the Imxi, and those Faey would utterly destroy any attempt to repel the surface invasions. A single Imperial Marine could take out a hundred unprotected enemy soldiers with her talent and do it from a position of complete safety. She only had to be within a couple hundred shakra of her targets.

Myri, Juma, Sioa, and Navii were clustered around the main display console along with Jason and Cybi hovering beside him in her full holographic image complete with legs, them in their armor, Cybi her usual featurelessly nude self, and Jason wearing a brand new Karsa Paladins tee shirt that Jyslin gave him that morning, as the rest of the command staff bustled about all around them. Mikano was back in the command center today, seated with the other comm officers at their stations, an Urumi ensign was receiving training at one of the other consoles, and two Makati hurried across the open area with a Beryan, the three of them with engineering stripes on their armor. Jason rather liked seeing more and more integration into the house, as more races started taking positions in jobs that were more or less all Faey and Terrans. And as more and more new house members got through basic military training, that was exactly what they'd be seeing. Their most recent class held every single race where they had recruitment centers, a true melting pot of every race represented in the Confederation, *including* a mated pair of Zagya, three Verutans, and two Grimja.

"It should start in about four minutes," Sioa said, looking at the graphic at the edge of the hologram showing the 27 different squadrons being anchored to Karinne tugs and preparing to jump. "We'll see how well those combined fleets operate without KMS ships there," she added.

"They should be alright," Juma replied. "The KMS ships usually serve as the flagships for the theater commander. Any other ship can fill that role."

"There's a psychological component to that, Juma," Navii said in her reedy voice. "When the other ships in the formation see that KMS battleship or heavy cruiser, they *know* it is the anchor of the formation. It provides a sense of continuity when one is in a formation where most every other ship has a different design and is manned by another empire. They

know their command vessel is rugged and powerful, that their theater commander will be there to give orders during combat, and it provides morale throughout the fleet.”

*“That is a very curious observation, Navii,”* Cybi mused.

“True, but I still don’t think that it should cause much trouble,” Juma persisted. “Especially since the Naval forces will run into very little resistance. If the plan fails, it’s the ground forces that are going to be doing most of the fighting.”

“If they have to fight at all,” Navii said sagely, studying the hologram between them. “I think the Imxi might surrender once it’s clear that they have no chance, even if they initially disobey their king. It will depend on how forcefully the Confederate forces make that point.”

“We can only hope, Navii,” Jason grunted as he brought up a camera from a Kimdori spy probe in the Imxi’s capitol system, PR-66, locally known as Imxa. The Imxi had put together a crisis fleet of about 30 ships, looking to be decommissioned warships and ships that had been undergoing repairs or refits, clustered around a fairly large space station. That was the largest fleet the Imxi had in any one system, some had no ships at all, just planetary defenses. He could almost feel sorry for them...almost. They’d put themselves into this, it was their lust for power that made them ally with the Consortium, and now they had to suffer the consequences of those actions. When one went to war, one had to understand that losing *could* happen. Those thirty ships would find themselves facing down 41 Confederate ships, all of which were bigger, faster, and much more powerful, with a mix of ships from every empire that would serve certain roles. Each fleet would have the Faey ships in the vanguard to defeat the initial missile attack using their shockwave generators, backed up by large tanky Urumi and Skaa warships. Alliance, Colonial, and Shio ships would flank any defending positions using their speed, and then the ships would deploy their ground attack dropships and support ships once all space-based resistance was neutralized, knocking out ground-based defenses and clearing the path for the ground invasion in case their plan failed. While it was a Confederate effort in space, only the empire that intended to occupy the planet would invade with ground forces, but they would also have Faey

Imperial Marines with them to help subdue the Imxi ground forces with a minimum of bloodshed and collateral damage.

They watched the camera feed as it began. The Confederate warships dropped out of hyperspace about 40,000 katha from the planet and immediately deployed, all ships raising their shields and the six Faey battle cruisers taking the lead with the other ships directly behind them, to force any incoming missile attacks to focus on the Faey ships. They accelerated as they came in, and when they crossed an invisible line, the Imxi ships and station launched a large salvo of missiles...probably when the Confederate ships came into the missiles' tracking range. Behind the missiles, a large swarm of Imxi fighters also deployed, chasing after the missiles. Alliance ships fired their defensive missiles as Confederate fighters launched but stayed behind the warships for their own protection, missiles that would shoot down missiles, which curled around the Faey ships and hurtled forward on their gravometric drives. Another view popped on as a second spy probe activated, showing a hellstorm of explosions between the two fleets as the missiles met, which only about 200 missiles fired by the Imxi survived to go on towards the fleet. Those missiles were torn apart when the Faey ships bloomed in red distortion, as their Torsion shockwave generators activated. As the six Faey battle cruisers came through the smoke and fire of the missile explosions, their shimmering red fields winked out, and that heralded the advancing of the fighters. Instead of racing off after the Imxi, they instead took a defensive position in front of the advancing ships, capable of dropping back in case more missiles were fired, baiting the Imxi fighters to come into the range of the Faey shockwave generator fields.

*"I have control of the three spy probes in local space if you wish to change the view,"* Cybi told them as the Imxi fighters surged ahead. The Faey battle cruisers launched a volley of plasma torpedoes, a common Faey tactic. Those torpedoes would explode just before reaching the fighters, trying to break up their formations and destroy some of them before they got within range. They did just that, erupting into brilliant blasts of detonating plasma, generating that telltale plasma storm, an expanding field of intense heat and high-energy plasma that would wreak havoc on any system sensitive to ionization. Several dozen Imxi fighters literally had nowhere to go and were engulfed by the hellish orange-red field, and they didn't come out the other side. The Confederate fighters pulled back to



defend the ships behind the six battle cruisers as the Imxi approached, and the Imxi must have gotten enough intelligence from the Consortium to know not to directly attack the Faey ships, that their shockwave generators had far more range than they demonstrated. The problem for them was, they had to go around the Faey cruisers to get to the other ships, and those cruisers were armed with weaponry that *could* track a small, fast-moving fighter. Imxi fighters exploded by the windrows the instant they came into range of the Faey cruisers and their Torsion weapons, which had more range than the Torsion weapons on the Imxi fighters, and then more and more vanished in a fiery blaze when the ships behind the Faey ships gained line of sight on the fighters. After the initial blitz, the Confederate fighters lanced ahead, Raptors, Warhawks, *Un'Dara* and *Krissha* fighters engaging the Imxi fighters just as they were scattered by the defensive blitz of fire, attacking at the perfect time to deal maximum damage. The Confederate fighters pushed the Imxi fighters away from the fleet as it advanced on the Imxi warships, who remained in a defensive formation around the space station, pulling the Confederate ships into range of its weapons. They'd planned for that, for the Confederate fleet began to slow as it approached, then once they were at the optimum distance, the fleet unfurled from behind the Faey cruisers like a fan opening. The Confederation knew exactly what the range of the Imxi ships had for their weapons, so they pulled up just out of range and opened fire with their longer-reaching weapons. Plasma torpedoes, missiles, MPACs, Skaa ion and hot plasma, Colonial iso-neutron, Shio ion and neutron, and Urumi neutron and plasma weaponry, which tore into the Imxi ships just as the station launched another salvo of missiles, saving them for when the Confederation got closer most likely. They were a different type of missile, Jason saw, probably with a shorter effective range. Six Imxi ships were blasted into pieces by the barrage, and the rest of the ships had no choice but to race ahead to at least get into range so they could fire back, leaving the station behind. The Faey ships stopped firing and raised their shockwave generators, but the other ships relied on their shields, explosions from the missiles blooming along their surfaces. But Imxi weapon technology wasn't as advanced without Consortium Torsion weapons, so no ship in the formation had its shields brought down by the barrage.

Jason leaned on his hands on the console and watched as the Confederation systematically eradicated the defending Imxi ships in about

14 minutes of battle. The Imxi's ships had no real chance even with their Torsion weapons, slower than the Confederate ships, with inferior shields but fairly decent armor, and the surprise tactic of pulling up and firing on them outside their range had fatally surprised the Imxi commanders. Jason watched with sober eyes as the Confederation basically wiped out the Imxi defense, fighters destroying the Imxi fighters and then joining in what was a turkey shoot, then they destroyed the weapons on the station with controlled fire, beating the station defenseless without doing any major structural damage. Once the station was defenseless, ten Faey troop dropships launched from the ships and crossed over with fighter escort, attaching to the hull on top of the station. Those were ship to ship troop dropships, equipped with a belly hatch they'd use to either blow open a hatch on the hull or cut their way through with heavy-duty annealers, then board the station and take it from within, a tried and true Faey tactic when dealing with opponents vulnerable to their talent. As they did that, Jason heard the Faey ship broadcast on all Imxi frequencies, demanding that the Imxi surrender.

They weren't going to, however. As marines fought their way into the space station, a large invasion force of Faey dropships launched from the cruisers and descended towards the capitol city behind low-orbit support craft, corvettes and frigates, which began bombardment of ground positions utilizing hot plasma weaponry, destroying ground batteries that could fire on the troop transports as they descended to their landing zone. Imxa was Dahnai's prize, the system she bargained hardest to procure, and she had a very good reason...the King of the Imxi. Other systems had better resources, but Dahnai wanted the enemy's capitol because it would put the King under her control, and that gave her the ability to take the rest of the planet without having to fight for every tikra of it, as well as giving the Confederation a means to take the rest of their empire without a long and protracted siege

Jason checked the other systems, and saw that in the time it took the Confederation to defeat the Imxi defense around Imxa, most of the other fleets already had boots on the ground, assembled at landing zones and preparing to invade should their plan fail, and in several cases, had accepted formal Imxi surrender. Some of the planets saw the inevitability of it and capitulated on their own, mainly those on the edges of Imxi territory who

had been starved of supplies since Maggie had shut down all commerce in Imxi space. Several systems surrendered almost immediately upon losing their orbital defenses...and Jason couldn't blame them. A planet was virtually helpless when some 20 or 30 ships orbited it from above, who could then simply bombard the planet to rubble. A single Skaa antimatter bomb could annihilate a city the size of Karsa, turn it into a smoking crater, and 30 ships could launch a few *thousand* of those kinds of bombs.

As they watched, all resistance to the Confederation more or less ceased everywhere but Imxa, where the Imxi were stubbornly trying to defend their ruler's palace. They were a dictatorship, much like many other governments in the sector cluster, but their dictator was a popular one, who had the loyalty of his people, and they demonstrated it by fighting as valiantly as they could against slender Faey soldiers who withered their numbers without firing a single shot. Absolute chaos reigned in their capitol city as Faey soldiers advanced behind a chaotic mob of dominated Imxi soldiers, who the Faey used as both weapons and shields, having them attack other Imxi soldiers as they marched right through the very large and very impressive capitol city of the Imxi. It was yet another stark, almost frightening demonstration of just how powerful the Faey were in the scope of things, that their greatest weapon was not their technology or their weapons, it was *them*, it was their talent, and the fact that there was no defense against a telepath except another telepath unless the opponent was one of the very rare species of sentient beings who were naturally resistant to Faey telepathy, such as the Kizzik, the Kimdori, or the Consortium's insectoids who were literally created to battle the Benga telepaths. Those were the only known species in the galaxy that the Faey could not affect with their telepathy.

Jason was fairly sure that Kreel and Shakizarr were watching the same feed he was watching at that moment and silently thanking their gods that they were allied *with* the Faey in that moment, as the Imperial Marines conquered the capitol of the Imxi empire basically without firing a single shot from their own weapons. They showed the entire galaxy why the Faey were probably the most dangerous species there was, because of their talent and because of their natural aggression, who were only held in check because they were too busy fighting each other. But when unified against an outside force, they showed the galaxy just how dangerous they could be.

The Imxi were defenseless. Without telepaths of their own, they were swept aside like chaff all the way to the palace, and moments later, the telepathically dominated King of the Imxi marched out of his palace and declared in a strong voice that the entirety of the Imxi Empire had surrendered unconditionally to the Confederation of Allied Empires. He surrendered his ceremonial scepter to the Marine Colonel commanding the forces that had taken his palace, then ordered all Imxi forces throughout the empire to stop fighting and lay down their arms.

And just like that, the Imxi Empire was no more.

And while he hated the part he had played in the destruction of an entire society—and it *would* be destroyed, since the Imxi were now a scattered people throughout eight separate empires—he knew that it had to be done. The Imxi were a threat, an undeniable threat, and it was best for everyone in the PR, PS, and PQ sectors that their aggression was neutralized by the ironclad treaties the Karinnes forced upon the others for the opportunity to claim parts of the Imxi empire for their own. By giving the others the Imxi, it would create a lasting peace through that part of the galaxy. The Imxi were the sacrificial lambs upon the altar of peace. Besides, they did have it coming. They attacked the Confederation, and in that attack, they opened themselves to counterattack.

Jason grunted out a sigh and Cybi looked over at him, then placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “That’s that,” he said grimly. “The Imxi will probably obey their king. I wonder what Dahnai will do with him.”

“It’s not our concern,” Myri said gruffly. “But if she’s smart, she’ll keep him on his throne as a puppet. The Imxi will obey their king much quicker than they’ll obey us. As long as she keeps a mindbender in the palace, she’ll have absolute control over the Imperium’s cut of the Imxi empire by controlling the one Imxi that the others will obey.”

“And maybe even control over the systems held by the other members,” Navii said with a dark smile. “I foresee a little chicanery on the horizon when it comes to the Imxi. Dahnai is not above using her grip on the king to try to steal little pieces away from the others.”

“Yila probably already has her hands in that kaba pod,” Juma chuckled.

“Lorna budgeted 27 hours for something that barely took two,” Jason noted.

“That was in case the Imxi didn’t obey their king,” Myri reminded him. “But it looks like they are. I’m seeing reports from every Imxi planet that the ground forces are surrendering. Now comes the reorganization.”

“And there they go,” Juma said lightly as large swarms of ships from the Confederation jumped out, holding logistical and supply ships, again towed by Karinne ships. This time warships were also towing, since the military operation was over, which allowed Karinne ships to enter Imxi territory...which was now *technically* Confederate territory. They were bringing in the supplies and materials and civilians that would occupy the systems and reorganize the native Imxi under their new respective governments. There were also exploration ships from every empire, including the Verutans and Grimja, who would race out to the unclaimed systems beyond the Imxi to search for systems they would want to claim.

That would almost be a circus, like the great western expansion of America in the mid-1800’s. Scout ships from competing empires would be racing each other to the most promising systems to see if they wanted to use their claim rights on that particular system, and the Karinnes would *not* be towing them out there. That was their own business, so they had to handle it themselves.

But that would also help keep the peace. As long as the other empires saw ways to expand and grow without taking territory from another empire, they had no reason to fight one another.

“I’m gonna go back up to my office,” Jason said. “No doubt today’s council meeting will be long and self-congratulatory.”

Juma chuckled. “It’ll be alright,” she told him.

Jason started towards his office, but almost unconsciously, he, Shen, and Suri were on the Marine Corvette *Honor* and were traveling over the northern coast of Karga. He didn’t feel like sitting in his office, and he was a little more unsettled about the fall of the Imxi than he expected. He felt a tiny bit of guilt in his own part of it, but he also knew that it had to be done. And when he was a little unsettled, when he needed to talk to someone

honestly, there was one place he knew he could be honest and receive wise counsel.

They landed on the outskirts of the Parri village just at the tail end of a passing shower, the water glistening on the grass and creating a shimmering rainbow effect. The Parri *shaman* and her two apprentices padded towards him on all fours, then she rose up and gave him a smile, putting her large paw-like hand on his shoulder. “It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne,” she said in her husky voice. “What brings you to our humble village?”

“A social visit, and someone to talk to, honored *shaman*,” he replied honestly.

“Then please, come join us. Tea for our guest,” she said in a lilting voice that nevertheless held the edge of command, and her two apprentices turned and loped back towards the village.

“I see a new *jaingi* on both of them,” Jason observed.

“They are progressing through the ten lessons at an impressive rate,” she said, pride for her students clear in her voice. “Soon they will begin their trials to make sure they can correctly interpret the meaning of the trees. If they pass, then they will be my apprentices no longer.” She dropped back to all fours and walked with him as they started for the village. “And when will you take up your own apprenticeship, Jason Karinne?”

He laughed. “I’d be a terrible *shaman*, friend. Besides, I have other duties.”

“I disagree. You have the potential to be a good *shaman*,” she replied. “You understand the power of love and do your best to stay within its gentle illumination as you tend the needs of your people. We see it as a good thing that you are the one that rules this planet.” She looked back at the guards. “But things are slightly unseemly. I would ask for you to bring your heir. The trees have heard about him from your tree but would like to take closer measure of him.”

He didn’t hesitate. “Shen, have them pull Rann out of school and get him over here,” he said.

She nodded and turned to look back to the corvette, passing on the order.

“And what do the trees think about him?”

“There has been a change in him of late that your tree has noticed.”

“That’s not a surprise,” he said, then explained the unusual circumstances involving Shya.

“Ah. Perhaps you might ask her to come as well?”

“Shen,” he prompted, and she nodded. “Is this a good change or a bad change?”

“Change simply *is*, Jason Karinne. It is how one accepts that change that can make good or ill come of it,” she told him.

“That’s a profound thought,” he mused.

“Actually, it is the simplest of things, it is just your need to complicate it that makes it profound,” she replied, looking over at him with a slight smile.

Jason laughed. “I do that quite a bit,” he admitted.

Jason sat at the campfire with the *shaman*, her two apprentices, and his guards, drinking tea as Jason told her about the Imxi, and his own misgivings about his role in it. “I know I’ve upheld my oaths, but I had to walk a very fine line,” he told her. “It almost feels as if I’ve violated the trust placed in me by my ancestors.”

“You do what you feel is right for others, not yourself, and that is always a good thing,” she told him after sipping at her *oye* bark tea. “But I see little reason for you to be so concerned. Often, the upholding of an oath at its most strictest interpretation is as necessary as upholding it at its most generous. Flexibility is not a bad thing in this case, so long as you do not lose sight of the *meaning* of the oaths you have sworn to uphold. Stay true to that meaning, and how you interpret them will always be correct, even if that interpretation changes like the leaves through the seasons.”

Jason was silent a moment, then laughed softly. “Why do I always feel better when I come talk to you, *shaman*?”

“Because you often need another to validate what you already know in your heart, Jason Karinne, and you have this misguided belief that I am wiser than you,” she added playfully.

“That’s not misguided,” he told her adamantly.

Rann wasn’t as awestruck as he was the last time he came to the village, but Shya certainly was. She’d never seen a Parri in the flesh before, just what she’d learned in her lessons, and those lessons in no way prepared one for that initial meeting. She gaped up at the stocky bobcat-looking creature, with her *jaingi* all over her body. The *shaman* leaned down and greeted her with a gentle smile, then put her paw-like hand on the side of Shya’s face. Rann and Shya joined them at the fire, Shya sniffing suspiciously at her tea, then gulping it down after taking a testing sip...then promptly burning her tongue. Both of them had had enough lessons in etiquette to sit quietly and listen as Jason and the *shaman* talked of less important affairs, basically just catching up since the last time he visited. The *shaman* liked to keep up to date on the activities on the strip, including the gossip...which never failed to amuse Jason. She liked to know who the girls were going out with, what shenanigans Kumi was up to this week, and all the trouble the kids had gotten into since the last time she heard from him. But then the *shaman* engaged Shya in conversation, and the girl quickly found herself being gently grilled about not just her new life on Karis, but what it *meant* to her. The *shaman* was subtly digging for the truth of the little girl, and Jason knew that she was getting it even if Shya didn’t answer a single question honestly.

After tea, Jason allowed Rann and Shya to take off their armor—much to Shen and Suri’s disapproval, and let them frolic like sprites among the massive *oye* trees, bare as the day they were born. Jason and the *shaman* walked along those huge trunks as the kids played. “So, Shya,” Jason prompted.

“A complicated little girl,” the *shaman* answered, looking over and up at him as she walked along on all fours. “There is a duality within her between all she was taught and all she wants to believe. Hers is a heart that yearns for a light that she was told will burn her. You need to take her in hand and teach her the truth of things, Jason Karinne, before her duality causes you problems.”

“If you mean deprogram her little Imperial highness of her conditioning, yes, I’m doing that right now,” he said.



“Do so quickly, before that duality of her taints Rann’s purity,” she warned. “We notice that you have been teaching him, but perhaps not enough.”

“How do you mean?”

“You are the light of this world, Jason. What would happen to it if your light was extinguished?” she asked pointedly. “Rann is not ready to stand in your place if it becomes needful. Things are too fragile here for that to be permitted to remain. Without you, all that you have built here will fall to ruin. A wise man prepares for the storm even when the sky is clear,” she told him seriously.

“I’ve been teaching him, but with all the insanity of the last few months, I haven’t had as much time,” he grunted. “But you’re right. With things calming down, I’ll be able to take more time for it. And perhaps I’ll put Shya in the chair beside him. Since she has Rann’s ear, teaching *her* what it means to be the Grand Duke Karinne will only help. That way she’s not trying to pull him away from the path he needs to walk.”

“Wise,” she nodded. “Rann Karinne is showing promise, Jason Karinne. I think he will be a fine ruler when he finally takes his place, so long as you teach him the power of love. His is a receptive heart, gentle but strong. He too could be a *shaman* if he wished to learn the ten lessons. But as with most cubs, it must be properly shaped and molded for it to reach its full potential.”

“If you find him worthy, then that makes me a whole lot of relieved,” Jason said earnestly.

“I did so before, that opinion didn’t change,” she smiled. “But the arrival of Shya Karinne does complicate matters. That is what the trees wished me to address to you. She must not be allowed to stain Rann Karinne’s heart with the darkness she herself struggles against, Jason Karinne. It is important.”

“I understand exactly what you mean, *shaman*,” he nodded. “And I’m already working on it.”

“Then the matter is as good as settled,” she told him easily.

Jason let the kids play for about another hour, then sent them back to school and got back to reality...and his reality was the endless reports sitting in his inbox and his growing dark fantasy of all the ways he could murder Chirk for filling it every time he turned around. He put on a brave face and plowed through a good portion of it while he waited for the council meeting, which he felt would be filled with animated back-patting and mutual congratulations about how awesome they were for steamrolling a defenseless opponent, but at least it wasn't a totally boring time. Jyslin and Symone came over for lunch, Tim came up from his office, and they had a really nice lunch down in the cafeteria, just spending some time together now that things were slowing down. He told them about his visit to the Parri, and her warnings about the kids.

*Not a surprise,* Jyslin noted as she took a bite of her sandwich. *We've known since before she got here that we'd have to scour the Imperial part out of her little Highness.*

*I'm surprised that the Parri would know that after just a couple hours,* Symone mused.

*The Parri are much more than they seem, hon,* Jason told her. *That's why I get advice from the shaman. Her advice is always good.*

*Yeah, but that was some pretty dark advice, telling you to step up Rann's training in case you die,* Tim complained.

*It's not an unreasonable request, Tim-Tim,* Jyslin said. *Think about it. What would happen to the house if Jason died in some accident? They do happen, you know. We wouldn't have anyone competent to step up and take over, except maybe Cybi. But she'd never do that. Rann does need to be ready if that happens. He's the one Cybi has accepted as the next Grand Duke Karinne. It can't be anyone else. Without Jason, the entire house would fall apart. That was why the Consortium tried to assassinate him, they knew that.*

*And that's why Aya's so fuckin' anal about keeping me safe,* Jason grunted in annoyance. *I'll be so glad when I can finally go around without armor again.*

*Not 'til after we take out the Consortium in the nebula,* Jyslin told him. *But there is one thing we should think about.*

*What?*

*Rann shouldn't be the only one getting lessons on how to be a good ruler, she replied. Technically, any of your kids can take your place, love, and if we're going to plan for what might happen to you, we'd better plan for what might happen to Rann. We shouldn't put everything in one basket. We'd be in the same boat if something happened to Rann. We'd have no properly prepared Karinne to take his place.*

*That...that's a valid argument. And besides, the others wouldn't feel like Rann is more than them more than the already do, Jason agreed. Alright, so I teach all the older kids what it means to be the Grand Duke, but I focus on Rann since he'll be the one that does ultimately take my chair. And I'll also be teaching Shya. Since she's Rann's wife, she'll have his ear. So, I'd better make sure she knows what it means to rule the house of Karinne, so she doesn't subvert Rann down the wrong path.*

*I'm sure their jealousy will fade real quick when they find out who much more work Rann has to do, Symone noted with a wicked little tilt to her thought.*

*Yup, but I think they have a taste of that from Shya. She's told them what it's really like to be an Imperial Princess, and they didn't think it was quite so awesome once they heard about the dark underbelly of it, Jason noted with an audible chuckle. But Jyslin, love, you're right. We should be preparing all of the first born for what I hope is a duty they never have to take up.*

*Sounds like a plan. You bring the whips, I'll bring the handcuffs,* Symone sent lightly, which made Jason laugh.

*Those might be necessary once they find out how boring the lessons can be, he told her.*

He told Cybi about his decision after he got back to the office, as she sat demurely on the edge of his desk, leaning on her hand as she preferred to do. *[It's only wise,] she agreed. [If something disastrous were to happen, it would only behoove us to make sure that the house will continue without you and Rann. I'll start having discussions with the others as I often do with Rann.]*

*[You do that already.]*

*[Not those discussions, Jason,] she told him. [And I will start discussing such things with Shya as well. No doubt that Dahnai will approve that you include Shya in your preparation of Rann for the throne, at least until she finds out that part of that preparation is preventing Dahnai from influencing her daughter,]* she noted with some amusement.

*[Yeah,]* he agreed as Chirk's mantis-like face appeared on a hologram in front of his desk. "What is it, Chirk?"

*"Yila Trefani just arrived on the east pad and requests audience, revered Hive-leader,"* she answered. *"She actually called ahead this time."*

Jason laughed. "She's starting to learn," he said, which made Cybi smile. "Send her in when she gets here."

She came into the office a moment later, dressed in formal robes. She must have just come from attending court. She swished in and took a seat as Jason and Cybi looked at her, and then Miaari came in behind her and closed the door. "Miaari," he said with a nod.

"Good, she's here," Miaari said as she walked up and sat on the other edge of the desk.

"What, you called me here, Miaari?" Yila asked. "I just got a message to come to Karis."

"I sent it," she nodded.

"What's up, Mee?" Jason asked, a bit more seriously.

"Yila has extensive contacts within the Prakarikai empire," Miaari said. "We will make use of them. Denmother sends word that while the Prakarikai intend to petition for entry into the Confederation and stand against the Andromedans, their motives are ulterior to the reason the Confederation exists. They see it as the opportunity to gain access to the secret technologies held by each of the member empires, then use it to expand their influence through the Grimja sector and beyond. They have always been dangerous players of the game," she said seriously. "We will have to watch them most carefully to ensure that they are kept in check."

"That's about what all of them want to do," Jason snorted.

“But the Prakarikai have the greatest propensity to betray the articles as soon as they feel it is in their best interest to do so,” Miaari warned. “The ultimate motivation of any Prakarikai is themselves over any others, hopefully while taking others down as they rise up. They are an extremely selfish race. While they will stand with us to fight a common enemy out of pure self-preservation, their objective will be to walk away from the Confederation as the most powerful of the varied members, and as much at the *expense* of the other empires as they can manage.”

“I do have any number of business contacts within their empire,” Yila noted, tapping her chin. “Which isn’t easy. The average Prakarikai considers anyone not a Prakarikai to be only a slightly higher form of life than pond scum. I don’t see how a race so tiny can have such towering egos,” she drawled, which made Jason chuckle.

“They’re compensating for something,” he quipped. “We knew they’d be handful if they entered the Confederation. This just proves it.”

*“But it does represent a rare opportunity,” Cybi noted. “Half the reason the Prakarikai are the way they are is because they shun contact with what they consider to be the lesser races. Perhaps exposure to those lesser races will change some opinions within their empire.”*

“Possible, but I am not quite that optimistic, Cybi,” Miaari said. “At least the Jun are honest about how they feel and why they feel that way. With the Prakarikai, you can never be certain.”

“Besides, seeing that the other empires are more than them might just make them that much more spiteful,” Yila added. “They’ve been *intensely* jealous of the Imperium for over a thousand years, mainly due to the fact that telepathy is so incredibly rare among their species.”

That was true enough. They were almost as rare as talented Zagya were, with only some .004% of the Prakarikai exhibiting any form of telepathic or psionic ability. And nearly all of them were employed by the Prakarikai to deal with the Imperium, to pit telepaths against telepaths.

“With Yila’s help, we can keep them under control,” Miaari said. “Come with me, Yila. We have matters to discuss, and Jason has much work to do.”

“Send me a report. A *brief* one,” Jason said as Miaari stood up. “I’m already spending like all my time just going through reports here. Don’t add to the workload.”

*You owe me for this, Jason,* Yila sent with a frown at him as Miaari padded past. Yila didn’t like Kimdori because they gave her the creeps, not because she found their personalities unpleasant, and now she’d have to spend a lot of time closeted up with one.

*I’m so glad you think so,* he replied, making a shooing motion with his hand.

She put her hands on her hips, then turned around and swept out of the office. *Dinner, with steak and lobster, and Dara and Zach will be there.*

*Well, if that’s all it takes to buy you off, deal. But I have to say, you’ve gotten a little too cheap and easy here lately,* Yila, Jason replied with a smirking kind of smile at her back. *Sometimes I wonder why the rest of the Siann is so afraid of you.*

*Keep digging, Jason,* she replied tartly, which made him laugh.

He leaned back and put his feet up on his desk as he worked out a new schedule for the kids, which would pull them at least partially out of school to take lessons in leadership and ethics, to understand the *essence* of what being the ruler of the House of Karinne meant, and Shya was included into those lessons. The Parri had only given voice to what Jason already knew, but in a slightly different way, that Shya was a viable threat to the House of Karinne by both the very nature of what she was and the potential it had to contaminate Rann’s objectivity. He’d known he’d have to retrain Shya to be a Karinne, and that she might pose a threat to the house because of her mother. But she also posed a threat by swaying Rann down the wrong path based on her Imperial upbringing, where power and rule were as important as food and water.

The *shaman* was right. He had to start preparing for the storm, even though it was a bright and sunny day. The house would need Rann to be ready if something happened to him, and the others to be ready if something happened to Rann. And now that the immediate threat of the Consortium had been neutralized, he had the time to devote to the task of preparing Rann to be a good replacement for Jason when the time came.

He just hoped that that time was a long time coming.

# Chapter 3

*Raista, 36 Demaa, 4401 Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 28 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raista, 36 Demaa, 4401, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*KMS Patrick Henry, in low synchronous orbit over Karsa*

Jason hadn't looked forward to anything in a long time as much as he had this.

He was almost giddy with excitement as he stepped off the Marine corvette *Honor* and into the main landing bay of the destroyer *Patrick Henry* and in front of a formation of 26 officers, the command crew of the destroyer. Leading them was the only captain the ship had ever known, Lisa Sheppard, a human telepath and like Justin, a former American military pilot. She hadn't been a fighter pilot, however. She had been a transport pilot in the Air Force before the subjugation, flying the big C-5, and had risen to a command position within the KMS. She was a tall willowy woman with dark hair and a very average face. She wasn't pretty nor ugly, she was Josephine Everygal, the kind of face you could never pick out of a crowd. But she was *damn* smart, and she'd be moving up from her destroyer very soon. The main reason she hadn't moved up wasn't because of lack of ability, but because she was one of the best destroyer captains in the KMS. She knew the capabilities of a destroyer like few other captains and having her experience on the bridge of a destroyer was an asset not just to her own ship, but to other destroyer captains who benefited from her experience. She was so good that her ship was one of the few in the KMS that came through the battle at Karis relatively unscathed. But she was needed further up the chain. She didn't know it yet, but the next cruiser that came off the docks at Kosigi would be hers.



Behind Jason boiled forth his children, all of them nearly as excited as he was, Shya, Jyslin, Tim, and Symone. His entire family was going to Kimdori Prime with him, as well as Miaari, who was going to see her children. But where Jason was in a tee shirt and jeans and his kids were in an assortment of old clothes, Jyslin, Tim, and Symone were wearing their armor, their helmets locked behind their necks, modified helmets that had untinted transparent titanium faceplates that would let the Kimdori see their faces, very much unlike standard helmets. They would have to remain in armor at all times off the ship once they got there, where Jason and the kids would be able to wear whatever they pleased...just not anything they wanted to keep. Their clothes would have to be thrown away after returning from Kimdori Prime due to irradiation. Zaa was serious when she said that they made no exceptions for anyone that visited Kimdori Prime, not even Jason's wife and *amu*. They were taking only one ship to Kimdori Prime, the *Patrick Henry*, but there was a fleet of Kimdori warships that would escort them there. That way, they only had to decontaminate one KMS ship, and since the *Patrick Henry* was going to be put in dock for a refit to test some of Myleena's engine modifications anyway, it was chosen for the mission.

He patted Lisa Sheppard on the shoulder and chuckled as his five children rushed by them and towards the far side of the hangar. "Slow down!" he barked at them. "You'd think they were going to *Disney World*," he sighed, which made Lisa laugh and her Faey XO give them a strange look. She most likely had no idea what Disney World was.

"You look a little excited yourself, your Grace," Lisa grinned.

"Hey, the chance to go to Kimdori Prime? Who wouldn't be excited?"

"And I'll spend it all with the shields up looking out a window," Lisa sighed.

Jason laughed. "That's up to you," he grinned. "Did you run the sims?"

She nodded. "We'll be able to get the shields up after coming out of hyperspace without injuring any crew member, as long as we pull them out of the sections next to the hull, just in case the computer doesn't automatically raise them once we drop out of hyperspace. For that reason,

anyone in the sections abutting the hull will be wearing their gauntlets and helmets for maximum protection, just in case.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he nodded as Jyslin reached them. “Jys, you remember Captain Sheppard and Lieutenant Commander Belanne, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” she said with a smile, shaking Lisa’s hand in the Terran fashion. “How are you doing, Erala?”

“Doing fine, your Grace,” Commander Belanne replied in a gentle, rich voice that just *screamed* that she was a beautiful singer. Erala Belanne was one of the new breed of officers that Jason didn’t know as well as he felt he should. He had personal relationships with most of the command-level officers in the KMS, relationships he was careful to cultivate. He did so because they knew what was going on, and they’d *tell* him, where Myri often told him only what she thought he should know. From the ship captains and the army Colonels, Jason kept track of what was really going on in the KMS where Myri and her general staff might not want him to see. “We’ve set up a schedule of four jumps, lasting approximately four minutes each. We felt it would be a little easier on the children,” she said, glancing at where Kyri, Shya, and Aran were standing at the foot of one of the four Gladiators that were assigned to the destroyer. Shya was in armor where Kyri and Aran were wearing tee shirts and shorts.

“Sounds like a plan,” he said as the crew of the corvette carried out their luggage, mainly throw-away clothes for their trip, but also a set of formal robes for him and his children just in case. Zaa hadn’t said anything about formal ceremonies, but he did want to be ready just in case something came up. “We ready to go?”

“The Kimdori escorts are just waiting for us to signal them, your Grace,” Lisa answered with a nod.

“Then let’s get this mob herded in the right direction,” he said, then sighed as he saw Symone activate one of the Gladiators, opening its cockpit. “Before Symone gets bored and steps on someone showing off for the kids,” he added, which made Jyslin laugh.

“I’ll be making the journey on the bridge, Jason, they’ll need me up there,” Miaari told him.

Jason nodded, for he knew that already. Miaari would have to be on the bridge to answer the initial hail from the Kimdori, part of their old customs, as well as being there to answer the query from the automated friend or foe system in case there was a malfunction. Only a Kimdori could make the automated defenses stand down in case the system thought the destroyer wasn't allowed to be there, so Miaari had to be on the bridge just in case.

Lisa put them in a lounge not far from the main hangar deck, and the Kimdori ships fell into position around them as Jason, Jyslin, and the eight guards accompanying them helped get the kids into their jump restraints. Aya trusted the Kimdori, the guards were coming mainly to keep the kids out of trouble rather than to protect them. She'd decided that Jason would need plenty of extra hands for that, so she assigned three other guards to Jason's usual detachment, came along herself, and put Kaera in command of the guards back home to keep watch over the strip while Jason was away. In addition to the usual faces of Shen, Suri, Dera, and Ryn, Uma, Mai, and Lelanna were assigned to the detachment, to give Jyslin some help keeping the kids under control. Each of them came from a different shift, to help spread out the burden of the home detachment being short-handed while Jason was away.

*I hate doing hyperspace,* Aran complained as Uma made double sure that the shoulder restraints of his jump harness was locked.

*It won't take too long for us to get there, pippy,* Uma smiled at him, tapping him on the nose and making him giggle a little. *Then you'll get to see something that almost nobody else has. You, little man, get to go to the Hearth. That's a big, big honor.*

*I just wish Mommy and Daddy Vell could come,* he fretted.

*Sometimes things happen you wish didn't happen, Aran,* Jason told him steadily. *Zaa couldn't invite everyone, so some people got left behind.* Jason didn't tell him the truth, that the invitation was *only* for Jason and his immediate family. While the girls on the strip were very close and dear to him, they weren't his immediate family. Zaa reserved opening the Hearth only to those with direct and intimate ties to Jason, who had something of an open invitation to visit the Hearth, which was an honor never bestowed to anyone outside the Kimdori that wasn't a Generation. Only those most worthy were allowed to enter the Hearth. That was why it was such an

honor for any Kimdori to be invited into the Hearth, and also why it was such a *big fucking deal* that Miaari could enter the Hearth without invitation from Zaa, as was her right as a Handmaiden. The doors of the Hearth were never closed to Miaari.

The Hearth wasn't just a palace, it represented the very core of Kimdori society. It was why Zaa's official title was Denmother instead of Queen or Empress, for she was the keeper of the Hearth, the most sacred place in Kimdori society. She was the mistress of the symbolic den which was the home of the Kimdori race.

*I know, but I still wish she could come,* Aran sent, his nervousness bleeding into his thought.

*It won't be so bad, Aran,* Jyslin told him as she locked her armor into the seat. *Remember, sometimes you see funny things as well as scary ones, and always remember that everything you see and feel isn't real. It's just sensory ghosts caused by hyperspace. I've never minded hyperspace jumps.*

*I dunno, Jys, I've seen some pretty scary things jumping,* Symone noted as she locked her armor in as well. Symone was the last one to lock in, and the guards moved among them to make sure everyone was secure.

*Those weren't real either,* Jyslin grinned at her.

*We'll be jumping in three minutes, your Grace,* Lisa sent from the bridge. *Are you ready?*

*The Ducal party is secured and ready for jump,* Aya replied strongly, sending throughout the ship rather than back to Lisa.

*Prepare for jump!* Erala's sending rippled through the ship. *All section chiefs report jump readiness!*

Jason listened in as the officers and lead NCOs reported back to the bridge in a specific order, all of them sendings, then the ship turned and started to slowly accelerate as the navigator aligned them for the first jump. *What's about happen, Daddy?* Sora asked. *I feel the ship moving.*

*They're lining the ship up to jump,* he replied. *Jumping requires the ship be pointing the right way, just as if it was moving normally. Right now, the navigator is lining the ship up so we can jump to our first stop point. We'll stop three times along the way because it's too far for us to get there in one*

*jump. It's sixteen minutes to Kimdori from Karis, pippy. We'd all go crazy if we tried that in one jump.*

*Why?*

*Jump shock, Jyslin replied. We can't take exposure to hyperspace for that long at once, pips. Our minds are based on our senses. Overload your senses, and it overloads your brain. That makes us go crazy. That's why we always stop and check each other for jump shock when we drop out of hyperspace, so nobody does anything crazy once they get out of their jump restraints.*

*That sounds scary.*

*It can be, but you're some tough kids, I'm sure you'll be fine, Jason smiled at Sora. You've all jumped before, you know what it's like.*

*Doesn't make it any less scary, Aran noted.*

*I think it's kinda neat, Kyri countered.*

*Then you don't do it enough, Shya sent fervently. They made me do jumps last year, cause a Princess has to be able to handle long distance jumps. It was not fun. I had nightmares about something I saw in a jump for a month.*

*And that's why they don't usually let kids your age jump more than absolutely necessary, Jyslin told her.*

*Then how did the bug people do it all the way from Andromeda? Aran asked curiously.*

*They put them to sleep for the journey so they didn't suffer jump shock, Jyslin answered.*

*That sounds kinda smart. Wish we could do that.*

*It takes too long to put a Terran or Faey into a state like that for it to be practical for short trips, Aran, Aya told him in a gentle mental tone. But I'm sure that Duchess Myleena is right now tinkering with some kind of system to allow our crews to jump long distances without suffering jump shock. She's a born tinkerer.*

*Most likely, Jason agreed with an audible chuckle, then he heard the twenty second warning. Okay, everyone, we're about to jump. Close your eyes and get ready, and remember, none of it is real.*

Jason had to agree with Aran about hyperspace. He gritted his teeth and gutted out four minutes of the entire world going crazy both inside and out, as wild and chaotic sensory impressions roiled through his mind. Colors, light, smells, sensations, random and irrational, and almost overwhelming. He winced when a sharp jagged edge of pain lanced through his left arm, like some giant claw had raked over his bicep; feeling pain was just as possible as pleasure in a jump, and the most common cases of jump shock were from those unlucky ones that suffered extreme instances of psychosomatic pain. Pain triggered all kinds of hormones and reactions in the brain, none of which responded well to being in hyperspace, and often led to the psychotic break known as jump shock when they came out of hyperspace, or its more severe form known as jump psychosis, which was *permanent* mental damage caused by jump shock. Or, at least damage that was permanent until repaired by a highly skilled telepath via a telepathic technique known as psychic surgery, the telepathic repair of aberrant mental states like psychosis or schizophrenia. Ryn would probably be the only telepath on Karis with that kind of skill, unless Songa had managed to lure one in from the *shaishain* to take up residency on Karis. Those kinds of telepaths were often doctors, since psychic surgery was considered a medical technique more than a telepathic technique.

They came out of hyperspace, and Jason breathed a sigh of relief. Almost immediately, Aya was standing over his chair, her hand on his face and checking him for signs of jump shock. He looked up at her and gave a nod. *I'm alright*, he told her, but she just took hold of his chin and raised it, making him look her squarely in the eyes. *And who's checking you, Aya?* he asked playfully.

*I don't need checking, like certain weak men who shall remain nameless*, she replied with a slight smile.

*Just keep adding to the list, Aya. That will make the retaliation that much more spectacular*, he sent dryly.

*Alright, now I'm sure you're okay*, she grinned suddenly, then moved down to check Jyslin.

*I hate that, I hate that, I hate that,* Zachary growled mentally.

*That's one down and three to go, pippy,* Jyslin told him supportively. *And remember, they're not all the same. Next one may be better.*

*Or worse,* Aran grunted.

*If you always think something bad is gonna happen, it will,* Rann declared.

*Next jump is in ten minutes, next jump is in ten minutes,* Erala sent from the bridge. *Remain in your assigned jump areas.*

The rest period after the second jump was a little longer, as the ship had to make a course correction due to drift in hyperspace, then the jump recalculated. After the third jump, Jason saw the shields activate out the viewing window across from him, shimmering into visibility for a second and then fading away. *We must be really close to Kimdori for the shields to activate on their own. The latent background radiation must be pretty strong,* Jason noted to Jyslin after Aya checked them.

*What's the minimum radiation threshold for the shields to automatically activate?* she asked.

*No idea, I'm not Myli, woman. I don't know everything about everything.*

Jyslin laughed. *She does know her shit,* she grinned.

*Your Grace, have the Duchesses, the Duke, and your guards put on their helmets and gauntlets,* Lisa called. *The next jump will be to Kimdori Prime, and you're in a section abutting the hull. That puts you in a danger area, so anyone there has to be ready in case the shields don't come online when we drop out of hyperspace.*

*We're on it, Captain,* Jason said as Jyslin pulled her helmet up and over her head and pulled it down.

The destroyer came out of its last jump with a large bluish-purple planet dominating the view outside the window, the planet Kimdori Prime. It was the only planet in orbit around its star, but it wasn't the planet that Jason was gawking at...it was what was *behind* it. The sky behind Kimdori Prime was dominated by faint white light, which was the combined light

emissions of the stars in the galactic core. Kimdori was about halfway to the core, and those stars were close enough to turn the entire inward sky a soft white, the individual stars lost in a wall of gentle white light. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind that they were closer to the center of the galaxy than Jason had ever been before, and that being that close was something that one would *not* miss. Miaari entered the lounge just as Jason passed his final check for jump shock and started working his way out of his jump restraints.

“Kimdori Prime,” he said as he raised his jump restraints and got out of his chair, walking over to the large viewing window with Miaari. “It’s beautiful.”

“One of the most unique planets in the galaxy,” Miaari nodded as she leaned on her hands on the edge of the window. “I’m very glad you could come, Jason. It’s only proper that you visit the Hearth.”

“I’ve never even seen a picture of it,” he mused.

“That is because only worthy eyes are allowed to look upon it,” Miaari smiled.

“Then why the hell are you allowed in there?” he asked lightly, which earned him an elbow to the ribs. “Did the shields raise properly?”

She nodded. “Didn’t you feel it?”

“Feel what? I was too busy getting over feeling like I was dunked in ice caused by hyperspace.”

“Ah, yes, you were still under the effects of sensory ghosts,” she nodded. “Well, when we exit the shield, you *will* feel it.”

“Feel what?” he repeated.

She gave him a toothy smile. “Why Jyslin will be in her armor.”

“And probably why I’m piloting the dropship,” Jason chuckled.

She nodded. “It minimizes the exposure of your crew,” she affirmed. “Since you can pilot the dropship, that’s one less person that will have to decontaminate later.” She looked back. “Come, cublings, it is time to be away!” she called. “The Denmother is expecting us, and we don’t want to keep her waiting!”



They returned to the hangar and got into the dropship that they'd loaded just for this, a modified Karinne Spatial TS-220 rigged to deal with the high levels of radiation, which could monkey with plasma power systems that weren't shielded against it. Jason and Aya got into the pilot's chairs as the other guards got the kids into seats before sitting themselves. Jason looked back and saw that everyone was ready, so he assumed command of the dropship via his gestalt. "Comm, this is Karinne One, ready to depart," he said aloud.

*"Karinne One, this is local control. You have permission to depart. The Kimdori planetary traffic command should be uploading a flight plan to your computer now."*

Jason checked the nav, and did indeed see a vector figure appear, telling him how they wanted him to come down. "I have it locked into my nav," he confirmed. "Alright, I'm disembarking now," he said as he lifted the large passenger dropship up off the deck, turning it slowly as the hangar doors opened, revealing the bluish-purple planet of Kimdori Prime slowly through the shimmer of the airskin shield. Jason piloted the ship out the doors once they were open and accelerated, and when they passed through the ship's shields, he gasped as he *felt* it. He could feel the radiation of the system against his skin, and he was *inside the ship*!

"It's stronger outside," Miaari said from behind as he heard the others gasp as well.

"It's like tingles!" Kyri blurted.

"I don't feel anything," Shya said.

"You're in your armor, cubling, that's why. Were you not, you would feel it, and be in the hospital in about half an hour. Faster if we were outside," Miaari said dryly. "That is *why* you are in your armor."

Jason put that out of his mind as he got them down to the planet, staying within the descent vector the Kimdori sent up to him. They came down through a cloud deck and over a city unlike any he'd ever seen before. It was huge, absolutely huge, even larger than Dracora, but all the buildings were much smaller, the largest of which looked only around a hundred stories. The buildings were all slender and slightly truncated, the bases wider than the tops, like spires, and all had flat roofs that served as landing

platforms. There was plant life between the buildings, plants with blue and purple leaves...which was what gave the planet its color from orbit, he realized. Those plants must dominate the ecosystem, like the way trees and grass did on Terra, Draconis, and other terrestrial planets. The sky towards the magnetic pole of the planet was lit up with an aurora, bright greens and blues shimmering and undulating, the effect of the background radiation emanating from both the Kimdori star and the galactic core colliding with the magnetic field of the planet. The field couldn't stop all the radiation, but probably reduced it to the point where the unique forms of life on Kimdori were able to flourish.

As they descended, Jason saw it, saw the Hearth...and he wasn't too surprised. The Hearth wasn't some grand palace like Dahnai's home on Draconis. It was a mid-sized house akin to a French chateau with an elaborate garden behind it, surrounded by a simple metal fence, and with a large landing pad beside it holding three different Kimdori dropships and skimmers. Two Kimdori were standing at the pad...Zaa and Grun, the Denmother and Denfather. They had no escorts. On the far side of the pad was a much larger and more modern building, which was Zaa's seat of government. The Hearth was not a place that Zaa conducted a whole lot of official business. Jason landed the dropship right on the center of the platform's borders, setting it down so gently that the ship barely even shuddered when weight was put on the skids. Aya took over to put the ship in standby mode, and Jason gathered up his family and opened the hatch.

He could feel it much more strikingly when he stepped down onto the landing pad, like tingling warmth shining down on him from above. The radiation of Kimdori Prime, which was deadly to anyone not a Generation, Kimdori, or Jakkan. It was so strong that when he looked up in the direction of the galactic core, he saw tiny colored spots in his eyes, the effect of that radiation striking his retinas. The radiation would kill Jyslin within half an hour if she weren't in her armor, but for Jason and his children, it was harmless at least for now. In six days, he'd have to decontaminate to purge the radiation built up in his body before it started doing physical damage, but for those six days, he would be safe.

Feeling that radiation against his skin made it so *obvious* why the Kimdori were so unique. Only a creature with a viral structure could survive a native environment like this, whose cells were extremely tiny,

resilient, and able to quickly reproduce. The Kimdori had evolved to thrive in this high-radiation environment, as did all life on their planet, which made them immune to all but the most powerful forms of radiation. He stepped up and gave Zaa a fond hug, patting her on her furry back, then embraced Grun the same way as Zaa reached down and picked up Rann. “I am very happy to see you here, Jason,” Zaa told him as she bounced Rann on her hip a few times, and then set him down.

“I’m happy to be here, Denmother,” he replied as Miaari stepped around him and took her place at Zaa’s right hand. “I want to see *everything* there is to see on Kimdori while I have this chance.”

“You speak as if you’ll never return,” Zaa chuckled.

“Given how busy we’re all going to be very soon, I figure this might be my only chance for a good six or seven years,” he replied seriously. “The Syndicate won’t just roll over, and then we’ll have the colonizing force from the Consortium just two years after that.”

She nodded, then took Jyslin’s armored hands. “I’m glad you could make it, Jyslin,” she said.

“I couldn’t miss this, even if I have to wear this armor for four days,” she grinned through her transparent faceplate, which allowed Zaa to see her entire face.

“A necessary evil, my friend,” she said. “You would not last long without it.”

“I know, I can *feel* it,” Jason said, holding his hand up, palm up, towards the sky. “It’s like being under a harsh heat lamp.”

“Very harsh, as you would measure such things,” Zaa nodded. “Are you having vision issues? That was always a problem for Generations who visited.”

“Only when I look up,” he replied. “I think it’s the radiation hitting my retinas.”

“Precisely that,” she said. “Your eyes aren’t designed to deal with it.”

“So, it’s more than sunlight you have to protect your cubs against when they’re born,” Jason reasoned.

She nodded, then knelt down and hugged Kyri and Aran fondly. “And how are you, my cublings?”

“We’re okay, Denmother,” Aran replied. “This place is so neat!”

“And it will get much neater as you look around,” she said with a gentle smile. “I’m going to show you things that few outside the Kimdori have ever seen with their own eyes, my young ones.”

“I can’t wait!” Kyri nearly squealed, her voice squeaking a bit.

“First, we’ll settle you in here at the Hearth,” Zaa told them. “Then after your father and I have a chance to speak of important matters, we’ll go out and see what there is to see. How does that sound?”

“It sounds good to me, Denmother,” Kyri grinned. “But how is Mommy Jyslin and Aunt Symone and Uncle Tim gonna sleep in their armor?”

“We’re not, pips, we’ll be going back to the ship to sleep,” Jyslin chuckled. “You get to stay down here, though.”

“It gives them a chance to decontaminate their armor every day to prevent excess buildup,” Jason noted. “And we’ll stay down here so we only have to do it *once*.”

“A wise plan,” Zaa nodded, then she hugged Zachary and Sora. She then reached her hand out to the armored Shya. “And welcome to you, Shya Karinne,” she said.

“I’m happy I got to come, Denmother,” she said, a touch formally as she put her armored hand in Zaa’s. “I wasn’t too happy about the idea of having to stay behind. I miss Ranny when we’re not together.”

“You’ll have to leave him behind at night to go sleep, but you’ll have the days,” she smiled. “Now, let us go into the Hearth,” she declared.

Jason’s assumptions about the mythical Hearth were shattered as soon as those huge gilded doors were open, for the entire building beyond was nothing but a single cavernous chamber. The inside of the house was a shell, an empty shell, holding several dozen Kimdori sitting at desks and tables, and with a large sloping ramp leading down which was flanked by two Kimdori wearing ornate, archaic shoulder guards and holding serrated pikes. The Hearth...of course. It was *underground*. It *was* the symbolic den

of the entire Kimdori race, and they originally made them underground. The Hearth reflected their acknowledgement of their origins. The building above held Zaa's staff, but it was what was hidden below that they considered the *true* Hearth. Zaa and Grun led them down that ramp, a good 20 or 30 shakra underground, to another set of doors, these much less ornate, but also bound in a shiny metal like steel. Two more guards holding pikes stood at those doors, and one of them opened the door for them as they approached as the other brandished his pike in salute.

Beyond was what Jason had almost expected. It was a residence built underground, large and spacious, but also decorated practically, fitting Zaa's personality. The large main chamber was dominated by a massive fireplace, its white stone intricately carved with many shapes, most of them Kimdori. That was *the* Hearth, and a fire burned in that 10 shakra wide hearth, which was itself flanked by another two guards. A couple of servants scurried about in the large chamber, and an aide that Jason recognized stood by a large comfortable chair, a shaggy-shouldered male with grizzled gray fur. That was Benaar, Jason recalled, one of Zaa's main aides, who often sat in on council meetings when Zaa was otherwise occupied.

"The Hearth," Zaa said in a measured tone, gesturing at the massive, stone-carved fireplace and mantle. "You are welcome before the Hearth, Jason Karinne, you and your family. May its fires warm you and bring you comfort."

"We thank you for the invitation," Jason said formally as his kids and Shya stood and stared at the large fireplace. "And now a lot of those little Kimdori idioms make more sense," he noted.

She chuckled. "Only a Kimdori would understand the meaning of the Hearth, and it is not something that they would even tell *you*," she smiled.

"Kimdori and their secrets," Jason teased.

"Benaar, see to the comfort of guests of the Hearth," Zaa called.

"At once, my Denmother," the large male called, then stepped up and called for the other servants. Jason stepped up to the large fireplace and put his hands out to it, felt its warmth over the heat in his skin caused by the radiation, which managed to penetrate underground, and Miaari stepped up beside him.

“It has been too long since I stood here,” she said in a musing tone. “This is the one place that every Kimdori wishes to be, Jason. You have no idea how honored I still feel to stand before the Hearth.”

“Guess even this is something that takes time to get used to,” he said, tapping her between her collarbones, touching the white band of station that marked her as a Handmaiden.

“When you attain a childhood dream, there’s always a few years of disbelief,” she said with a slight smile. “And of course, sister Kiaari is *unbelievably* jealous.”

Jason laughed. “You two wrangle almost as much as Kumi and the twins. Just in your own special way.”

“It is my duty as her elder to keep that little upstart cub in her place,” she said airily, which made him laugh harder.

“So, first order of business. When can we see your cubs?”

“Most likely tomorrow,” she replied. “They are being assessed by a medical specialist to ensure it’s safe for you to be in the same room with them, and such examinations take some time.”

“How so?”

“Remember when I told you that we’re the most virulent form of life in the galaxy?” she asked, which made him chuckle. “That is the threat you would face, friend Jason. Newborn cubs often cannot control their viral attack cells, and your body lacks the defenses to fight them off. They attack anything that touches them with viral attack cells, except their own mother. A mother is immune to the attack cells of her cubs, since their viral attack cells see the mother as part of itself, and thus won’t attack our cells. Denmother and the nurses that rear my cubs had to be inoculated against my cubs to be able to care for them, using a serum developed from my own immunity,” she chuckled. “It is a quirk of our biology that the fathers *do not* share this immunity to the cubs, which is one of the biological reasons that our social customs about the young developed,” she smiled. “Males cannot even *touch* the cubs until they reach a certain age, else the cubs will try to kill them. They quickly gain control over their proactive immune systems, which they then use only to attack invaders to the den that might sneak in while the pack is out hunting. You can think of it as a defense mechanism.

You being a Generation *will* protect you once they reach that stage, for the newborns will consider you Kimdori and won't try to kill you. The cubs are being assessed by a doctor to ensure that they've gained control over their attack cells. When the doctor deems them safe, I will take you to them. Until then, they are a danger to you."

Jason whistled. "That's one hell of a defense mechanism."

The Hearth was *big*. It was an entire underground complex, of which only the top floor was open to Jason and his family. Some of the deepest, darkest secrets of the Kimdori were kept on those lower floors, the only place they felt comfortable holding them, and as such there were very large and imposing security doors on the ramps leading deeper into the underground complex. The honor guard of Kimdori that defended the Hearth's secrets stood in pairs at every door and passage within the complex, and Miaari explained that *only* they knew of what lay at the deepest levels of the compound. Not even Zaa knew every secret of the Hearth. After all, she was only a temporary caretaker in the eyes of the Kimdori. She would eventually either pass on or abdicate, and a new Denmother or Denfather would win the right to lead when the clan leaders met to undertake the trials that would choose the most capable among them. But the honor guard would always remain, and so it was to them that some of the deepest secrets of the Kimdori were entrusted.

It was a curious metaphor to Jason. The Kimdori, ever secretive, even kept secrets from *themselves*.

But despite being banned from the lower levels, the top level was more than big enough to keep Jason and his family occupied. It was twice the size of Jason's house, with living chambers, two kitchens, sleeping chambers, two separate home offices for Zaa and Grun, where Zaa did some of her work and Grun conducted many of his studies, and of course, there was the chamber that held Miaari's cubs, just off Zaa's bedchamber. They'd brought some vidlinks and toys in for the kids to keep them occupied, putting them in a wing of the floor where three bedrooms opened to a single common room. Sora and Kyri would share one room, Aran and Zachary another, and Rann would get the third bedroom to himself...and he wasn't that happy about that, since Shya couldn't sleep on the planet. Rann wasn't used to sleeping by himself. Jason would be sleeping in a guest room just down the

hall from Zaa's bedchamber, with Miaari's bedchamber between them. Miaari had her own room in the Hearth, as was her right as a Handmaiden.

Kimdori servants helped Jason unpack his clothes and put them away, all of them wearing a small triangle of white fur between their collarbones, no doubt an indication that they served in the Hearth, then he met up with his family, Zaa, Grun, and Miaari back in the Hearth chamber. "We'll begin with a tour of the city," Zaa said in a happy tone. "Then we'll go to a special place for a meal, so Jyslin, Tim, Symone, and Shya can partake with us," she said, smiling at Jyslin, who was standing with Tim and Symone as they looked at a mural on the wall.

"Why do we have to go someplace special to eat, Denmother?" Rann asked.

"Because your family can't take off their helmets to eat, cubling, and I'm sure they'll be *very* hungry when we finish our tour," she replied.

"I thought you wouldn't take any special precautions for visitors, Zaa," Jason noted.

"We will set up no radiation shield where I intend to have dinner, Jason," she smiled. "But it should be safe enough there for your family to take off their helmets for a short time. I'll have sensors at the location to make sure the radiation levels are within Faey tolerance for short exposure."

"Sounds good then, I trust you, Denmother," he told her.

The city was *very* interesting. The reason the buildings weren't that big was because the Kimdori built *below* the ground as much as *above*, almost Makati or Kizzik in their approach. An average Kimdori's home was half above and half below ground, with "public" areas above ground and private living areas below...at least those Kimdori that could live thusly. There were too many Kimdori for that much ground area, so they also lived in more conventional apartments in the buildings. But it *did* explain Miaari's house back on Karis, which she'd had built with a huge basement that she utilized. The Kimdori liked lots of open space between their buildings, much like the Faey.

But the open land beyond the city was *far* more interesting. Zaa took them out to the open land beyond the city, which was a low, rolling ground



covered with what almost looked like moss. Little flying animals hovered over the purple moss, almost looking like gray bats with hummingbird wings, and they weren't very timid. One of them flitted around the kids as they walked out, then almost seemed to play with them as Zachary tried to catch it, flitting and swirling around him as his siblings giggled. Jason knelt down and put his hand on the strange moss, and saw that it wasn't actual moss, it was some kind of fibrous plant that had hair-like growths on it, and was very soft to the touch. It was also extremely tough, he found, resisting his attempt to pick a sprig of it for closer inspection.

"We call it carpet moss," Zaa told him as he watched what looked like a tiny ten-legged insect amble along one of the shoots. "It's as common on Kimdori as grass is on Terra."

"Plantlike," Jason said. "It must use photosynthesis."

"Actually, it metabolizes the radiation," she explained. "Much of the life on Kimdori has evolved to take advantage of the radiation here, Jason. All forms of life here are either immune to the radiation or actively metabolize it for sustenance."

"Replacing sunlight with radiation, clever. That's almost Jakkan," he mused. "Let me guess, most of the life that doesn't metabolize the radiation eats the life that does."

"Yes," she replied. "And some do both."

"Ahhh, so this place you're taking us to have dinner is somewhere that has some kind of natural life form that consumes so much radiation that it drops the levels into the safe zone for Jys and the others."

She smiled. "Astute," she nodded. "They'll cover the sky over us with their fronds, and those fronds absorb most of the radiation. So long as your family stays in the shade of the fronds, they'll be safe."

Zaa took them next to what almost looked like a conventional forest, with tall, slender-trunked trees with blue and purple leaves, looking almost like pines with birch leaves, which had more fauna in it. They saw several small quadrupedal tree-dwelling animals that were about the size of a cat, quite a few insect-like animals that buzzed around the trunks, and more of those hummingbird bats that were trying to catch the bugs. "It was in forests like this that we originated," Zaa told him as they walked along the

trunks. There was almost no ground brush, just the occasional sapling of the same species as the trees, but carpet moss covered the ground. Since he could still feel the heat of the radiation, he knew that there had to be more than enough getting through the trees and reaching the ground to sustain the carpet moss. The moss didn't cover everything, though. There were bare patches here and there, usually around saplings, and others where little ant-like bugs were eating it.

Jason noticed one thing, which he found curious. The air itself wasn't very warm, and the sunlight wasn't very strong. He realized that if this planet and star weren't where they were, the planet would be like Jobodi, an arctic wasteland. The ambient radiation from the galactic core made up for the lack of solar power.

From there, they visited what passed for the tropical belt of the planet, Zaa taking them by dropship to a small island with white sand beaches and strange wide-leafed purple plants that almost looked like prehistoric ferns. But it wasn't for the plants that she'd brought them. She pointed out to sea, and Jason gawked as he realized that the island across the way wasn't an island...it was a *living thing*. It was some kind of creature so huge that its back had plants growing on it, and he knelt down and pushed his hand into the sand, digging down until he hit something solid...chitinous.

"Correct," Zaa said with a smile, looking down at him. "We stand on the moving islands. They are actually gigantic life forms akin to the turtles of your world that drift with the tropical currents, feeding off microscopic life in the water as well as drawing sustenance from the plants that grow upon their shells in a symbiotic relationship."

"Amazing," Jason breathed. "That something so huge could be viral."

"Are not the blue whales of Terra giants while being cellular?" she asked lightly, which made him chuckle and nod.

After exploring the living island's small forest, they went to eat. Zaa took them to a forest near the north polar region where it was just as warm as it was in the city, and they walked into the most unusual forest Jason had ever seen. The plants here looked like water lily pads out of the water, huge dark blue fronds, some as big as twenty shakra across, suspended in air by delicate little stalks made up of multiple fibrous tubes braided together. A

tug on one of those showed that they were pliable, flexible, but they were also extremely strong...and they were *holding down* those huge dish-like leaves. Those things were *floating*!

“That’s why we call them skyfronds,” Zaa told him as the kids ran among the stalks, which made it easy to see quite a ways underneath them. The stalks were widely spaced and very slender compared to the size of the leaves they were holding down. “These plants have evolved a natural form of suspension by utilizing the energy of the ambient radiation. They float above the ground and compete with one another for open sky. They are also highly combative,” she said, pointing. He looked up and saw where the leaves were touching, how one leaf almost looked to have bitten off the other leaf where the two overlapped. The result was the victim leaf had a big chunk taken out of it.

“What causes that?”

“Tiny animals that live on the leaves, which respond to an invading leaf by devouring it,” she replied. “Any time two leaves touch, it is a war on a microscopic level as the frondmites from each leaf attempt to devour the other leaf.”

“They won’t eat their own leaf?” Jason asked.

She shook her head. “Each leaf cultivates its own unique strain of frondmite, who won’t eat their host leaf. The plant feeds them nectar, and in return, the frondmites attempt to devour any invading leaf that tries to block its access to the sky.”

“Huh,” Jason sounded, looking up. “Almost like spider nanites.”

“A good analogy,” she smiled, then she turned and looked back. “We’re deep enough into the forest, friends, you can remove your helmets,” she called. “The plants above block the radiation.”

“Yah, I’m getting a green light on my indicator,” Jyslin said, then she reached up and took off her helmet, pushing it back to seat behind her neck. “Those leaves absorb all the radiation?”

“Most of it,” Zaa nodded as Miaari knelt down and helped Shya remove her helmet. “But you can’t go without your helmet for too long. Keep an eye on your indicator. Our meal awaits us deeper inside the forest.”

About half an hour's walk into the strange forest, which had animals lurking in the distance that lived among the slender anchors, they reached a picnic area where some of Zaa's house servants had set up a meal, and Jason noted lightly that they'd used heavily shielded boxes to bring it, to protect the food from the radiation. How they managed to get the food here and cook it without irradiating it...that was a question he decided not to pursue. Then again, given it was all Faey food, and Kimdori weren't exactly known for culinary expertise, maybe the simple answer was that Zaa ordered carry-out.

No matter where the meal came from, it was a good one. The food was good, and the company was better, as Jason had the chance to just sit down and *talk* with Zaa, about both important and unimportant matters. Zaa was his advisor and mentor in many things, but she was also a friend, and he enjoyed just spending time with her. Given how busy they were, that often wasn't possible.

"And what do you think of our world so far, Symone?" Denfather Grun asked as they finished up the meal.

"I think it's all kinds of interesting," she replied. "I've never seen half the stuff you have here before. I've never even heard of it."

"Our world is somewhat unique," Grun smiled. "And just like Karis, it changes with the seasons. The skyfronds are at their most active this time of year. They grow as much as they can through the summer and then stop for the winter, biding their time until they can grow again."

"Our seasons here aren't based on the angular tilt of the planet, but the position of the planet relative to our sun and the core," Miaari supplied. "When the planet is behind the star in relation to the core, it is summer. When it's in front, it is winter, because the sun's solar wind either weakens or intensifies the core radiation depending on where the planet is."

"That's pretty cool," Tim said as he finished his chocolate mousse. "So this is summer?"

"Yes, Tim, this is the peak of summer, when the planet is almost directly aligned with the sun and core," Grun nodded. "The ambient radiation will reach its peak in two days, and then ebb as the angle of the sun changes, and its solar wind begins to impede the core radiation."

“Your winter must not be very dark,” Symone mused, looking up at the leaves over their heads. “The sun in the sky during the day and the core light at night.”

“Quite observant, my dear Symone,” Grun smiled. “And these nights will be among the darkest of the year for the opposite reason.”

After dinner, the tour continued. Zaa had their dropship fly all over the planet, visiting several cities, visiting several natural areas, letting Jason view the wildlife, which was staggeringly varied. From the tiny bat-like animals to giant sloth-like quadrupeds that roamed a flat plain on the southern hemisphere, animals three times the size of elephants that moved so slowly that carpet moss was growing on their backs. At first he thought they were just standing still until he realized that they were moving, moving so slowly that it took one of them almost five minutes just to move one leg. Little canine-like animals dug at the footprints they left behind, taking advantage of the weight of the animals to tear the tough, fibrous carpet moss on the ground to get at bugs or something underneath. The planet was rich in a vast diversity of life, from tiny to gigantic, from passive and friendly to highly aggressive, populating a planet that was almost exactly 50% land and 50% water, and all protected from the majority of the deadly radiation outside by a powerful magnetic field, the sky aglow to the north and the south with multicolored curtains of light akin to the aurora borealis and aurora Australis on Terra.

By sunset, Jason was actually a little tired from their globe-spanning tour and was happy to rest a moment within the Hearth as Jyslin and the others prepared to go back to the *Patrick Henry* for the night. After escorting them out to the landing pad, Jason playfully kissed the faceplate of Jyslin’s helmet as he held her armored form loosely in his arms. *You make sure you get back here early, he told her. After me and Zaa have a conference, she promised to take us shopping in the city.*

*We’ll be back down after you finish those long, boring talks, she grinned in reply. Wearing this armor this long isn’t as much fun for us as it is for you, silly man.*

*I know, I can’t feel you up or anything, he complained, which made her grin impishly.*

*Call when you and Zaa finish all the politics.*

*I will, he promised.*

After seeing them off, Jason did get back to some actual business. Three guards had remained behind to watch the kids—they trained extensively to wear their armor for long periods of time—freeing Jason and Zaa up to go over to her government building and attend a meeting of the Confederate Council. Jason knew the room she used to attend the meetings, but it was a little different being inside it, sitting on the other side of her large desk. The others knew he was visiting Kimdori Prime, but they didn't ask him anything about it as they discussed the imminent application of the Prakarikai into the Confederation, continuing a nearly week-long discussion they'd been having. Jason and Zaa didn't really have that much to do with it since they weren't really voting members, but they did pay attention because the addition of Queen Anavan into the council would change things.

"Still no word from High Archon Gau?" Magran asked.

Zaa shook her head. "My children report he still has made no decision," she answered. "However, I have received reports within the hour that the Jun Senate is in the final stages of approving tendering their own application."

"The *Jun*," Magran whistled. "It would take something truly as momentous as this for them to ally to *anyone*."

"They understand the reality of the situation, Speaker," Brayrak Kruu said grimly. "As did we, which is why I am here now."

"And we," Zaa added. "And the Leader," she added, nodding towards the hologram of the present but ever-silent Leader of the Zyagya, who was attending today's conference himself rather than have an aide listen in. He had never uttered a single word during any conference, taking the title *neutral observer* to its ultimate expression. "Most likely, they will join purely for the economic assistance, keep to themselves, and then fight alongside us when the time comes."

"Even that stretches their political stance a bit, but it does make sense," Dahnai mused. "They almost never leave their sixteen systems."

“Their traditions allow a pre-emptive war if they are certain that an invasion of their territory is provable, unavoidable, and imminent,” Assaba stated. “They are simply taking steps to prevent fighting in their *own* territory.”

“Their traditions will have to bend a little, since the Benga are in Andromeda and thus beyond their reach,” Sk’Vrae noted dryly.

“I’m sure them annihilating the Benga to the last man *here* will satisfy their traditions in war,” Magran supplied. That was how the Jun conducted warfare, and why the other empires in the Grimja sector had the sense not to bother them. The Jun never left their sixteen systems, which they considered theirs by divine right, but their divine providence *only* applied to those sixteen systems, which was why they were easy to have as neighbors. But anyone who went to war with the Jun had to be ready to fight a war of total annihilation; they either wiped out the Jun to the last man, woman, and child or they were wiped out themselves. The Jun believed that anyone who attacked them would never honor their word and would attack again, so their brutally practical viewpoint was to eradicate the attacker to the last living soul, thus permanently removing the threat that race or empire posed to them. They would sally forth from their territory and conduct a war of total genocide, even killing the infants of their enemy, level every city, scour every last vestige of their enemies from the universe, then return to the borders of their territory and pose no threat to anyone else...so long as they weren’t attacked. That was how the Jun handled their business, and in an odd way, it was *very* effective. The other empires in their sector would bite off their own fingers before they got into a war with the Jun. Given that the Jun didn’t socialize with anyone else and had only the most basic diplomatic contact with outside empires, they were given a *very* wide berth. They were even more isolationist than the Zyagya, who at least would agree to trade deals with outside empires. The Jun would not, at least not with anyone but the Moridon, whom they trusted enough to handle certain financial affairs for them. The Moridon were the only race allowed to enter Jun territory.

“The first thing they’ll have to stipulate if they join the Confederation is that they’re not fighting the war by their rules,” Dahnai said. “They’re doing this *our* way, and that means that Jun military units obey the chain of command.”

“I’m sure they understand that,” Magran said, tapping his chin with a slender, gray, long finger. “I have very tentative contact with the High Senator. I think I’ll call him after the meeting and find out where things stand.”

“That would be much appreciated,” Ba’mra’ei noted.

*[And when were you going to tell me that?]* Jason communed with Zaa’s memory band, which would allow her to hear him.

*[I just did, cousin,]* she replied lightly through her band without looking at him. *[I just received word about the matter ten minutes ago.]*

*[I so need to be added to the Kimdori biogenic network, so you can’t drop these little bombs on me,]* he complained, which made her give him an amused look.

“I think they understand that,” Magran said. “But a little confirmation before they officially apply for entry wouldn’t hurt. But I see this as a good thing. Perhaps allying with the Confederation to fight off the Andromedan invaders will soften their positions a little. The Jun are a highly intelligent and culturally rich race. Their isolationist tendencies have harmed them over the last thousand years.”

“In their case, it’s best for all if they stay within their territory, Magran,” Assaba declared.

“I have little experience with these Jun,” Shakizarr said. “Are they that dangerous?”

“Dangerous? Naw, as long as you don’t do anything they interpret as an act of war,” Kreel said lightly. He had his feet up on his desk, showing them all the pads of his hybrid feet. “But that’s the last thing you ever, ever want to do. As long as they’re left alone and their borders are honored, they’re quiet and considerate neighbors. Believe me, I keep our ships way the *hell* away from their border,” he chuckled. “We have a no-entry zone along their border that’s nearly five light years across. I won’t even let our ships get *close* to their territory, to make sure there’s no accidental border incursion. That’s all it takes, and they don’t give you a second chance.”

“Ah, I see,” Shakizarr noted. “So one ship errantly entering their territory could spawn a war?”



“It’s not a guarantee, but it can,” Kreel said. “Two hundred years ago, we had a ship accidentally jump into their territory when its jump computer malfunctioned. They had the sense to immediately contact the Jun and tell them about the accident, then wait there for Jun warships to arrive. The Jun arrived and inspected the ship, deemed it an honest accident, and allowed the ship to jump back to our territory. They even helped fix the jump computer. But if they’d have decided that it wasn’t an accident, then we’d probably *still* be in a war with them. The Jun don’t surrender, and they don’t accept another’s surrender. For the Jun, the war ends when the last living member of the enemy empire’s dead.”

“Brutal,” Shakizarr grunted. “And dishonorable.”

“They have very extreme views, but the good side of it is they have established and well-known triggers,” Magran added. “As long as you don’t set them off, they are peaceful neighbors.”

“I’m sure we can work around those burrs,” Dahnai said. “We could use their help no matter what. This is them against us, and we need all of *us* on the line when they get here.”

“Not for the Syndicate, but when the colonizing force of the Consortium arrive, yes,” Magran said musingly. “With the Verutans and the Grimja with us, we should have the manpower to send the Syndicate back to Andromeda. It’s with the Consortium where we will need all the help we can get.”

“The more we have to face the Syndicate, the fewer losses overall we take that we must replace to fight the Consortium,” Sk’Vrae said.

“True. I’ve never been much of a military tactician,” Magran nodded.

*“The esteemed Brood Queen speaks truth,” Grran’s vocoder added. “The key to facing the Consortium’s colonizing force is the swift and total destruction of the Syndicate expeditionary fleet with minimal casualties to our forces. We will need every ship, every resource at our disposal to deal with the much larger Consortium force.”*

One of Zaa’s aides literally ran into the room, and almost tripped and fell when she crashed into another aide. Both Zaa and Jason looked in her direction as she recovered and ran up to Zaa’s desk, bowing her head low and offering a handpanel to her. Zaa took it and read the screen quickly, her

furry brows rising. “I have just received another missive from my children. High Archon Gau has decided to apply for entry into the Confederation. He intends to make the official announcement within the hour. As usual for a Haumda, he is moving with determination once he has reached his decision.”

“That’s very good news,” Magran said with a bright smile.

“That was actually quite hasty for a Haumda to make a decision,” Shakizarr mused.

“Truly, but it was a good one, at least from our point of view,” Dahnai chuckled. “So, that’s what, the Haumda, the Prakarikai, and the Jun?”

“The threat we face is a powerful motivation,” Vizzie spoke up, for the first time in the council...that was a little unusual. She must be wrangling with Grizza again. “The Republic joined this body for mutual defense as much as mutual cooperation against the Andromedans. Gau sees that only if he sits on this council can he depend on Confederate assistance if his territory is invaded.”

*[Jason, we are receiving a request for council from the Haumda,]* Cybi communed with him, easy for her to with the Kimdori biogenic network.

“And speaking of Gau, he just asked to talk to me,” Jason spoke up. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” he said, then he leaned back and closed his eyes. He pushed his consciousness up into the Kimdori’s biogenic network, which felt decidedly different from the one on Karis, and constructed in his mind’s eye an image of his office back in Karis. He placed himself into it, then looked towards where he’d usually regard a hologram. *[Go ahead and connect us, Cybi,]* he relayed. *[I’ll do it this way.]*

*[Clever idea, Jason,]* she said approvingly, and an image of Gau appeared on that imaginary hologram in his imaginary office. Gau’s ursine face appeared before him, his eyes rising a little bit.

*“I was under the impression you were on a state visit to the Kimdori, your Grace,”* he said.

*[Actually, that’s where I am now. What you’re seeing is nothing but a construct that lets me focus my attention, High Archon. In reality, I’m*

*communing with Cybi and she's feeding your comm directly to me.]*

*"Quite interesting," he said with a nod and a curious look around. "So this is all merely a hologram of some sort?"*

*[Something like that. What you see isn't real, but it helps me focus my attention, and it gives you something to actually look at, else this would be audio only. What did you need, High Archon? I'm attending the Confederate Council at the moment, and we're talking about something fairly important.]*

*"Perhaps it's an omen from our gods that you would happen to be talking to them when I call you," he chuckled. "I thought to contact you first, your Grace, and inform you that the Haumda will formally petition for entry into the Confederation. I have my diplomatic staff on Terra tendering the written petition to the Confederate office at the Academy as we speak."*

*[You had it ready? It sounds like you'd already made up your mind a bit ago, High Archon.]*

*"Not entirely, but I like to have all paperwork prepared for any possible decision I make, so things can move smoothly once a decision has been made," he answered with a slight smile.*

*[I'll inform Denmother, she can tell the others,] he said, then he expanded his focus enough to query her memory band. [Denmother, could you tell the council that the High Archon is having his diplomats bring his formal application to the office on the Academy grounds? That way they know they're coming.]*

*[Of course, cousin. I'll also tell Kiaari so she might quickly spread the word.]*

*[And there we go, High Archon,] Jason relayed. [The Confederate Council knows, and they'll be waiting for a copy of your petition to get sent to us.]*

*"Very good, your Grace," he said. "On a slightly different note, I called you first to also make a slightly unusual request."*

*[Go ahead, High Archon.]*

*“I would ask that you allow me and three of the high priests of our religion to travel to Karis to investigate the possible fulfillment of omens. And I would like a less crowded state visit, a chance to speak to you one on one in secure surroundings about important matters both Confederate and private between the Haumda and the Karinnes, things I would feel most uncomfortable discussing over galactic crypto. I would only ask for perhaps two days of your time.”*

Ever polite and considerate, the Haumda way. Jason was a bit surprised he’d ask, and only thought about it for a few seconds. *[I’d be happy to receive you, High Archon. Get in touch with Secretary of State Yeri and work out a schedule with her. She knows my schedule and knows when I’ll be available. Wait. Actually, I have a better idea. Cybi.]*

Cybi appeared in his construct of her own volition, inserting herself into his very mind, appearing in her usual pseudo-nude hologram, this time manifesting feet. Gau gave her a curious look as she sat demurely on the edge of his desk, as was her habit. *[Yes, Jason?]*

*[If you would please, make the arrangements for the High Archon to visit Karis. I’m sure the High Archon would enjoy another chance to talk with you.]*

“I would very much like just that, your Grace,” Gau smiled, showing his fangs.

*[I would be happy to do so, Jason,]* she answered, smiling towards Gau’s hologram. *[And I would be most pleased to have a nice conversation with the High Archon. He is a very engaging and intelligent man.]*

*[Then that’s all settled. If you don’t mind, High Archon, I should tell the council about this,]* he intoned deliberately.

Gau took the hint. He nodded and glanced to his right. *“I’ll be available for conference if the council wishes to speak to me about the petition,”* he replied.

*[I’ll tell them. Until later, High Archon. Walk within the light.]*

“Blessings of the Great Spirit go with you,” he returned.

Jason blinked his eyes open and found all of them looking at him, waiting. “Gau said he’ll be standing by to speak to the council after you

receive the petition,” he relayed, then realized that Zaa had her hand over his on the desk, which let her be privy to everything that went on in his little meeting...eh, like he could keep any secrets from a Kimdori anyway.

“Kiaari sends the message. The Haumda retinue has reached the office, so we should have a copy of the petition within moments,” Zaa told them.

“Then perhaps we should adjourn until the petition has time to reach us through proper channels,” Magran offered. “I find myself in need of a quick meal. Today’s meeting was a bit inconvenient,” he said with a slightly rueful expression.

“That’s a good idea. How about we reconvene in one standard hour?” Dahnai asked. When nobody objected, she leaned back in her chair and turned it a little bit. “Alright then, we’re adjourned for one standard hour.”

The holograms winked out, and Zaa tapped her muzzle. “I think it might be time for the council to adopt more formal rules,” she said. “The Prakarikai especially will seek to usurp the free-wheeling manner in which the council operates right now.”

“What kind of rules?”

“Nothing momentous, cousin. But a formal council chair should be set up who has control of meetings, and the chairmanship can rotate through all council members, say, once a takir, and this chair of the council can only be held by a member with certain standing, to prevent a new member from having control of council sessions until they’re more established and used to how things work. That puts a controlling voice in place that holds the Prakarikai in check.”

“I’m sure they’ll agree if you suggest it, Denmother,” Jason said. “As long as you make sure us four neutral observers don’t take the chair, it’ll work just fine.”

“That goes without saying, cousin,” she nodded. “It is a violation of both our oaths and yours to lead the council in any official manner.”

“I do think it’s a good idea, though,” Jason said. “Sometimes things can get a little murky when Assaba and Dahnai are each trying to run things their way.”

After a quick snack and a chance to walk around a little bit, then a chance to read the one-page petition for entry into the Confederation from the Haumda, they reconvened, and Zaa wasted no time making her suggestion. “The Prakarikai especially will take advantage of the open nature of council,” she explained when the other leaders gave her curious looks after she explained her idea. “By putting a chair in place that has control of certain council meeting functions, it prevents Anavan from holding us here for hours and hours as she drones on.”

Dahnai laughed. “I never thought of that!” she said. “I don’t think it’s a bad idea. So, we rotate through the chair every ten days, and it’s only open to the current members?”

“For now. Once the new members have certain tenure, they should be added to the rotation,” Zaa nodded. “That way they know that they are equal within the council and within the Confederation.”

“I think we can work out the chair’s powers and responsibilities after we receive Gau,” Shakizarr said. “We shouldn’t keep him waiting for long.”

Gau’s hologram joined the others after a moment, and the council exchanged quite a few pleasantries with him before getting down to business. “I think I can speak for the council when I say that you’ll have little trouble getting past the vote, High Archon,” Dahnai told him. “We’ve been hoping that you’d petition for entry since the summit on Karis.”

“It was the summit that accelerated my decision,” he replied modestly. “I saw that despite the great differences between your empires, you were able to come together around a picnic table and plan for a future that protected *all* of us, not just *some* of us. We must defend our galaxy from these invaders, but also protect each other as much as our own. I am convinced that the Confederation upholds that ideal, and so I have petitioned on behalf of my people to join you.”

“Well, I think we can call for a vote right here and now,” Kreel said. “Before the rule change slows things down. Anyone here *not* voting for the Haumda to join the Confederation?” When there was silence, Kreel grinned that cheeky grin of his. “Welcome to the Confederation, High Archon Gau,” he said grandly.

Jason just had to laugh, and Zaa smiled roguishly. "I see the proposed rule changes were a good idea, Kreel is already abusing things," Jason said. "But as the Terrans say, welcome aboard, Gau. We'll be a better group with you among us."

Dahnai chuckled. "I think that does mean that you're here now. Even if it's a bit unorthodox. So we'll have to get your military commanders to Terra as quickly as possible so they can start their orientation. We don't have to wait for you to sign the Articles to get things moving."

"I'll send a cruiser to Haumda Prime to pick them up," Jason supplied.

"I would sign the treaty in person on Terra, as soon as possible. There does not need to be a public ceremony over this. We only have so much time, I'll not waste it demanding a public spectacle," Gau declared.

"If that is your wish, we can get things ready. I will ensure you have suitable security, High Archon," Kim spoke up, finally saying something. He was usually as quiet as the Leader during the meetings, here mainly to know what was going on. The Articles they'd all signed were on Terra, in the Confederate Headquarters, kept in a secure vault but with a copy on public display in the visitor's center, a public demonstration of the alliance between the various empires for self-defense. Since most of the Confederate offices and departments were on Terra, he often needed that advance warning. While the rulers may think they ran the Confederation, it was actually Kim that did most of the grunt work, for he was the one that coordinated the operation of the various new Confederate bureaus that were headquartered on Terra.

"I would appreciate it, Secretary Kim," Gau nodded to him. "I will arrive on the Karinne warship, but I would be willing to push back my arrival until such time as you have things prepared if it's needful."

"Feel free to arrive as soon as possible, High Archon. I have a very efficient staff," Kim said with a diplomatic little bob of his head. "They will have everything ready for you. Will you require lodging, or will you return to Haumda after the signing?"

"I will return to Haumda, but thank you for the offer of hospitality," Gau replied.

“I think it would be best if all of us came to Terra to witness the signing,” Assaba stated.

“That’s a good idea,” Dahnai agreed. “We were all there when Shakizarr and Kreel joined us, we should afford Gau the same respect.”

“I would leave such official matters to you,” Zaa stated. “As I’m sure the other neutral observers on this council will agree. It is not our place to engage in such things.” Brayrak nodded in assent, and the Leader just watched on impassively.

“I completely understand, Denmother,” Gau said with an eloquent nod. “Neutrality must be maintained, for all of you.”

“It pleases me that you understand,” Zaa told him. “It is not a matter of disrespect, High Archon.”

“I do understand, Denmother, and I take no offense at your decision. Nor yours, your Grace,” he added, looking at Jason. “Nor yours, Overseer, revered Leader. Your position within this body is understood to me.”

“I should have everything ready for you to arrive at the main headquarters of the Confederation Bureau within the hour,” Kim declared. “So you may depart at your leisure.”

“Then I think we should adjourn as soon as Jason tells me he has a ship on the way over here to pick me up,” Kreel grinned.

“I’ll get it on its way, Kreel,” Jason chuckled. “A small one. With broken jump restraints.”

Kreel laughed richly. “I do love an adventure,” he grinned impishly.

After the council broke up, Jason relayed orders back to Myri to have her dispatch ships to pick up Shikizarr, Kreel, and Gau, to bring them to Terra to witness the signing. “That was pretty fast,” he said to Zaa as they left her office, heading back to the Hearth. Zaa walked without guard or escort as they left the building, something Jason fervently hoped he’d be able to do again when he got home and defeated Aya in an epic battle to the proverbial death over his movement restrictions.

“Faster than I expected,” Zaa noted. “I thought it would take him two or three months to reach a decision.”



“You heard him say that he didn’t think we had time to arrange a public signing,” Jason said. “He must be serious about it.”

“Truly. And thank the gods, we won’t have to go to Terra to attend.”

Jason laughed. “I should kiss you for getting me out of that,” he said with a grin. “Much as I like Gau personally, I hate the ceremony.”

“As do I, cousin. Sometimes neutrality has more than one benefit.”

*Brista, 1 Kedaa, 4401 Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 29 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Brista, 1 Kedaa, 4401, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Hearth, Kimdori Prime*

The Haumda were officially part of the Confederation.

Gau certainly had everything ready for his decision. Haumda military officers were already getting their initial briefings at the Confederate Combined Military Command Center, which was so brand new that the paint wasn’t entirely dry, but they needed it to be up and running and Lorna had barely waited for the Makati to get the carpet into the main command building. Other parts of the complex were still under construction, but the main core building where Lorna and the other staff officers were stationed was only just finished, and she’d moved in literally as the Makati workers filed out.

Luckily, Jason and Zaa didn’t have to go to Terra, so they had plenty of time. After a surprisingly restful night’s sleep in the Hearth, Jason finally managed to do the one thing he’d really wanted, to see Miaari’s cubs. The Kimdori doctors had declared them safe, and so Jason was there first thing that morning to see them, before the kids were awake, even before Jyslin and the others managed to get down from the destroyer. Zaa and Miaari took him to the nursery chamber, which was on a lower level. He had to utilize a sensor pod to “see” in the room, merged to it so he could see its sound-map imagery akin to an ultrasound, since the room was utterly

lightless. The cubs looked a little more mature now, had thicker fur, and their eyes were closed now, their lids finally having formed enough for them to close their eyes. The three exceedingly tiny Kimdori infants were nestled in what almost looked like a doggy bed, the three of them curled up with each other in the soft cushioning of their little bed. Miaari cuddled one of them to her breast as Zaa allowed him to pick one of them up, having to be very careful because they were so tiny. He picked up the honey-colored female Yemaari in the litter, found her to be strangely hot, and so tiny she could fit in the palm of his hand. To think that she would grow to be Miaari's size, it reminded him of his own children, how small they'd seemed when they were born. "They can actually tolerate the light now, but most cubs prefer it dark," Miaari whispered. "I would wait another week or so before I introduce them to the light, to make it as easy as possible on them."

Yemaari yawned and put her tiny, tiny paws on his finger as he touched her gently, and he gasped when he felt her connect to him through his nervous system. The connection was open, unskilled, as she almost instinctively attached herself to his nervous system through the touch on his finger. Where other Kimdori throttled his ability to see inside them, Yemaari couldn't, proving that the Kimdori's unique ability did go both ways. Since the tiny cub couldn't control the connection she made, it allowed him to look into her mind even as she looked into his. "I should have warned you that infants tend to do that," Miaari smiled at him. "It's one way we learn, through direct nervous interface with our elders. It is a very efficient way to teach an unformed mind."

Yemaari's mind was that of an infant, lacking rational cognizance, a bundle of instincts and impulses, but Jason could detect an underlying intelligence, as she *learned* from attaching herself to him, saw what was in his mind and understood that there was a world beyond the lightless den. She also came to the understanding that Jason was not nursemaid or mother, but also sensing *kinship* with this odd creature. She could sense that he was a Generation even at that stage, and it inclined her towards him. She did not see him as *alien*. In fact, she rather liked him. He was different from nursemaid and mother, and the difference of him intrigued her rather than frightened her.

“She’s extremely intelligent, Miaari,” Jason said in a hushed tone as she picked up her other son. “I can see it in her.”

“I know. I have high expectations for all three of them, but she seems to have the greatest intellect. I sense great physical ability in Maaaleth, and a cunning in Haan that will make him a formidable player of the game. There is much potential here.”

“As is only proper for the children of a Handmaiden,” Zaa declared in a soft voice, which made Jason chuckle a tiny bit.

“Are you taking them home with us?” Jason asked as he rubbed his fingertip along Yemaari’s furry little belly, which made her smile. His finger was nearly as wide as the tiny cub cradled literally in the palm of his hand. She was the size of a newborn puppy and looked almost creepily similar to one.

“Not quite yet. As soon as I have my home in Jaxtra to my liking, I will come for them,” she replied as Zaa took one of the males from her, cradling him in the palm of her hand. “They are well cared for here in the Hearth, Jason. That gives me leisure to ensure that everything is just so before I bring them home.”

“Will they be alright jumping hyperspace?” he asked in concern.

“Better than infants of other species,” she replied. “After all, they were brought *here* by hyperspace.”

“True,” he chuckled, bringing Yemaari up and nuzzling her against his cheek fondly. “You just wait ‘til we get you home, little girl. I’m gonna spoil you *sooo* rotten,” he said, which made Miaari laugh softly.

“Not my child,” Miaari warned.

“It’s more fun to spoil other people’s kids, that way you don’t have to deal with them at home,” he replied easily, which made Zaa laugh.

Once that bit of very important business was out of the way, Jason got back to the real reason he was on Kimdori...to relax. After Jyslin and the others came down from the ship, they spent a few hours just puttering around the Hearth, spending time with the Denmother, Denfather, and Miaari. They went to see Miaari’s cubs again after they had a chance to rest a while, then they went out on another trip into the huge capitol city of the

Kimdori to sightsee a bit and do some shopping...not on an organized tour as Zaa had taken them on yesterday, but just running around the city to see things from the ground level. Zaa and Grun walked with them, not wearing their bands of station and simply mixing in with the millions of Kimdori that lived there, without guards, without trappings. Just the way Jason liked things. But, since Jason and his family weren't Kimdori, they did stand out quite a bit, and got a lot of curious looks their way.

The city was large, clean, and orderly, and it had everything in it Jason would expect in a city, but a few things were noticeably missing. For one, there was not a single restaurant or bar anywhere in the city...and he didn't have to think very long about that one to understand why. The Kimdori *could* eat, but they didn't *have* to eat. There were shops that sold what a Kimdori would consider food...if featureless blocks of stuff that looked like gray tofu could be called food. Eating held no social convention to the Kimdori, so in their own society, it had no dedicated shops that catered to the practice. Their shops were much like Karsa's in that they held merchandise from a large number of different empires, and many beyond even Karsa's supply lines. The Kimdori had their hands into almost every civilization in their *quadrant*, and their shops reflected that long reach. For another, there weren't any *amusement* places in the city either, like amusement parks or water parks or anything of the sort. That seemed strange to him, since Miaari very much enjoyed the water park, and knew that Kimdori did in fact like to have fun. They had no sports arenas in the city, no stadiums, no organized sports or any such things. There were tons of museums and art institutes—Jason had no idea Kimdori loved art so much—but no sports.

That was what was missing. There were places in the city devoted to the nature of the Kimdori. There was a tutoring center in town where Kimdori with experience offworld hired out to teach other Kimdori to shapeshift into some of the animals out there that might be useful to them, or perhaps just animals they rather fancied, and of course they taught Kimdori the various sentient races. Kimdori could shapeshift into animals and creatures they could see easily enough, but that was purely cosmetic, taking on its appearance and perhaps its basic abilities, such as the ability to run fast on all fours or fly using wings. But to pass close inspection or to gain access to the creature's more exotic natural abilities, they had to have intimate

understanding of the creature's biology and anatomy. Miaari could shapeshift into the guise of a giruzi, would look like one in every way, but to be able to use its electrical discharge powers, she had to have an intimate understanding of exactly how those biological processes worked in a giruzi so she could copy it. And that was where these tutors came into play. They would shapeshift into the animal completely—well, up to the point where they were the animal but could withstand the radiation—and trained their customers in how to take the shape themselves.

There were places where Kimdori gathered, almost like coffee shops, but they sold no coffee or any other drinks. They instead simply rented out seats where Kimdori sat and talked in groups while pleasant music played in the background. There were also music halls where Kimdori would assemble and listen to music played live for their benefit, which seemed *almost* like a bar with a live stage, but they served no food or drinks there, only access to water. There were news outlets on almost every street and corner, holograms and viddies from every empire in the quadrant playing for the populace, letting everyone in the city keep up with everything going on everywhere. The Kimdori on homeworld may not be as involved with keeping things under control out there as the Gamekeepers and their staffs, but even Joe Kimdori who worked in the music hall as a musician liked to keep up with what was going on out there in the galaxy. And theaters...the theaters! There were theaters *everywhere* in the city, almost one every five or six blocks, where plays and other pieces were performed. They didn't show movies or viddies in them, they were *all* live action plays and performance pieces.

But aside from those little quirks, he found the city to be very interesting, the Kimdori friendly, and he and his family had a pretty good time. Zaa took them to a music hall that had a piano in it, and she talked him into demonstrating the Terran instrument as played by a Terran for the Kimdori that happened to be there at the time. They walked along a beautiful beach along the edge of the city and watched as the kids chased those curious little bat-like creatures, went to a couple of plays and found the acting superb and the stories engaging, and after Jyslin and the others went back up to the ship to eat and get some rest out of their armor, they returned to the Hearth and let the family relax a while as Jason and Zaa sat down for more talks about the Syndicate, the Consortium, and the

Confederation. When they came out to relax a bit before the scheduled council meeting, Jason was quite surprised to see that Miaari had removed her cubs from their dark room and had brought them up to the main living area, still in their basket, and all three were awake and looking up over the edge of the basket with wide-eyed curiosity as Rann, Shya, and Kyri tried *very* hard not to play with them like they were puppies, sitting beside the basket and touching them, all but petting them, but not picking them up, as they were instructed not to do.

“You brought them out,” Jason said as he knelt by the cushioned oval and touched Haan gently on the head as he looked up over the lip of the basket, staring at Kyri and Sora as they played with a couple of dolls they’d brought. Haan looked up at him with those eerie eyes, and Jason felt him *trying* to connect to his nervous system. “Hello, Haan, it’s good to see you,” he said in a soft, nurturing voice that made the exceedingly tiny little Kimdori cub smile at him.

“I told you they could tolerate the light. I had the nursemaid gradually increase the light in the nursery while we were out, to prepare them. It’s good for cubs to see beyond the nursery from time to time. I will take them back to the nursery when they get tired.”

“It’s a good thing Amber isn’t here,” Jyslin laughed. “I don’t think they’d be that peaceful.”

“On the contrary, vulpars have little trouble interacting with Kimdori cubs,” Miaari replied. “They know they’re infants and treat them carefully.”

“So, you guys almost done with your silly politics?” Symone asked as she studied a chessboard, sitting across from Grun. Jason knew she knew how to play, he’d taught her himself, but didn’t know that Grun had learned the game.

“Almost,” he replied. “Just have to sit through a council meeting, and we’re done. It’ll be the first one Gau attends officially,” he noted.

“Gau will probably remain silent and simply observe until he grasps the intra-council politics,” Zaa noted. “And you should take more of an interest in those silly politics, Symone. Given who you are and where you live, understanding what goes on would only behoove you.”

“I’m just here for the ride, Denmother,” she grinned through her transparent faceplate. “I’ll leave the politics to the smart people, like Jayce and Tim-Tim.”

“She doesn’t *want* to know,” Tim grunted as he bounced Zach on his knee a little.

“And has your father started you on your lessons, cublings?” Zaa asked, looking at Rann, Shya, and Aran.

“You mean teaching us what it means to be the Grand Duke? Yeah,” Aran replied. “I didn’t realize those lessons were so boring, Ranny doesn’t talk about them that much.”

“They are lessons you should learn most keenly, cubling,” she smiled down at him. “You cannot *be* a Karinne unless you understand what it *means* to be a Karinne. And since your family holds the position of being the caretaker of the CBIM and the secrets of your house, no one on Karis should understand what it means to be a Karinne more than you.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s still a little boring,” he replied.

“They’ll be coming to work with me twice a takir like I was doing with Rann before things got crazy,” Jason relayed. “Just not all at once. They tend to lose their focus when they’re together, so they’ll come one at a time.”

“Wise,” Zaa chuckled as Symone gave a short swear.

“Aww, come on, Grun! You just learned this game! You’re not supposed to be this good at it!” she complained.

“It’s a game with simple rules, but a complexity to its underlying strategy that intrigues me,” he replied. “I thought *emzura* was a complicated game, but this one has many layers. Many, many layers. I would be of a mind to study it more formally.”

“Grun’s main job is to be Zaa’s most educated advisor, Symone. I think you picked the wrong person to teach just so you could beat them and inflate your ego,” Jyslin teased a little.

“I did *not*!” she protested.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jyslin hummed playfully as Jason sat down beside her and took her gauntleted hand. “Just not the same, is it?” she asked with a smile through her faceplate.

“We’ll live for two more days,” he replied.

“Denmother, it is time,” one of her aides called from the ramp leading out.

“We must have been talking longer than I thought,” she mused, standing up. “Come, Jason, let us get this over with.”

Jason chuckled and stood up. “That’s how I feel about council more often than not,” he agreed.

Council was somewhat surprising because not only was Gau attending for the first time, but the Grand Master was also in attendance, his hologram beside Magran’s. The Grand Master very, very rarely attended council, allowed Magran to handle it due to his advanced age, and that age looked even more advanced than just a few takirs ago, when he came to Karis. He looked...*tired*.

Jason considered that as they waited for the others to arrive. The Colonies were a very orderly and calm place, and Magran’s position as the heir to the mantle of the Grand Master was already a settled matter. The transition would be smooth for them, but it would cause about a month’s disruption in the Colonies as they observed the mourning rituals and ceremonies of succession that would seat Magran as the new Grand Master when the current one passed away. He would pick a new Speaker for the council, and that Speaker would be *his* heir apparent. But, Magran would be the one still attending council, since he wasn’t so old that it tired him out.

“It’s good to see you again, Grand Master,” Jason said to him as Assaba’s hologram winked on.

“And you, my young friend,” he replied in a weary voice. “But I’m afraid I haven’t come to council today to be social. I have an announcement to make to the council.”

“We’re listening, Grand Master,” Sk’Vrae said as the last of them appeared, Grayhawk’s hologram winking on.



“Now that we are all here,” he said, then he cleared his throat, which led to a minor cough. “I fear that this will be my last official function as the Grand Master,” he declared. “My medical staff has informed me that I’ve contracted Eniver’s Syndrome.”

Jason gasped slightly. Eniver’s Syndrome was an incurable Colonist disease much akin to Alzheimer’s and Lou Gehrig’s Disease in Terrans. It was a degenerative nervous condition that caused Colonists to lose motor control and mental faculties. It mostly affected very old Colonists, and few Colonists were as old as the Grand Master. The Grand Master was looking at a rather grim scenario ahead, where his ability to move and his ability to think would degrade at an accelerating rate, until he was effectively paralyzed and comatose. But at his highly advanced age, he probably might not live long enough to reach that state.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Grand Master,” Dahnai said with honest emotion in her voice. She was very fond of the Grand Master.

“I appreciate your support my friends. But in these trying times, it does not bode well for the Colonies or the Confederation for me to be ill. For this reason, I’ve decided to take the unprecedented step of abdicating my position before my death. The Colonies needs a healthy Grand Master at this time because of the trying times to come, a Grand Master capable of making quick and rational decisions with the support of a full council. Because there is the very real possibility that I may wake up tomorrow unable to perform my duties due to my illness, I’ve decided that steps must be taken to protect the Colonies from my own indisposition.”

“I didn’t think that was even possible, Grand Master,” Jason said in surprise.

“There is a legal process for me to willingly step down,” he replied with a weak smile. “It’s just never been exercised before. Because there is no telling when I will become unable to discharge the duties of my office, I have decided to take the pre-emptive step here and now to prevent the process of exclusion.” That process was the way the council could have a Grand Master declared mentally unfit to carry out his job due to illness, which took 20 days and a lot of procedure and ceremony to carry out. “I’ve already begun the process. In five days, I will step down as the Grand

Master, and Magran will take my place. I would ask that you, our friends and allies, come to Exeven to witness his coronation.”

“I would be honored to attend, Grand Master,” Assaba said with a stately nod.

“I would ask that *all* of our friends attend, Overseer Kruu, great Leader of the Zyagya, Grand Duke Jason Karinne,” he said, looking towards the grizzled Zyagyan, who was attending in person today. “Though your position in this council is one of neutral observer, in my heart, the Zyagya are the friends of the Colonists, and I would ask that the Zyagya be present.”

For the first time ever in council, Hraga, the Leader of the Zyagya, spoke. “It would be a great honor for the Zyagya to be present for the coronation of Magran,” he said in a powerful voice, thumping his fist against his chest. “I will be there.”

“It warms my heart to hear that, great Leader,” he said with a nod.

“It would be both an honor and a pleasure to attend the ceremony, Grand Master,” Brayrak declared with an eloquent nod.

And that bombshell more or less derailed their entire agenda. They spent the entire council organizing the Confederate Council’s trip to Exeven, the capitol planet of the Colonies, so they could be present when the Grand Master stepped down and allowed Magran to take his place. The Grand Master informed them that he would be inviting *every* leader of every empire in the entire sector cluster, some 49 different rulers, with whom the Colonies had at least fleeting contact, and Jason saw that as primarily a good thing.

And he saw that even in his last act, the Grand Master was moving with political skill and subtlety. He was using his abdication as a vehicle to get the non-member rulers in one place so they could be persuaded to join the Confederation. It was simple truth that the more empires signed on, the better chance they’d have against the Syndicate and the Consortium, and with them on Exeven, it gave Jason and others a chance to talk to them face to face.

He already had it forming in his mind. If there was one remote empire he would want to get into the Confederation, it was the Aridai. They were

the largest empire in the sector “above” the Grimja sector in the cluster as one would view the galactic starchart, diagonally “up” and “outbound” from the galactic core from the home sector, and their empire was all the way over on the other corner, nearly as far as an empire could physically be from the Imperium and still be in the sector cluster. Over half of the Aridai empire were actually in the next sector over on Karinne starcharts. What made them so promising was that their empire was 107 systems, a very large territory, comprised of 12 different races, and they were technologically advanced and had lots of natural resources at their disposal. The founding species of the Aridai Empire and for whom the empire was named was also a humanoid species, they were a humanoid race that looked amazingly similar to the Terrans, Shio, and Faey...just that they averaged about 6.7 shakra tall on the average, or about 7.5 feet or about two and two-thirds meters. They were from a slightly lower than average gravity homeworld that made them tall, like the Grimja. If they could get the Aridai to join the Confederation, it would significantly increase their industrial production capability. And since their empire was comprised of 12 races that had worked together for over two thousand years in a democratic government not too much unlike the old Republic of the United States, so they would be more amenable to working with different species with different viewpoints.

Jason could see that the Grand Master wasn't joking about his condition. He tired visibly during the council session and looked exhausted when they finally called it after about two hours. Eniver's Syndrome moved swiftly once it reached a certain stage, and unfortunately, it was very hard to detect until it *reached* that stage. It could also appear and start doing damage very quickly in the extremely aged Colonists...and the Grand Master was about as elderly as a Colonist could get. It wasn't too much of a surprise from a medical standpoint to see him suffering from the effects of the disease just days after its diagnosis. Much like how cancer could appear suddenly and spread like wildfire through a Generation's body, Eniver's Syndrome could appear out of nowhere and strike hard and fast against an aged Colonist.

After the council session ended, Jason just gave Zaa a long, sober look. “That is not news I wanted to get,” he sighed.

“I know. The Grand Master is an asset to us all, and it grieves me to know that he is not much longer for this world,” she replied grimly. “But even in his last days, he thinks ahead and thinks of us all.”

“I know. He’s fishing to get others into the Confederation by having them attend Magran’s coronation,” he nodded.

“It *is* an opportunity,” she said as they both stood up. “We will have the opportunity to speak to them face to face, in somewhat private surroundings. And there are several that you should think seriously about approaching.”

“Not *me*, I’ll just tell Dahnai and sic her on them, or maybe Grayhawk, or Sk’Vrae,” he replied, which made Zaa chuckle. “With us being independent now, I have to be more careful about what I say and do to make absolutely sure the house maintains its neutrality. It gets close to the oaths I took to directly campaign to get others to join the Confederation, since the Confederation itself is nearly a violation of the oaths. I can’t directly act, but I can sure as hell use Dahnai and others to do it for me.”

“I will make a Kimdori of you yet, cousin,” she said with an approving look.

Jyslin and the others were honestly shocked when Jason spread the word when they got back to the Hearth. “The Grand Master? That’s awful!” she gasped, putting her hands to her faceplate. “He’s such a wonderful man!”

“I know, it’s like a gut punch,” Jason agreed with a nod. “So almost as soon as we get home and decontaminate, we’ll be going to Exeven to attend Magran’s coronation. I’d like you to come with me, love. The Grand Master is very fond of you, I’m sure he’d like you to be there.”

“Of course I will! I want to talk to him before he disappears from the public eye,” she assured him.

“Can I come too, Daddy?” Rann asked.

Jason looked down at him. “Not this time, pippy, it’s going to be a little too uncontrolled for me to feel confident bringing you along,” he replied, then looked to Aya. “I’m sorry for the short notice but look at the circumstances.”

*I know. I'll have the security plan on your desk as soon as we get back,* she replied. *I will demand a larger than normal security detail, since you'll be going outside the Imperium or the Collective.*

"I can live with that," he answered her. "I want Dera in the detail. She could be handy."

*That goes without saying, Aya agreed. A listener is almost a requirement when venturing into unknown territory, especially if we're going to the Colonies. They have a very high percentage of telepaths in their population.*

"I think we should try out bringing a few of the Marine Guard for this," Jason mused. "You said they're ready, and there's no real need to stretch your girls thin trying to protect the strip *and* escort us out for these state visits. Exeven won't be the only one, just the first. Unplanned, but the first."

*I can do that. The Marine Guard is almost up to my standards. The field mission will be a chance for me to see how disappointed I'll be in them.*

"Such a bitch," he teased, which made her smile roguishly through her transparent faceplate.

"I almost fear ask what she's saying," Grun chuckled.

"Debating the performance potential of the Marine Guard that protects the White House and a few other high-security sites on Karis," he answered. "Aya seems to think that they'll never be good enough just because they're not Imperial Guards."

*Naturally not,* she sent arrogantly, though she was smiling.

"Ah, well, I'll leave the internal wrangling to you, then," Grun smiled. "I'd much rather learn more about this fascinating game," he said, looking down at the chessboard.

"Sometimes I think you have the best job in the galaxy, Denfather," Jason told him.

# Chapter 4

*Baetha (Midsummer's Day), 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 25 July 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Baetha (Midsummer's Day), year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation,  
Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Karsa Sports Complex, Karsa, Karis*

There was just something to be said for the bright sunshine gleaming down over a grassy sports field...and it was the calm before the storm.

Jason and Jyslin walked with Frinia, Suri and Dera following behind them, walking over the prepared batchi pitch of the Karsa Sports Complex, the new home of the Karis Paladins. The pitch had been prepared under IBL rules by the grounds crew and inspected by officials from the IBL office just an hour ago to ensure that the ground crew had everything correct. Tomorrow was the official start of the IBL's season in that it was the first day of pre-season training camp, and on the first of Romaa, the season would begin, it would be the first game of the season...and sadly, it would be an away game. The Karis Paladins would open their first season on Karis by traveling to Varos III to play the Varos Blitz. IBL teams didn't play preseason games against other teams the way many Terran sports leagues did, so the team would not leave Karis until they traveled to open the season. Tomorrow, the training facility built over on the far side of Karsa would be in full swing, where thousands of rabid fans and reporters would be watching the first day of training camp.

Jyslin and Frinia had busted their asses to be ready for tomorrow. Frinia's vast knowledge of the inner workings of the IBL had been a critical asset to Jyslin, the elderly Grand Duchess an excellent mentor for her as she conducted her first draft with the coaches, signed 14 key free agents, and then started dealing with the players on a personal basis as they began

filtering in to Karsa to take up residence in their apartments, with Kimdori shadowing their every move without their knowledge. Some of them had shown up over a month ago, the totally serious ones, who came that early to be there to give their input with Red Horn on how to make the training facilities *just so*, which turned out to be decent advice, get some personal one on one time with the coaches, and some had come to just to hang out on Karis since they had right of passage into the system. They found that if they wanted a little privacy away from the constant press coverage they dealt with in the Imperium, then Karsa was the place to go. There were local reporters, but Jason had made it clear that if one of the Paladin players said she wanted some personal space, they'd damn well better give it to her.

Coming out to greet the IBL officials and observe their inspection of the stadium was a welcome break from the mountain of paperwork he had waiting for him at the office, most of it revolving around the current critical things going on...and there were a few of them. For one, the Confederate Combined Military was nearly back to the strength that Lorna had required for them to take out the last of the Consortium forces trapped in the nebula. Lorna had sent down the battle plans for all militaries to study and practice individually before joint exercises began tomorrow, and six days after that, if everyone did well, they'd execute Operation Broadsword, which would eradicate the last of the Consortium military presence in their galaxy.

That was the military part of it. Politically, things were getting *really* annoying, mainly due to their three newest members. It had started out fairly well, though. The retirement of the Grand Master and the ascension of Magran to the post had been very good for the Confederation, for they'd all had a chance to come together in person and both celebrate the long and illustrious career of the Grand Master and celebrate the ordination of the new leader of the Colonies. The Grand Master had quite cleverly set it up that way, and Jason couldn't complain. Everyone felt more *united* after Magran's ceremony, as if they had a personal investment in the Colonies, which was part of what the old Grand Master had been after.

Then the dynamics on the council changed quickly as new members joined. The Prakarikai were everything that Jason feared they would be, for High Queen Anavan was conceited, arrogant, self-centered, cunning, opportunistic, and a general all-around flaming bitch. Nobody on the council liked her, not even Kim, who liked *everyone*. She talked and talked

and talked and talked and *fucking talked*, trying to turn every council meeting into a six-hour marathon of them listening to her spend hours trying to make a single point. The Prakarikai took ceremony to the extreme, and it showed up in their racial personalities in other ways. It was like they had no concept of time, or they were oblivious to the fact that they were boring the absolute fuck out of everyone else with their fifteen-minute diatribe over how much they enjoyed reading romance novels. Anavan couldn't say hello without it taking five minutes.

And that was just Anavan. Prime Senator Quord of the Jun Republic... well, he was certainly...*intense*. That about summed up the Jun, intense. Everything they did was intense, as if their lives would crash and burn if they didn't inject absolutely 100% of their energy and attention into everything they did. He was a polite enough fellow, Jason could admit that, who loved art and poetry and was almost addicted to opera, proving that the Jun weren't as fearsome as their reputation...until they started discussing the upcoming military operations. That's when the Jun war mentality showed itself, and they had to all but put a leash on Quord to prevent him from drawing his sword and jumping in a warship to do battle with the entire Consortium all by himself. It seemed like bloodlust on casual glance, but in reality Quord detested war, and was quite a well-mannered and cultured man. He was simply of the mind that if he had to go to war, then best to get it done and over with as quickly as possible. The problems Quord caused were mainly due to his intensity, he seemed to really annoy the Skaa for some reason that eluded Jason, probably some racial quirk, but Sk'Vrae seemed quite fond of him.

To Terrans, though, the Jun were curiously attractive. Like the Faey and Shio, they were a humanoid species that looked almost identical to those three races, with only some minor cosmetic differences. Jun had large eyes compared to the other three species, their eyes a uniform black iris with the whites of their eyes actually a dark gray, which gave them a very eerie, chilling stare, eyes set into a face that about any Faey, Terran, or Shio would find attractive. They had pointed ears like the Faey, but their skin was varying shades of brown depending on where the Jun lived in their empire. In all, they weren't a very bad-looking species to a Faey, Terran, or a Shio, but there were some differences. For one, Jun had small, basically useless tails, like the Na'Vi from the old *Avatar* movies. Also similar to that



fictional race, the Jun had fanged incisors, which when combined with their eerie dark eyes gave them a “vampire-esque” appearance. Their fangs weren’t as pronounced as they were on the Beryans or the Moridon, but their incisors were definitely longer than the rest of their teeth and ended in points. Their most unusual aspect from the Terran perspective even over their tails were their hands. They had only four digits on their hands, but those digits were arrayed as two fingers and *two* opposable thumbs, one on each side of the hand. Their feet were much more “normal” as Terrans, Faey, and Shio would reckon things, for they had five toes instead of four, and their feet had the same physiological shape as a Terran’s foot. Jun were physically slim and slender, built lightly, but they were enormously strong, and they had very long arms. Not enough to look unnatural to a Terran, but it was noticeable.

Then there was King Shevatt of the Ogravian Empire, their newest member. It was the third-largest empire in the Verutan sector, and Shevatt aggravated the absolute fuck out of Dahnai for reasons that seemed almost irrational. Shevatt looked like the typical, average Ogravian, who were a race akin to the Goraga...and maybe that was what annoyed Dahnai so much. The Goraga and the Ogravians were both bovine species, both much akin to the minotaurs from Terran mythology, but where the Goraga were huge, aggressive, and stupid, the Ogravians were huge, highly cultured, and exceptionally intelligent. The average Ogravian stood nearly seven shakra tall, or nearly three meters tall or around eight and a half feet, and weighed upwards of 165 *konn*, or around 180 kilograms or 400 pounds. The Ogravians nearly stood eye to eye with the Moridon but were much more heavily built. There were huge, massive, hulking bull-like creatures who could move with blazing speed when they so wished, were almost ridiculously strong and powerful, and didn’t look even a fraction as intelligent as they actually were. They were a peaceful species who got along with everyone in their sector, and Shevatt was highly educated, extremely intelligent, patient, observant, and politically savvy. He seemed to just push Dahnai’s buttons on every level because she was almost reflexively prejudiced against him due to having to deal with the Goraga. Shevatt was just as big as a Goraga, looked vaguely like one, was just as physically powerful, one of the most physically intimidating and imposing races in the sector cluster, but the Ogravians were pacifistic by nature, using their intelligence and political skills to resolve all their issues with outside

empires with diplomacy. Shevatt embodied everything Ogravian in his careful words and insightful observations, as well as being able to read most of the other rulers in the Confederation like an open book with the most casual of glances.

Those were the new full members. They also had a new neutral observer on the council, in the personage of Mesaiima, President of the Imbiri. Everyone respected the Imbiri's neutrality, but the Imbiri had decided that they needed to know what was going on, so they had petitioned for the right to sit in as neutral observers like the Zyagya and the Moridon. But Mesaiima wasn't as quiet as the Leader was, asking questions in council and engaging the others in smalltalk, where the Leader remained stonily silent at all times. She was using the council to make contacts within the Confederation, Jason could see that, to arrange trade agreements with the larger empires in the sector cluster. But nobody minded, since Mesaiima was an absolute sweetheart, gentle and kind and thoughtful like most Imbiri were. Imbiri were highly charismatic creatures by their very nature and were total and complete pacifists. The Imbiri would not do harm to another even if it cost them their own lives, but luckily for them, the two major empires that claimed the space around their home system respected their neutrality and their sovereignty. The Haumda and the Verutans often used Imbiri as a neutral meeting site for treaty negotiations, and the Imbiri were happy to host them, as well as act as mediators.

And that was just a fraction of what was going on. Gau had already come and gone on his visit to Karis, had arrived 12 days ago, spent five days with his retinue of 16 priests, and had spent that time touring some parts of Karis and talking with Cybi. The priests were there to investigate the possible fulfillment of omens, and they'd been utterly focused on that task. Gau, on the other hand, was there to talk business, and that business was exactly what Jason expected, trying to get the Karinnes into lucrative trade and research agreements. The Haumda were plodding and meticulous, but they could also be very determined, and it had taken a lot of deflection to keep Gau in his chair. But even Jason could admit that it was a productive state visit, because Gau got his own section of Kosigi set up, and Haumda shipbuilders had started arriving just three days after Gau returned to Haumda.

The first of the large empires had finally accepted his deal to open a Stargate into their territory and centralize and streamline their logistic schedules, and to Jason's surprise, it had been the *Grimja*. Kreel had spent maybe five days discussing the proposal with his governing body and his advisors, then signed off on it 12 days ago. Grimja, bless their easy-going souls, weren't all that good at constructing and sticking to a highly regimented and disciplined schedule, which were mandatory requirements for a large and complex transportation and logistical network. The two Skaa empires and the Verutans had yet to move on it, but Jason was sure that they would, especially after they saw how efficient his transportation department would make the Grimja's logistical network. Makati and Kizzik, and to a lesser degree the Beryans, they were just built to handle those kinds of issues, and the team from Jrz'kii's office currently in the Grimja empire retooling their transport system to turn what Jrz'kii had confided to him was a knotted mess of utter chaos into a well-oiled paragon of efficiency. When they saw what the Makati and Kizzik could do with a *large* empire's transport network, they'd jump at the treaty just to have his consultants go in there and iron everything out for them.

Along the lines of treaties, Jason had some 103 different treaty proposals sitting in his inbox waiting for his consideration, the vast majority of which were trade proposals tendered by just about every fucking empire in the entire sector cluster. Now *everyone* was jumping on the bandwagon, sending him so many proposals that he felt like he was drowning in offers. Most of them were one-sided, other empires thinking they could take advantage of the newly sovereign Karinnes, but there were a few that were mutually beneficial, and Jason would agree to those. He was just taking his time to thoroughly consider all the ramifications of signing *any* treaty with *anyone*, since he had a lot more riding on those treaties than the other party did. The neutrality of the Karinnes had to be beyond reproach, and that was the primary aspect of any agreement he considered.

Domestically, there was nearly as much going on, and it didn't all revolve around batchi. Two days ago, Justin Taggart had been awakened from his induced coma. Yesterday, Songa had sent him the report that Jason was desperately hoping to see. Justin's brain repair operation had been a complete and total success. His synaptic maps had been completely restored, and after about four months of physical therapy and mental

exercises, he would be back on duty and wouldn't even have any scars to show how grievously he'd been injured. And what was more important to the Faey, the brain repair procedure had completely restored Justin's talent to pre-injury levels, meaning that finally, Faey medical science had devised a means to repair damaged talent.

Songa had already sent a fully detailed report back to the main headquarters of the Medical Service showing them how she and Myleena had invented a procedure to repair damaged brain tissue, and also damaged talent, using Faey medical science and Karinne nano-technology. It would require Karinne technology and thus would be proprietary, but Jason had already told Songa that temporary medical transfers to Karis for brain repair procedures would be allowed. Jason would not allow politics to stand between someone in need of medical care and the care they desperately needed. If anyone in the Imperium needed nanite-assisted brain repair, they would be granted a medical travel permit to come to Karis to have the procedure done, then transferred back to the Imperium so the Medical Service could do the rehabilitation regimen for the patient. That wouldn't require Karinne technology. Songa had already created a training regimen to get her doctors qualified to perform the procedure, and she projected that in about two months, the Karsa Medical Annex would start taking brain injury cases from off planet with a staff of about 20 certified neurosurgeons that could perform the procedure.

And that was what some had been waiting to see. If everything was still on schedule, Kyva should be waking up any minute after her jack implantation procedure. Just as Jason predicted, as soon as Kyva was absolutely sure that the jack wouldn't damage her talent, she had one implanted...and in her case, she made sure to the point of waiting to see how Justin was when he woke up, if he'd regained his talent after the brain repair procedure, which would mean that there would be a proven procedure in place that could repair her talent if the jack *did* damage her talent. As soon as she heard that he'd make a full recovery with his talent fully restored at its original strength, she called Songa personally and made an appointment. And Songa was probably finishing up Kyva's jack implantation at that moment. Kyva would be looking at about a month of assimilation training, then another month of specialized consultation as she worked with central command to create a training program to help a jacked

rigger train using the jack's unique advantages. Kyva would literally write the manual when it came to training a jack-enabled rigger on a Mark II Gladiator.

And when he was fully recovered, Justin would be doing the same when it came to a Wolf fighter.

The jack program would officially end its trial phase in three days and would become publicly available to all house members. The jack program was finally going public, and for the last week, the White House had been releasing information about the jacks, what they did and how to go about getting one. Any house member that wanted a jack could get one, and the jacks were not being mandated for any career field due to the very personal nature of the jack. Anyone who wanted one had to pay the C560 for it unless they were in what was deemed a "critical need" occupation, where the jack would have a direct beneficial use in their job. Those people would receive a jack for free if they wanted one. That classification applied to the entire military, everyone in the Planetary Guard, all government workers, all computer professionals, and oddly enough, all professional transportation operators; professional commercial pilots, commercial hovercar and atmosphere-only skimmer drivers, mass transit drivers, and civilian-application mecha operators, like mechloader and mechcrane operators. Anyone whose job was to operate a complicated piece of machinery fell into the critical need sphere.

Those jacks...he could already see how they were going to fundamentally change the house on several levels. They emulated a Generation's ability to merge to a computer in every way but one, since biogenics could augment a Generation's psionic abilities. But everything else a Generation could do, a jacked person could do. Once she finished her assimilation training, Kyva would be able to merge to any computer that could communicate with her interface—which was virtually every computer on Karis—receive information as well as transmit it, submerge herself *into* the computer the way Jason could. That would allow her to all but *become* her Gladiator, as if it was her own body, and give her a level of control and precision that surpassed even the current one-way interface technology they employed. Just like that old anime *Ghost in the Shell*, the members of the House Karinne would be able to completely interact with

computers at a mental level, which was one of the main objectives of the Program started by the Karinnes so long ago.

So, in that respect, Cybi felt that the Program had been successfully completed, for the Karinnes had devised a means to interact with computers on a nearly telepathic level. It wasn't telepathic, but the jack created a direct mental interface, and that was very nearly the same thing. And when coupled to a biogenic interface that *could* communicate telepathically with other biogenic units, well, it was 99% of what the Program had been trying to accomplish.

And the technology to implant and run a jack *was not dependent on biogenics*. Songa was refining a new jack implantation procedure that didn't utilize spiders, which were Karinne technology, and Myleena had already designed a moleculartronic control chip for the jack that did everything a biogenic chip did, just not quite as efficiently. They even had a working prototype non-biogenic jack controller that Songa and Myleena had collaborated to produce. Biogenics *were* created to interface with an organic mind and thus were uniquely suited for use in the control chip of a cyberjack, but that didn't mean that a moleculartronic chip couldn't do the same thing. It was bigger and more complicated than the biogenic chip, but did the job and only suffered an 8% increase in response time compared to a biogenic control chip. That was more than acceptable, given biogenic response times averaged 1.2 microseconds. That whole extra .1 microseconds wasn't all that much of a big deal.

What was a big deal was that with Songa's research into the use of micro-remotes that would replace the use of spiders in the dataline laying aspect of the jack implantation, it would allow other empires to install non-biogenic jacks in their own citizens without using Karinne technology. Jason didn't consider the jacks themselves to be protected technology; in fact, he saw it as a *good* thing if he released it into the public domain, because it would remove one of the reasons why others would want to come after the Generations. It would give most anyone 90% of the abilities of a Generation without needing biogenics or the right DNA. But he could admit, the one thing a Generation could do that a jacked subject could not was the biggest reason that the Consortium, Dahnai, and just about everyone else wanted the Generations. The Generations would have to

remain safely on Karis, but he felt that it *would* cut down on the sheer number of people trying to procure biogenic technology for their own.

They already had a prototype moleculartronic jack, so as soon as the perfected a non-Karinne implantation technique, it would give anyone in the Confederation access to jacks and all the advantages those jacks provided, from “instant learning” via computer-assisted knowledge insertion to assisted memory in the form of external memory the brain could access to removing the need for any kind of input-output device for anything from a handpanel to a battleship. Cyberjacks were going to revolutionize the basic way the House of Karinne did its business, all but turning the entire house into Generations, and it would do the same for those who adopted the technology for their own.

And if their technology wasn’t capable of performing jack implantations, well, the Karinnes would be able to do it for them if they wanted it. The Medical Annex at the Academy could be set up to perform jack implantations on an out-patient basis using procedures that didn’t rely on Karinne technology, and that way anyone who wanted a jack could just go to the Academy and get one for about C700, to cover the costs of the procedure and the more expensive moleculartronic control microprocessor.

The jacks, that was exactly the kind of knowledge that the House of Karinne was created to *distribute*. The house had not been founded on the idea of keeping secrets, but with the idea of releasing technology that benefited everyone when and only when it was appropriate. The rest of the galaxy could handle jack technology without causing massive upheaval, wars, or chaos. It did have military uses, but it also had uses far beyond the military applications. It would improve the quality of life of the common galactic citizen. The release of jack technology would not violate the Karinne oath that their technology would not be allowed to be used to allow one civilization or empire to inflict its will on another, for the technology would be made available to *everyone*, keeping everyone on even ground. The benefits of releasing the technology far outweighed the drawbacks. And for those reasons, as soon as Jason had everything organized and finalized, when Myleena signed off on the moleculartronic jack, Songa had medical procedures vetted and certified for jack implantation techniques that didn’t require the assistance of spiders, and they had some defenses in place to protect *them* from jacked computer specialists trying to invade their

computer systems—those would be the Moridon more than anyone else—he would release cyberjack technology to the Academy’s public domain for anyone to study and adapt using their own technology, the same way he’d released the technology behind Karinne rail weaponry.

The House of Karinne existed to hold many secrets, but it also existed to reveal those secrets when the house felt that the galaxy was ready for them.

That was just one of the tech issues going on. Jenny and Eraen had made some major progress on the diffuser project, having created a diffuser that reduced Torsion effects by 49% at the same diameter that the ship projected its Teryon shields, which was the target distance to create the diffusion field effect. That was nowhere near where it needed to be, but it was a marked improvement from Myleena’s prototypes, and Jason was confident they’d come up with something that would get to the target of 75% power reduction to provide complete protection from Torsion weaponry. If they could get the diffuser to 75%, it would all but nullify the threat a Torsion weapon posed, for the Torsion bolt would peter out before it reached the hull of the ship. A Torsion bolt’s power also dictated its range, and by drastically reducing the power of the bolt, it also reduced the distance it traveled before the Torsion effect faded. The 75% target power level at the same standard distance as the ship’s shields would make a standard Consortium Torsion bolt fade out an average of 1.61 shakra from the outer hull, which afforded the ship complete protection against Torsion weaponry.

There were some drawbacks, however. They’d already figured out that a ship couldn’t operate a diffuser and a Torsion shockwave generator at the same time. The diffuser didn’t discriminate when it came to Torsion effects, it tried to diffuse *all* of them, including a beneficial one like the shockwave effect that protected KMS ships from fighters and missiles. There was no amount of monkeying or tinkering that was going to change that, either. For another, operating a diffuser caused some issues with a ship’s artificial gravity systems. In a way, the artificial gravity system used a low-grade form of Torsion, the manipulation of space, to produce directional gravity without that gravity affecting the ship as a whole, and the diffusion field distorted the gravity system. The diffuser cut the artificial gravity in the



ship by about half, which would require the artificial gravity system to be overhauled to compensate.

There was also an issue with diffusers and Karinne singularity plants. They too utilized a form of hyper-Torsion as part of their operation, and the diffuser wanted to try to smooth *that* out as well. The diffusers didn't seem to want to monkey with most other forms of spatial warping that their technology utilized, the diffusion effect didn't mess with PPGs whatsoever, but the one form that it did monkey with was the one that they *didn't* want it to disturb the most.

Jenny and Eraen were looking at ways to make the diffusion effect *directional*, so it would only project *outward* from the ship's hull. If they could figure out a way to make it do that, it would alleviate a lot of the problems the diffuser technology was causing their current systems. Hell, in a way, they *had* to do it, else they'd have to do a whole lot of refitting on their ships to protect the ship's vulnerable systems from the diffuser effect.

If they perfected the diffuser, they'd have to use it judiciously, for they couldn't leave it on and still protect the ships from missile attacks or enemy fighters. But, given the fact that shields and armor worked against missiles where it didn't work against Torsion weaponry, the diffuser would be the defensive system of choice for most ship captains. The ships would still have shockwave systems in them, but against the Consortium, they wouldn't see much use.

Another drawback was the power requirements. The prototype Jenny and Eraen had showed Jason yesterday drew *massive* amounts of power, so much that at the projected 75% field strength, a standard destroyer would just barely have the power to run the diffuser and keep life support going at the same time...and forget using anything else, like, say, weapons, shields, or the engines. The diffuser sucked every joule of power out of the system if the projections panned out. Jenny and Eraen would first have to get the diffuser to the target power, then figure out how to keep it from interfering with the ship's other systems, then figure out how to reduce its power load so the ships that used them could do more than sit dead in space and act like shields. That or they'd have to install additional power systems *just* to run the diffusers, which was something nobody really wanted to do. That would require a massive redesign and refit to every KMS ship, given the sheer

amount of extra power they'd have to put in the ships. Entire systems would have to be yanked and major structural modifications would have to be made to make room for those additional power plants, so it was much more critical for Jenny and Eraen to tackle the problem from the diffuser side than from the "just stick more power plants in the ships" side.

But that was what 3D was there to do, invent things and then figure out how to make them work in reality as much as in a simulator.

They'd figure it out. Jason had faith in them.

So, like most any engineering problem, they were making progress both forwards and backwards at the same time. After all, the diffusers were new technology, and that technology was having unforeseen effects on *other* technology. Jenny and Eraen had two years to work out the bugs and come up with a viable unit, and given how much progress they'd made already, he was sure they'd pull it off.

Jyslin nudged him a little, and he blinked and looked at her. She was *obviously* pregnant now, a slight yet unmistakable baby bump that she showed off a tiny bit wearing a half-shirt that ended at her rib cage. Thank God, Jason finally convinced Aya to let him and the family move around within Karsa without armor, so Jyslin was in batchi shorts and a half shirt and Jason was wearing a tee shirt and a pair of cargo shorts. She gave him an impish smile and glanced her eyes towards Frinia, who was looking at him expectantly. *I'm sorry, what?*

*I asked what was putting such a serious expression on your face, Jason,* she replied with a smile. *You've barely sent a thought since you got here.*

*Just all the paperwork, Frinia,* he told her with an audible sigh. *It just keeps piling up and piling up, even as I invent new departments and offices to take it out of my inbox. I must have seriously doubled the staff at the White House in the last month alone, and everyone's still running around like crazed chabi trying to keep up.*

*I can well imagine,* she nodded, compassion bleeding into her thought. *Are you attending tomorrow's opening day practice?*

*I'm going to try to make an appearance, but I can't hang around all day. I've murdered my schedule just for this brief escape from that evil freakin' Kizzik.*

Jyslin laughed. *Don't blame Chirk, it's not her fault.*

*I gotta blame somebody, and she's convenient, he replied airily. She thinks all my complaining is funny.*

*Kizzik are weird, but they know a good joke when they see it, Jyslin noted lightly.*

*How ready are we going to be for the season?* Jason asked, knowing how to change the subject.

*We're going to be fine, Frinia replied brightly. We shored up our midfield with the free agent signings and drafted for defense, which was our weak spot last year. I have to thank you two for actually going after the free agents, she sent with a grateful smile. We didn't get all the ones we were after, but we signed the four most critical, including Uera Miyalle. Uera will solidify our defense in a big way, and her experience and leadership will turn our defense into a Neutronium wall, she sent eagerly. We have some talent on defense, they just lacked leadership on the field. But the real steal for us was Emala Kivalle, a center midfielder. Batchi is won or lost at the midfield line, so getting talent like Emala was a major coup for us. She'll be running the offense on the field as much as Uera will run the defense, and there are few center midfielders better at recognizing defense and setting plays than her. The only good thing about finishing last in the division was a high first pick in the draft, and we picked up an outstanding center striker, Shaela Edanne, which is the most important striker position. I think she'll be the foundation of our entire offense once she gets some experience. With Emala forming the foundation of our midfield and Uela anchoring the defense, we're in very good shape for the future. We'll be in rebuilding mode for one or two years, then I see us contending for playoff spots. The entire coaching staff agrees.*

*That's good. I'm too competitive to let the Paladins sit in the basement for long, Jason chuckled audibly. I may not know much about batchi, but if I own the team, they'd damn well better win.*

*And that's why I sold you the team, Frinia sent seriously. I want to see them win, and you'll do your best to make that happen.*

*We've already put about two billion credits on it, Jyslin sent with a laugh. That's how much salary we've put down on contracts.*

*You did the right thing signing them to ten-year deals, Frinia told Jyslin with a nod of approval. Especially Uera and Emala. Uera will solidify our defense, and Emala is one of the most important players on the pitch. You won't find many better than her in the IBL. She was worth every credit of that 650 million credit contract.*

*Why did she go free agent if she's that good? Wouldn't her last team have locked her up in a long-term contract?* Jason asked.

*Emala just finished her draftee's contract, Jason, so she's on the market for every team, that's how it works. Her last team didn't want to bid on her because not every player is as valuable as she appears to be, Frinia told Jason with a slight smile. I keep a very close eye on the players, and Emala is a true gem. She just suffered on her last team due to an overbearing coach and a system that doesn't suit her talents. Emala's not the best offensive player, but her ability to read a defense and set the play for the team makes her one of the best offensive play callers on the pitch. Emala won't have to play like a striker in our system, that's what our strikers are for. She can pull back and study the defense and get the ball moving where it needs to be to score.*

*I understand what you mean. Back when I played football, some players did better than others because of the defensive system the coaches used. So, this Emala will do better in our system than the one her last team used.*

*Exactly, Frinia nodded. Three other teams tried to get her too, they saw the same thing we did, but thank Trelle Jyslin was willing to open the purse for her.*

*You said she was the most important one to get outside of Uera, so we got her, Jyslin smiled. This team is going to win, dammit, even if I have to wait tables at the stadium restaurant to raise extra credits for salaries.*

*That's exactly the kind of attitude an owner needs to win in this league,* Frinia sent, her thought rippling with approval, pride, and a little relief.

Jason was about to send something, but he stopped dead when something...something *rippled* through the biogenic network. It was something he'd never felt before, and almost immediately, several confused communes drifted through the network along with a hell of a lot of searching queries from biogenic computers that lost contact with the

network and were trying to reconnect. He then felt the network fail, felt the node closest to him lose connectivity with the adjoining nodes, a disconnect so sudden that it was actually painful, making him wince and put a hand on his gestalt. *[Cybi!]* he tried to commune but got nothing but silence.

*What's wrong, love?* Jyslin asked in concern as Jason turned and looked back and up, where the node for that district of the city was located. There was no smoke in the distance wafting over the top of the stadium, so at least it wasn't some kind of cataclysmic explosion that brought the node down. He reached back to the corvette hovering in the air nearby and accessed the tactical gestalt in it, one of Aya's security measures. Aya had dictated that any corvette carrying Jason be carrying a mobile tactical gestalt so he could use it in defense of himself and the corvette in case of attack. He accessed the tactical and used its more powerful transceiver to manually try to connect to the next node, which was over in the seaside district. But it too was silent. The tactical was strong enough to reach back to the White House, and he used it to do just that. *[Someone over there tell me what's going on, the entire biogenic network just went down!]* he communed to the mainframe over in the command center.

*[We're not sure, Jayce, but right before it went down, we got a garbled message from Cybi. I think you'd better to check on her, cause we can't get in touch with her,]* Myri answered.

*[Did you try transmitting directly off the array? The issue might be stopping your command mainframe from accessing the transceiver through the network.]*

*[Of course we did, but we can't raise Kosiningi. Orbitals show nothing unusual at least visually on the island, but we've lost biogenic contact with the Emergency Response Center.]*

That was *not* good. *[Find Myleena and get her to Kosiningi now,]* he ordered as he turned and all but ran out into the middle of the pitch. *Land right here, Captain Kora! We have a problem!* he sent to the captain of the Marine corvette *Tornado*. *Girls, get in touch with Aya and tell her I have to go to Kosiningi right now,* he told the guards, sending openly for Jyslin and Frinia's benefit. *We just lost the entire biogenic network, and they can't raise Cybi or anything on Kosiningi.*

*Oh dear Trelle, I hope Cybi's okay,* Jyslin sent fearfully, rushing along with him.

*The fact that she's not answering is not a good sign, she has her own transceiver array on the island,* Jason replied as the corvette descended towards the pitch. *Frinia, you go ahead on to the training facility, we've got to get to Kosiningi now.*

*Oh my, don't put your skids on the pitch!* Frinia sent suddenly.

*You heard her, just get down close enough for me to jump up onto the stairs,* Jason affirmed. The corvette descended with the forward passenger hatch open, and Kora was hanging in the doorway with her hand out. Jason jumped up to the folding stairs and took Kora's gauntleted hand, then she hauled him up into the ship as Suri and Dera used the grav engines in their armor to lift Jyslin up to the stairs, then they got in behind her.

He went straight to the cockpit and accessed the onboard computer and called Kosigi. Myleena was up in Kosigi today, doing some collaborative work with Mahja Siyhaa and her computer team and overseeing the final testing of their first pair of Stargates. He had to use gravband rather than the biogenic system, but Myleena was already a step ahead of him. *"Thank Trelle, babes, I've been trying to call you for five minutes! I'm on my way to Kosiningi right now, something serious is going on."*

"So are we, we're just leaving Karsa now. Where are you?"

*"About halfway down from Kosigi. We'll be entering the atmosphere in about ten minutes. Call back to the CC and tell them to get every member of 3D to Kosiningi with the field equipment fucking now. We might need them."*

"Good call, hon, I'll send it back."

The list of people who had authorization to even enter Cybi's bunker was about ten times longer than the list of people who were allowed to actually do anything but look at her equipment, and that list was three people long. Jason, Myleena, and Jyslin were the *only* technicians that were allowed to do any work inside Cybi's systems, and Jyslin was usually there just to watch and learn. Myleena was the expert when it came to Cybi and her staggeringly complex computer architecture, but Jason knew enough to do delicate work, since Cybi could guide him step by step via communion.

There were others, like Siyhaa, who had the expertise to work on a biogenic CBIM, but for pure security reasons, only the most trusted were allowed to put their hands inside the last operating CBIM's systems. And if Cybi wasn't answering, they might have to do some repairs.

For inspections and other basic things, the only ones outside of those three who were allowed to do that were the technical members of 3D. They had the clearance, and several of them had the technical skill, but still, even they weren't allowed to do any actual work on Cybi. They could come and do a preventive maintenance inspection, but if anything had to be repaired or replaced, they called in Jason or Myleena to do it. But they *would* be maintaining the next CBIM that came online, so Jason and Myleena had been training them for it...they just weren't allowed to do any hands-on training on the only CBIM in existence whose status as the repository of all Karinne knowledge made her too precious to risk to a training accident. The 3D techs would be maintaining the next CBIM, but when it came to Cybi, the *only* ones allowed to do real work on her were Myleena, Jason, and Jyslin.

She wasn't even answering him. He tried over and over to commune with her now that he was close enough to not need a transceiver, but there was nothing but ominous silence.

Jason and Jyslin met Myleena as her skimmer landed just seconds after the corvette set down, and they didn't even waste time greeting each other. They ran straight for the Emergency Response Center, where the center's administrator was literally running out to meet them. *Your Grace, your Grace, thank Trelle you're here!* she sent in a frenzy. *The entire island's computer network has gone completely crazy, and what's worse, we can't get in touch with Cybi!*

*That's why we're here,* Jason replied.

*Crazy how?* Myleena asked.

*It's hard to explain, your Grace, the computers are spouting gibberish, and we've had to manually disable them from holographic emitters. We had two injuries from the computer manifesting hard holograms that then injured staff.*

*That's not very encouraging, Jason growled mentally as they ran up the stairs into the center. Is Cybi's door locked down?*

*No, but we dare not go down there without authorization.*

*You did the right thing. Get your people out of the building and help 3D when they get here with our mobile equipment dropship.*

*I'll get everything ready, your Grace, she sent as the three of them headed for the door leading down to Cybi's core.*

The core chamber was dark. Usually Cybi lit it when they entered, but the fact that she didn't told him that Cybi had no idea they were there. *She's non-responsive*, Myleena sent fearfully as she brought up the lights. *She won't answer my communes.*

*I've been trying since I got in range, Jason sent worriedly. Alright, let's fan out and find the problem. Myli, you check her core memory. Jys, you check her primary I/O tree, and I'll check her external I/O tree.*

Cybi's systems were divided into three major sections. Her core was where 90% of what Cybi did was handled, the crystalline spire in the center of the room that was protected by rails and a hard shield, but she did have external systems that she relied upon, and that was her Input/Output Tree system and her power supply system. The I/O tree system was how Cybi dealt with everything outside of her core, from basic data flow to communications. The tree system was the pipe through which all data flowed into and out of Cybi's core, divided into subsystems that handled different types of data. The major tree subsystems handled basic sensory input, allowing her to see and hear, even smell, taste and touch through sensors, helping her organize the raw data and make sense of it. The second major subsystem dealt with communion through a transceiver, where the thousands of communes per second Cybi maintained were actively managed through the main biogenic bus. That part of the tree was like a switchboard, allowing Cybi to assign priority levels to the various communal connections she made and allow the tree system to maintain and manage the low-priority communions, only bringing them to her attention if they became important. The third major subsystem dealt with the biogenic network in place around Karis and was her newest subsystem, and Jason had a sneaking suspicion that that might be where the problem was, since it



was only a couple of years old. Some of the biogenic processor units in the core room had been operating for centuries, he rather doubted that one of those units had decided to fail *now*. He'd check the most recent addition to her system first before he started combing through the most stable parts of Cybi's external systems.

It was hard to treat this like he was troubleshooting just another piece of equipment, because Cybi was *far* more than the collection of biogenic processors, modules, and logic boards. She may be composed of hardware, but she was as much a living thing as any of them were, and the absolute importance she had to the house and to Jason couldn't be easily described, not even if he had an hour to try to do it. Jason had to keep a firm throttle on his emotions and think like an engineer as he combed through the bank of units that served as Cybi's external I/O array, part of what helped her communicate with external biogenic units, where Myleena was checking her core and Jyslin her ability to communicate with her internal systems. Something was making her nonresponsive, but something was *also* making the biogenic computers on the island go crazy, and odds were they had a common root problem. They were joined by the technicians in 3D after they arrived, who did *exactly* what Jason, Myleena, and Jyslin told them to do, mainly checking external connections and looking for physical evidence of a malfunction.

*It's not her core, Myleena called after a few minutes. It's operational and nominal, but I'm afraid to jack into it until we find the problem. Whatever's messing with Cybi's system might feed back into me if I jack my gestalt in physically.*

*That's a good call, Jason agreed. Whatever's going on is screwing with Cybi's ability to use her own core systems, or she'd be able to commune with us. Let's find the problem before we jack in to talk to Cybi. I'm sure she knows we're here, and that means she knows we know there's something wrong.*

*I'll ping her core a few times so she knows we're here, but that's as far as I'll go. She was silent a moment as she did that, pinged a signal into Cybi's core that told her that there was someone here...and when she did that, a strange feeling went through Jason, almost as if he felt it. Myleena shivered a little herself. Cybi knows we're here, but she can't talk to us, she*

reasoned. *It's gotta be a problem in her I/O tree, something feeding back into her core and disrupting her attempts to reroute around the problem. Forran, take the biogenic network hub down,* she sent strongly enough to be heard in the crisis management center. *Until we find the problem, I don't want any external system trying to access Cybi's functions. They might be exacerbating the problem.*

*I'm taking it down now,* he called from the offices above.

"The power management system's not the problem, boss," Luke called from across the room, on the other side of the core. "We've got nominal readings and the logs show no spikes or aberrations in the power flow."

"Sounds good, Luke. Check the conduits visually, look for anything unusual," Myleena answered. "Deploy the scout spiders."

"On it, boss," he answered.

"It sounds like data corruption," Jenny mused. "If her core is good but she can't communicate, and we can't find anything wrong with the hardware, it has to be a data corruption issue."

"That's what I'm thinking," Myleena agreed. "Something in one of her I/O systems is only half-broken, and it's corrupting all the data going through it. Jayce, I think we should disconnect the entire I/O system from her core," she proposed. "That should let Cybi commune with us and let us isolate the problem in the I/O tree."

"Sounds like a plan."

It was a good one. Luke and Myleena went over to the core control manual board and physically disconnected Cybi's core from her I/O tree system, and the instant she did, a powerful commune rippled through the core chamber. *[Thank Trelle for you, Jason and Myleena,]* Cybi's mental voice called. *[There is a major malfunction somewhere in my I/O primary data management subsystem. It was feeding back into my core and preventing me from issuing commands to any external system.]*

*[That's what we figured,]* Jason answered. *[We've isolated your I/O tree so we can track down the problem, so just hold out a little bit without your main links.]*

*[If you can take the core system cameras and sensors off the I/O tree, I can access them via local commune. It's a bit dark and scary in here, Jason. I've never had this happen before.]*

*[Of course. Just keep a touch on me 'til we get them off the tree.]*  
“Cybi’s communing,” he called, which caused a few cheers from the guys. “She says the problem’s in her primary data management subsystem, and it’s so severe it’s feeding back into her core and corrupting all her commands.”

“That’d do it, that system manages all of Cybi’s communications with her external systems,” Myleena grunted. “Okay guys, we know where to start looking. Let’s track down the problem.”

“Luke, you go around and disconnect a few of the core room sensors from the tree so Cybi can access them using her core systems,” Jason ordered. “She’s completely blind and deaf right now, and she’s finding it a little scary.”

“I’ll get her a few cameras and sensors right away, tell her it’ll be just a minute,” Luke said, hurrying over to the nearest access panel to disconnect the datalines from the sensors so the I/O tree couldn’t corrupt them.

The entire I/O tree was showing corruption, and that corrupted data was feeding back into all her other major subsystems. Everyone shifted over to the data management I/O system and started a very careful, meticulous process of troubleshooting, trying to find where the corruption was coming from.

*I think I might have something,* Jyslin called after nearly an hour of them and the 3D crew carefully checking over the subsystem, holographic logic charts and schematics hanging in the air all over the room as Cybi watched through two cameras that Luke had taken off the tree system for her to access. They’d been using both old-fashioned visual inspections and readings and were using scouting spiders equipped with cameras and sensors to get into the places they couldn’t see, looking for any physical evidence of a malfunction. *I think I found where the data corruption is coming from.*

Jason left checking boards to Eraen and Luke and rushed over, then knelt down and looked into the unit. *Where?*

*Right here, subsystem 14-23-144, she replied, pointing. It's in the main data processing subsystem that manages most data flow in and out of Cybi's core. I'm getting erratic fluctuations from this biogenic processor that show up in other systems a few nanoseconds later. I think it's the problem.*

Jason slid his hand over the board and found it secure, still annealed into the rack, and accessed the tree system in Cybi's schematics. It was one of the main I/O processing units that handled basic rules about how Cybi received and transmitted information in and out of her core, like the main bus and BIOS of an archaic old Terran desktop computer. Virtually all of Cybi's I/O data went through that subsystem. Jason ordered a couple scout spiders to the board to check for physical problems. "I think you're right, Jys," he said. "I don't see anything wrong, but this board *is* in the right place to cause all these problems. It's in the right place to corrupt every megastreaming of data flowing in and out of Cybi's core."

*"And that would explain why the biogenic systems here have been transmitting nonsensical gibberish, the system wasn't preventing me from sending data out, but it was corrupting everything I sent,"* Cybi noted aloud, using a speaker. She still had no access to the holographic emitters, but she could use the speakers to talk to them. He could still sense her fear, a fear that nothing made sense, a fear of the thousand years of silent solitude she'd endured after the destruction of Karis. Those thousand years had weighed more heavily on her than even Jason realized, like an old childhood fear of the dark thought long conquered creeping back up on an adult in a moment of vulnerability.

"I think that's also why the entire biogenic network went down when your system failed. You're so deeply tied into it that when you started transmitting gibberish, the system shut itself down because it couldn't make sense of your commands. I didn't think it was that delicate," he grunted. "We might have to do a little work on that, I suppose. Anyway, I think we've found the problem, so just hold tight for a bit. We'll disable this subsystem, and if that clears up the corruption, we'll reconnect you. That should let you reset your I/O tree and reroute around the failed subsystem, then we'll replace it once you're back online."

*"That should work,"* she agreed, her fear easing. *"We'll need to run a level one diagnostic of both my systems and all biogenic systems on the*

*planet to make sure there was no permanent damage done.”*

It took him and Myleena about twenty minutes of careful and delicate work to pull the failed subsystem out of the stack, then they reset the entire tree, reconnected the datalines to Cybi, and waited. Cybi’s hologram shimmered into view near the core slowly, and then she opened her eyes and put a hand on her pseudo-nude chest. *“I/O tree systems are rebooting by major subsystem stack allocation, but local core systems are reset and back online,”* she called. *“I am ever so grateful for your fast response, my friends. That was a very frightening experience.”*

“We’re glad to see you too, Cybi. You had us worried there for a few minutes,” Bo said as he held up the failed board. “Here’s the problem, right here. We’ll have another one installed in a jiffy.”

*“If there was any one thing I would not want to fail, it is that,”* she said in reply. *“That branch system was corrupting my entire I/O tree due to its critical location within the system.”*

“It was a partial failure,” Myleena said, taking the board from Bo and studying it with a critical eye. “If it had went completely down, you’d have been able to reroute around it. But it was still up, and you don’t have any safeguards in place to isolate a main I/O processor unit from the rest of the system tree. So when it started sending corrupted data into your system, you couldn’t stop it, and it was effectively corrupting everything else. This one little board effectively took you down, Cybi,” she said with a dark chuckle, holding it out so Cybi could see it.

*“It seems that even I have a couple of design flaws,”* Cybi said with a rueful look.

“More like an oversight. I doubt they ever considered that this might happen when they designed your I/O architecture. Eh, we can fix it. We’ll install some hardwired breakers into the tree system you can control directly from your core system to isolate the three different subsystems in case one malfunctions again. And I think we’ll install an emergency bare-bone I/O stack directly off your core so you can manifest a hologram and communicate with the techs if your I/O system goes down again.”

*“That would make me feel much better,”* Cybi said. *“I’m getting the rest of the I/O tree back up, and I’m accessing the biogenic network hub here on*

*the island. Wait, it's down."*

"We have it down right now, we were afraid that the network was somehow causing *you* to malfunction," Jason told her. "Jenny, tell Forran to bring the biogenic hub back up," he called.

"You got it, Jayce," she replied, then she touched her interface. "He's bringing it back up right now."

*"It's restarting. I have access,"* Cybi declared, looking up towards the ceiling momentarily. *"I've initiated a level one diagnostic of the biogenic network hub and the island relays and will not allow it to reconnect to the planetary network until the diagnostic is complete. And I'm beginning a level one diagnostic of all internal systems. This will take a while, friends."*

"A few hours at least," Jyslin noted. "Well, we can bring the kids here after they get out of school, and have dinner over in the cafeteria," she said to Jason.

"Yah. Myli, call Myri and tell them we've got Cybi back up, and we should have everything back to normal in a few hours. And tell them to bring the planetary biogenic network hubs back up and run level one diagnostics on every hub before trying to reconnect it to the system."

"Will do, Jayce."

"Jys love, could you call Frinia and tell her that we have things under control? I'm sure she's a little worried since we kinda abandoned her at the stadium," Jason noted, which made Jyslin laugh and nod.

The replacement of the I/O processor board took a few hours, because they had to have the Shimmer Dome manufacture a replacement for it. While they waited for them to get it grown and etched, the guys from 3D got a few lessons in CBIM architecture from Myleena as Jason just stayed near Cybi's core to just *be there* for her as her systems ran a top-level diagnostic to make sure the failed processor didn't damage anything else. This was one of those stark reminders to him that Cybi was a living thing, because the fear she felt when she lost contact with the outside world was a palpable thing that any Generation would have felt in her bandwidth. When the replacement board arrived, Myleena was the one that half-crawled into the stack unit and annealed it into place very carefully, aligning the board with the data fibers embedded in the rack rails and mountings so they had

connectivity, then annealing the board into the stack with surgical precision. She checked her work with a micrometer after annealing the board at two spots, then she annealed it the rest of the way when she was satisfied with the alignment. After she finished, she wriggled out of the unit and looked over at Cybi's hologram. "Alright, Cybi, it's in, see if you can access it."

The hologram nodded, and her eyes turned distant for a split second. *"I have access. Initializing the board and downloading all pertinent updates to the chips."*

"Well, guess we can't complain *too* much about this one, it lasted, what, a thousand years?" Jenny said lightly, holding up the failed board.

"Well, we'll make sure this doesn't happen again," Myleena noted as she got back to her feet, her armor clacking a bit. "I'm gonna add some maintenance spiders to the list that Cybi can control from her core, so she can send them in if she needs to."

*"That would be prudent,"* Cybi agreed with a nod of her hologram. *"And this little incident only proves to me even more that getting another CBIM online as fast as possible should be the primary goal of the house."*

"I don't think I can argue too much about that," Jason grunted. "We have everything on schedule, but we can push up the external assembly construction schedule so we have it all ready sooner, if only so we have some spare parts for your systems if we have another outage," Jason said contemplatively. "But until we get the core crystal grown, there's really not much more we can do."

"Is that still on schedule?" Tom asked.

Myleena nodded. "It's 12% grown, and it should be finished in about 206 days. And as soon as we're sure it's viable, they'll be starting another one." They'd had to build a new building just for CBIM core crystal production, since it took a *ton* of effort from both workers and materials. A CBIM's core was one of the most intricate and delicate things that could be manufactured on Karis, where the position of every molecule in the biogenic matrix had to be managed with exacting precision. A single molecule out of alignment could corrupt the entire core crystal, so the estimated completion time of 206 days was not exaggerated in any manner.

The men and women who worked in that building had security clearances as high as 3D did.

“Myli, you and me should stay here until Cybi gets back the results of the diagnostic. Everyone else, great work, but you can get back to our other projects,” Jason declared. “Just keep your emergency interface channel on top of the queue in case we need you back.”

“Sounds like a plan, boss,” Bo said. “Glad you’re feeling better, Cybi.”

*“You and me both, Bo.”*

“Love, you should go back to Frinia,” Jason offered. “Seems like the crisis is passed, and the team needs you over there.”

“I guess, if that’s okay with you, Cybi.”

*“It is quite fine with me, Jyslin. I too want the Paladins to do well,”* she said with a gentle smile on her hologram.

It took nearly three hours for Cybi to finish her diagnostics, time Jason and Myleena spent doing a little extra work, knocking out a few preventive maintenance inspections due next month on Cybi’s systems, then going over some of the ultra-top secret things that Myleena worked on, stuff of which even most of the guys in 3D had little knowledge. They discussed Myleena’s continued attempts to merge biogenic and moleculartronic computer architecture, and also her continued attempts to reduce the power demands of Karinne translation engines, two of the biggest things on her very long list of things to do. When Cybi’s diagnostics came back, there was thankfully no problems or damage done by the malfunction, though there were a few minor issues that came up that Jason immediately added to the task list for them to repair. Cybi didn’t run a level one diagnostic very often, since it tied up many of her systems and slowed even her awesome processing power down quite a bit, which in turn bogged down the planetary biogenic network, which fed back into the moleculartronic network, which even fed back into CivNet.

*[We’ll have to come back tomorrow and deal with that power distribution cycle relay in 13B-126, since it looks like it might fail any time now,]* Myleena communed to them as she sat on the rail around Cybi’s core and tapped on a solid hologram projected in front of her displaying Cybi’s power distribution network. *[The five other problems your diagnostic found*



*can wait a while, since each of those is a four-hour job minimum. That sound good to you, Cybi?]*

*[It's fine, I have enough redundancy in those systems to take the failing units offline without any loss of efficiency,]* she communed, her hologram hovering near Myleena and nodding. *[Besides, they haven't failed yet. May as well get all the use out of them I can.]*

*[Always so frugal,]* Myleena grinned. *[Jayce, you and me need to go up to Kosigi. I have to finish the final inspection of our new Stargates, and you should be there. I know you don't want to go back to the office, so consider it your free pass. If Chirk bitches, tell her I ordered you up there.]*

He laughed brightly. *[Sounds like a plan to me, this day's already completely shot paperwork wise,]* he agreed. *[Okay, Cybi, we'll be back tomorrow morning to replace that cycle relay.]*

*[I've already put in the order to material management, we have plenty in stock. They'll have the replacement here in the morning.]*

*[Sounds good. Okay, hon, we're gonna get back to work. Or ducking work in my case,]* he communed cheekily.

*[Thank you so much for getting here so quickly,]* she communed earnestly, putting a hand on each of their shoulders.

*[Of course we would, you're important to us, Cybi, and not just because you're tied into every computer on this planet,]* Myleena winked.

Twenty minutes later, Jason, Myleena, and his guards were on the corvette and heading up to Kosigi. Jason was putting on his armor—both because Aya wouldn't let him go up to Kosigi without it with the foreign workers and the engines in the armor were convenient to get around in the weightless environment—with Suri and Dera helping him. Jason was so acclimated to the Faey lifestyle that he didn't even consider the fact that he undressed in front of the relative strangers among the corvette's crew. The upper echelon officers, he knew the vast majority of them by name, but he didn't know every woman in the crews, especially on corvettes that didn't often carry him.

The two Stargates were hanging in the cold air deep inside Kosigi when the corvette pulled in and parked about 300 shakra from one of them. They

were gigantic rings with a diameter of about 2 kathra, or around 1.8 kilometers or about a mile and a half, which was easily big enough for them to allow the capitol ships pass through them. The capitol ships were bigger than the Stargates, but that was all *length*. Width wise, they easily fit through the rings of the Stargates. They were based on standard Stargates, but since they were built by the Karinnes, they employed some biogenics and a few upgrades thought up by Myleena. Their Stargates used less power than similar sized Imperium-built gates and were 14% more stable in short-distance linking scenarios. It was a quirk in spatial linking that the closer two gates were, the harder it was to link them, but their gates were a little better at it than Imperium gates. The rings that made up the Stargates were hollow, filled with gravometric warping units similar to engines that all focused at the center of the gate, as well as substantial security and enough quality of life amenities for the crews of the gates to keep them very comfortable.

*Those look so pretty*, Myleena purred as they came out of the corvette, using the engines in their armor to drift out. Neither of them had their helmets on, and the air was a bit chilly that far out from the gates, where they kept it warmer.

*How does the production line look?*

*We'll have it streamlined by Chiira, and we'll be cranking out four gates every 17 days*, she replied. *One of these still going to RG-118?*

*Yup, as soon as they pass final inspection*, he nodded. *I want that planet sending food as fast as possible. We're going to need it.*

*I haven't been keeping up with that. Where's it at?*

*If Grik'zzk did it right, the first harvests should be at the port waiting to be picked up as soon as we get the Stargate linked and online*, he answered. *That's why I've been so anal about you keeping my office up to date on construction. She needed to know exactly when we'd have the gate up.*

*That explains it*, she sent with a chuckle. *Where are the twins now?*

*Still in the R quadrant*, he answered. *They're surveying RH-31, it had some promising long-distance scans. There are two other teams surveying RG-209 and RF-440.*

*Wow, the KES is starting to get big.*

*It'll get bigger in about a month, when that next line of scout ships comes off the docks, he said as one of Myleena's techs floated over and gave her a handpanel. They're training enough KES personnel to triple the size of the division. Considering how important exploring is, I want a nice large exploratory service that can deploy to multiple parts of the galaxy.*

*Not a bad plan. When is Zaa sending those Kimdori to Andromeda?*

*In a few days. They've finished refitting the scout ships I gave her, he answered. Me and the Denmother are having a bit of an issue over that.*

*Why?*

*Zaa intends to use a one-way wormhole to catapult the scout mission deep into intergalactic space, to get a head start. I'm completely against it, but she won't listen to me, he sent sourly.*

*Seriously?*

*He nodded. She's already built the wormhole system out of translation engines her techs haven't installed on ships yet. I wouldn't be against it if it wasn't so fuckin' dangerous. I mean, I can understand the need to get those scouts to Andromeda as fast as we can, but she's flinging all precaution to the wind here, and it rubs me raw. She's risking the lives of her scouts, but she won't listen to reason.*

*Well, take back the scout ships. Those are our ships, and she's risking them as much as her people.*

*He gave her a dirty look. Riiiiiight, you do that, Myli. I want to see if you get away from her with any of your teeth.*

*Myleena laughed. That's your job, babes, not mine.*

*Anyway, like you said, that's not your problem. The twins are gonna hate me when I tell them that if they want to run the KES, they'd better spend more time behind a desk, running the KES instead of having their home office do it. The exploring is gonna be other people's jobs once they have enough survey teams trained. I'm having Red Horn build them their own headquarters in Karsa, where they'll have nice big offices that I'll*

*expect them to actually be in most of the time. If I have to sit behind a desk, then dammit, so do they.*

Myleena grinned. *They're gonna be pissed at you!*

*I want them home anyway. Things are getting boring with them out there and Kumi here. They can't prank each other with the twins roaming around the galaxy, and those three are always entertaining.*

Myleena burst out laughing. *I think that's more along the lines of keeping them within arm's reach if they talk Ayuma into pranking you by proxy again.*

*Oh no, they learned that lesson, he sent darkly. So did Ayuma, for that matter,* he added, which made Myleena laugh even harder.

With the lead engineer there, they observed as the team conducted the final inspections and initial start-up tests of both Stargates. A Stargate didn't need a terminus gate to test its gate generation system, they simply focused it on a distant point and started it up to a certain point, which was all that was needed to get the readings of the system to make sure it was working properly. But they couldn't do both at the same time, since the proximity of the two gates would create distortion in the spatial flux that would produce false readings. The crews were already inside the gates, bringing them up into standby mode, and had already been trained for the job. *Let's start with gate A,* Myleena sent strongly, her sending reaching through the entire area, a reminder of just how powerful she was. Myleena was the second strongest telepath on Karis if her being a Generation wasn't brought into play, just slightly weaker than Yana, but with a gestalt she was easily the most powerful. *Let's bring it up into link mode.*

Starting the gate up and initiating link mode didn't take that much time, what took the time was getting two gates to link. So, while the two of them watched, the crew inside the gate brought the gate fully up and put it into link mode, focusing the gate on a pre-determined point of empty space in the Kypan Void. The gate was searching for a terminus gate that wasn't there, but the act allowed them to test the gate linking systems and the computer control systems that managed the wormhole the gate would create. Creating a link handshake was essentially the same as creating the wormhole itself. They studied the output graphs on the handpanel intently,

then Myleena nodded. *We have nominal readings across the board*, she declared. *Put her back in passive standby. Gate B get ready to bring up your gate as soon as gate A is in passive standby.*

They watched as the first gate put its systems in passive standby, basically just keeping them turned on but not doing anything, and the second gate brought up its systems and then focused on the same point, searching for a terminus gate that didn't exist. The output readings on the handpanel were right where they were supposed to be and stable, which made Myleena grin broadly. *All readings are nominal across the board*, she declared. *That's it, everyone. The gates are operational. Break them down and tell Dellin and Myri it's a go.*

*May as well ignore the chain of command*, Jason mused. *[Koye,]* he called over the now-functional biogenic network, calling the ship captain that was going to be towing the gate to RG-118. The battleship *Shiani* was going to be towing the Stargate to RG-118, which would be a three-day trip for them

*[What is it, Jason?]*

*[The gates are operational, so your mission is now on the board,]* he called. *[You should be getting orders from the command center in the next half hour or so, but I figured you wouldn't mind a little advance warning.]*

*[I never do,]* Koye answered lightly. *[I'll bring the Shiani over to the gate area so I'm nearby when I get the orders. Though, I'm a little put out with you, Jason. By the time I get back, we'll be heading out to destroy what's left of the Consortium. We're going to miss the practice wargames.]*

*[That's why your squadron will be in reserve for the operation,]* he told her.

*[And that's why I'm put out. I have to watch everyone else get to have all the fun.]*

*[Savage,]* he teased lightly.

Jason watched as the gate on the left powered down and prepared for tow mode. Myleena had designed them so they could be folded in half with little preparation, a requirement to get them out of the doors. It had the bonus effect of making them a little easier to tow, since they didn't have so

much *volume* as when they weren't broken down. The empty volume inside the ring did have an effect on the ship towing the gate through hyperspace. The gate would fold in half at its top and bottom, the two halves would lock together, then the battleship and its escort of 14 other ships would tow it out of Kosigi and off to RG-118. Once it was there, it would take the gate approximately 27 hours to link back to the gate at Karis, and then they'd be in business. So, in four days, RG-118 would be part of their private Stargate network and give them a foothold in all four quadrants of the galaxy.

*Alright, let's go ahead get gate B in orbit after it's folded, Myleena ordered. Get a pusher ship over here and have them get ready to open the capitol doors.*

*The battleship Shiani's already on the way over to tow gate A, we can just have them pull it out while they wait for the escort task force to assemble,* Jason offered.

*Sounds good to me,* Myleena nodded. *It'll take something that size to tow the gate anyway.*

When Koye got her ship over to them, she already had her orders, and gate B was already folded, locked, the crew inside in their jump restraints, and ready to be towed. The battleship swung around deftly, proving they had a good navigator at the controls, and they locked four towing beams on the gate. The ship *very* slowly began to move, to prevent putting too much stress on the towing beams, the ship towing the folded gate out into the gloom and towards the capitol doors. It would take them about 40 minutes to get the gate to its assigned position in far orbit around the planet, about 32,000 kathra from the edge of the atmosphere and about 10,000 kathra from the gate leading to PR-371, which was the minimum distance two active gates could be without interfering with each other. *Alright, that's that. The next two gates will be off the line in 25 days,* she told him with a smile. *And after that, we'll have gates coming off the line every 12 days, once we get the other two assembly lines up and running.*

*How long 'til the third set of lines get going?*

*A couple of takirs, we haven't finished building the assembly equipment for a third pair of lines.*

*Well, I'd better send Brall over there to kick some shins. We're going to need those Stargates, Myli, and soon.*

*I know, that's why I've been kicking some butts over there personally,* she nodded as they drifted towards the corvette.

They talked more about it on the way over to where Myleena had been working, then he dropped her off and almost reluctantly returned to the White House. He was *so* far behind now due to the emergency on top of murdering his schedule to attend the inspection of the pitch, and he could see that it was going to be even more of a delay when he came into the outer office and saw Yila sitting demurely on the couch, chatting with Brall. She was in usual Yila attire, wearing what looked like a sporty halter not much unlike a batchi top, a waist chain, soft ankle boots, and nothing else. She stood up abruptly when Jason padded into the office, still in his armor and with his guards behind him carrying his clothes. *And here comes trouble*, he drawled mentally as she came up to him.

She laughed and gave him a roguish wink. *It's about time, what took you so long?*

*We had an emergency*, he answered evenly, his mental tone making it clear that he wasn't going to discuss the issue.

*Ah. Well, you're here now*, she sent as she put her hand on his shoulder.

*So, this is a business meeting*, he noted, looking at her.

She laughed aloud. *Yes, it is. Let's step into your office and talk about it.*

*Eh, may as well, it's the only way I'll get rid of you*, he replied. "Give me a few minutes before you make me hate you, Chirk," he said aloud to the large Kizzik, who clacked her mandibles in amusement and gave him what for a Kizzik passed as a light look.

Yila followed him into his office, and Yila sat on one of the chairs in front of his desk as he stood beside it and started removing his armor. *So, what do you want now?*

*I got wind of the fact that you're going to open cyberjack implantation up to the general Confederation population*, she replied.

*What? Who told you that?*

*I have my sources, she smiled.*

Kumi. *Fucking Kumi*, she had to tell her, and he'd told her that that was confidential information. He added kicking Kumi's ass to the list of things to do when he got home.

*And what does that have to do with this visit?*

*Several things. First, I want one, a jack and a jack-enabled interface I can take back home with me to pair with it, she declared. I've seen how useful they are, and how useful they can be even if I'm not on Karis. I've heard that you can implant a jack without damaging talent, and that's all I needed to hear.*

*And that's it.*

*That's what I want, for my own personal use, she replied. As far as business goes, I want to start a little joint venture with you into the entertainment sector.*

*Entertainment? What kind?*

*Viddy and movies, she replied. I want to start up a venture that takes a jacked actor and encodes all his sensory impressions into the vidy to be played back to the watcher. Naturally, it'll require the watcher to have a jack, but I can see that in twenty years, jacks are going to be commonplace throughout the sector cluster. I want to get my seeds in the garden now, before the other flowers start to grow.*

*You're serious. You want to record sensory impressions into a vidy?*

*I'm dead serious, she replied. The Colonists utilize empathys in their live action dramatic pieces to project the emotions displayed by the actors, and it has a powerful effect. I've attended those empathic operas, I know firsthand. A vidy where you can feel what the actor feels, if she's a good actor and can project emotion, as well as being able to feel everything she feels, that has major potential for profit. Imagine watching a movie where you feel what the actor feels and can sense the actor's emotional state. Imagine one of your Terran horror movies where you can feel the dread of the actors when they think there's a monster hiding in the shadows. Imagine watching an action movie where you feel the adrenaline of the actor as she fights the bad guys, imagine a show where you feel the rain and wind*



*against your skin as an actor walks across a rainy street. And naturally, imagine what a massive boost it'll bring to the porn industry when you can feel what the actor is feeling. I have the credits and the contacts in the entertainment industry to make it happen, and you have the computers and hardware capable of recording sensory impressions, thanks to the cyberjacks you invented. You create hardware that can encode the emotional states and sensory impressions into the vidy shows in a way that doesn't require a biogenic computer to encode and decode it, and I provide the credits and connections to back the venture and turn it into its own industry. We split the profits down the middle and we're both happy.*

He gave her a long look, a little surprised at what she was saying. Telepathy was capable of what she was talking about, able to convey *emotion* and sensory impressions over sending. Using sending, Jason could see through Jyslin's eyes, hear what she heard, feel what she felt, feel her emotions, and telepaths used it during intimacy to intensify the experience, which was the major delineation in Faey society between *making love* and *having sex*. Making love was the joining of minds, where having sex was the joining of bodies. And she was right that a biogenic computer was capable of *recording* emotional states and sensory impressions. Faey moleculartronic computers were capable of recording sensory impressions too, since that was a simple matter of electrical stimulation of the proper parts of the brain, which was possible if that brain was wired with a cyberjack. But they weren't capable of recording an emotional state, since a non-biogenic computer had no idea what an emotion *was*, where a biogenic computer *did*. The jack *already* tapped into the sensory centers as part of the installation process, to allow *exactly* what Yila was describing, and an emotional state wouldn't require tapping into any additional part of the brain to which the jack wasn't already wired. But Jason had never considered the idea of using it in a *commercial* manner. And a biogenic computer could encode an emotional state...but could a non-biogenic computer do the same?

"Hmm," he mused aloud. [*Cybi, you think that's possible?*]

Cybi manifested her hologram into the office with it already sitting demurely on the edge of his desk. "*Jason, Myleena has already perfected a portion of the technology Yila envisions,*" she answered, looking quite *normal*, like she'd gotten over her scare earlier that day. "*Refer to project*

*code 1326-15-459-3945A, it's part of the non-biogenic cyberjack control chip that Myleena designed for use outside the house. She has already developed computer algorithms to allow a moleculartronic computer to decode both sensory and emotional data recorded by a biogenic computer. Moleculartronics have the processing power to be capable of encoding and recording sensory data, but to completely remove biogenics from the process of encoding emotional states, that would require some additional work. But I believe that it is entirely possible and would not take much extra research to make feasible. The computer doesn't have to understand the emotion to encode and decode it."*

"Outstanding!" Yila said brightly, switching to speaking now that Cybi was in the room and obviously part of the conversation. "I've already put in an application for a trademark for the brand name *Simsense Entertainment*, short for Simulated Sense, which also describes the format of it fairly well. You develop the technology, I'll bankroll that development, and I'll produce the shows and movies that utilize it once we have viable technology to make it feasible. Then we split all profits from simsense entertainment fifty-fifty."

"We'd have to put some limits on it," he mused, leaning back against his desk and pinching the end of his chin carefully between two armored fingers. "Some hardwired limiters that prevents the simulated sensory input from overloading the receiving brain's ability to process it. I wouldn't want people to get so keyed up on this simsense that they decide it's better than real life. It could be addictive. But it would add an entirely new dimension to watching a movie as long as we make it safe."

"So, you like the idea?"

"I think it has some potential," he said. "Any telepath would know exactly what you're trying to get across, and as a Generation, I can appreciate it even more since I *can* receive an emotion from a computer. Mainly that one right there," he chuckled, pointing at Cybi, who smiled in reply. "But seriously, you'll be spending a fuckton of credits to develop the idea, Yila. We're talking hardware, software, new programming algorithms, recording equipment, decoding equipment, the whole deal. An entirely new genre of computers and programming built from scratch. There's no tech we have outside of biogenics to use as a reference, and we *can't* use any

biogenics in the finished product. We can't just import how biogenic computers do it, because of the fundamental difference in how they work compared to moleculartronics. That means we have to build moleculartronics-based recording computers that can encode the emotional aspect of simsense from scratch."

"It's an investment, Jason. I'll get fifty times my investment back," she stated confidently. "But there's already enough there to start profiting off it, Jayce. You said that you already have moleculartronic units capable of encoding sensory data, right?"

*"Myleena has developed that technology, yes."*

"Then we can start there with simsense that *only* works with sensory data while we develop that tech that will allow us to add emotions later, and we can even market it as advances in simsense technology and get everyone to upgrade their hardware to the next generation, which means more profit for us," she said with a laugh. "But think of the profit, Jason! Billions! Billions! So, you'll agree to it?"

"I'm not committing 'til I see the contract, woman, I know you too well," he said, which made her laugh. "Besides, if Myleena already invented some of this, then she has to be included in the contract. She more or less owns the patent for it."

"I don't have a problem with that, and I'll get a contract over here for you to read tomorrow. Once I get my hands on the specs for those simsense recorders, I'll produce the fuck out of them in my factories, get some actors jacked to record the simsense, then I'm going to base this new entertainment division on Tamiri. And if I'm right, it'll turn Tamiri into the next Terran *Hollywood*," she said, using the English name for it. "We'll be the only ones producing simsense entertainment at first, and as cyberjacks become mainstream, so will simsense. And once it does, we can license out the technology to other studios, allow other studios to start producing simsense programming to increase the available programming options, which will only make it more popular. They do the producing, we earn royalties off their work because we have the licensing for the format," she purred in a predatory manner. "We'll even profit off our competitors' success! It's win-win, Jayce!"

“Damn, you’ve thought this through,” he chuckled.

“I *always* think things through,” she replied with a smile. “You want in on it as well as Myli, Cybi?”

“*You mean work as a consultant?*”

“You bet. You’re the biggest, baddest computer in the entire galaxy, girl, I’d be an idiot not to ask for your expertise to develop second generation simsense recorders to add emotional states. I’ll give you a cut of the profits if you want, I think even a computer needs some spending money from time to time.”

“*Why not?*” she replied with a smile. “*I would enjoy the challenge. And yes, I could actually use the money.*”

“Good, First, we get Myli in on this. Second, I’ll need you to release the technical specs on those encoder units so I can build them. Once we get that going, Cybi, I’ll need you to start developing those algorithms you were talking about for the emotion encoders while I assemble a crack team of computer experts to develop the hardware. But, Jayce, I’ll kinda need to have them all come here to get a jack. They gotta have one to do this, or it’ll be impossible for them to do it. Without a jack, they can’t *experience* the simsense to know if it works or not.”

Jason laughed. “You’re lucky that Myli and Songa developed a jack for use outside the house,” he told her.

“I *know* they did,” she said smugly. “That’s why I’m here now. I want to go straight to the Medical Annex and have that jack implanted by supertime.”

“It’s not entirely ready for consumer use, silly.”

“Then consider me your first non-Karinne test subject,” she declared, which honestly surprised him. If she was *that* hot to get a jack, she seriously must think that it was such a profitable idea that she was willing to take the risk to essentially be a guinea pig. “I know you have to have a working prototype of it.”

Well, yeah.”

“Then it’s going right here,” she declared, touching her finger behind her left ear, tapping the back edge of her interface.

“There’s some risk involved in that, hon.”

“If Myleena and Songa invented it, it’s gonna work,” she declared confidently.

“Clearly you weren’t here for Myleena’s Mark Five engine modifications,” Jason drawled, which made Cybi burst into laughter.

*“That was definitely not Myleena’s shining achievement,”* she snickered after getting control of herself.

“It was bad?” Yila asked.

“We still haven’t found some of the pieces of the engine,” he replied, which made Yila burst out into laughter herself.

“Well, I’ll trust her on this one. So, you’ll do it for me? You’ll let me get a jack?”

He considered it a moment, then nodded. “As long as you understand that it’s a prototype and you don’t hold us responsible for any complications, yes.”

“I’m not worried at all,” she said eagerly.

“And you’ll have to undergo what we call assimilation training. You have to learn how to *use* the jack, hon. It’s not automatic. It takes about a month or so.”

“Fine with me, it’s gonna take that long just to get this project off the ground.”

“Alright then, at least in that respect, you have a deal. Cybi, could you call Songa and tell her about it? And drag Myleena out of whatever piece of equipment she’s molesting, we need her here for her expertise.”

*“Of course, Jason.”*

“While we’re waiting for Myli to get here, let’s discuss your idea.”

Myleena arrived about twenty minutes later, and they started fleshing out Yila’s idea, which impressed Jason more and more with how thoroughly she’d thought it through. She had a detailed plan in place that covered the

introduction of simsense, how to spread it as jacks spread through the Confederation, and how to maximize profits off of it even when they started letting other companies use the technology to produce their own simsense. Jason had to admit after hearing a more detailed overview of her idea that it was *damn clever*...but then again, it was Yila. Yila's plans almost always were damn clever.

After they told Myleena about the idea, and she looked honestly surprised. "Shit, I never thought of using it that way," she said with an intrigued expression.

"Cybi said you already invented some of the tech we'll need for it," Yila prompted.

"Yeah, but I mainly thought it would be military, you know, sensory tapping of scouts and soldiers so commanders could get real-time intel of a combat theater at ground level. But *fuck*, it could be used for viddy too," she said, then she laughed. "You realize that that's *my* tech."

"And I'm willing to cut you in on the deal along with me and Jayce and Cybi," she said immediately. "We'll just have to hammer out the percentages. I was gonna just go fifty-fifty with the house as a whole, but now I think it'll be more along the lines of 45-45 between Trefani and Karinne, and five-five between you and Cybi."

"Deal," Myleena said immediately. "Cause five percent of this is gonna make me even more filthy rich than I am now."

"See this, Jayce? This is how you negotiate," Yila declared, pointing at Myleena. "What about you, Cybi? Does five percent sound fair?"

"*Oh, I suppose it will have to do. At least I won't have to beg Jason for advances on my allowance when I want to buy things,*" she replied playfully, which made Myleena grin.

"45% work for you, Jayce?"

"Yup," he said.

"Well, that made this deal easy," Yila grinned. "We'll put it on paper and do it all official later. Now lets talk about the next step, producing the hardware to make it happen."

“I can have the specs ready for the moleculartronic encoding unit in a couple of days, I just have to make a few tweaks to it,” she announced.

“You get it to me, and ten hours later I’ll have factories building them,” Yila declared. “That way I have them on hand and ready when I have actors capable of encoding the simsense for the productions.”

When Songa called about an hour later to tell them she was ready for Yila, they’d managed to talk a great deal about what they’d need to do to develop the emotional encoding unit Yila wanted, relying a great deal on Myleena’s knowledge of the subject. She agreed with Cybi that it was possible, and what was more, that it wouldn’t take a whole lot of extra work to invent. When her skimmer arrived to take her to the annex, Yila almost ran out of the office.

“You realize that we just changed the entire entertainment landscape,” Myleena chuckled after Yila was out of the office.

“Eh, we’ll make money off of it, and there’s nothing wrong with us bringing some happiness into the lives of the people,” he shrugged. “And while Yila focuses on viddies, we’ll quietly develop simsense-based games and release them under a dummy corporation as soon as she opens up the licensing to outside corporations.”

Myleena gave him a look, then erupted into delighted laughter. “I’ll give that project to Farran, he’d enjoy something to keep his mind occupied between projects.”

Myleena went back to Kosigi after they talked a bit about the technical aspects of it with Cybi, leaving him to get back to the boring paperwork. He changed into his clothes as he marveled at just how smart that woman really was. She’d learned about the jacks, then had envisioned an entirely new form of entertainment to take advantage of their capabilities, and she had every step of it all planned out, from the initial research and creation of the hardware to the production of the shows and movies, to marketing and distribution once jacks started to appear in the Confederation. And since simsense would *require* a jack, it might very well tempt people into getting one implanted if only to be able to experience simsense, if they heard such good things about simsense from those who had jacks. Word of mouth would be their best friend so long as Yila’s company could produce a

product that made people want more of it. Yila may be a thug and a gangster, but it was times like this when her incredible intelligence and foresight became so crystal clear and showed that she was also one of the most dangerous *businesswomen* in the Confederation. She was so sensitive to the ebb and flow of business opportunities and open to new ideas that it made her incredibly formidable. Only Yila would have envisioned a new form of entertainment so quickly after learning about the cyberjacks and how they worked.

And someone was telling Yila more than she was supposed to know. She not only knew about the jacks, she knew that Songa and Myleena had developed a non-biogenic version of it, and she also knew that Jason was planning on offering jack technology to the Confederation.

Kumi.

“Cybi, would you be a dear and find out where Kumi is? I’m gonna go kick her ass,” he said in a mellow tone, motioning. The paddle he kept hanging on the wall behind his desk, the one he used to chastise Meya and Myra, drifted over to his waiting hand, which made Cybi laugh and his two guards give him a curious look.

*You think she’s telling Yila things she’s not supposed to know?* Dera asked.

“Let’s just say that the list of suspects is incredibly short,” he replied, brandishing the old-fashioned wooden paddle. “If it’s not her, then Yila’s spying on us in ways even Miaari hasn’t considered.”

*“It will have to wait, Jason, the meeting of the Confederate Council is in twenty minutes,”* Cybi said. *“You’d be best suited to catch up to her tonight when she’s home.”*

“Good point, that way she’s not spanked in front of her staff,” he said, which made both Dera and Suri wheeze in that voiceless laughter as he reluctantly returned the paddle to the wall.

Jason decided to just get that out of the way as the holograms of all the members appeared. If Yila knew, then it was only a matter of time before Dahnai got wind of it through her spies in House Trefani, and that would make it common knowledge through the *Siann*. As soon as this takir’s chair of the council, Assaba, called the meeting to order, he leaned back in his



chair, glanced at Cybi, who was in her customary spot sitting demurely on the edge of his desk, and spoke up before anyone else. "I'm going to release some information into the public domain of the Academy sometime later today that might be of interest to everyone in the Confederation," he said. "We've almost perfected a new technology called a cyberjack—"

Dahnai gasped. "You're going to release it!" she blurted.

He gave her a slightly annoyed look. "Yes, we are, at least once we're absolutely sure we have all the bugs worked out," he replied.

"What is this...cyber-jack?" Shevatt of the Ogravians asked.

Jason brought up an image of a jack socket implanted behind the left ear of a host, which was actually a picture of Kyva. "This is a piece of cybernetic technology that acts as an interface between a brain and a computer," he answered. "We've been working for a long time to perfect the installation procedure so it causes no damage or complications to the host, and we've finally managed it. This jack allows the user to directly control a computer they're jacked into without the need of external controls."

"So it emulates aspects of a Generation's ability to telepathically communicate with computers?" Assaba asked curiously.

"Yes, exactly that, your Imperial Majesty," Jason replied as Cybi nodded. "Since we can't release gestalt or interface technology to the Confederation, we've come up with this alternative. We've invented a version of the jack that doesn't use any biogenics, and our medical teams have finally developed a technique to install the jacks so they cause no damage to the recipient without using any proprietary Karinne technology, and they don't damage telepathic ability in telepathic hosts."

*"Though this technology was not created by the Karinnes of old, this is exactly the type of technology they had been researching through the Generations program," Cybi added. "The purpose of the program was to allow a Faey to communicate telepathically with a computer. This device achieves the same result, but it simply removes the telepathic aspect from the scenario. That biogenic units can amplify psionic talent was something of a fortunate happenstance in the course of the development of the technology. That was never its original intent."*

“This jack will allow this recipient to connect to a computer and control it directly with her mind, to send and receive information to and from the computer. It works almost exactly like the interfaces you used when you visited Karis, but these jacks allow *two-way* communication. You can receive as well as transmit using a jack, where the interfaces can only transmit.”

“I want one,” Dahnai declared in a powerful voice. “If you have this ready for release—”

“We *almost* have it ready for release,” he stressed.

“Seriously, Dahnai? You would allow them to implant a device in your brain?” Sk’Vrae asked with honest surprise, regarding Dahnai.

“You bet your ass I will,” she replied instantly and forcefully. “I’ve *been* on Karis, Sk’Vrae, and so have you. I’ve seen what a Generation can do with two-way communication with a computer, and I’m not talking about them amplifying psionic power. Jason can do *amazing* things when talking back and forth to a biogenic computer, and this jack will let me do some of those same things too. I’ve seen it first-hand, I know what kind of potential these jacks have. Love, the *instant* you have this ready, call me. I want the first one.”

“Well, second,” Jason chuckled. “I already have a guinea pig for the prototype. Yila Trefani.”

“Yila? You gave *Yila* a jack before me?” she asked hotly.

“She’s the test subject, love,” he smiled. “She’s getting the *prototype*. If she has no complications, then we’ll know we have a viable unit. *Then* I’ll give you one. The first one that’s *not* a prototype.”

“Well, that’s okay then,” Dahnai grinned. “Better her test it than me.”

“If the infamous Yila Trefani is getting one before it’s even fully tested...well,” Kreel said, then he laughed. “Maybe they are as useful as you think they are, Dahnai.”

“You have *no idea*, Kreel,” she said with an emphatic nod. “Imagine never having to type, use a control, or touch a holographic I/O display ever again. Imagine being able to compose a ten-page treaty as fast as you can think up the text. Imagine being able to have information directly written

into your brain's memory centers like a computer saving data to a memory stick. And imagine having a computer linked to your brain that can support you with its processing power and its memory whenever you need it," she said. "So, if you need to remember some obscure fact buried in your archives," she snapped her fingers, "there it is. If you need a translation of a language you don't know, there it is. If you need to calculate the value of pi to ten thousand places for some reason, there it is. You have all the convenience of a computer literally connected to your brain, there for you to use whenever you need it."

"Hmm, that does sound intriguing," Grayhawk mused, tapping his fingers together.

"And it has certain military applications," Dahnai continued. "I've seen how interfaces increase the ability of Jason's KMS fighter pilots and exomech riggers to fight, and I can only imagine that a jack makes them even nastier. But I doubt Jayce would be releasing it over that."

"You're right," he nodded. "We've decided that this technology has overall benefits to everyone, and the benefits outweigh the fact that yes, it does have military applications. We also feel that the outside world is *ready* for it, so there you go. The house doesn't keep *everything* a secret. When we feel that the galaxy is ready for a technology we've developed, we release it. That's one of the core goals of the house, to spread knowledge across the galaxy. Once we have it perfected, we'll be releasing it into the public domain of the Academy's database, and we'll also be offering jack implantation services to *all* interested parties at the Medical Annex on Terra in case an empire's medical technology can't perform the implant procedure on their own."

"Mayhaps, august ruler of the Karinnes, a general summation and overview of this experimental technology might be made available to us all for study and assessment?" Anavan asked, actually managing to ask a question without it taking five minutes. She had a high-pitched, almost squeaky voice since she was so small, but she didn't *look* small in the hologram. Her elf-like face and body were entirely proportional for any average sized humanoid woman; she even had generous breasts in proportion to her body, at least in relative terms. A Prakarikai male would

find her to have generous breasts, since he was the same size she was. And like all Prakarikai, she was almost ethereally beautiful.

“Sure, I can have something to send to all of you in a couple of hours, a very general overview and summation of a jack’s capabilities,” he nodded. “If the prototype pans out, we might have this technology available for release in about a month, at least for *some* of you. This procedure requires that the doctors have a detailed map of the recipient’s brain architecture so the jack can do what it’s supposed to do, and my doctors don’t have them for all species quite yet. But they do have them for *most* of the member species of the Confederation, and they should have the rest by the time we’re ready to release this technology to the public.”

“Babes, seriously. Seriously. The *instant* you know it’s ready, call me. I’ll be on Karis before you can even finish the sentence,” Dahnai said intensely.

“If you’re that serious about it, alright,” Jason told her. “Just keep in mind that it does take some assimilation training so you can learn how to use it. Our training regimen for most of the races we have in our initial beta-testing program is about a month, give or take, to gain competency using the jack for anything but a passive application. For Shio and Urumi, the regimen is about twenty days, they seem to be able to adapt to the jack quicker than the rest of us,” he mused, glancing at Sk’Vrae. “So you’ll be spending about a month in assimilation training before you can get the most out of the jack.”

“You can send a couple of trainers and the software back to the palace,” she said. “I can do the assimilation training in my off hours.”

“You *are* fairly serious about it,” Jason noted.

“You bet your big gorgeous dick I’m serious about it,” she retorted, which made Anavan actually giggle. “I’m seriously tempted to have you give me another prototype.”

“I’m not going *that* far,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t be crushed if that jack burns out Yila’s brain, it might actually be a service to the galaxy as a whole, but I’m not about to give one to *you* until I’m absolutely, positively, one hundred percent certain that the jack is safe, viable, and ready for use. You are an *Empress*, love, you are *not* a beta tester.”

Dahnai laughed. “She’s annoying you again, isn’t she?”

“Since when is she *not* annoying me, Dahnai?” he replied.

Brayrak Kruu leaned forward in his chair on his hologram. “And after you finish calling Empress Dahnai, I would ask that you call *me*,” he declared. “I understand the potential her Imperial Majesty foresees with these devices.” Of course he would, he was a Moridon. “I do hope that you can implant a Moridon with such a device?”

“Actually, yeah, we can,” he replied. “We haven’t actually done it yet, but Songa has the implantation procedure worked out.”

“Then I would ask that you add me to the waiting list.”

“I can do that,” he said easily.

“Well, then, if there’s nothing left to discuss about the subject, we have General Lorna Shaddale awaiting her chance to provide the briefing about the upcoming operation against the last of the Consortium forces,” Assaba prompted, getting them back on schedule.

Jason tuned out after that, since it went into the boring busy work that the council seemed to adore, sitting around and talking about things that others would actually be making the decisions about. He rapped his fingers on the desk and continued to discuss Yila’s simsense idea with Cybi via communion as Lorna gave her briefing, then they started talking about tungsten availability within the Confederation. Then they talked a little about her scare that morning, and the changes they were going to make so she didn’t fall victim to such a thing again. It really *was* a design flaw, albeit a very tiny one that was only discovered because of a “perfect storm” of the exact perfect thing failing in the exact manner at the exact time to expose the flaw. Cybi had gone some 1,700 years without noticing the potential flaw, so it wasn’t like it was going to happen every other week now that they knew about it.

That was a bit awe-inspiring when he thought about it that way. That board that failed was 1,700 years old. It had been in continuous operation for nearly four hundred years, was offline for 1,300 years, and had again been in continuous operation for 6 years before it finally failed...that was some *incredible* durability and design excellence, coupled with the very

exacting environmental controls that were in place in Cybi's core room to prevent corrosion, decay, or external agents that might cause failure.

Bo was outside his office when the council session ended, and Chirk let him in. Jason was about to start the futile process of trying to clear out his in-box when the tall, lanky man approached his desk, a biogenic board under his arm. "Jayce, you got a minute?" he asked. "I have something weird."

"Sure, I was about to start doing paperwork, and I'll do about anything to put that off," he said, which made Bo laugh. "What is it?"

"You and Myli are the resident experts on biogenic chips," he said. "This is the board that failed in the core today. I decided to check it out to see why it failed, you know, just for something to do, and I found something weird."

"Weird how?"

He glanced to the side and put a hand up and on his interface, and he felt Bo's interface query his office computer for access to the holographic emitters. Jason allowed it, and a 2-D hologram of a close-up picture of the biogenic board appeared. "Okay, here's the chip that failed. I looked it up, and the specs say it's a RK-47 master processor class chip, you know, one of the big ones. Look at it."

Jason did so, and saw immediately that the chip had become discolored, not the usual aqua color of a biogenic crystal of that processor class, but instead a cerulean color, almost sapphire. Biogenic crystals came in multiple varieties, and different types of crystals used in chips had different colors based on its power. Cybi's core crystal was clear, because it was a very different type of crystal than those used in chips, with a different chemical composition and a different crystalline and organic structure

*"I haven't seen that happen since before the Third Civil War," Cybi noted. "It's a very rare occurrence where a chip's on-board encoded DNA mutates and causes the chip to malfunction. It often causes them to discolor like this one has,"* she noted, pointing at the dark blue crystal embedded in the chip.

"You mean this chip failed because its DNA mutated?" Bo asked.

Cybi nodded. “Remember, Bo, that biogenic chips are organic. They are not alive, but they are based on organic crystals infused with a genetically engineered DNA helix that serves as the programming of the chip. That DNA can mutate or break down, even though it was engineered to be stable over thousands of years. This specific corruption of the chip is extremely rare. Maybe one chip in ten million fails in this manner, and usually only after a very long service life. Time is the enemy of all things organic, Bo, even organic computer chips.”

“Okay, that explains half of it. It doesn’t explain this half,” he said, then another hologram appeared showing a graph. “This is an output chart of this board I took just before coming here. All I did was hook it up to a power source. Watch.”

They did so. The board’s output was zero for nearly 30 seconds, then there was a blip of activity. That blip increased in amplitude and frequency for several seconds, then stabilized. “This chip is processing something without being attached to anything,” he said, pointing at the graph. “This isn’t random data fluctuations. It’s organized and rhythmic, but it becomes disjointed when you try to connect it to another biogenic system. This is what happened to the board’s output when I hooked it up to a biogenic panel,” he said, then the graph became wildly chaotic, corrupting the datastream of the panel similar to what it did to Cybi, corrupting it so severely that it reached all through the stream tree; biogenics operated in parallel, with multiple pipes for data flow simultaneously, and the chip was corrupting every pipe in the stack instead of just one.

“So, that’s what it was doing to Cybi, Bo,” Jason replied. “That’s why it went bad.”

“Yeah. Now watch what happened when I disconnected the panel and left the power on.” The data output graph reading changed, grew stronger and took on a rather complex pattern. “I kept recording for nearly twenty minutes, and this complex pattern repeats with stronger and stronger levels. I’ll jump to where it gets *really* interesting,” he said, and the playback shimmered and reset, showing the same output pattern as before but much stronger, then it shuddered, flatlined, and then reset as a constant stable output. “The chip’s processing data, guys, but it’s processing its *own* data. Jayce, Cybi...I think the chip is *thinking*.”

“Thinking?” Jason asked in surprise.

Bo nodded. “I did a full spectrum analysis of the datastream waveform, and it’s pretty damn close to the biogenic biorhythms that Cybi emanates from her core crystal. Here, look at it,” he said, bringing up a different graph showing a spectral graph of various frequencies and waveforms, a sight that anyone familiar with biogenic computer architecture would recognize almost immediately. “It may not be alive, but it’s definitely processing data, it’s just processing its *own* data, data it’s generating by itself. And in a biogenic chip, that means that it’s *thinking*.”

*“That is a very intriguing hypothesis,”* Cybi said seriously, reaching down and picking up the board in her holographic hands. *“I take it that your theory is that this chip spontaneously mutated and took on semi-cognitive capability?”*

“Something like that, Cybi. I’m honestly not sure what to call it. I seriously doubt it’s actually alive, but it *is* acting against its programming. I’d like to see if it’s some kind of glitch, some kind of mutation, or if this little bugger actually *is* thinking. With your guys’ permission, I’d like to run some more tests, and I’d like to get some archive access to study old Karinne records on biogenic chips in more detail. Specifically, how they studied the chips that malfunction. It might give us some insight into what’s going on in this chip’s little crystal brain,” he said, pointing at the board.

*“The engineers didn’t devote much time to the study of failed chips, outside of devising techniques to prevent the malfunctions from recurring,”* Cybi told him. *“But I do have some data on the subject I can give you.”*

“You have my blessing, Bo,” Jason said. “Just don’t do any tests that destroys the chip. Non-invasive only.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“I mean that if it turns out the chip is self-aware, then we hook it up to a power source and let it *be*,” he replied. “It’s not our place to be god and decide who lives and who dies, Bo. If this chip *is* self-aware, it has a right to exist, and that means we have a responsibility to give it that chance. But first, we have to know if it’s really thinking for itself, or if it’s some kind of complex bug in its DNA encoded programming causing it to process noise data in an endless loop, making it *look* like it’s thinking. Hook it up to a



power supply and see what it does. Run experiments that aren't designed to destroy the chip, focus on experiments where you introduce small amounts of data to the chip as a stimulus and see how it responds to it. Try to *teach* it, Bo, that'll tell you if it's actually thinking. As long as we don't get into *Terminator* territory, anyway," he added, which made Bo laugh.

"Sure, I can do that," he replied, taking the board from Cybi. "So, I can run experiments as long as they don't damage the chip?"

"Yup," he nodded in reply.

*"I'd like you to give me access to your experimental datastream, Bo. I am quite curious about this now."*

"Sure thing, Cybi, just access it through my personal panel."

After Bo left, Jason and Cybi traded a long look. *[This is turning out to be an eventful day,]* he noted to her. *[First you go down, then Yila's little scheme, and now it looks like you might have gone down because one of your supporting processor chips got a mind of its own...literally.]*

*[I highly doubt that a chip that small could have become self-aware as I have,]* she replied dismissively. *[It doesn't have the processing power to handle living.]*

*[A virus doesn't have much of a brain, Cybi, but it's alive too.]*

She gave him a sidelong, speculative look. *[That is an astute observation,]* she acceded. *[If this chip did gain self-awareness, we may have a responsibility to let it stay online, but we should also be careful to protect ourselves from it. If it is the biogenic equivalent of a virus, its instincts might be harmful to us. But it does warrant investigation and validation.]*

*[That goes without saying. If the chip is self-aware, we just hook it up to the grid and shield it so it can't access the biogenic network, but also give it some data to process so it has something to do. Just isolating it would be like tossing someone in a bare cell for a hundred years. With no stimulus, the chip might go insane, and we're not going to torture it like that. You said this is a one in ten million occurrence?]*

*[About that. I have 1,412 documented instances of a chip failing in this manner in my archives. So, 1,412 out of the hundreds of billions of biogenic*

*chips produced over the last 3,100 years. The last such failure happened 1,481 years ago.]*

*[Yeah, I'd call that pretty damn rare,] Jason nodded. [Bo's pretty imaginative, so he's a good choice to run the tests. He'll find out for us.]*

*[And if it turns out he's right?]*

*[Then we give the chip a power feed and a subscription to a few thousand magazines and let it pass the time reading,] he shrugged, which made Cybi laugh.*

*Kaira, 6 Kiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 31 July 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 6 Kiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Battleship Dreamer, Squadron A flagship, orbiting PR-371-2*

*This was what it was all about.*

Lieutenant Iyoi Emarre nearly skipped down the companionway between her quarters and the hangar deck, which was practical planning. By putting the fighter pilots close to their fighters, it allowed them to respond to a scramble that much faster. Six days of wargames and practice was done, and now it was time to get it going. It was time to pay those *fucking* bugs back for injuring the Commander.

And the brass upstairs made sure to give the Ghost Squadron the chance to get their revenge, because they were going in *first*.

They had a job to do in this fight, and an important one. They'd be going in first and destroying the bugs' external sensor pod network to blind the bugs to the fleet, and since Iyoi had so much nebula experience, their acting squadron commander, Lieutenant Berya, had put *her* in charge of her element of two fighters. She'd be leading her wingwoman in the operation, and it would be her job to use her knowledge of flying deep nebulas to navigate her Wolf and her wingwoman to knock out sensor pods. And Iyoi

had been given some of the toughest pods to reach and knock out, because she *did* have so much deep nebula experience.

It had been almost *wrong* since the boss was injured. Everything in the squadron felt off, different. Berya was a good leader, she knew her shit, but she just wasn't *the boss*. Iyoi had never realized just how much she respected him until she lost him and saw what he meant to Ghost Squadron and to her. He was tough, he was hard-nosed, but he was also one of the best fighter pilots she'd ever seen and one of the best commanding officers a girl could hope to have.

She wasn't the only one all but biting the blade of Demir's sword to get those bugs back for what they did to the boss.

The other side of it was the replacements. They'd lost six pilots and 5 wizzos in the battle at Karis, and their replacements had barely had time to settle in before they drew this assignment. Like anyone assigned to Ghost Squadron, those girls were the best in the business. They were either veteran fighter pilots with illustrious records or they were like Iyoi, fresh graduates with very high scores and a lot of natural talent. The boss personally approved every member of his squadron, and that included the 13 new girls. Those he had approved from his bed at the annex after looking over their files and interviewing them. So at least in that respect, the new girls weren't facing the prospect of being seen as unworthy of being in Ghost Squadron. The boss may be in a sickbed, but he could still pick winners, and he'd picked those 13 girls. But they were still 13 new girls, unused to the ways of the squadron, and having both the privilege and the responsibility of being in the best fucking fighter squadron in the KMS.

Strange that Iyoi thought of herself as a veteran warhorse already. She'd fought in three battles in her young career, but they'd been pretty fucking intense and important battles. It was Ghost Squadron that had gotten the KMS the intel they needed to assault the nebula. It was Ghost Squadron that had recovered the Kimdori spies in the attack on the enemy com-con, and she had been the pilot in the dropship that had been responsible for picking up the Kimdori and getting them to safety. And it was Ghost Squadron that had the highest kill count and kill ratio of any squadron in the CCM at the battle of Karis. Ghost Squadron always pulled the hardest job in the battle plan, and that was just the way every girl in the squadron liked it.

They were *the best*.

And now they were working with the best the other militaries had to offer. The 30 pilots of the Alliance's elite War Talon Fighter Squadron were already assembled in the fighter bay when Iyoi hurried out, 20 tall, sleek, menacing-looking Shurai wearing gleaming silver armor, so highly polished that it looked like it was mirrored. These were the best fighter pilots in the Alliance, their most experienced, their most skilled, and just like the Ghost Squadron, when something dangerous had to be done, they were at the top of the list of candidates to pull it off. It was tasked to the Ghost Squadron and the War Talons to blind the Consortium in the nebula so their fleets could jump in and attack the enemy com-con without having the bugs know exactly where they were or how big their fleet was.

There was a lot of competitive respect between the War Talons and the Ghost pilots. They'd been jockeying against each other for the last six days in the exercises, and even Iyoi could admit that those fucking Shurai were *amazing* in the cockpit of a fighter. They were a bit gangly and a little awkward looking outside of a fighter, but once they were in the cockpit, *Trelle's garland*. It took a hell of a lot to impress a Ghost pilot, and those fucking Shurai were damn impressive. Iyoi was glad she was on the same side as them. Even a Ghost pilot would be a little anxious coming up against a War Talon, but to be fair, they felt the same way. But Iyoi could admit, the wargame dogfights they'd had with the War Talons were both aggravating and all kinds of fun. Facing the best only made you better yourself.

Iyoi joined the 78 other members of the Ghost Squadron who were sitting on benches beside the standing Shurai as Captain Marayi Karinne and Alliance Admiral Jarik Furystorm from the CCM's command staff approached. The Shio was the officer in charge of the *Dreamer's* part of the operation, and it said a lot that the guy had the courage to be on the ship. It would be in a lot of danger when it jumped in by itself to launch the fighters, and he was gonna be right there sharing in the danger with the crew. Iyoi could respect that, since most command officers sat on their butts in a nice safe command center a few thousand light years away from any real danger. This Shio had some ovaries for a man. They all stood at attention when the pair arrived, and the Shio wasted no time. "At ease," he

said. “We’ll be starting this operation in an hour,” he announced. “Let’s go over the battle plan one final time before we start final preparations.”

He turned and looked at Marayi, who put a finger to her interface and caused a hologram to appear in front of the assembled pilots, a tactical map of the nebula. “The *Dreamer* will jump in at this point,” the Shio said, pointing at a blinking red dot on the hologram. “Your job is to go in and destroy the Consortium advance warning sensor pods scattered around and within the nebula. I know that all of you already have your assigned jobs in that operation, so I won’t break it down element by element. What I will remind you is that this operation is on a very tight timetable,” he stressed. “If you take too long knocking out the sensor pods, the Consortium will get accurate scans of our fleet before we arrive, and that means we lose more ships and more lives. This is about moving quickly while they’re blinded and before they can organize a response to you or to our fleet.

“Phase one is this sector,” he said as a segment of the map blinked. “Once this area is clear, our fleet will jump in. Phase two is the approach to the enemy com-con, and as you advance forward and clear sensor pods along the route our fleet will take and these four decoy routes. Additional fighter squadrons and one squadron of CCM warships will be coming up behind you to attack and destroy any enemy resistance or scout craft along all five routes to further conceal our fleet’s position and size,” he continued as a cylinder inside the nebula blinked. “Phase three is the area around the com-con itself. Once you have all the targeted sensor pods destroyed, your orders are then to engage any deployed drones, fighters, or scouts to prevent any intel from reaching back to the Consortium. Remember that the Kimdori will be jamming their communications and the nebula will make using their light signal language impossible over distance, so they’ll be relying on scouts to go out, look around, then come back. Once the sensor pods are taken out, go after those scouts. I want to stress to all of you that as soon as the Consortium realizes what you’re doing, you *will* run into resistance,” he stressed. “They’ll move to defend the remaining sensor pods. Remember always that the pods are your primary objective. Knock them out as fast as you can with a minimum of distractions. Just leave any enemy resistance alone that you can avoid, we’ll clear them out when our fleet advances into the nebula.

“Once the attack on the enemy begins, you’ll redeploy into the main combat theater and do what you do best, ladies and gentlemen,” he said easily. “The enemy has quite a few automated drones and still have some Imxi fightercraft, so you’ll be needed to protect the line ships from the enemy fightercraft. Just mix in with the CCM fighter squadrons and kill anything that moves that isn’t broadcasting friendly telemetry. This is an attack of complete annihilation,” he reminded them. “They won’t surrender, and we can’t allow even a single enemy ship to survive or escape. So keep shooting until nothing’s moving, then shoot what’s not moving to make sure it’s not playing dead. But to get close enough to attack, ladies and gentlemen, we’re absolutely depending on you to do your jobs and do them well.”

“Belay your concern, Admiral,” the squadron commander of the War Talons declared, nodding his beaked head. “We are well prepared for this mission. It shall succeed.”

“I’m just glad we’re not being called off before the shooting starts,” Berya declared.

“Oh no, we’re not sidelining our two best tactical fighter squadrons. Once you finish with the pods, we’re going to need you in the combat zone. The only intelligence we have from the com-con area is this one image,” he said, and Marayi nodded her head a little as the image changed. It showed the interior of the nebula, where a very shoddy-looking series of modules had been thrown together. They all looked like they were built of scrap metal, and Iyoi realized that they *were*. The antimatter bombs they’d detonated after the hit and run attack had all but annihilated their huge base, and what was left was the shrapnel and debris that they’d used to build these rough-looking modules to serve as their new base. Iyoi frowned a bit when she recognized a few letters of Faey script; they must have found pieces of one of the destroyed KMS cruisers that attacked the base and salvaged the armor for use in this new base, since the armored carapace of the ship was probably the only thing that survived. Few of the pieces of that scrap metal were much larger than her own fighter, which demonstrated the incredible power of those bombs. Another indicator was that the density of the gases and dust particles around where they had their new com-con was significantly less than elsewhere that deep in the nebula. That was also because of the bombs. The area had been blown out by the bombs, and the

gas and dust was very slowly refilling the vacuum created by the blast wave of the bombs. The gravity well of the nebula wasn't very strong, so it would take months for the gas and dust to fully equalize. The result was that visibility around the com-con was much better than anywhere else that deep in the nebula, giving them nearly 3,000 kathra of visibility. That meant that they were going to see the CCM coming when they finally made their move and have time to react before they got in range with their strongest weapons.

They had been smart to build their makeshift com-con in that void.

"As you can see, they have visibility from their base, so you're going to be coming in under fire," Admiral Furystorm called. "To prevent the bugs from immediately entering suicide mode and trying to take as many of us with them as possible, we're leaving the attack on the com-con to fighters who will damage and disable it, but not *destroy* it, until we have their fleet completely contained and in a position where we can prevent suicide ramming attacks. The main attack points on this floating junk heap are here, here, and here," he pointed, as dots blinked. "This is their main communications array. These other two points are the locations of their primary power plants. Swing in, hit those points, then pull back and protect the line vessels from enemy fighter action. This thing is probably as rickety as it looks, so it most likely won't withstand heavy fire. They literally built it of the small scraps left behind when the KMS detonated antimatter bombs. But the main opposition you'll be facing is their fleet. They have 917 warships in the nebula, consisting primarily of destroyers and cruisers, and expect them to fight to the death. They have nowhere else to go, and they won't surrender. So, remember the focus of this mission, which is the complete destruction of their fleet to the last ship. We keep shooting until there's nothing left to shoot at, ladies and gentlemen."

"We can do that, Admiral. We're fairly good at it," Berya said mildly, which produced a few chuckles.

"We'll be maintaining a military presence in the nebula to sweep up the debris, but your squadrons won't be part of this occupation. Any questions?" When silence greeted him, he nodded. "Alright then, you are dismissed. Conduct final prep of your ships and get ready to deploy. We jump in 48 minutes."

“You heard the Admiral, girls,” Berya said, standing up. “Ship prep better be complete in 28 minutes!”

They broke up and headed for their fighters. Iyoi had to get on the lateral tram over to the other hangar bay, where her fighter was stationed, riding along with Wings three and four of her squadron and half of the War Talons. Her wizzo Tikaiya almost bounced beside her, while her wingwoman Lieutenant Alae stood easily with her wizzo. Alae was a veteran pilot new to Ghost Squadron, transferred in from the 202<sup>nd</sup> and with 4 years of experience in a fighter. She was one of the replacements, and if she showed any annoyance at being assigned to the wing of a greenhorn, she didn’t show it. She knew that Iyoi had all but grown up in the cockpit of a skimmer, and that skimmer was flying in one of the most notoriously dangerous nebulas in the Imperium, the nebula known as the Wastelands, which bordered Alliance territory. This was something of Iyoi’s area of expertise.

She was a predominantly quiet, focused woman not given to smalltalk, but she did give Iyoi a curious look. “I meant to ask,” she said. “How did you get Lieutenant’s bars right out of flight school?” That *was* a bit unusual. Most pilots right out of flight school were either Ensigns, or rarely Lieutenant JG’s.

Iyoi laughed. “That’s a long story,” she grinned. “The very short and boring summation is that I was in the KMS before going to flight school, so I started flight training academy as a JG and had enough time in service to get my Lieutenant’s bars right after graduation.”

“Doing what?”

“I was a cook.”

Alae gave her a startled look. “A *cook*?”

“I never finished primary school, and that’s a requirement for about any job in the KMS except a cook,” she said, a bit sheepishly. “Things are a bit more lax out in the Wastelands,” she added when Alae and her wizzo both gawked at her in disbelief. Imperial law *required* every citizen to finish primary school. “And call it a mis-spent youth flying unauthorized cargo through the Wastelands,” she grinned.

“You were a *smuggler*?” Alae asked in shock.



“We called ourselves independent cargo haulers,” she replied lightly. “And there wasn’t much law out there to make me go to school after I finished middle school. I had to eat, and I didn’t have many choices. Anyway, a cook was the only job I could qualify for in the KMS while I got my primary certificate, and as soon as I had that, I was placed in flight school. My time in service applied once I completed OTS and became an officer, and it gave me an extra step in rank when I graduated.”

“I’m on the wing of a smuggler,” Alae said with a sigh, then she laughed. “But that just means you’ll know what to do in that nebula.”

“Exactly,” Tikaiya spoke up. “You haven’t seen Iyoi fly in the nebula yet. She’s amazing!”

“So you’re a merit officer,” Alae’s wizzo noted. *Merit officers* were those given a commission when they didn’t have the educational requirements for a commission, who gained that commission based on an exceptional talent or ability that was a requirement in a field where being an officer was mandatory...such as a fighter pilot. Since Iyoi had so much flight experience, and they’d been so desperate for fighter pilots, they’d waived her advanced educational requirements and sent her to OTS, and once she graduated from OTS, she entered flight training. And her time in service from her days as an enlisted woman carried over and allowed her to earn a promotion to JG immediately after completing OTS, then she earned a promotion to Lieutenant after graduating flight school based on her seniority, which was as high as she could go without having some time in rank. Ensign and JG ranks didn’t have a minimum requirement of time in rank to be eligible for promotion when the officer was in certain PTS fields such as fighter pilot, only an overall time in service, which Iyoi had. She’d have to serve a minimum of two years as a Lieutenant before she was eligible for promotion to Lieutenant Commander. Iyoi could get promotions and was an officer in every respect, but she couldn’t transfer out of her job as a pilot, and she couldn’t become a squadron commander unless she completed all the other requirements for being an officer.

“If being a pilot is what she excels at, *how* she earned her rank is irrelevant,” one of the Shurai stated easily. “Put her in a fighter and let her do what she was meant to do.”

“Exactly,” Tikaiya smiled at the tall Shurai. “How do they do it in the Alliance?”

“A commission is not needed to be a fighter pilot, but one is required to command,” he replied easily. “Isn’t that right, Sergeant?”

“Yes it is, Lieutenant,” another Shurai replied.

“The fighter pilot program is based entirely on skill. You have to be a pilot before you can apply, and if you score high enough in the simulations, you are eligible for fighter service. All pilots earn a promotion to the rank of Technical Sergeant on completion of flight academy, to reflect their new high-skill profession. While in the fighter service, an NCO can complete the requirements to go to officer’s training if they wish to enter command. But few of us ever leave the fighter service. We are fighter pilots, born and bred,” he said proudly, to which all of the Shurai nodded. “Those of us with commissions command within the fighter service.”

“That’s a good system,” Alae nodded. “And we do something similar, as she proves,” she added, pointing at Iyoi.

The tram stopped, and so did the conversation. The pilots and wizzos boiled out and hurried over to their fighters. Iyoi’s fighter was new, since her last one had been destroyed in the battle of Karis, and she couldn’t complain. It had several upgrades compared to her last fighter, part of the eternal tweaking and improvements they made to the fighters, and her crew was busy around the fighter getting the last inspections done. *Get a move on, ladies*, Iyoi barked mentally as she put on her helmet. *We have to be saddled up and ready to deploy in 23 minutes!* She rose up into the open doors in the belly of the fighter and settled into the pilot’s box, locking her armor in as she felt gravity vanish within the box, then she felt the armor connect to the fighter through both remote and hardlines, two datafibers jacking into the back of her helmet through the gel backing into which her armor locked. Her armor negotiated with the fighter’s computer, then she was online. The displays lit up before her eyes, projected both onto the visor of her helmet and onto the ceiling above her head, showing the fighter running an initial diagnostic as the crew did the last-minute checks and tweaks to the systems. Tikaiya settled into the cockpit and closed it as she brought the engines online, putting on her helmet and jacking in her hardlines. *Drone systems coming online now*, she sent privately, since there

was thick chatter in the air of the hangar bay. *I've got four green lights. ECD systems green. Auxiliary weapon control systems green.*

*Be ready to ride jockey on the guns, Ti, Iyoi called. If we run into thick chop while engaged, you do the shooting while I concentrate on the flying.*

*No sweat, boss, I can shoot straight,* she replied lightly.

*Alae, make sure your engines are calibrated for gravity flux,* Iyoi sent openly. *We're gonna run into a fuckton of gravity ripples in the nebula. And make sure you suck the dick of whoever invented translation engines when we get out there,* she added with an amused tilt to her thoughts. *Flying standard grav engines in a nebula like this one is no walk in Trelle's garden.*

*I've read the specs, Iyoi,* Alae replied calmly. *I'll just sync to your fighter so I can see your engine settings.*

*Good plan,* she answered, *cause we're gonna be flying like a crazed chabi out there. We've got the most ground to cover between pods, and we have to cross three different wake currents and a gas vortex to do it. You're about to get a crash course on deep nebula navigation.*

*You lead, I'll follow.*

*"Thirty-five minutes to jump. Thirty-five minutes to jump,"* a voice called over STG, and no doubt over the ship's intercom.

*How's it looking out there, Merigwen?* Iyoi sent to her crew chief.

*Annealing the last maintenance doors now,* she replied. *Everything's purring like a vulpar. Do try not to blow this one up, Lieutenant,* she added lightly. *I just got this handsome fellow just the way I like it.*

*Yeah, yeah, lick me deep and hard, Merigwen,* she replied tartly, which made Tikaiya laugh up in the cockpit. *I'm getting green lights on all maintenance doors,* she added after a moment, as her crew closed and annealed the last door to form a contiguous carapace of compressed Neutronium, which gave the armor that much more strength. *Let's finish the checklist, Ti, then it's just waiting for the go signal.*

Four minutes later, they were ready, but they were still some 20 minutes from jumping. But that was normal for a fighter squadron that was to deploy as soon as a jump was finished, they had to be in their fighters and

ready to launch as soon as they returned to normal space, and this mission made it even more critical. The bugs were going to see them jump in, and they had to be moving the *instant* they could safely launch, so they could get that critical first jump before the bugs responded. Every second would matter, because they had to be deep in the nebula before the bugs could reach them, where the nebula would protect them much more than their enemies. Sensors were heavily restricted in the nebula, and they'd only see the fighters through their external sensor pods seconds before they reached them and took them out, due to how fast a fighter could move in there compared to a line ship. Iyoi spent the time waiting in meditative silence, preparing herself for the mission by going over her flight path in minute detail, getting last-minute looks at the obstacles the nebula itself would pose to them. Iyoi and Alae had the toughest flight path of them all because of Iyoi's experience flying deep nebulas, giving the most difficult pods to reach to her to take out.

And she was just fine with that.

*"Ten minutes to jump. All sections report jump readiness to comm three,"* the comm officer called.

*"Ghost Squadron, sound off readiness,"* came a different voice, coming in over command STG; that order came straight from the bridge. Iyoi listened as each member of her squadron answered in their order. Iyoi was fighter 3 of Wing 4, so she was nearly at the bottom of the list, calling out "Ghost 33, standing by," when it was her turn, reporting her readiness directly to the bridge. The same officer then had the War Talons sound off as Iyoi made a few last-minute tweaks to her engine output, so they'd be able to more quickly transition from deep space to nebula based on last-minute long-range sensor readings fed directly to her ship from the sensor arrays. She saw Alae mirror her engine adjustments on the sync holo, the telemetry going back and forth between their two fighters. *Be ready for some chop when we cross into the nebula,* Iyoi sent openly. *It's gonna be a little rougher than the last time we did this, we're coming in at a border with more gas density. And be ready for some lateral drift, there's a tertiary vortex current running just 600 shakra inside the border. It's gonna drag us.*

*Got it,* Berya answered. *All you bitches listen to Iyoi, she's the nebula jockey here. And Iyoi, mirror over STG so the Shurai can listen in.*

*No need, Commander, I have talent,* one of the Shurai replied, their commanding officer. The captain, whatever his name was. Iyoi wasn't too good with names. *I'm relaying that to the squadron in real time.*

*Good deal,* she answered. *Anything else, Iyoi?*

*Umm, yeah. Everyone moving through arc sector 17-113, see that gravity anomaly? That's a rip tunnel forming, and you won't see it on anything but a passive mass variance sensor. Don't get inside it, it looks like it's fairly nasty. It'll suck your fighter in and drag you all the way to the terminus.*

*Understood,* Raiki called.

*You have good eyes, Lieutenant,* the talented Shurai called.

*I grew up in a nebula, Captain, it's experience,* she replied easily.

*"Jump in five minutes. Five minutes,"* the call came over command STG. *"All personnel in your jump restraints. All personnel in your jump restraints."*

Iyoi took in a deep breath, then exhaled as she took hold of the posts by her hands and prepared herself for the jump. She still didn't like jumping, but after so many jumps over the last couple of months, she was starting to at least build up a resistance to it. She let her mind drift a little bit as she stared at the screens, watching as Tikaiya performed tests on the spinner cameras and sensors without deploying them, though they wouldn't be deployed in the nebula unless they *had* to. The spinners had trouble keeping up with a fighter in the nebula due to the sensor disruption. Iyoi tested her own cameras by sweeping them around the hangar and zooming in and out, focusing on several fighter crew women locking in to jump restraints along the walls, pulling the bars down over their chests and taking hold of the handles atop them.

*"Jump in thirty seconds. Secure for jump!"*

That thirty seconds barely lasted two, at least to her. She heard the countdown, but before she paid much notice to it, all of reality suddenly went crazy. She closed her eyes tightly and gritted her teeth as an icy cold sensation washed over her upper chest, one of the many sensory ghosts that someone could feel in hyperspace, and then there was a bright light in her

eyes that made her flinch. But it vanished as quickly as it hit her, and since it was just a sensory hallucination, there were no after-images or spots in her eyes. She gritted her teeth and gutted it out for what seemed forever, then everything just *snapped* as they returned back into normal space.

She shook her head a little bit, then immediately picked her fighter up off the deck. They'd been told to launch the instant they were back in normal space, and she didn't feel groggy or disoriented, so she turned her nose towards the outer doors even as they began to open. She was the first fighter out of the bay, with Alae right behind her and four Alliance Warhawk fighters behind them. *Stay off STG, the bugs can eavesdrop,* Berya called. *Radio silence from here out. Once we get out of sending range of each other, we're on our own. Everyone knows their job, so let's get it done,* she added as the fighters from the port landing bay appeared on the far side of the battleship when they passed by the bow, leaving the *Dreamer* behind. It immediately began to turn as soon as the last fighter cleared the bow, where it would jump out from the nebula and into a pocket of sensor blanket set up by the Kimdori's SCM division. The fighters began to scatter as each element got onto their flight plan, some of them going after sensor pods outside the nebula, some heading straight for the nebula to attack sensor pods within. Iyoi's pods were in a gentle arc that went right into the heart of the nebula, including four pods only 15,000 kathra and on the far side of the enemy com-con. They would have to circle around the majority of the enemy's forces to get at those sensor pods, and since Iyoi was the nebula jockey, that dangerous task had been assigned to her.

Fine with her.

The fighter shuddered as they entered the nebula, passing into the edges of its unstable gravity field and encountering the gas and dust within. Heat readings started to rise rapidly as the external gas and dust started friction heating the armored carapace of the fighter. *Two minutes to first target,* Alae called. *Keep your head on a swivel up there, Erara. Sensors don't work well in here. You'll see them before your sensors will pick them up.*

*Keep an eye on your passive mass variance sensors, they'll give you the clearest view,* Iyoi called. *Deionizers on, Ti, we'll run into a high-density band once we pass into the current. That'll spike the ionization on the hull.*

*Got it. Deionizers on,* she replied.

The fighter shivered and rocked and shuddered as they passed through the lateral current running parallel to the edge of the nebula, which caused their fighters to drift. The four Warhawks with them turned and headed for their own targets as Iyoi drifted with the current, allowing the current to put them on her planned flight path. The nebula could work *for* them if they let it. She saw on the tactical map that several sensor pods were already off the map, destroyed by the other fighters, all of them outside the nebula. That was where the fleet was going to jump in, so the fighters were clearing a space for them so the bugs wouldn't know how many ships were coming.

She almost wished she could see the looks on their faces when they saw what was coming.

*Forty seconds to target*, Iyoi called as the sensor pod flickered on the edge of her passive mass density sensor, a nifty little gadget that read the effect mass had on space, a form of detection that was *extremely* hard to counter. And in the nebula, seeing something with high mass moving fast would mean resistance. *I'm reading some smaller mass variances around the pod's location.*

*Drones or fighters*, Alae reasoned. *Weapons hot, Erara. You take the guns so I can focus on navigation.*

*Don't bother, we got this. Just follow me*, Iyoi called as she panned out a bit and read the mass variance map, seeing a little something that made her smile. She veered to port and ascended, then enabled her Wasp defensive missiles. She rose up into an area where the reddish tint of the nebula was slightly darker, then to Alae's surprise, she pulled up and became stationary.

*Iyoi, what—* Alae was about to protest, then the rip tunnel formed with an incandescent bolt of lightning that lashed out into the distance, originating just in front of their fighters. Both their fighters were sucked into the sudden vortex caused by two major ionic imbalances in the nebula equalizing, which also pulled the gas and dust along with them since the flowing ions had mass and pulled other mass along with them. Rip tunnels formed quickly and could be very violent, then dissipated nearly as quickly as they formed, leaving behind a residual wake current that could flow for days before it finally lost its inertia and vanished. Iyoi's Wolf shuddered and shook in the rip tunnel as they were sucked towards the pocket of ionized gas that had attracted this one, almost like riding a lightning bolt.

Iyoi kept the sensor pod locked on, and as they passed by it at a speed that would have cooked the ship if they'd been outside the rip tunnel, she launched her missiles. They punched through the boundary of the rip tunnel with all that velocity, their outer hulls turning white-hot almost instantly, but the dozens of small missiles managed to slam into the cylindrical sensor pod and blow it to pieces. The two fighters screamed by within the rip tunnel, leaving behind the destroyed pod and 10 automated drones that flew in crazy circles around the debris of the pod that remained.

*Slick*, Alae noted, her thought impressed.

*And this is a small rip tunnel*, Iyoi replied lightly. *I wouldn't have done this if this was a big one, not even a Wolf could handle that. Start braking, we're almost out, and we'll get cooked if we're going this fast outside the tunnel.* Iyoi engaged the engines and had them push back against the current, making the ship shudder considerably as it decelerated in the tunnel and suddenly had all the resistance from the flowing gas and dust battering the hull, ionizing and heating it up.

*I'm starting to appreciate being put on her wing*, Alae, Erara noted.

*I'm learning something, that's for damn sure*, Alae chuckled mentally in reply. *We're 106 seconds to next target. Get the drones warmed up*, Erara, *they have their own drones defending the pods.*

Iyoi kept one eye on the mass variance map and the other on her cameras as she navigated them around a high-density pocket of gas, which would have required them to slow down had they passed through it, and she saw what she expected. Ten consistent mass variances appeared on her scope splitting away from the sensor pod, hidden by the pod's mass, and they accelerated towards them. *We got ten drones inbound*, she warned the others. *Their scanners aren't going to be all that reliable in here, so let's take it to 'em.*

*Agreed*, Alae responded. *Erara, you're on the guns. Let's save the drones for when we need them.*

*Aye-aye, boss*, she answered.

*You take the guns too, Ti, we're gonna be flying through a layer border*, Iyoi called.



The two fighters barreled straight at the ten slapdash Consortium drones, but just as they came into visual range, the two sleek Wolf fighters veered off to port and rotated, flying sideways. The ten drones moved to turn towards them, but the pulse cannons and the external rail cannon pods mounted under the wings were already firing, taking advantage of the fact that the nebula's highly ionized interior made the targeting systems on the drones take far more time than usual to acquire targets. But the fighters were firing by visual aim, Tikaiya up in the cockpit lining up the drones with her crosshairs and taking her shots. She was using the double-shot technique, firing the rail cannon on target and firing a pulse burst into the target's path, so if the rail slug missed the pulse blasts were coming in right behind it. That required walking the weapons' firing arc across the path of the target, since the rail cannons didn't require leading the target where the pulse cannons did. Alae's fighter was taking a less precise approach, as Erara fired her weapons on full auto, sending a hail of fire in the direction of the drones. In this situation, that was *exactly* what she was supposed to do. In this combat scenario, where the drones had sensors and targeting computers that were being affected by the nebula, the drones would be slow to react to the incoming fire and thus easier to hit. They couldn't easily "see" those shots coming, so the evasion subroutines in their programming would be slow to respond as they wouldn't know which direction to go to avoid shots until the shots were all but right on top of them. The fighter shook roughly when they crossed into a more dense layer of nebula gas, a layer border, where rotational gas currents created a more sharp and distinct boundary between two areas with different densities. Iyoi and Alae slithered their ships through a spatter of Torsion blasts fired from the remaining drones as they finally acquired them, but drone after drone bloomed into a fireball as their wizzos systematically shot them down as they passed by, each drone blindly turning right into their lines of fire as they slid by.

Alae's wizzo took out the pod, the module blowing apart as the fighters streaked by. *Start watching for manned ships, Ti, they have to know the drones won't do much out here. They're only here to try to slow us down so they can scramble destroyers and fighters.*

*I've already got a pretty strong mass variance on the edge of my scope, moving towards pod 1382. That's not one of ours.*

*They're reacting almost right on schedule, Alae mused. 289 seconds to next target.*

*Button up, Alae, we're going to be riding a wake current to the next pod*

*Something tells me the rest of them won't be quite this easy.*

*That's why we drew this route, girl. Leave the tough stuff to the best pilots,* Iyoi called, a tad smugly.

Fluttering her thick pink eyelashes, Palla felt the last of the sensory ghosts evaporate as the *Aegis* came out of hyperspace. Flashes of whitish-blue light heralded the arrival of other ships, dropping out of hyperspace just after them and still in formation, and the reddish mass of the nebula dominated the forward viewscreen. The tactical grid map was up to the left, and fleet allocation graphics were displayed to the right. Palla watched as icon after icon on that display shifted from red to green, as their telemetry reported their arrival and operational status back to the *Aegis*, which was carried the flag in this task force.

Naturally.

Queen's Admiral Kre'Vak of the Urumi Navy stood up from his chair after releasing his jump restraints, as did High Admiral Vaark of the Skaa Republic, members of the CCM command staff and on site to oversee the operation. The two large reptilian creatures took up a lot of space behind Palla's chair, and she could almost feel them looming over her back. But they weren't the only members of the command staff on the bridge. Some 14 different command-level admirals and generals were on the bridge behind Palla's chair, members of the command staff and observers from the new member nations of the Confederation there to observe a CCM operation. "All sensor pods in our path 2,700 kathra into the nebula are cleared. We're right on schedule."

"Begin phase one," Palla nodded to her, scratching at her deep blue cheek, marking her as a native of Jerama.

"All fighters and drones launch. Begin phase one, repeat, begin phase one," one of the comm officers to her right called, a bank of ten Faey, a lone Shio, and a lone Beryan. The Shio was one of Haema's comm officers on

temporary assignment from the *Iyaneri*, which was still in drydock being repaired. The Beryan was fresh out of OTS, and Palla had chosen her for her crew because she had excellent scores, and she was also talented. That was almost a requirement for the comm PTS on a ship the size of the *Aegis*.

Behind them, a truly massive fleet of some 2,300 Confederate Combined Military warships began to move. The bulk of the fleet were Verutan battle cruisers and Grimja warships, with ships from every other Navy in the Confederation intermixed with them. And leading them all was the *Aegis*, continuing the pattern within the CCM to place the flag of any task force on the largest KMS ship in the formation. They outnumbered the enemy fleet by over two to one and would be attacking by surprise if the fighters in the nebula did their jobs, but this wasn't about some glorious, honorable battle. This was about destroying the enemy to the last ship, to the last *bug*. That was the only way to absolutely ensure that the threat they posed to the PR sector was neutralized.

That was a fact that sat very well with one of the observing officers from one of the newer members of the Confederation, Quarter-Admiral Drark of the Jun Republic Navy. He stood up beside Frazzil and crossed his long, gangly arms, his dark eyes taking in the bridge. He was here to observe how the CCM conducted a military operation, and it would be one of his jobs to integrate his sailors into CCM operations. The Jun had made it clear that he approved mightily of their plan to utterly eradicate the bugs in the nebula, but that was how the Jun did things when it came to war.

A face flashed onto a holo to the right of the tactical asset graph, the handsome face of Sevi Aranne, captain of the tactical battleship *Arabax*. She was in the act of sitting down with her helmet in her hands when the holo winked on. "Captain Palla," she said as she put on her helmet.

"Deploy your squadron, Captain," Palla told her.

"We'll clear a path all the way to the enemy com-con for you, Captain," she grinned through her faceplate. "Squadron D, increase to flank! Let's go clear out the blockers and get the striker to the goal box!"

A formation of 31 CCM ships, mostly Faey and Skaa vessels led by the three KMS tactical battleships, the *Arabax*, the *Shikoi*, and the *Prophet*, surged ahead of the large fleet and plunged into the reddish gloom of the

nebula. Their task was to sweep any resistance out of the path of the fleet and destroy any missed sensor pods to hide the true size and composition of the fleet from the enemy, and since it was a high-priority mission, it was decided that no Verutan or Grimja would be part of that squadron. They hadn't *entirely* adapted to CCM procedures quite yet. It would be a mission of pure offense, and as such, it was perfect for a tactical battleship and a captain like Sevi Aranne. That woman had been *born* to sit in the chair of a tactical battleship.

"I find it curious that you use such a small squadron for this operation," Drark noted to the others.

"They are uniquely suited for the task," Frazzil replied. "Those ship classes can move much faster in the nebula than Consortium ships, the small size of the squadron will make them harder to detect by the enemy's long-range sensors within the nebula, and they have *three* KMS tactical battleships in the formation. That is all they need."

"Are these KMS ships that formidable?"

"Yes," every member of the command staff said in unison, which made Palla smile lightly where they couldn't see.

"There's a reason we have our flag on this ship instead of the larger command ships in the CCM, Admiral," Frazzil added. "The KMS serves the CCM by being providing the central organization and a strong platform to conduct operations. The neutrality of the Karinnes in political affairs allows all ships in the CCM to accept the Karinne ship as the flag of the task force, and besides, you have never been on a KMS vessel in combat," he said with growing eagerness. "The Karinnes have outfitted these ships with their most advanced technology, Quarter-Admiral, and these ships are *devastating* in combat operations. They have overwhelming firepower, but they are also some of the most rugged and durable ships in the CCM, capable of withstanding battle damage that would put other ships out of action. Those traits make the KMS command-class ships the natural choice to carry the flag in any task force. Those three ships leading Squadron D makes the squadron more than a match for an enemy formation four times their size, for the tactical battleships are probably the most effective combat vessels the KMS possesses. They are lovingly called *bulldogs* by the KMS, and there has never been a nickname more appropriate," he chuckled.

“What is this *bulldog* creature?” Admiral Oriatari of the Prakarikai asked, looking up at the Skaa that was more than three times his height.

“A Terran canoid animal known for its strength and tenacity, Admiral,” Palla answered. “The nickname does suit the ships perfectly.”

“Squadron D will do exactly what they were tasked to do,” Kre’Vak nodded. “They will sweep all resistance out of our path, destroy all scouting Consortium destroyers, and allow us to reach our objective without the enemy knowing how many ships we have.”

“Squadron D is at distance, Captain,” her tactical officer called.

“Begin phase two,” Palla called loudly. “Ahead at one quarter, navigator.”

“One quarter, aye sir,” her helm officer nodded, taking on a look of concentration as the *Aegis* began to move.

“Begin GRAF cannon ignition sequence,” she called. A new holo winked on to display the GRAF systems activating.

“Aye sir, begin GRAF cannon ignition sequence!” her tactical officer barked.

“GRAF singularity plants coming online.”

“Power distribution compensators activating.”

“Engine compensators online.”

“Recoil absorption systems online.”

“GRAF cannon ignition sequence initiated, Captain. T minus six minutes until primary couplers are engaged,” called her engineer, as a series of bars on the GRAF power graph began to rise on the holo.

“Ah, the GRAF cannon, I hoped to see this weapon in use,” Admiral Kenjett of the Ogravians noted. “A simple concept developed to quite impressive levels.”

“I have never had the honor of seeing it fired from the bridge,” Frazzil said. “This should be quite memorable.”

“I would remind my esteemed guests not to wander too far from your jump restraints,” Palla said, glancing back at them. “We have to use them

when we fire the GRAF cannon at any level stronger than 37%.”

“We are crossing into the nebula now, Captain,” her navigator relayed, even as there was a tiny ripple of movement through the ship as it encountered the resistance of the gas and dust at the edge of the nebula. The temperature bar on one of her tactical holograms began to rise steadily as they moved beyond the border.

“Steady to target, Lieutenant,” she replied as she crossed her legs demurely.

“Hull temperature at one thousand shuki and rising,” her engineer called.

“Keep us under the yellow line,” she answered. “Where are the fighters?”

“Passing us now, Captain,” the navigator said, pointing to a side holo showing a camera view of the port of the ship. Several squadrons of Wolves, Raptors, *Krissha*, and Warhawk fighters were sliding by them in the reddish gloom, and then overtook them. The smaller ships could move faster through the nebula, and they exploited that fact to vanish into the haze before them to act as the initial point of contact for anything that might manage to slip by Sevi’s squadron. “Enemy sensor pod status?”

“On schedule, Captain,” her tactical officer replied. “All sensor pods 35,000 kathra into the nebula are destroyed, and the decoy paths are being cleared on schedule. Telemetry off the fighters indicates they are running into light resistance from drones stationed at the pods for defense and skirmish destroyers trying to anticipate their movements and meet them. No fighters are reported destroyed at this time.”

“That’s why we sent the best fighter pilots we have in first,” Frazzil said with an approving nod. “They’ll get the job done.”

“Estimated time to target, T minus 23 minutes,” her secondary navigator declared.

“Squadron D reports contact with an enemy skirmish force,” one of her comm officers called. “They’re sending out scout destroyers with the pods destroyed. They know we’re coming, sir.”

“Of course they do, they just don’t know how many ships we have,” she said easily. “And that’s what this little game is all about, Ensign.”

Several moments later, they passed the debris of Sevi’s initial contact with the enemy. Scans were reliable from that close, and her sensors were able to puzzle out that 3 enemy ships had been destroyed, two of them Consortium and one of them Imxi. Smoking, burning debris drifted along with eerily dissected pieces of ships, victims of KMS particle beams that had sliced them apart, and the cameras showed dozens of bodies floating in the reddish void, most of them looking uninjured. Explosive decompression had dragged them into the nebula, where they died of either asphyxiation or exposure to the negative pressure of the nebula compared to their environmental norm. The bugs’ exoskeletons made them surprisingly resistant to pressure injury, where the Imxi dead hadn’t been quite that lucky. Many of them showed the tell-tale signs of death by rapid depressurization...not a pleasant way to die. “I’m getting updated sensor telemetry from our advance fighters, Captain. It’s showing several squadrons of enemy ships converging on the enemy’s com-con.”

“They know we’re here to finish them,” Kre’Vak mused. “They’re not risking their forces to skirmishes away from their base, and they know where we’re going. They’re pulling everything in to defend the com-con.”

“Fighter status?”

“They’ve cleared the primary lane and all four decoy lanes to the com-con and are about to start clearing the pods immediately around the station,” she answered.

“Time to target?”

“Eighteen minutes even.”

“GRAF cannon ignition sequence complete, Captain,” her engineer called. “All systems are green across the board. We can begin the firing sequence on your command.”

“Stage the cannon’s firing sequence,” she called. “But don’t begin the charging sequence.”

“Aye sir, GRAF firing protocols engaged,” she called, looking at a series of holos over her station. “Outer doors are unlocked and ready to be

opened.”

“Order the fleet to begin spreading out behind us,” Frazzil barked to the comm station. “Let’s encircle our prey and prepare for the kill.”

“Aye, Admiral,” one of the Faey replied.

Screaming by so close that her wing almost scraped the hull, Iyoi lanced her fighter right into the path of the Consortium destroyer and turned hard. The move seemed suicidal, at least until the four enemy drones pursuing them crashed into the hull of the enemy destroyer, unable to match the nimble Wolf fighter’s turning ability. That close, the destroyer’s weapons couldn’t lock onto them, or even track them, which made the area within 1,500 shakra of the enemy ship a safe zone as long as they didn’t pass directly in front of one of its gun ports. Alae was right on her wing as she dove under the Consortium ship’s bow even as it tried to turn, but it was too late. The sensor pod came into view behind the spiky port wing of the large ship, and the instant they had line of sight on it, Tikaiya opened up with her rail cannons. White-hot streaks lashed out as the slugs superheated in the denser gas and then slammed into the pod, making it shudder and jerk backwards from the multiple impacts.

*Imxi fighters launching from the destroyer!* Alae barked mentally.  
*Erara, nail ‘em!*

*You too, Ti, I’m taking the guns back,* Iyoi called, even as she fired a cloud of Wasp missiles dead astern as they slashed out away from the destroyer, still trying to turn to chase them, the dozens of tiny missiles visually aimed at the gunports along the port beam of the ship, which would have a firing line on them as they raced into the reddish gloom. If they could get into the shrouding gas before the gunners could get a visual on them, they’d be safe. But the Consortium weren’t about to give up easily . A dozen Imxi fighters launched from the destroyer and turned towards them, but one of them immediately turned and rammed the fighter beside it, the pilot dominated by one of the mindstrikers before they got out telepathic range and made to ram his own wingman. The two fighters exploded in a fiery burst, a halo of displaced dust and gas shuddering away from the detonation as the two Wolf fighters screamed away. Reddish streaks of



Torsion bolts chased them after the Wasp missiles exploded, which both fighters corkscrewed around skillfully even as they lost visual of the destroyer in the nebula. If they couldn't see the destroyer, then the destroyer couldn't see them. Several more Torsion bolts fired along their last trajectory, but as they'd already turned, the bolts sizzled harmlessly into the gloom well off their starboard stern.

*141 seconds to next target, Alae called. I'm reading major mass variance at the pod. I think they have four or five destroyers there.*

*I'm not surprised, it's the last one this close the com-con, Iyoi grunted. Those fighters are right on our ass, siting just outside mindstriker range. They're learning, she noted to Tikaiya.*

*They'll make their play when we come up against the defense around the last pod, her wizzo predicted. Try to blindside us when we're too busy to do anything about it.*

*We still have locks on them?* Alae asked.

*Yup.*

*Send the last of our Wasp missiles at them, they may not see them 'til it's too late.*

*Good call. Do it, Ti,* Iyoi ordered.

*Time to pincer them,* Alae added. *I'll go high to starboard, you go low to port. We circle and attack from both directions.*

*Iyoi studied the mass variance map as they approached the last pod. That won't work, the density is too light there, they'll see us coming. In fact, the density is so thin, we can go at 80% throttle without going over the red line. Without targeting computers, we'll be inside their firing range before they can get a lock on us. We go right between them so they can't fire on us without shooting at each other.*

*I'm reading a large number of smaller mass variances. There must be 40 fighters massed up around the pod, Iyoi, Tikaiya warned.*

*Fuck, that's too many,* Alae growled. *The only way in is to run a gauntlet with them sitting at the end of it shooting at us. It might be time to deploy the 3D toy, Iyoi.*

Iyoi studied the mass variances, then nodded to herself. *Yeah, that's too many. Load the 3D shells into the rail cannon, Ti.*

*Let's pull into a firing position, Alae called. Where are those Imxi fighters?*

*Hanging back. We destroyed nine of them with the last of our missiles.*

*They don't know that it's the last of our missiles, Alae noted with a sly tilt in her thought. How fast can they reach us when we get into firing position?*

*Ummmmmm, 21 seconds.*

*More than enough time, Iyoi called.*

*Remember not to fire until we're stationary, Ti, Iyoi called as the two fighters swung around and began to slow. And be ready to eject the cannon pod as soon as we use up the shells.*

*Got it. Soon as you're ready, Iyoi, she replied.*

*Fire as soon as you see my engines spike.*

*Copy that. Disengaging the safeties on the cannon pod.*

Iyoi worked out the best position, then turned towards it. To fire the shells, they had to be stationary, and in fact, the Wolf had to use its engines to hold the fighter in position when it fired the shells. The shells would be fired while the cannon's safeties were removed, allowing it to fire at such a power level that it would burn out the cannon, maybe even blow it up when the magnetic flux fed back into the system. The modification was done so the cannon could fire at a power level way above normal for a fighter-mounted cannon, and that was an absolute necessity given what they were about to fire. Those shells had to be as far as *fucking* possible away from the fighter when the protective magnetic bubbles decayed.

*Shunting all power into the cannon's firing system, Erara sent, her thought tense, nervous. They were about to fire an experimental weapon, and they'd been thoroughly briefed about the dangers that it posed...but that was why they were given those special shells, because of all the elements of the fighter squadrons, Iyoi and Alae were the ones that might have the greatest need for this.*

The two fighters pulled into position and carefully lined up their noses with the last sensor pod, some 34 kathra dead ahead, lost in the gloom of the nebula, with them sitting right at the border of the denser gas and dust that concealed them. Iyoi used her mass variance sensors to align the ship, and Tikaiya refined the aim of the pods as Iyoi anchored the ship at its point and then spiked the engine output in that point, which all but anchored them directly to the fabric of space so long as the engines could crank out the power. *Go!* Iyoi barked as the ship's power output spiked and the engines whined audibly, causing the entire fighter to shudder.

*Power...power...power,* Tikaiya sent openly as the power output for the rail cannon rose towards the required power level to fire the cannon. Four different red lights blinked on her console holo as the power system tried to handle feeding the rail cannon and meeting the demand of the engines.

*Fire!*

Iyoi flinched as an incandescent white blast blinded the forward camera, as they fired the experimental shell, even as the ship bucked violently against the recoil of firing the rail cannon at a power level very nearly equal to the power output of the heavy-mount rail cannons on the warships. The rail cannon all but melted in its pod almost instantly after firing, and since the cannon pods had been decoupled from the superstructure, the recoil tearing the pods free and having them rocket to stern and quickly get lost in the reddish gloom. They'd been warned that would happen, and it was a good thing it did. If those cannons had been part of the structure of the fighter, the recoil would have sent the fighter flying backwards, or even caused the cannon and everything behind it to tear free of its mountings and rip the fighter apart from the inside out. Not even the Wolf's engines had the power to hold against that much recoil; they'd barely had the power to hold against the *fraction* of the recoil fed back into the ship as it held the cannon steady for that split second as the shot fired, before the cannon tore free of its mount. That fraction of a millisecond where the fighter was subjected to the force of the recoil had been more than enough to put the engines on the red line, then the laws of physics took over and sent the fiery cannon pods screaming into the reddish gulf behind them, victims of the equal and opposite reaction induced by all the power they put into the shot.

The blazing light shuddered, then everything in front of the fighters went pitch black for a split second, an effect that they'd been warned about.

The ships shuddered violently as they absorbed the monstrous recoil of the rail cannons, but the shockwave at the *front* of that effect was fifty times more powerful, since the energy was released with all the velocity imparted into it by the rail cannon slugs that had encased the weapons.

Those slugs contained a bundle of compressed Teryon energy within a multidimensional spatial bubble inside a cannon slug and fired at a velocity that almost defied rational terms.

The effect was absolutely spectacular. The entire nebula in front of them just seemed to tear free of reality for that split second, blazing light turning to pitch black as even *light* was caught up in the explosion, then the blast wave caused by the Teryon explosion erupted from two points that were only about 70 shakra apart, and moved at about 40% of the speed of light. The two multidimensional blast waves merged into a single directional explosion, like a shaped charge that projected the vast majority of its force in one direction, creating an expanding cone of absolute devastation that rocketed away from the two fighters. But, it was moving so fast that when it reached the enemy formation, the shockwave passed directly between the two Consortium destroyers without the direct blast wave touching them, and that concentrated force slammed into the sensor pod dead center, tore through it, then hit the destroyer behind the pod in its lower ventral mass, just below and to the left of the neck attaching the bow section to the main superstructure, blasting a hole all the way through the destroyer that was so neatly precise that the individual ends of data fibers were visible between the bulkheads. The Teryon blast had done what Teryon blasts do, disintegrate three-dimensional matter, leaving behind a clear demarcation between the area of Teryon burst and what it hadn't touched. The pod, its defending fighters, and a cylindrical section of the destroyer were dissolved into free-ranging atoms with no ionic bonds in a fraction of a picosecond and then had that atomic mass carried away by the momentum of the Teryon burst, then the Teryon burst flashed deeper into the nebula, only to dissipate back into hyperspace within the span of 5 picoseconds. The burst effect left behind only the physical effects the blast had exerted on the three-dimensional universe before that energy escaped back into hyperspace. The five Consortium destroyers around the pod were initially pushed away from the line of force, but then they were dragged *towards* it as they were caught in the wake of all that displaced gas and dust, as the gas

and dust that was pushed away at the terminus of the blast wave some 2,600 katha into the nebula began to move, as the physical matter displaced by the Teryon burst was invested with tremendous momentum and continued to move after the Teryon burst dissipated. The effect right at the initial point of the blast wave was minimal, but the effect was *cone-shaped*, and that meant that the displacement effect of the blast wave at its terminus was some 470 shakra wide at the terminus and had displaced a massive volume of nebula matter. The sudden vacuum and motion induced by the blast wave was about to form a powerful rip current in the nebula, which would become a self-sustained current in the nebula due to the sheer volume of mass of gas and dust that would be moved by it, a current that might last for years before it finally lost its momentum

*Trelle's garland!* Tikaiya sent in awe as the four undamaged destroyers in front of them were pulled backwards by the growing rip current. A flash of light below and behind signaled the end of both rail cannons, the pods exploding from being overloaded to fire those shots.

Iyoi, however, had to laugh. *Demir's holy dick, now that was a fucking shot!* she declared impishly. *They made something a fighter can use that can blow up a line ship with one shot!*

*But we only get one shot, and now we'd better get the hell out of here,* Alae noted as she turned her fighter.

*True, there's gonna be a rip current coming right down our asses in about fifteen seconds,* Iyoi predicted as the two fighters began to turn. *How's the ship, Ti?*

*Power is at 30% due to the shot, which is all going to the engines. The singularity plant is recharging the primary power distribution network,* she answered. *Weapons, sensors, and most tertiary systems are offline. They're in a reset cycle due to power drain.*

*And that's the danger of using that little toy,* Alae noted. *They leave us sitting ducks once we fire the shot. But at least we still have engines.*

*We still have the location of those following fighters?*

*No, the MV scope is down, and they're outside of my telepathic range.*

*Then this'll be like dodging patrols in the Wastelands,* Iyoi grunted mentally as she turned her fighter almost straight down.

*But one where we can see them before they can see us,* Alae noted lightly as she turned to follow, and the two fighters headed for a pocket of higher density gas and dust that would hide them from visual. *Erara has nearly forty kathra of range with her talent.*

Iyoi could silently admit that that was pretty impressive...but she was still a newbie to the squadron, so she wouldn't *act* all that impressed. *Let's find the thickest soup and slip by as we wait for the MV scopes to recharge, then get to our patrol area while the fleet gets into position. If we dawdle out here too long, we won't have anything left to shoot at by the time we get there.*

The trap was nearly set.

Palla sat with her legs crossed demurely as she studied the tactical map of the area and saw that the two advance fighter squadrons and Sevi's squadron had done their jobs. The Consortium had stopped trying to send in scouting vessels into the surrounding nebula, and now the fighters and drones they were sending instead were being systematically destroyed by the advance elements of fighters that were prowling the perimeter of their clear area, hidden in the reddish mists and destroying anything that ventured into that shroud to conceal the number and locations of the Confederate fleet from the enemy. The individual squadrons of the task force were moving into their assigned positions, some of them sitting in wait as others circled to the far side of the nebula with CCM fighters prowling around them, destroying anything that left the clear area holding the enemy com-con and the vast majority of their fleet. There were 12 enemy destroyers not in the theater, but Palla knew where they were thanks to biogenic telemetry coming in from the Ghost Squadron, whom those destroyers were chasing. The bugs couldn't intercept *that*, and they'd decided to take advantage of it by adding sensor data and ship logs to broadcast telemetry to further inform the task force what was going on around the fighters. Thanks to that biogenic telemetry, what the fighters' sensors and cameras were seeing, Palla could see by accessing their telemetry feed. That telemetry told her that the Ghost Squadron had not lost

a fighter, but they'd engaged in several fights with defending drones, fighters, and destroyers, and it also told her that the Ghost Squadron's last element had destroyed their last assigned pod, and now all of them were pulling in to patrol the perimeter to keep the enemy from getting accurate intel on their ships. Two of the fighters had even used the experimental prototype weapons 3D had installed on 8 Wolf fighters, weapons they were told to only use as a means of last resort...but given those two fighters had had five enemy destroyers defending the last pod they had to destroy, Palla could see why they decided to use the weapon.

They had some great telemetry about that, too. Whatever it was that 3D had thought up this time...*wow*. That had been *impressive*. It had looked like some kind of Teryon-based weapon, but it was fired from a rail cannon. It had crippled an enemy destroyer and destroyed the sensor pod with that one attack, which was fired from well outside the fighter's usual range. But, it had also overloaded the cannon pod and nearly knocked out the power systems of the two fighters who used it, so the weapon wasn't without some risk when it was used, and also meant that it wasn't entirely perfected.

"Contact the Ghost Squadron using BG1 and tell them that all fighters begin phase two," she called to her comm. BG1 was a biogenic communication system that would allow the computer core of the *Aegis* to communicate with the biogenic crystals in the comm system of the fighters, bypassing gravband and providing them with a secure means of communication with massive range. The drawback of the system was that only a line ship was big enough to carry a transceiver array big enough to be used in such a manner. It allowed the line ship to communicate with the fighters but didn't allow the fighters to communicate with each other. They had to rely on STG, sending, or short-range ship-to-ship biogenic communion to communicate with each other. The power requirements and physical size of the comm antenna required for a biogenic crystal to transmit its modulated communion and thus give it the ability to be used in a manner similar to gravband made it prohibitive to place on a ship as small as a fighter. But, since the BG1 system emulated telepathy in some respects, only *one* side of the connection had to have the power to bridge the gap for *both* sides to communicate freely. The fighters could talk back to the BG1 comm despite not having a comm array themselves, they only required the ability to modulate their communion via a biogenic module in their comm

systems to put the communications in a format that the BG1 could understand.

The system itself wasn't innovative or new, but it *was* new in that the house had finally allowed the system to be installed on something not permanently based at Karis, due to the critical sensitivity of the device. Should it fall into enemy hands, they would have a way into the biogenic network back at Karis from virtually anywhere in the galaxy. Only the command ships and battleships had the BG1 system installed. Not even the tactical battleships carried it.

The comm officer relayed the order as the admirals and generals behind her remained quiet, watching and listening as the tactical map showed the fleet of 2,300 ships moving into their assigned positions around the void, hidden by the red mist and at an altitude that would allow every ship to fire on the com-con without risking being hit by friendly fire. They wouldn't be destroying the com-con immediately, since that would provoke the bugs into suicidal ramming attacks, but when the time came, they'd be in position to all but atomize that floating amalgamation of scrap armor pieces.

"Squadron B in position," her tactical officer relayed.

"We're right on schedule," Kre'Vak noted.

"Begin the charging phase for the GRAF cannon," Palla called. "Hold stage at 20% power."

"Aye sire, initiate charging sequence!"

"Particle beams and plasma torpedoes are on GRAF standby. GRAF primaries online, charging sequence engaged," the tactical officer declared. "Charging to 20%. T minus 23 seconds until we have 20%, Captain."

"Engine compensators?"

"Online, Captain," her navigator called.

"Recoil absorption system?"

"Engaged and online, Captain," her engineer answered.

The engineer counted it down, and when she reached zero, the power indication bars on the GRAF hologram turned yellow and began blinking.



“GRAF charged to 20% and holding at stage,” the tactical officer called.

“Squadron J in position, Captain.”

“That’s it. Broadcast the go signal to all fighters,” Palla barked, standing up in front of her chair. “Tactical, target the largest Consortium ship in their fleet! Prepare to fire the GRAF cannon!”

“Aye sir, initiating GRAF firing sequence!” the tactical officer barked.

“Send it down to all ships to begin the attack after the GRAF cannon fires,” Palla commanded.

“Prepare for GRAF recoil!” came a call over ship wide intercom. “This will be a 20% power shot! Prepare for GRAF recoil!”

“Do we need jump restraints, Captain?” Drark asked.

“No, but the recoil of the cannon will feed back into the ship despite our compensation systems. The ship will jolt considerably upon firing, so be ready for it, Admiral,” she answered. “GRAF status?”

“GRAF systems nominal, staged at 20% and ready to fire, Captain!”

“Target acquired, Captain! GRAF cannon is locked on and prepared to fire!”

“All weapons on GRAF standby! Open the outer doors! Fire upon confirmation of outer door sensors reporting open and locked for firing!”

“Aye sir! GRAF cannon engaged, T minus 16 seconds until firing.”

Palla hit ship wide intercom. “GRAF cannon about to fire! GRAF cannon about to fire! All hands, brace for recoil!”

The tactical officer counted it down over ship wide intercom, and everyone either locked their jump restraints or grabbed hold of something. Palla remained standing in front of her chair, reaching back and getting a grip on one of the armrests as she set her feet, watching the countdown timer on her right holo.

Outside the ship, the huge outer doors opened to reveal the recessed barrel of the cannon, a shimmering glow of resonant flux rippling at the tip of the barrel. Almost as soon as they fully opened and stopped moving, the cannon then unleashed its tightly controlled blast. A white-hot bar of pure

kinetic energy blasted from the cannon's muzzle, searing light into the reddish clouds of the nebula around them and puckering the gas formation in front of the ship. The ship's engines whined as it and the recoil absorption system mitigated the recoil of the blast, but not so much that those inside the ship failed to *feel* the cannon fire. Palla's body swayed forward as the entire ship shuddered and was pushed backwards a couple of shakra by the power of the blast, but her eyes were on the Kimdori spy probe's visual telemetry. She saw the intense energy blast from the GRAF cannon sizzle into the void holding the enemy fleet in the blink of an eye and then strike the largest surviving Consortium battleship almost dead center. AT 20%, the beam wasn't large enough to atomize the entire ship, but it was large enough to shatter the central mass of the ship, causing its spiky wings and bow section to spin crazily away from the GRAF blast when what they were connected to was shattered into dust-sized particles in a microsecond.

And that was the signal. In unison, 2,300 Confederate warships plunged out of the gloom and raced towards the enemy fleet, some of them already firing at the enemy Rail cannons and missiles lashed out from hundreds of ships in the encircling formation, firing down and into the enemy's massed fleet, which was arrayed in a defensive formation around the enemy com-con to protect it from attack. But the com-con wasn't the target of those initial strikes. Ship after ship in the enemy formation turned dark or had gouts of fire erupt from its hull as rail slugs pounded into them, and thousands of fighters screamed out from between the warships and hurtled towards the enemy. The *Aegis* advanced much more slowly, the GRAF doors remaining open as it recharged. The *Aegis* was as much the bait in this attack as it was a weapon, for the Consortium absolutely could not allow it to sit back and systematically pound their fleet and their station to pieces using its incredible firepower. The battle plan was designed around the idea that the enemy would try to charge down the *Aegis* and disable it to knock the GRAF cannon out of operation, and for that reason, the bulk of the CCM's firepower was directly in front of the command ship, promising that any attempt to reach the *Aegis* would take place under intense fire.

"Quite impressive!" the Ogravian declared from behind Palla.

“Set the GRAF cycle sequence to 5%!” Palla barked. “Tactical, fire at targets of your discretion! Threshold distance is 5,000 kathra!”

“Aye sir, GRAF cannon cycle sequence engaged, charging to 5%!”

“All weapon systems online, power distribution system set for GRAF cycle protocol!”

“Targeting duties to tactical, aye sir!” her tactical officer affirmed. “Threshold of 5,000 kathra!”

“What significance does that level hold?” Drark asked curiously.

“At 5%, the ship can utilize most of its other weapons,” Kre’Vak answered, “yet also fire the GRAF cannon with enough power to destroy any enemy vessel it hits.”

“The threshold distance is the minimum safe distance the GRAF cannon can be used in a combat theater,” Frazzil added. “If any enemy ship gets within the threshold distance, they will take the GRAF cannon offline and close the outer doors to protect the cannon and the ship. The main vulnerability of the GRAF cannon is that if it is damaged while in a firing cycle, its energy feeds back into the ship and can cause catastrophic damage. For that reason, they take extreme caution in using it in situations where enemy ships can close distance on the ship before the cannon can fire and expend its stored energy.”

Palla was both surprised that the command staff knew so much about the GRAF cannon, and a little annoyed that they were spreading that information around so freely. It *was* a proprietary Karinne weapon, and Palla thought they kept its operational parameters a bit more secret than that.

“GRAF cannon firing at 18 second intervals, brace for multiple recoils!” the tactical officer barked over ship wide intercom.

“Missile barrage coming in!”

“Deploy the pinpoint shockwave ECDs!” Palla barked. Those were another new toy from the minds of 3D. It was a series of external Torsion shockwave generators affixed to mobile platforms that would protect the *Aegis* by getting into the path of enemy missiles and then activate the shockwave generators to destroy them. The ship was far too big for a

shockwave generator that could protect the entire ship, so they'd come up with this system to at least provide partial protection against enemy missile attacks. The pinpoint ECDs would protect the important parts of the ship from missile attacks but allow missiles that would hit less important areas through.

Various visuals from cameras showed them the initial contact. The CCM had to close the distance on the enemy, and in those seconds, the Consortium had time to realign their formations and fire a blitz of missiles. Faey and KMS ships took the lead as they raced in, reddish sheaths surrounding them as their shockwave generators activated to absorb the attacks, providing at least some protection for the ships behind them. Fighters in front of the ships also helped mitigate the missile attacks by firing on the incoming missiles, but they too couldn't protect every ship. Dozens of ships were knocked out of their formations by repeated missile strikes, fires blazing on the hulls of the ships as they lost control. A Verutan cruiser sideswiped another cruiser when it veered hard to port, scraping its sister ship as it yawed, its stern drifting to the right and ascending as the two ships ground against each other, pieces of metal and other debris flying away from those points of contact. Some fighters blasted right through the Consortium ship formations as they reached them and dove at the enemy station, but the Consortium barely had time to send any fighters or drones after them when the CCM got in range of more than rail cannons. The ships pulled up suddenly about 1,000 shakra out of Torsion range and unleashed everything they had, each shot precisely placed to avoid the fighters that were screaming through the enemy formation on their way to the enemy com-con. A blitz of rail shots, missiles, plasma torpedoes, and drones lashed out from the ring of CCM ships, pounding the Consortium ships as they seemed to hesitate between engaging the warships or chasing the fighters that blew by them on their way to the enemy station. They made up their mind when another Consortium battleship was blasted into dust by an incandescent bolt of pure kinetic energy, the second victim of the GRAF cannon, and the Consortium surged forward to get intermixed into the CCM formations to protect themselves from the GRAF cannon.

Consortium ships were engaging CCM squadrons all around the enemy station while fighters screamed past the enemy ships and dove at the enemy station's slapdash hull. Missiles and Torsion fire filled the red-tinged sky as

the gun batteries on the station fired on the fighters. Small puffs of fire around the station marked the destruction of fighters, but so many of them got through the enemy fire that their response all but looked like they'd set the entire station on fire. They targeted its critical control nodes and every exposed weapon battery they could see, knocking out missile launchers, Torsion cannons, dark matter cannons, and even some ion and plasma weapons that they'd probably salvaged from Imxi ships. The fighters swarmed around the enemy station like a horde of angry locusts, nibbling away at its offensive capabilities shot by shot, fighter by fighter, then in one dazzlingly coordinated motion, they turned and raced away to attack the Consortium ships and their supporting Imxi fighters and drones from behind as other fighters squared off against those units from the front.

In less than ten minutes, it looked like organized anarchy. The disciplined formations on both sides broke down as the Consortium used CCM ships as shields to break line of sight with the *Aegis*, sending all their missiles towards the flagship to try to prevent it from firing its GRAF cannon, turning the cleared area around the enemy com-con into a complete scrum of turning and maneuvering ships. But Palla directed that dance of chaos with a practiced eye, directing the movements of elements in the squadrons to force the Consortium to sacrifice a tactical advantage to protect itself from a GRAF strike. Any time a cluster of Consortium ships got the upper hand on an element of the CCM line, Palla called in ship movements that exposed those ships to the line of sight of the *Aegis* and forced them to give up that advantage or face instant destruction. The pinpoint ECDs and defending fighters, drones, and Gladiators in emplacements on the hull shot down those missiles in large numbers, but the ship still took fire. Damage dots appeared all over the front sections of the hull on her ship status display, though none of them were anywhere near the GRAF doors, locations where missiles got through the defensive screen, and mostly areas where the defense *allowed* the missiles to impact. The missiles that would hit low-priority areas were ignored in favor of missiles targeting much more important areas of the ship, and particularly anywhere *near* the GRAF doors.

"Exactly as projected," Verutan Admiral Irikarr declared. She was a female Verutan with long, silky black hair and resplendent in her polished

blue armor, one of her long fangs broken at the tip to make her look a little rough and tumble. “The enemy is almost fatally predictable.”

“Only because they have very few options, Admiral,” Palla said absently. “This battle plan was drawn up to take away as many options as possible. They are cunning and dangerous opponents when not backed into a corner. Soon they’ll begin suicide attacks, and *that* is when they become the most dangerous. Half the reason we’re allowing them to fight from such close range is to prevent them from gaining too much momentum when they begin to try ramming our ships. It is for our own protection as much as their belief that they protect themselves from the *Aegis*.”

“Hmm, possible,” she acceded with a nod as another Grimja ship’s icon vanished off the tactical display.

The battle plan was going according to projections in more than one way. The fact that they heavily outnumbered the enemy began taking its toll on the Consortium in mere moments, as they lost nearly a quarter of their fleet within five minutes of combat. Consortium ships trying to keep from getting instantly killed by the GRAF cannon were isolated and blasted into wreckage by elements of Confederate ships moving in disciplined groups of two or three, and pockets of enemy ships were wiped out in several sectors along the arc of combat. The enemy ships closest to the *Aegis* were the first to be wiped out to remove the threat it posed to the command ship, and the ships were isolated and destroyed in twin arcs away from the *Aegis* as per the battle plan. When the enemy ships were reduced to 450, Palla sat back down and crossed her legs. “Tactical, charge the GRAF cannon to full power and prepare to fire on the enemy com-con,” she ordered.

“Aye sir, removing GRAF from cycle sequence and charging to full power, T minus 225 seconds until full power!”

“All weapons on GRAF standby!” Palla barked as she engaged her jump restraints, then hit the ship wide intercom. “All hands to jump restraints! All hands to jump restraints!”

“Primary couplers are online and engaged.”

“Recoil absorption system resetting to full power.”

“Engine compensation system cycling to full power mode.”

“GRAF charging sequence engaged, T minus 217 seconds!”

“Get those Gladiators locked down!” Palla barked as she looked over the ship status holo. “Pull all ECDs from in front of the ship! Tactical, mirror targeting coordinates to comm so they can send out the shot vector to all fighters!” She hit the intercom again. “This will be a full power shot! This will be a full power shot!”

“Report secured readiness to comm six,” one of her comm officers added.

“Into your jump restraints, sirs, ma’ams,” her XO told the command staff. “Quickly, please!”

“All bridge personnel secured, sir,” her tactical officer relayed.

“Fire at countdown zero!” Palla ordered as the power bars on her GRAF holo began to rise.

Fighters scrambled out of the way as the GRAF cannon charged, a bright light forming within the doors that warned *everyone* that the command ship was about to inject itself into the battle in a much more dramatic fashion. Palla gripped the handles on her jump restraints when the countdown hit single digits, then the tactical officer gave a final warning, “Brace for recoil!”

That firing of the cannon was *far* different from the previous shots. A blinding blast of pure kinetic energy, pristine white and nearly half a kathra in diameter once it cleared the barrel of the cannon, lanced away from the *Aegis* like the retribution of an angry god. It raged across the void and struck the enemy’s base almost exactly dead center, and everything it hit just *disintegrated*, shattered to molecular dust in a fraction of a microsecond. The shot was so powerful, so incredibly abrupt that the rest of the station didn’t even flinch for a second as the center of it was eradicated, the blow was so heavy and so powerful, *then* the station tore itself apart as the shockwave of the blast rampaged through the slapdash remains, sending smoking debris and wreckage flying in every direction. The blast was angled downward in relation to the rest of the fleet, so it lanced off into the gloom of the nebula on a harmless vector that posed no threat to any of their own ships.

It happened in the blink of an eye, and that was all it took for the Consortium to change tactics. With the com-con destroyed and nearly half of their fleet destroyed, the bugs knew that they had no chance of victory and no way to escape. And when they made that determination, the suicide attacks began. Consortium destroyers veered directly into the path of Confederate warships, guns blazing as they tried to accelerate to flank, but the Confederate forces were expecting and ready for it. The first destroyer to try it tried to ram a Faey battle cruiser, but the wily ship captain activated her Torsion shockwave generator, which ripped the enemy ship apart when it tried to cross the area of effect. Instead of being rammed by a single huge ship, the Faey cruiser was instead assaulted by a large number of burning, twisted pieces of metal and polymer, greenish-red fire engulfing them as they slammed into the armored Neutronium hull of the INS warship. Other Consortium ships had better luck when they tried to ram ships without that piece of hardware, but the fact that the Confederation had engaged the enemy at point blank range and was intermixed with them suddenly became much more apparent both to the bugs and to the admirals behind Palla, as those ships found they had no room to accelerate or maneuver to deal massive damage in a ramming attack. What had at first seemed like brazen tactics of getting all but side by side with Consortium ships and trading fire at point blank range revealed itself not as a brash tactic of the bold, but as a cunning tactic of the wily, for that severely reduced the effectiveness of Consortium ramming attacks. They had little choice but to ram ships right in front or beside them, because the Confederate ships hemming them in on their flanks reduced their ability to turn to get an optimal collision course where they could ram enemy ships amidships or bow to bow, and they were blown apart if they tried to avoid the ships hemming them in to gain velocity to ram more distant ships. Their only real option was to turn into the ships hounding their flanks, which was the least effective means to go about it because the enemy ship could turn with them to reduce the relative velocity between the two vessels, while the vessel on the other side had clear vectors of fire to pound the Consortium ship as it tried to ram the wing ship. The ships still managed to ram Confederate warships, but the fact that they couldn't get up any real speed and could really only try to ram ships that could maneuver away from them to reduce the force of the impact made the attacks far less devastating than usual. Confederate ships took damage surely, had buckled sections and torn hulls, but the Consortium



ships couldn't get up enough momentum to totally destroy the ships they rammed.

Over the span of fifteen minutes, the Consortium fleet effectively destroyed itself as ship after ship either rammed a Confederate ship and knocked itself out of action or was destroyed in the attempt. As ordered, the Confederate forces did *not* ignore any Consortium ship that even *looked* whole. They fired on darkened enemy ships, they fired on ships on fire, they fired on any Consortium ship that returned *any* life signs or signs of computer core activity, and they kept firing until those signs of activity faded off short-range sensors. They even fired on ships with no active signs that didn't look sufficiently damaged. The Confederate ship captains had been thoroughly prepared for this, and they did not disappoint. They even fired on the burning pieces of the enemy com-con that had not spiraled out into the nebula.

Exactly 101 minutes after the *Aegis* jumped into the system, it was over. The last Consortium ship showing signs of computer activity was blown into fiery pieces by a salvo of ships, and the remaining Confederate ships simply drifted in the void, searching for another target to attack. "Stand down from battle stations and begin search and recovery operations. Send out the scout probes and deploy our own sensor pods," Palla ordered. "Squadrons A, B, and C, assist damaged ships and tow them to coordinates broadcast on command STG two for assessment and repair operations. Squadron D, you will hunt down and destroy the 16 enemy ships that aren't accounted for, going on their last known positions. Fighter squadrons attached to ships in Squadron D, report to your ship commander to assist in the search and destroy operation. Squadrons E and F, return to the jump entry point and prepare to escort in sweeper and logistic ships, they'll want to analyze the debris and salvage anything we can use. Squadrons G and H, I fear your task is to chase down any drifting wreckage and tow it back into the void area," she added, tapping her armored fingertips together. "Squadrons I, J, and K disperse along the border of the void and form a defensive perimeter to protect the rest of the fleet as it undertakes repair and recovery operations. Ghost Squadron, War Talons, you will attach to Squadron D and assist in the destruction of the last enemy ships," she added. "Ghost and War Talon squadron commanders report to *Arabax* command comm for further orders. All other fighter squadrons report to

task force command comm four for CAP rotation assignments. Command out.” She looked over to her tactical officer. “Disengage the GRAF cannon and begin shutdown sequence and close the outer doors.”

“Aye sir, GRAF shutdown sequence initiated. Taking primary couplers offline.”

“Outer doors closing, Captain,” her engineer called.

“Weapons are no longer on GRAF standby, Captain.”

“Well done, Captain,” Kre’Vak called from behind her. “Very well done.”

“Thank you, Admiral, but the accolades go to every man and woman in this task force, not just to me,” she replied mildly. “I want damage report updates every two minutes, Commander Lani. Get the damage control macro units out to the damaged ships, and get me a detailed list of damage and repair estimates from ships not on the board.” She looked to her comm officers. “Comm one, get me central command.”

“Aye sir,” the Faey man nodded.

Seconds later, the face of General Lorna Shaddale appeared on her central hologram. “General Shaddale, PR-253 is now under Confederate control, and the last 16 enemy warships are currently being located and destroyed,” she said simply, which caused a few cheers across the bridge. “The enemy com-con and the rest of the enemy fleet has been destroyed to the last ship and the last bug. This star system is now under the flag of the Confederation.”

“Well done, Captain. The clean-up barges and hospital ships are jumping from PR-371 as we speak.”

“Elements of the fleet will arrive at the border of the nebula in 26 minutes to escort them to the void area, General. All telemetry and logs are being compiled and will be transmitted to command as soon as they’re ready.”

Lorna nodded. “Remain at PR-253 to assist in recovery operations, then the *Aegis* will escort the hospital ships back to PR-371. Arrange to transfer the theater flag to the *Arabax* when the *Aegis* is ready to depart. Captain Sevi Aranne will command the task force upon your departure.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Palla replied. “She’s currently hunting down the last of the enemy ships, but I’ll relay the order immediately.”

*Kaira, 6 Kiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 31 July 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 6 Kiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

Now *this* was what he wanted to see out of every combat report.

Number of fatalities: *zero*.

There were some injuries and some battle damage, but the best possible outcome at least from the admittedly biased viewpoint as the Grand Duke Karinne was what was glowing in midair on that hologram. There were 587 injuries among the 229 KMS vessels that participated in the attack on the nebula, moderate damage to three destroyers, light to medium damage to most of the other ships, but no KMS ship had suffered severe damage, no injury was more severe than a lost arm, and nobody died...at least in the KMS.

From the Confederate point of view, the operation had been a complete success, but not a completely clean one. The CCM had effectively ambushed the Consortium forces and destroyed them to the last ship, to the last bug, in 168 minutes while taking 4,018 casualties—both killed and wounded—and losing 71 ships out of the fleet of 2,300...which was *damn* good. 427 additional ships had suffered moderate to severe damage, and 807 ships had suffered light to moderate damage, so in that respect, the Consortium had definitely left their mark in the battle by doing some significant damage, but their tactic to lessen the ability of Consortium ships to destroy other ships in suicide attacks had been very, very effective. They’d taken a little more damage in combat from Torsion weapons in exchange for not having ships completely destroyed in suicide ramming attacks when the bugs decided the battle was lost. It had taken them nearly half an hour to track down and destroy the last straggling ships, and now the

logistics ships were there to effect field repairs to allied ships to get them jump ready, start sweeping up the debris for analysis, and send out some sensor probes to do some scientific research in the small nebula. The Verutans had lost the most ships at 22, the Grimja had lost 18, and no other navy in the Confederation lost more than 7 ships. The KMS had not lost a single ship in the operation, and the Kimdori had not had any ships assigned to the attack due to the nature of their weaponry. In a battle where everything had to be completely destroyed, the crew-killing stream weapons used by the Kimdori were decided to be potentially confusing to the other ships during the fight, who might attack a ship they'd already struck.

The Kimdori were doing something else right now anyway. Jason moved to another holo that both he and Zaa were watching at the same time that showed one of the eeriest places he'd ever seen...SAR-12. It was a star cluster packed into a single "solar system" that had *six* stars in a tight cluster, three blue supergiant's in a complex interlocking orbital system with three "child" stars orbiting *them* like planets, almost like a solar system which was comprised of nothing but stars. Two of the blue supergiant's orbited each other while that binary system orbited the largest of the three, and the three smaller stars, all three medium size white stars, orbited those three core stars...and all of it was packed into an orbital system that was about the same area as the orbital track of Jupiter in the Terran system. The gravitational flux in the system was intense, but so was the combined solar wind those six stars emanated, so powerful that it offset the intense cosmic radiation emanated by the galactic core. There were some planets in the system beyond the stars, two gas giants with terrestrial moons and a single terrestrial planet orbiting so far out that it wasn't reduced to liquid by the radiation and gravity flux.

And that was where a fleet of 23 Kimdori ships were sitting, over the barren, airless planet's pole. It was a planet about the size of Terra but looked like Mercury, its surface scarred by meteor strikes and with an ambient surface temperature of 270 degrees Celsius on the day side and an average of -30 degrees Celsius on the night side, the night side heated by the ambient galactic core radiation when it was facing it. That introduced wild temperature swings on the night side depending on where it was in its orbital track if the night side was facing towards the core or away from the

core. And, given the planet had an orbital period of 37.6 standard years, that temperature swing took a *long* time to cycle. Like Terra's moon, the planet was phase locked in its orbit, so it always presented the same side to the interior stars, and it had no angular tilt. That made the pole a good place to build something, since the temperature along that twilight region was only 170 degrees Celsius most of the time and was fairly consistent.

They were there to install the new trans-galactic comm array, which had already been placed in its protective armored dome and was being carefully set down on the rocky surface of the planet by a team of Kimdori engineers. They'd built the array and then built its protective armored shell around it, everything self-contained within the dome, and all they had to do was anchor the dome to the ground and turn on the array. The Kimdori had already prepared its site with foundations and anchors, so it was a simple matter of setting the dome in place and locking it down, a process that would take them about an hour. But, as soon as the dome was on the surface, the Kimdori inside the dome would begin activating the array, it didn't need to be anchored down to work. The radiation in the system would kill anything but a Kimdori, Jakkan, or Generation without extravagant radiation shielding, but to even get to it, they'd have to get past the interdicator that was set there three days ago and had already expanded out to its full interdiction effect.

Jason had to spare an amused look at Kyri and Aran. It had been their turn to come to work with him today to see what he did from a much closer perspective and receive lessons on the art of leadership, just in case they somehow found themselves sitting in his chair someday. The kids had been really enthusiastic about the idea of doing what Rann did...until they actually *experienced* what Rann did. It wasn't as much fun as they thought it was, because Rann had all kinds of extra lessons and had many more responsibilities than they did. Kyri was the most troublesome one, since she got bored easily and tended to zone out. He was letting them relax a little, the two of them sitting on the couch he had on the side wall by the door to his private room, talking with Cybi and being taught without realizing it.

Cybi was fairly sneaky like that.

They were both wearing nothing but shorts, what they'd brought with them since Aya wouldn't let them come to the White House without

wearing armor, but they were allowed to take it off in his office. And that, Jason was going to make Aya change. She'd said that she wouldn't relax the armor requirements until the last of the Consortium was destroyed...well, they were destroyed, effective about three hours ago. Shen and Suri weren't making a beef about it, at least. They weren't even in the room, they were out in the office talking with Chirk and Brall, but they'd also secured the door so not even Jason could open it. They were allowed to leave him alone inside his own office, because it was so secure...but they weren't allowed to leave the outer office and had to maintain visual contact with the door to his office at all times, since it was the only way into his office from the outside. Aya had very strict rules about such things.

After the dome set down on the surface gently, Jason watched as they turned off the hoverpods that had brought it down slowly and carefully, and on another hologram, he watched a readout of the array's systems as the Kimdori inside the dome began to bring it up. It would only take them about 12 minutes to get the array up and running, since it had already been tested and configured when it was built in Kosigi. While the technicians inside did that, the engineers outside were locking the clamps they'd mounted in the bare rock, which they'd also leveled out to provide an optimal foundation for the dome. They'd lock the 36 clamps down on the dome to secure it, and as long as the array inside was operational, that was it. The array would serve as a second transceiver unit for modulated communion and would have the power to reach well past Andromeda. In fact, it could reach the six closest galaxies to the Milky Way, giving them the ability to theoretically communicate at a distance they couldn't realistically travel. He saw the radiation shield activate around the dome to further fortify the unit against radiation damage over time, and saw through his remote telemetry that the array was active and going through start-up sequencing, bringing up its systems.

"They're about to bring up the array, Cybi," he called aloud, mainly for Zaa's benefit, whose face was on a 2D hologram on the far side of his visual.

*"Just a second,"* she replied, leaning over and putting her holographic hand on Aran's shoulder. That was all for the kids, to make them feel like she wasn't ignoring them in any way...after all, Cybi could do a few trillion

operations per second, and was more than capable of handling the array startup and talking to the kids at the same time.

“Are you still holding to your plan with the scouts, Denmother?”

She nodded. “They’ll begin the journey to Andromeda tomorrow morning your time. And believe me, they almost rebelled when I told them they couldn’t leave until this array was operational.”

“And you’re still going to go through with this crazy idea?” he asked, a bit disapprovingly.

And it *was* crazy. After the success that the Consortium had had building a one-way wormhole system, that it lasted long enough for them to get thousands of ships through it, Zaa had built a similar system at Kimdori Prime out of translation engines. It was Zaa’s intent to use that one-way wormhole system to “slingshot” her expeditionary force halfway to Andromeda so they could get there *before* the Syndicate’s advance fleet reached their galaxy. Jason was against it, he was *majorly* against it, but Zaa had made up her mind, and she didn’t care how dangerous it was. She’d even sidestepped him and had Myleena design a more stable system for her to build that, according to Myleena’s math, had a 79% chance of working. Jason wasn’t the kind that was going to risk the 217 lives on those three scout ships on a 79% chance of success, but Zaa had a different outlook than he did.

Getting the fleet *to* Andromeda using that system had been Zaa’s goal, but about halfway was the best she was going to get due to the sheer distance. The system was *capable* of opening a wormhole directly to Andromeda, but the further the engines had to focus the terminus, the greater the risk the wormhole became unstable because of the increasing variables in the mathematics. If they had a probe or something at the proposed opening point to at least send back some data it would make the wormhole safer, but still not *safe*. Without that, a point about 2.5 “hyperspace years” towards Andromeda was the statistically safest point and still maintain what was for Zaa a reasonable chance of success while still getting her scouts there in time. If it worked, then her scouts would arrive at the edge of Andromeda about a month before the Syndicate reached the edge of the Milky Way.

He couldn't fathom how she was willing to put her people at risk that way...but that was one of the major ways Jason differed from about every other ruler on the Council. To Jason, they were people, not statistics, and he would not order them to go through an unstable wormhole and have a 21% chance of not living to get to the other side.

"As you have said to me many times, Jason," she said, giving him a steady look, "sometimes crazy works."

He scowled at her, both annoyed that she'd say that, and she'd make *light* of the terrible risk her scouts were undertaking.

"Agree to disagree with me in this regard, cousin," she stated soberly. "My children were fully briefed of the risk. But they deem it a worthy one to get there *before* the Syndicate reaches our galaxy. The intelligence they can send back to us in real time will be invaluable, even with the Syndicate forces here jammed from receiving any transmissions from Andromeda."

And that was true. The Syndicate used a different method of communication than the Consortium, which was both less advanced and highly clever in its development. They lacked the technology to transmit in energy strings or by modulating Teryon energy, but they had devised a unique and highly clever technology that Myleena had deemed *quantum vibration*. They modulated the fabric of hyperspace itself in a way much akin to the ancient Morse Code, just "pings" in the fabric of hyperspace which radiated out from the origin point like ripples on a pond. The advantage of the system was that it had exceptionally long range and was actually faster than string or Teryon communications, because it dealt with the quantum vibration of hyperspace itself. The drawback of the technology was that it was even slower than old Morse Code, and it didn't have frequencies or channels. A message with 200 characters would take nearly three minutes to transmit because each vibrational "ping" in hyperspace had to have complete separation from the others, so they'd created an encoded "shorthand" they used in this vibration communication technology. And also, at any one time, only *one* message could be transmitted anywhere within Andromeda, or the different messages would interfere with each other.

According to the last of the data that the Kimdori had taken from the Consortium, the Syndicate managed this problem by prioritizing



communications and by having only one vibration transmission station in Andromeda that sent out all messages to all ships and star systems, and each ship or system contacted had a window of time in which they could respond before the next message was sent. And because of the limitations of this system, only the most important messages were sent over quantum vibration. The vast majority of their comm was conducted by a much less advanced communication system where high-energy phased tachyons were modulated and transmitted site to site akin to lasers. This system was faster than light, but it still wasn't as fast as string or Teryon systems. A message transmitted over that system would take about 5 seconds to travel from one star system to the next one...but when an empire spanned half a galaxy, that time suddenly ramped *way* up to where a system on the edge of the galaxy would take 16 days to get a message to a system in the center of the galaxy. Because of the time restraints of their phased tachyon communication system, news took a long time to get through the entirety of their empire unless it was really important.

Jason would consider the system to be obsolete, even archaic, but it was the best they had, and they'd learned to work with it in rather clever ways. That demonstrated the intelligence of their opponents and made them worthy of respect. Just because they weren't as technologically advanced, that didn't make them stupid. Quite the contrary, the Benga seemed to be *extremely* intelligent, since they'd managed to overcome the technological gulf between them and the Consortium and were now winning the war.

With their quantum vibration communications, they were able to send simple messages all the way to the Milky Way, and those messages would get here in 23 days instead of nearly 90. But the drawback was that when they sent those messages, they couldn't talk to anyone else while transmitting them, and the medium in which they transmitted those messages was *very* easy to both intercept and disrupt, making it vulnerable. The primary mission of the scouts was to crack the code of their quantum vibration communications and start listening in, then sending all that information back to them using the new array that was even now booting up at SAR-12.

That was the good part for them. The bad part was that Myleena and Cybi had already added an algorithm to the string jammers to befuddle the vibrational comm with vibrational white noise, to bang a drum overtop it to

use a metaphor, making it indecipherable. That would let them jam the Syndicate just as easily as they had the Consortium.

Jason just glared at her a moment, then sighed and reached down and picked up Kyri. He set her in his lap as she put her small hands on the edge of his desk and looked at the holograms. “Which is what, Daddy?” she asked.

“This one is a visual of the new communications array they’re installing at SAR-12,” he answered, pointing. “This one here is a feed from the array’s telemetry so I can watch them start it up. It looks like they’ll have it online in about five minutes,” he noted aloud. “This array will let us talk with the Kimdori going to Andromeda.”

“Oooh, I hope they send back pictures!” Aran said eagerly as he looked over the desk from beside Jason’s chair. Jason picked him up with his talent and sat him on the edge, and he promptly turned and sat cross-legged.

“This one is a report Myri sent me about the battle over in the nebula,” he added, pointing at the far left hologram.

“We won, right?”

“Yes, we won, cubling,” Zaa chuckled. “The outcome was actually never in doubt. They were trapped and surrounded. But the good news was that we defeated them with very little damage to ourselves in return. The command staff did a good job protecting our own.”

“All the military stuff is boring,” Kyri complained.

“The military stuff is a part of being the Grand Duke, and you’d better at least understand the basics of it,” he retorted. “I don’t understand all of it, that’s Myri’s job. But I trust Myri’s judgment about military matters. Learning who you can trust to give you good advice is another part of being the Grand Duke.”

“How did you learn?”

“Time,” he answered immediately. “And a lot of trial and error,” he added. “Sometimes I wish I would have had someone to show me how to do all this.”

“Oh really,” Zaa drawled.

Jason flashed her a quick grin. “You weren’t here every moment to hold my hand, Denmother,” he answered.

“Had I needed to, what point would it have been for us to find you and restore your line to the throne, Jason?” she asked lightly.

“I thought you knew everything about being a Grand Duke, Daddy,” Aran said.

Jason laughed. “Not even,” he replied. “No matter how smart you are, Aran, you can never know *everything*, and other people will see things from a different point of view than you do. They’ll see things you won’t, and hearing their advice is a very important part of this job. I try to make my decisions based not just on *my* judgment, but also on the advice that people I trust give to me. That’s why I always talk to people before I make any important decisions, so I can hear their opinion based on their point of view, which will be different than mine.”

“Like that Parri?” Kyri asked.

“Oh yes. The Parri *shaman* is one of the wisest people on Karis, pippy. I value her advice as much as I do Denmother’s, or the Kizzik Council in the colony over on Kirga.”

“Why? She lives in a mud hut,” Aran protested.

“Son, you’re making the biggest mistake you could possibly make,” Jason said seriously. “Don’t underestimate the Parri because they seem primitive. Sometimes I think they’re actually far more advanced than we are, and act the way they do for *our* benefit,” he said with a grunt.

“Listen to your father, cubling,” Zaa agreed. “The Parri have chosen a different way of looking at the world, where they don’t need the same technology or comforts that you do to be happy. But do not for one moment believe that it does not make them *smart*. They live as they do because they have *chosen* to live that way, not because they can’t comprehend modern technology like the Goraga can’t.”

“I like her, I think she’s really neat,” Kyri piped in. “And she’s really nice, too. I love that thing she gave you, Daddy,” she said, pointing at the wooden disc that the *shaman* had pulled out of the tree, which he had sitting on a stand on his desk. It was now ringed in titanium and had a loop eye for

a neck chain at the top. Jason wore it as a medallion with his formal robes but kept it on its stand the rest of the time. For some reason, he preferred to keep it at work so he could look at it when he was making important decisions, as if the quiet wisdom of the *shaman* could reach through that disc of rich, dark wood and help him.

“Speaking of the Parri, I haven’t gone to see them in a while, I think I’ll take care of that tomorrow. I can stop by and see them after I get back from Jaxtra to see Miaari’s cubs. And I think you’re going to go with me, Aran,” he decided. “I think a little talk with the *shaman* would show you a few things.”

“Ooh, can I go too?” Kyri asked, twisting around and looking up at him hopefully.

“Sure, pips,” he replied, looking down at her and seeing her beam. He tapped her on the nose, which made her giggle, then she turned back around and leaned against him. He put a hand around her bare torso and watched as the Kimdori continued to lock down the dome, but his eyes were on the array. When he saw its computer come up and reach out to connect back to Cybi, she brought her hologram over beside his chair.

*“The array is undergoing start-up diagnostics,”* she related. *“I’ll have it do initial tests when they’re complete.”*

“What does that mean?” Kyri asked.

*“It means that the array is making sure that everything’s working properly, pippy,”* Cybi answered. *“When it’s done, it will let me know, then I’ll have the array send out a test transmission to make sure everything’s working.”*

“Wouldn’t it already know that?”

Cybi smiled. *“The first rule of being an engineer, pippy, is that nothing ever works until you see it actually work,”* she answered.

Jason laughed. “That’s the truth,” he agreed. “The diagnostics only say that the array thinks that everything’s working properly. The only way to find out if that’s the case is to have it do something.”

It only took about three minutes. The diagnostics finished, then Cybi had the array transmit using all of its various modes, from standard Teryon

to communion to passive detection that Cybi used to sense distant biogenic units. As she successfully tested every function of the array, it updated on the status hologram both he and Zaa were watching. The Kimdori would also have access to that array for their own transmissions, which would be a secondary array that they would both use for long distance transmissions. Local comm in the home quadrant would be handled by their primary arrays, but communicating with the outlying quadrants would be handled by the SAR-12 array, relayed to it from the primary array and allowing it to transmit for long distances. That was going to take some wear and tear off the Kosigi array, since the SAR-12 array had been specifically built to handle both Teryon and communion long distance communications. They'd already updated their comm system so all extra-quadrant comm would be routed to the new array, so as soon as the array finished its diagnostics, it would be put straight into service as the primary array for communications with PR-371, RG-118, and Exile.

*"It's up and running,"* she declared.

"Alright, update the comm system to put it in service, and warn Myri," Jason said.

*[Revered Hive-leader, Grand Revered Hive-leader Magran is requesting audience,]* Chirk's translator communed to him.

*[Okay, go ahead and put him through,]* he answered. "Magran's asking to talk to me, Denmother. If you'll excuse me for a bit?"

"Of course, cousin," she replied with a nod, then her hologram winked out. The others did as well, to be replaced with a 2D hologram of Magran. He looked a little more comfortable wearing the Grand Master's robe now after a month to settle into it.

"Jason," he said, then he smiled gently. "And I see you have Kyri and Aran with you. Good afternoon to you two."

"Hello Mister Grand Master sir," Kyri replied, waving to him.

"Grand Master," Aran added.

"Their turn for bring the kids to work day?" he asked. Magran knew about Jason's little program.

"Yup. What can I do for you, Magran?"

“I had a few spare moments and I was curious to find out if you’d set a date for your state visit to the Colonies,” he replied.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” he answered, bouncing Kyri a bit on his knees. “I’ll iron all of that out when things around here start to settle down.”

“Oooh, can we go, Daddy?” Kyri asked eagerly.

“You might, I’m not sure yet,” he replied. “How’s the Speaker search going?”

Magran made a bit of a face. “I still haven’t selected a Speaker, much to the annoyance of many on the council,” he replied. “Speaking of jockeying for position, I think you might want to keep an eye on the Prakarikai.”

“I already am,” he said with a bit of a weary sigh. “They’ve got no less than ten little schemes going at the moment to increase their influence or standing within the Confederation.”

“Well, this might be number eleven,” he said. “The High Queen has been trying to get detailed information on the logistics schedules that we have running in the Colonies that your Kizzik implemented once we installed the Stargate at Exeven. She professes that she wants to see how efficient things are run with the Stargates and the interdictors, but that doesn’t require a detailed list of ship schedules. She’s fishing for something else, and it has to do with the Karinne transport system.”

Jason almost leaned back in his chair, but he wasn’t *too* surprised. Ever since they joined the Confederation, the Prakarikai had moved swiftly to learn everything about everything, even what they had no business knowing, and they were doing all of it not in the interests of the Confederation, but for their own benefit. The High Queen had almost driven Jason nuts trying to get her shipbuilders into Kosigi, which was a service the Karinnes provided to *all* Confederation members, and once she got allotted space inside, she tried to get nearly three times as many workers as she needed into the moon, half of which were agents and sleepers for their intelligence service. And every single one was talented, to make it harder for counter-espionage agents to determine who was a spy and who wasn’t. The maneuverings of the Prakarikai were both blatant and subtle at the same time, as if they tried to sneak the subtle things by as the blatant

ones attracted so much attention...like someone sneaking through into the back of a restaurant as someone else made a scene in the dining room. The Kimdori nearly had an entire regiment of intelligence operatives devoted *just* to the Prakarikai in Kosigi. Jason wasn't too surprised that the Prakarikai were trying to get the logistics schedules for the other empires, if only so they'd know how to sabotage them if it came down to it.

Sometimes he felt it was a mistake to include the Prakarikai in the Confederation, but it wasn't his decision, it was just something he had to live with.

It was also a good thing that Miaari had completely overhauled the security procedures in Kosigi, because now they were very effective at keeping the 14,500 Prakarikai "workers" up in the moon contained. And Dellin had taken the extra step of assigning the Prakarikai a sector of the docks that was far away from everyone else, using the excuse that they were using the Prakarikai as the anchor of opening a new sector of the shipyard to new operations, when in reality they put them *way* out by themselves so they had no earthly business being about anywhere else in the moon. Dellin would place the Jun and Ogravian operations out there as well, but that would be safe enough since the Ogravians were so far from the Prakarikai that they had no real business messing with them, and they had the sense not to mess with the Jun in any form or fashion. Not even the Prakarikai were about to poke *that* bear with a stick.

"I'd better find out what they're up to," Jason sighed, making a note in his gestalt and then sending it to Miaari's band.

"Have they been causing you problems?"

"No more than anyone else," he replied artfully.

"Then they are," he said without much humor. "I'll leave you to it, Jason. I'm actually fairly busy at the moment. I was being literal when I said that I only had a few moments."

"I know that feeling," he answered. "I'll see you in a few hours at the council meeting."

Magran nodded and his hologram winked out, and Jason did lean back in his chair and silently curse a few times...which would have been very vocal if his daughter wasn't in his lap.

“What’s the matter, Daddy?” she asked.

“Just the Prakarikai being the Prakarikai,” he answered. “And it’s about time to get you two home,” he added. “It’s almost dinnertime, and I’m hungry.”

“What about your meeting?” Aran asked.

“That’s what my home office is for, silly,” he replied. *Shen, Suri, we’re about to leave*, he called. *You can let us out now*. The door opened as soon as Jason put Kyri down and moved with his kids towards where their armor was stacked. *Can you call the corvette and have them get ready, Shen?* Jason asked.

*I’ve already alerted the corvette, and it’s standing by*, she answered.

That was another thing he was going to try to get changed. He didn’t need a corvette to ferry him around anymore. He doubted Aya was going to budge very much, since it took her a long time to get him *into* these security precautions, but he’d do what he could to at least get her back to allowing him to use his Wolf fighter, or an armored dropship that he piloted.

A quick trip on the Marine corvette *Thunder* later, Jason was carrying his armored daughter into the kitchen door of his newly remodeled house, where Ayama and Surin were preparing dinner. Red Horn had done a great job adding another floor to the house while he was at Kimdori Prime, but he’d come home before they were done and spent a couple of days at his vacation house on Kosiningi as they finished. The first floor was unchanged, but the second floor was now nothing but bedrooms for his children, and the third floor was divided into two major sections. The first and much larger section was a personal apartment of sorts for Jason and Jyslin, with a large, spacious bedroom, luxurious bathroom, walk-in closet, a home office for Jyslin to do Paladins work, and his new office, which was pretty big. The rest of the third floor was devoted to an apartment for Rann and Shya, who now had their own living room and bedroom over at the west end of the house. Their bedroom overlooked the ocean and the living room was on the opposite corner. Jason had felt it was only fair to give Rann and Shya an apartment rather than a room, so they had a little more space for their things, as well as give them a feeling of their own personal space. They *were* married, after all. There were five new bedrooms on the



second floor for his future children, but they would serve as guest bedrooms until the day they had permanent occupants.

And Jyslin certainly wanted to put a child in every room.

*That smells good, what is it?* Jason asked as he set Kyri down, and the two of them ran into the living room, where Rann and Shya were sitting at the piano.

*It's going to be Shio padroki soup, Emshada style,* she answered, brushing some chopped vegetables into a bowl.

*We're also having chicken casserole and steamed ruga roots,* Surin supplied. *With apple pie for dessert.*

*Now I'm glad I decided to come home,* Jason chuckled audibly with his sending. *But I have some more work to do, so I'll be up in my office. Jys still at the training facility?*

*She said she'll be home within the hour,* Surin answered. *Frinia is with her.*

*And Yila is on the strip as well, I thought you might want to know,* Ayama added, glancing at him. *She is at Kumi's house, recuperating a bit from the jack implantation. But that hasn't stopped her from asking if you're home about every ten minutes. I think she wants to talk to you about something.*

*Oh boy, it's gonna be one of those afternoons,* he sent sourly, which made both of them laugh. He wandered into the living room and saw Rann and Shya sitting side by side at the piano, Shya watching in curiosity as Rann practiced the scales Jason taught him, his first step down the road of learning to play. Both of them were bare-ass naked, a condition that Jason had come to grudgingly accept since Shya moved in. She'd turned Rann into a total little streaker. *Hey guys, how goes practice?*

*I'm just finishing,* Rann answered, biting his lip a little bit as his small hands worked over the keys. *I played all those songs you taught me twice, and now I'm doing the scale thingy. I like the piano in my room better.*

*That one's good for some things, but it's also good to know how to play one that isn't sized to your hands, pippy,* he answered. *Not every piano's gonna be like the one in your room. How was school?*

*A little boring today*, Shya answered, looking over at him. *But I still like it better than the tutors back at the palace.* Shya had fully settled into her new life as the Duchess Karinne rather than be her little Imperial Highness, but she did have a few burrs left in her personality from her Imperial upbringing. Despite that, even Jason could see that she was *much* happier living on Karis. She loved her mother and her family, but the rigors of the life of an Imperial princess were weighty on a little girl, especially one that had to learn all of it and would never realistically sit on the throne. She had to do all the work and would get no reward for it other than to be the “spare” in case something happened to the Empress before she had her own children. It had taken her a while to get used to the idea that she didn’t have all those duties and responsibilities, and she was enjoying just getting to be a kid. Jason had been making sure to teach *her* along with Rann when it came to lessons in how to be a good leader, heeding the advice of the Parri *shaman* in this case. That included a lot of deprogramming, undoing some of her Imperial conditioning...but not all of it. Some of it was actually good for her and would be good for Rann. Jason felt confident that when the time came, she’d be ready for her role as the wife of the Grand Duke and would be an asset both to Rann and to the house. But until then, she was a smart, sweet, loving, wonderful, slightly acerbic little girl with much more of a grasp of what was going on than Rann had most of the time, and he could admit that he loved her as much as any of his children.

More and more, Jason felt he’d gotten the best of the deal when Dahnai sent Shya to Karis.

He put his hand on her bare shoulder and leaned down, and she giggled a little bit when he gave her a noisy kiss on the cheek. *Stop being silly, Daddy Jason*, she protested, then she burst into helpless laughter, squirming as he tickled her sides.

*Don’t tell me what to do, you silly little girl*, he taunted playfully. *Got your homework done?*

*Done already, and we had our lessons with Miss Aya and Miss Ayuma too*, Rann answered. *I learned how to pick up the space around water today!*

*Good for you, Rann!* Jason sent happily. *I told you it wasn’t that hard.*

*Not really once you get the idea of it, like picking up the edges of a blanket that a stuffed animal's sitting on.*

*Exactly. And it's much easier than picking up the water itself, isn't it?*

*Oh way way easier!* he agreed emphatically.

*I wish I could do that,* Shya complained a little.

*There's no telling if you can or not, Shya, Jason told her. Your mother's a very strong TK, and Saelle told me just yesterday that she finally urged some ability out of Sirri. There's a good chance you have some potential too.*

*You're already a listener, don't be so greedy,* Rann protested, sending in a way that wouldn't let his sending leave the room, a trick that was highly advanced for such a young child. But then again, with all the instruction he got from some top-tier telepaths like his mother and Ryn, it was no surprise he was demonstrating so much skill.

*What? You're both a Generation and a TK, is it greedy to want to be both a listener and a TK? That's a bit hypocritical, Ranny.*

*Being a Generation means that I'm already a TK,* Rann protested.

*Well, if you want to try, Shya, I'll talk to Ayuma about it. She'll start teaching you the exercises,* Jason sent, heading off the potential squabble. Like any kids, Rann and Shya had their share of disputes, but to their credit, they always worked them out fairly quickly. *TK isn't like telepathy, it doesn't always manifest at the same time you express. Just don't get your hopes up. Not many Faey have TK, even if one of their parents do.*

*I know, but thanks for letting me try,* she answered, looking up at him with her beautiful eyes that reminded him of Dahnai.

*It never hurts to try,* he nodded. *Now, I've got some more paperwork I have to do, and I have to talk a little more with the Denmother. Why don't you two come get me when dinner's ready?*

*Sure,* Rann said as he started the scales over at the beginning.

He passed along Magran's warning to Zaa when he got into his new, larger home office, standing at the window and looking out at the ocean as a full hologram of Zaa paced on the other side of his desk. "I am of a mind to

invite Anavan to Kimdori Prime and take away her radiation suit,” Zaa growled, which made Jason laugh without much humor.

“You and me both, Denmother,” he agreed as he watched Sheleese and Min frolic around a bit in the surf. “They’ve been nothing but trouble for us since they joined.”

“I’ll have my children look into this,” she promised. “And we’ve started using the array.”

“I know, I’ve been watching the telemetry on my gestalt to make sure it’s gonna be stable,” he replied. “I still wish I could talk you out of this.”

“You will not, Jason,” she replied calmly. “There is a risk, yes, but my children are fully aware of it and are willing to take that risk.”

“And that’s about the only reason I’m not yanking those scout ships,” he grunted. “But I still don’t like it.”

“Duly noted, cousin. And for what it’s worth, your concern for my children touches them greatly, that you would care so much about their welfare.”

He gave a low grunt and put his hands on the windowsill. Her hologram came over and looked over his shoulder, which for her back in the Hearth gave her a fully immersive holographic representation of everything she could “see” from her hologram’s point of view. “Is that Sheleese?”

Jason nodded. “And Min.”

“She’s starting to show her pregnancy.”

“They all are,” he replied. “I figure in about five months, we’re going to have another wave of newborns. Symone will be first, then Jyslin, then Kumi, then it snowballs from there. Oh, and Dahnai, but that’s an entirely different set of problems.”

“They are trying to bankrupt me, buying all those birth gifts so close together,” Zaa complained, which made Jason laugh.

“I know that feeling,” he agreed. “Tim and Symone have already bought all the furniture for their nursery,” he chuckled. “They can’t wait for Lyra to be born.”

“A beautiful name,” Zaa mused.

“Lyra Melissa McGee Ayalle Karinne,” Jason said lightly, reciting her full name. “I’m sooo looking forward to them experiencing the un-fun parts of being a parent. They could come over and play with Rann and have all the fun, but they weren’t around for the middle of the night feedings or the diaper changes. My revenge is coming, and it shall be terrible to behold,” he declared, which made Zaa laugh.

“It will be Kumi’s first as well,” she noted.

“You know, I’m really surprised,” he mused. “She’s taking her pregnancy *way* more seriously than I expected. She’s gone to parenting classes and has talked with Jyslin about what to expect. Kumi sometimes seems immature when it comes to things other than business, but she’s showing a lot of maturity about this. I’m glad to see it. I was actually a little worried that I’d be all but fostering her child myself because she wouldn’t want the responsibility. I’m glad to have been proved wrong.”

“Things change when you’re suddenly responsible for more than yourself, Jason, as you well know,” Zaa told him, her holographic hand patting his shoulder. “Has she decided on a name?”

“Not yet. She won’t let Songa see if it’s a boy or a girl either. She said she wants it to be a surprise.”

“Kumi is a complicated young woman,” Zaa chuckled. “Are you still going to Jaxtra tomorrow?”

He nodded. “It’s almost scary how fast the cubs are growing,” he noted.

“That’s entirely natural. They’ll grow very fast for the first few months, then slow down somewhat. They’ll be ambulatory once they finish their initial growth, and that is when they’ll start causing Handmaiden Miaari problems,” she said with a click of her teeth.

“I can almost smell the *schadenfreude*, cousin,” he accused, turning and leaning against the windowsill, crossing his arms below his chest.

“The what?”

“It’s a word from the Terran *German* language. It means to take pleasure in the misfortune of others,” he explained, which made her laugh.

“This isn’t her first litter, cousin. She knows what’s coming,” she said, a touch smugly.

“And this must be why you’re resisting all the calls for you to have another litter.”

“I will be as Tim and Symone and enjoy the delights of the cubs of others without the troubles that comes with raising them myself,” she declared a touch airily, sticking her snout up and wagging her tail in an exaggerated manner.

“You are such a bitch,” he accused, which made her smile wolfishly in his direction.

Another Kimdori appeared in the hologram, one of her aides that Jason had never seen before. “It is time, my Denmother,” she called with a little bow.

“Thank you, Kemaari,” she nodded. “Oh yes, Jason, meet Kemaari, Miaari’s youngest sister. She will be arriving on Karis tomorrow to take up her new position as trainee in Miaari’s office. She has worked in the Hearth as a junior page for the last two weeks as reward for graduating at the top of her academy class, and has performed satisfactorily,” she said with an even look in her direction. That was as good as praise when it came to Zaa.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Grand Duke Karinne,” she said with a bow. That declaration made Jason look a little more closely at her. She was shorter than Kiaari by about half a head, willowy, with small furry breasts and narrow hips, but she had a longer tail than the norm for Kimdori females and a narrower snout, making her look more foxlike. She also had unusual coloration. Most Kimdori were a single color or had a belly of a lighter shade, but Kemaari had patches of black fur mixed in almost randomly on her honey-colored fur, almost like a monochrome calico, including a patch of black fur over her right eye that went up to her ear, making her left ear honey-colored and her right ear black. That patch of black also discolored her hair, which was a tawny shade a little lighter than her fur, almost like a lion. And since Kimdori never intentionally changed their appearance on homeworld, that was *natural*.

“A page, eh? That’s pretty prestigious for someone so young,” he noted.

“Do not give the young daughters of the Threxst clan even bigger heads than they have now, Jason,” Zaa protested. “Kiaari is almost insufferable as it is!”

“And whose fault is that for posting her to Terra?” he countered.

“A mistake I consider rectifying on a daily basis!”

Jason had to laugh. “Denmother does make a point, Kemaari. You have some very high expectations on you, given who your sisters are.”

“I can do only my best to prove my worth among them, Grand Duke Karinne.”

“Jason,” he corrected. “Or cousin. I’ll be looking forward to meeting you in person. You’re working for your sister?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m to be trained in the ways of Gamekeeping, and sister Miaari honored me by accepting my application to train under her,” she answered. “Cousin,” she added awkwardly.

“Well, there’s always room for another Threxst daughter on Karis,” Jason chuckled. “And better Miaari than Kiaari,” he added.

Zaa actually laughed. “I would not permit any trainee to train under *her*,” she affirmed. “Her methods are radical and experimental.”

“And that’s why you give her so much leash,” Jason said with a smile. “You’re letting someone without a reputation to risk to try new ways to do things, which among the Kimdori is almost heresy. If they pan out, good for Kiaari. If they don’t, well, she’s young and didn’t know any better.”

Zaa only smiled slightly.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he said teasingly. “If only the Kimdori knew how much of a scoundrel you are, Denmother.”

Zaa laughed, which took some of the mortified shock out of Kemaari’s face that Jason would say such a thing to the revered Denmother. “Even the Denmother must be able to play the game, and most often it is against her own children,” she admitted lightly. “But I must go now, cousin.”

“Alright, you gonna be at the council meeting?”

She shook her head. “I have more important duties to attend this evening.”

“Alright then. Kemaari, you *will* be at my house tomorrow afternoon for dinner. I want to get to know you,” he declared.

“A-As you wish, cousin,” she said, a bit hesitantly.

*Chiira, 7 Kiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 1 August 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 7 Kiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

Chirk had better count herself lucky that she was just too damn fucking important to murder and dump in the Karsa Bay.

Jason almost fumed as he sat at the desk in his office, looking at the 181 items in his inbox, all accumulated just *overnight*. Status reports. Intelligence reports from Miaari’s office. Financial reports from Kumi’s office, these done by Temika; she was taking on more and more responsibility over there. 61 different personal missives from the other Grand Duchesses in the *Siann*, all trying to sweet-talk him into deals, agreements, or mutual ventures. 37 different new trade or research proposals from the other empires.

But there were a few important ones in there, which Chirk did manage to put on the top of the pile...in some ways, Chirk knew even more of what was going on in the house and in the Confederation than Jason, since she read almost everything that came across his desk so she could better prioritize things for him. That was one reason why he valued her opinion and often consulted her, she wasn’t just his secretary, she was also one of his most trusted advisors.

The first important missive came from Myleena. Over the night, she’d sent Jason a missive rather than wake him up to let him know that the Imperium had successfully tested their prototype jump engine. It had



jumped from Draconis to a point in deep space near Menos and then to Terra, to utilize the Terra Entry Station to get back inside interdicted space. It was already modified to allow it to jump outbound through the interdiction effect, but that didn't help it get back *inside* the Imperium once it jumped out. That meant that the engine was viable, and after some inspections and final adjustments, the Ministry of Research and Development would present the technical specs to the Empress for her final authorization. Then the Imperium would upgrade their entire fleet and join the ranks of the empires that could jump in real time...all four of them—the Karinnes, the Kimdori, the Syndicate, and the Consortium. The refit was going to require them to more or less replace their engines, which was a *major* refit, so it was going to take time for the Imperium to fully convert their fleet to their new real-time jump engines. Myleena estimated that once they tooled their factories to produce the new engines, it would take the Imperium about a year to completely refit every military and merchant ship under the Imperial flag, and it would take the individual houses of the *Siann* maybe another six months to complete the upgrades to their private fleets. Dahnai couldn't sit on that technology and hold it just for the Imperial Navy and her own house. If she tried, the *Siann* would bounce her off her throne so fast even Jason wouldn't be able to save her.

That was going to change the balance of power in the Confederation, as well as the entire sector cluster. If Dahnai was smart, and she was, the first ships she'd refit with the new engines would be her scouts. The entire Confederation was swarming around the PR and PQ sectors looking for promising star systems, but the Merranes were also sending out scouts in the rest of the QMC and the QMD sectors, using their outpost colony over there as a hub to search for other systems to colonize. With the ability to jump her scouts in real time, she'd get to any valuable system *first*, file her claim on it over at the Confederate exploration bureau, then walk away with the lion's share of the good systems. After her scout fleet was upgraded, she'd be smart to upgrade her merchant marine fleet next, *then* her military fleet. Claiming a system did no good if she couldn't get supplies out there in a timely manner.

Miaari had received the same report and sent him a missive containing the status of other empires' progress in doing the same, predicting he'd want it. The combined research of the Shio and the Colonists were the

furthest along, and the Kimdori estimated they'd have a working engine in about four to six months. The Urumi were also close, Miaari estimating that they would manage it within six to eight months, but both Skaa nations and the Alliance had suffered some setbacks in their programs. The Skaa and Alliance had the dual problem of the engines *and* their power, since their current power plants couldn't put out the required power to allow a ship to jump in real time. Both empires had to revamp their power plant technology to increase the power to the engines before those engines would be real-time capable. The Colonies had the power plants, and had agreed to share that technology with the Shio in exchange for access to the ion weaponry they'd developed that was effective against plasma-powered ships, something Colonial iso-neutron weaponry couldn't duplicate.

He'd thought about this problem quite a bit and had decided that a subtle hand was what was necessary here. He'd allow the empires to do it themselves, at least up to a point. In two years, if the empires hadn't figured it out themselves, the Karinnes would give them some help secretly, to give them just enough time to upgrade their warships for the upcoming war with the Syndicate, if only to take the pressure off the Kimdori and the KMS to tow ships all over the place. He wasn't entirely sure he liked the idea of the entire Confederation real-time jump capable, but quite simply put, it was going to be *necessary*. It was going to give the Confederate empires a major advantage over just about everyone else in the galaxy, since *only* the Karinnes and the Kimdori had the capability to jump in real time where native empires were concerned. No other civilization of whom the Kimdori had knowledge had real-time hyperspace capability, and the advantage that would give the Confederate empires over non-Confederate empires could not be ignored. It would unleash the aggressive empires in the home sector cluster on the entire quadrant, and Jason had no doubt that more than one of them would engage in a secret little bit of conquering of tiny little backwater civilizations they encountered where they thought nobody else could see.

This was the biggest concern for Jason. He had no diplomatic hold over the other empires in the home quadrant when it came to them using their real-time engines to jump three or four sectors out, find some weak civilization, then conquer it. The right of passage treaties he had in the P quadrant *did* give him that hold, since the treaties were very specific and

very strict to protect less advanced civilizations against the rapacious Confederate empires. Half the reason he'd shaped the Confederation the way he had was to promote peace, to get the empires in the sector cluster so inter-dependent through trade and mutual protection treaties that they'd never go to war with each other again...but that didn't protect the little empires out there that had no diplomatic contact with Confederate empires, nor would it protect the technologically emergent species who had yet to develop space travel, species like the Rakarri.

The Rakarri. He had to switch over a hologram and take a look at the images his diplomatic team had sent. They now had established diplomatic contact with largest of the kingdoms of the Rakarri, secret contact in respect to the race as a whole, and were trading even more period-equivalent textiles for more Rakarri foodstuffs, primarily wool, cotton, and silk cloth for seeds and seedlings. Their fruits and vegetables had tested to be entirely compatible with the ecosystem on Exile, were entirely delicious, and they'd gone back for more seed so they could start producing Rakarri fare in massive quantities.

There was something going on over there, and it had Dahnai's perfumed stench all over it. The rules about their world were very strict, and Dahnai's people knew they were being watched like a hawk by the Karinnes, who kept a very visible sensor outpost in the system who had all of its arrays pointed at QMC-202-2, the Rakarri homeworld. They also had diplomatic contact with the largest kingdom with whom they'd organized their trade, where the king there had the ability to communicate with a representative from Yeri's state office using a non-biogenic comm unit, the only technology that they'd left on the planet. Dahnai knew he had it, and that he had been told that if there were any unauthorized landings by spaceships anywhere on Rakarra, he was to contact them *immediately*. But more than that, Denmother had left a contingent of Kimdori on the planet to both study the Rakarri from a sociological standpoint and also to be on-planet to make sure that Dahnai didn't meddle with Rakarri affairs.

But in the last 15 days, the king of that large kingdom had sent out diplomatic missions to all the other kingdoms on their continent to meet and discuss forming a council of kings, which would discuss matters that impacted their entire world, mainly the appearance of the "star people" of whom most of the kings had knowledge. His idea was to trade with the star

people, to present a unified Rakarri interest to bargain with the star people for their goods, for the good of all Rakarri. What he was proposing was suspiciously similar to the Confederation in its ideals, and if he managed to bring all the kings of Rakarra together to form a council, it would technically satisfy the *unification* clause that prevented Dahnai from inviting the Rakarri to join the Imperium. Dahnai couldn't invite the Rakarri to join the Imperium unless they *all* agreed to it, and if this king managed to join all the kings together, they could make that decision. Jason had this sneaking suspicion that one of Dahnai's diplomats had told him about that little clause, that if the Rakarri could unify, they could join the star people and sail into the skies and learn all about their amazing technology.

He sent a missive to Zaa telling her about that and relating his concerns. He asked her to find out if the Merranes were meddling, and if they were, to step on them. Hard.

He was a bit surprised when Chirk told him that Zaa wanted to talk to him, since he'd only sent the missive like two minutes ago. She appeared in front of his desk on a 2D hologram rather than the free-ranging full hologram, but she was in the Hearth, so that explained why. "I just read your missive, and I'll see to it," she said.

"I don't think you called me to tell me that."

She shook her head. "I wanted to tell you in person that the scouting operation has launched. All three ships *safely* navigated the wormhole, the crews are in hibernation, and are now en route to Andromeda. They will arrive in 2.45 years and will beat the Syndicate's arrival to our galaxy by 53 days. That will give them enough time to set up and gain penetration into Syndicate quantum vibration communications and conduct initial long-range sensor scans of the sector cluster at which they arrive."

"They all made it?"

"No damage to the ships, no injuries to the crews," she told him. "The crews are safely in hibernation and we are in constant contact with the ship computers, who are navigating the journey to Andromeda."

He sighed in relief, but still glowered at her a little bit. "And you will promise me here and now that you will *never* use that system again."

“It has served its purpose, cousin, and I’m already having it dismantled,” she replied calmly. “Even I agree that it is too dangerous to use in any but the most dire situations. Well, to me, this situation was dire enough to take that risk. We *must* have eyes and ears in Andromeda as quickly as we can get them there, and specifically before the Syndicate starts operations in our galaxy. It was worth the risk.”

He snorted. “Well, I don’t have to like it,” he declared.

“I will ferret out the truth of the Rakarri,” she told him. “But you should consider that perhaps they do this of their own accord. You yourself had said that they are highly intelligent. Perhaps the sudden knowledge that they are not alone in the universe is causing them to think in terms of *the world* rather than *the kingdom*. And should they join the Imperium, you should consider them eligible for induction into House Karinne,” she said lightly.

“They do tempt me, Denmother, in ways the *Gruug* never could,” he admitted. “They’re highly intelligent, and from what little I’ve studied about them, they’re a very impressive species. Their art is exceptional, they have high rates of literacy among their lay population, and scientifically speaking, they’re very high up on the bell curve for their technology level. I bet they could comprehend modern Confederate technology with sufficient education and training.”

“Speaking of the *Gruug*, have there been any other incidents on Exile?”

“Not since the attack on our planter,” he replied. “My manager over there managed to get the chief into a council, and they made a few agreements. The *Gruug* agreed to leave our farmlands alone, and they agreed to trade some of their hand-made leather, furs, pelts, game, and fish for farm yield and rudimentary tools, like spears and knives. I authorized it. The meat can feed New Karsa, and it helps that tribe of *Gruug*. And *Gruug* leather is turning out to be popular with the farm workers. It’s almost as tough as synth-leather, its even more flexible, and something about it naturally repels a species of biting insect that’s prevalent in the area, which is a *major* relief for the farm workers. When they use the *Gruug* leather, they don’t have to carry around insect repellents. Whatever the natural tanning methods are they’ve managed to work out, they’re pretty damn effective.”

“It shows that the *Gruug* are more intelligent than their brutish features suggest.”

“I already knew that, it’s just that they’re so primitive that they can be violent when confronted with things they can’t understand. That’s what makes them so different from the Rakarri. The Rakarri were very curious about our diplomats, not fearful.”

“I will relay your fears to my field team on Rakarra,” she told him again. “And I fear I must go. I’m fairly busy at the moment, cousin.”

“So am I. I think I’m gonna go in the front office and beat Chirk to death with my paddle,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the paddle, which hung in ominous prominence on the wall behind his desk and beside the window.

Zaa laughed. “Another full inbox?”

“Overflowing,” he said in disgust. “I think she does it just to torment me.”

“Welcome to independence, cousin,” she said.

“Oh, push off, Zaa,” he said waspishly, which made her laugh as her hologram winked out.

# Chapter 5

*Kaira, 1 Romaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Thursday, 30 August 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 1 Romaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

Swearing inwardly, Jason shut off his external comm so Jyslin could stop pestering him...after all, he was fighting for his life here.

Engaging the grav drives, he burst out from behind the covering wall far faster than he could have run, feeling a tiny bit of vibration through the mecha as he disengaged and put his feet back on the broken ground of the training range on Virga, part of the Camp Beranne Marine Training Base. With another Gladiator just beside him, the pair slid to a stop behind a wall, sliding on a foot and a knee, a hand going down as Jason felt the contour of the rock and pebbles under the fingertips of the mecha, felt the heat radiating from the rocks by the strong sunshine. Ebri put her back against the wall and fired a spinner directly up, which almost immediately went still and moved off the field as the control system marked it as killed, shot down by Kyva.

*Save your spinners, you'll never get them out of her range,* Jason chided as he cocked the external rail cannon in his other hand. *Did you see where that shot came from?*

*Nope,* she replied nervously. Of course she was nervous, *anyone* that was on the wrong side of the training field from Captain Kyva Karinne had damn good reason to be nervous. They were in a large-scale training exercise where Kyva and her squadmate were pitted against 5 Red Warriors and Jason. The three to one odds meant that the Red Warriors were only *slightly* outmatched.

Jason was both nervous and nearly giddy. He almost *never* got to do stuff like this, and now he understood why Symone loved rigging so much. He deployed one of his RVR drones, affectionately called Rover drones since they were built to resemble robotic Doberman Pinschers in both physiology and size. The drone unfolded into active mode and received orders, scampering off to the left at full speed. The RVR drones were fast, agile, and had damn good AI in them that made them very, *very* welcome assistants to Gladiator riggers in the field, since RVR drones were armed with pulse weapons. Several simulated pulse and rail shots screamed by the RVR as it dashed across an open area and got behind a wall, and several more shots followed it trying to lead it, the controlling computer calculating as if those shots had gone through the wall to hit the drone and deciding it had not. The visible appearance of those shots were pure illusion, just simulated visuals whose vectors were calculated by the control computer and fed into the sensory stream of his Gladiator to provide more realism, when in fact the wargame shots were invisible to the naked eye. The drone got safely out of their firing pattern, hunkered down in a shallow depression and deploying its *own* drone, a toy poodle-sized tracking drone designed to get eyes into cramped spaces. Jason called those quadrupedal drones Spot drones, both for what they were designed to do and the fact that it too was based off a dog's physiology. The Spot drone started sneaking forwards, its mission to get into a position where they could see where Kyva and her partner were hidden.

There was a reason it was Jason out there with Ebri rather than one of the members of the KBB or one of the other Red Warriors, and that was because Jason was the only Generation outside of Saelle rated to pilot a Gladiator. They needed him for this exercise, because they were compiling data to generate the training simulator programs for jacked riggers, and the program engineers decided that having data from two riggers capable of full sensory immersion would help their programming. The fact that Jason merged to his Gladiator in a manner different from Kyva didn't matter in what they were doing, since what they needed most was the sensory transfer from mecha to pilot, and *that* data didn't matter if it was fed by jack or by biogenic communion. This wargame had two objectives, to help Kyva acclimate to running her rig with a jack, and to help compile data to be used to create the new training program for the rest of the riggers.



What the programmers were building was very similar to Yila's idea, for the simulator would be *simsense*, introducing sensory feeds into the regular training simulators. And to get proper *simsense* data, they needed two *simsense*-capable pilots so they could get a broader range of data. They were building a simulator program to train Gladiator riggers, but Jason was of a mind to take their finished product, strip it down a bit, replace Gladiators in the simulator with a simplified exomech, then market it as a *game*.

This was the last phase of Kyva's assimilation training, which she had completed a few days faster than usual thanks to a seemingly natural compatibility with the jack, and that was assimilating her to using her jack with her rig in combat situations. In all other respects, Kyva was fully trained with her jack and capable of accessing all of a jack's functions, which made her just one step below a Generation. She could merge to computers that were designed with that ability—which was every computer on Karis—she could control computers via jack, she could utilize the interface computer plugged into the jack as a “secondary brain” that was under her control, giving her the ability to use the computer's memory as her own or have the interface computer write memory directly to her brain's memory centers, giving Kyva virtually all the same abilities that Jason had with his gestalt. The only thing Kyva couldn't do with her interface that Jason could do with his gestalt was have it amplify her telepathy. It was capable of everything else, even accessing the planetary biogenic network thanks to the biogenic chips in the interface.

Kyva and Justin were the first non-Generations that had entered that private and somewhat hallowed area. Much like how Tim and Temika had reacted long ago back when Kumi was brought to the Legion after nearly being killed, the Generations were a bit leery of Kyva and Justin venturing into what before was a place *just* for Generations. They weren't used to the idea that non-Generations could hear the planet-wide broadcasts that they sometimes sent out, the Generations talking openly to each other over the network. Things were a little quiet in the network for a few days after Justin and Kyva started exploring this new area, but they were getting used to it.

And they'd created a hidden segment of the biogenic network *only* for Generations, where they could talk about things only Generations would really understand or care about.

Kyva was a holy terror in a Gladiator before she was jacked, but now... holy *shit*. It was more than just the response time increase. The addition of sensory input *from* the Gladiator had increased Kyva's fighting ability to almost frightening levels, for the same reason that Jason was also quite formidable in a rig despite not having formal Gladiator combat training. Jason could feel the warm, dry wind against the chassis of his rig, and could smell the dust in the air thanks to the sensors in his rig's exostructure. He could feel the texture of the rock under his hand and feel the heat radiating from the rocks. The sensory immersion made him more alert, more responsive, gave him that esoteric *something* that dialed him fully into his rig and into the wargame. Jason did have basic combat training from his Legion days and was familiar with small unit tactics, which were deployed in mecha to mecha combat, so he wasn't a fifth wheel out there in the Urban Combat Simulator Range, a series of ruined buildings with lots of walls and debris, mimicking a war-torn city in which street to street fighting was being conducted.

*Fuck, she just got Kanri*, Ebri growled as she pumped the lower slide of her railgun, loading and cocking it for auto-fire. Jason saw Kanri's telemetry disappear off his status screen, meaning that she'd been shot down. *I hate fighting Kyva in these fucking games.*

*Look at it this way, she makes you better when you're fighting other people*, Jason told her lightly as he deployed his monomolecular blade, then held it up just enough so the polished blade just crested the wall. He looked at the reflection in the blade to see if he could see anything moving, since his drones couldn't see anything and Kyva would shoot down any spinner they tried to launch. He kept it up there for only a heartbeat, then pulled it down before Kyva saw it and started shooting at the wall behind which they were hiding. *Still can't find her*. A quiver in the ground under his hand caught his attention, caused by the heavy weight of a Gladiator moving. *She's moving, I'm getting some ground vibration.*

Ebri gripped her railgun and started looking around, her Gladiator's head unit swinging to and fro as she panned her sensors in every direction.

In a split second, things went completely insane. Kyva's black Gladiator appeared over the wall, and only Jason's fast reflexes saved him from instant "death." He and Ebri rolled to each side and came up firing, but

Kyva was already on the move, running in a strafing path around Jason as she avoided several shots from Jason's pulse cannons, putting Jason between herself and Ebri and keeping Ebri from firing on her. Jason felt that was way too easy, and he turned his gun the other way just in time to see Kyva's partner dart out from cover; Kyva had decoyed them to give her partner a chance to get into firing position. Jason took three shots at her, all of them missing, then he and Ebri rejoined and dashed away themselves, Ebri laying down covering fire to keep both Kyva and Zabra pinned down as they found cover behind a broken wall, a pile of rocky rubble to their side to further protect them from strafing attacks.

*And here I thought you spent all your time sitting behind a desk reading,* Kyva called tauntingly as Jason panted a bit inside the cockpit, the "exertion" of the Gladiator feeding back into his own biorhythms. *I never expected to see you move that fast, your Grace.*

*Why don't you come out from behind that wall and see how fast I can move, bitch?* he retorted. Contact between enemy teams was against the rules, but he was the Grand Duke and she was *Captain Kyva Karinne*...the controllers weren't going to say all that much.

*I should, you and Ebri are the only ones left,* she replied cheekily. *You just cost a lot of girls a lot of credits, Jason. They were all betting you'd be the first one shot down.*

*I'm so glad to ruin their day,* he shot back as he cocked his railgun, pumping the slide like an old-fashioned shotgun. *And you're gonna pay for coming after me last, just because you don't think I'm a threat.*

*Promises, promises,* she taunted.

*That arrogant bitch, I'm gonna take her down or die trying,* Jason fumed privately to Ebri. His Spot drone got a visual on Zabra, who slid to a stop behind a wall about 60 shakra to their left. *Zabra's over there,* he informed, pinging her location on the tactical map that he and Ebri were sharing between them. *I bet Kyva's somewhere in front or to the right waiting to get us in a crossfire. They think we're gonna be easy cause I'm not a Red Warrior. Let's use that against them.*

*You do think like a rigger, your Grace,* Ebri replied with some surprised respect in her thought.

*Thank my wife, she taught me small unit tactics back when I was in the Legion, he answered. You're the better rigger here, Ebri. Let's set Zabra up for being taken out. I'll pull her out of cover, and you take her out, then we'll split up and try to get Kyva in a crossfire.*

Ebri raised her arm and fired the nested pulse weapons, and a Spot drone immediately deactivated. It was one of Kyva's drones. *Well, they knew where we were anyway, so no loss, Ebri growled. I'm not sure if she has any RVR drones left.*

*Probably, Jason answered. He did a sweep looking for any RVR drones from the "killed" members of his squad, but they were all deactivated. Kyva and Zabra had found and killed them all, with Jason's drone the last one...if only because he hadn't deployed until just now. That drone was holding fast in its crater, staying hidden and watching for any movement. I'll work my way towards Zabra and then lure her out of cover. You kill her the instant she clears cover, then we just have to figure out a way to kill Kyva.*

*Got it.*

Jason swung his legs over the pile of debris and stayed low as he worked his way around Zabra, who was stationary, probably waiting for Kyva's command. Jason kept his scanners wide as he moved, slipping from cover position to cover position, and just as he was about in position to lure Zabra out of her cover, Kyva's black gladiator blazed into view around a wall just as Jason moved to cross a street. Jason reacted almost instinctively, rolling to the side as several pulse shots came in his direction, and as he raised his rail cannon to return fire, Kyva was gliding forward on her gravometric drive, her monomolecular blades extended. Kyva had a tendency to do that, to close into melee range and engage her opponents blade to blade like a knight of old. Jason set his foot and knee and rose up just as she reached him, snapping her blade wide with his rifle, using it like a shield, then he grabbed hold of her Gladiator, twisted, and threw her in an Aikido shoulder throw. He threw his ruined rail cannon aside and deployed his own blades as Kyva rolled back to her feet almost seamlessly, then he weaved back and to the side when Zabra popped up on his scanner, rising up to take a shot at him while he was busy with Kyva. But Ebri was waiting for that, and as two rail shots went over his head, Ebri jumped up and took her own shot at Zabra. Zabra had missed Jason, but Ebri didn't miss Zabra.

Her telemetry went out as the control computer deemed her dead, and he heard Zabra curse loudly and sulfurously over STG as her rig fell face first over the wall, disabled by the control computer to make her lay there dead, just like all the other rigs she and Kyva had killed during the wargame.

Jason feinted surging forward to engage Kyva, but then he suddenly turned and dove over a nearby wall, which gave Ebri a clear line of fire on Kyva. Kyva reacted just as fast as he did, a cloud of dust heralding the activation of her glide drive as she zoomed away from him, her pulse cannons extended and firing at Ebri as she swung in a wide circle around his partner. He felt the rocks slide under him as he rolled through his dive over the wall, then he was up and running to try to keep Kyva from flanking Ebri, putting her between him and Kyva to keep him from firing on her... which was too late. Ebri's rig pitched backwards as it was taken offline, her telemetry vanishing from his stream as Kyva took her down, leaving him alone against the most dangerous rigger in the entire Confederation.

*You're all mine now, your Grace,* Kyva purred tauntingly as she vanished into the dust kicked up by Ebri's fall. *Should I just take you down now, or shoot pieces off your rig until you surrender?*

*You're overlooking something, woman,* Jason retorted as he took a deep, cleansing breath and closed his eyes.

*And what is that?*

*I cheat,* he answered. He reached out not with his sensors, but with his talent, finding Kyva's mind, then he used that location to focus on her rig. He snapped an arm up, his Gladiator's hand appearing over the wall, and Kyva gave a shout of surprise over STG as her rig was lifted into the air; Jason's Gladiator wasn't a loaner from the base, it was *his* rig, the one that stood on the pad at the strip, and it had a tactical gestalt in it. Jason pulled Kyva nearly thirty shakra into the air, then with a slash of his hand, he literally threw her to the side. Shards of rock went flying when her rig was slammed through a rocky wall—

And his rig went dark. He was about to protest, but he saw a red blip on the internal holo representing rig functions, and realized that Kyva had shot him with her rail cannon just as she hit the wall...and that impressed the *fuck* out of him, that she could aim that precisely while moving so

erratically. Even as she was being thrown through the air, she was able to dead-center his rig with her rail cannon. And that shot was *fatal*, it had gone right through the cockpit. Had they been in a real fight, Jason would be dead.

*Ha! Even when you cheat, you lose!* Kyva taunted.

*Yeah yeah, keep talking,* Private, he retorted, which made her laugh brightly both over STG and mentally.

“Exercise complete,” the range officer called over STG. “All rigs return to staging area for stand-down and debrief.”

Jason’s rig came back online, as did all other rigs and all disabled drones. His lone deployed RVR and spot drones bounded back to him, the Spot drone folding into carry mode and attaching to the RVR, then the RVR went into standby mode and reattached to the outer leg of his rig. Zabra pulled herself off the wall and walked with him as they started back for the staging area, pushing playfully at his shoulder when she reached him. *That was a cheap trick, your Grace.*

*I’m fairly well known as an outrageous cheater, so why are you so surprised?* he replied, which made her laugh.

*Despite that, I’m impressed, your Grace. I thought you’d just flounder around out here.*

*I’ve had combat training, Zabra,* he answered as he scooped up his broken rail cannon. *I wasn’t about to embarrass myself out here.*

Her Gladiator’s head turned in his direction. *Well, you didn’t,* she assured him.

*Kyva does owe me a new rail cannon,* he noted, holding up the damaged weapon. It was a dummy weapon, built for and only used in training. Kyva’s blades were also dummies, exercise blades, so they were blunted, but the sheer force of her blade hitting the cannon had nearly snapped it in half.

*That was fast thinking,* she sent approvingly. *That move kills almost everyone else.*

*I have hand to hand combat experience,* he replied dryly. *Something I think she wasn't expecting when she charged me.*

*I wouldn't. After all, you're a Grand Duke. You sit behind a desk all day,* she sent liltingly, then recoiled with a laugh when he raised the back of his hand towards her.

"How's the data looking?" he asked over STG.

"Looking good, your Grace, we got some excellent data off your and Captain Kyva's telemetry streams," came the reply. "With all the other data we've collected, we should have a framework for the training simulation software ready in a few days."

"Happy to help, especially when it means I get to do something fun," Jason replied with a chuckle.

The eight rigs walked into the staging area, where technicians, range control personnel, and the programmers were waiting for them. Kyva opened her rig's cockpit doors and grinned broadly at Jason from behind her helmet's visor as he did the same, and she laughed when Jason flipped her off in the Faey fashion as his doors fully opened and he unlocked his armor from his cockpit. Both of them disconnected the hardline fibers into their armor, then Jason jumped down to the ground, taking his helmet off as Kyva joined him. *That's what you get for cheating,* she teased. *Next time don't pick me up, that just gave me a visual on you.*

*I'll remember that,* he answered. *And you owe me a new rail cannon.*

*That was your fault, you were supposed to die right then and there.*

*Push off, bitch,* he sent waspishly, which made her laugh and wink at him.

Jyslin, however, wasn't about to be denied. *[Jason, either you answer your wife, or she will do something truly ugly to me,]* Cybi warned him.

Jason laughed aloud, which made Kyva glance at him. "Sorry, Cybi said something," he said aloud, then used the biogenic network to get in touch with Jyslin. *[I didn't forget, woman. We're almost done here, and I'll be there on time.]*

*[You'd better, buster! This is our first game as the owners!]*

*[I'll be leaving here in just a few minutes,]* he assured her. *[How's the holo-cast looking?]*

*[Trelle's garland, love, it's incredible!]* she replied. Myleena, not satisfied with the idea that they couldn't attend the first game of the Karis Paladins in person on Menos, had come up with a rather clever alternative. She'd spent nearly a takir building a portable holo-grid and installed it over the batchi pitch in the Karsa Sports Complex, got permission to deploy 32 small holo-cameras in the Menos stadium, and using them, they were going to holo-cast the game, projecting the players onto *their* field as if they were playing in the KSC instead of on Menos. After the game was over, the grid system folded up into a storage configuration the size of a standard Stick cargo container, something that could be easily stored in the stadium's warehouse. They'd sold tickets to the stadium at a quarter of the usual price so anyone that wanted to watch the holo-cast could do so from the stadium, almost as if they were at the real game, and the stadium sold out in 12 seconds. Even holo-casted, people wanted to be in the stadium watching, and the quality of Myleena's incredibly ingenious system would make it hard to tell that the figures moving around on the pitch were holograms instead of actual players. Jyslin had all but demanded that Myleena install a permanent version of her idea in the stadium so they could holo-cast all away games the same way, something they could simply retract like a roof when it wasn't needed rather than having a removable system that had to be installed and removed over and over.

Ardalla Koyanne, Grand Duchess of the Highborn house of Koyanne and owner of the Menos Predators, was already beating Myleena's door down trying to get the specifics of Myleena's holo-casting system, after she found out what the extra holo-cameras were for. Nobody had *ever* thought of doing what Myleena did before, holo-casting a batchi game onto the pitch of another stadium, and Ardalla could smell the extra revenue from doing exactly what Jyslin did, holo-cast the game onto the home pitch for ticket-buying, concession-buying, and souvenir-buying spectators. The holo-cast system would all but allow every game to be a home game.

Jason had the feeling that Myleena was about to patent yet another invention and get even *more* rich than she already was.



*[The holograms on the field look like real people, and there's no flickering or anything!]* Jyslin continued.

*[That's Myli for ya,]* Jason replied lightly as he took off his helmet. *[Is Dahnai still on schedule?]*

*[Yeah, she just called me a few minutes ago, she's about to leave Karvectos. She said she'll be here in about an hour.]*

Dahnai was coming to Karis for three reasons. Firstly, and officially, she was taking a short vacation. Red Horn had completed her new Summer Palace just yesterday, and she was going to spend six days at her new palace to set it up to her liking, including bringing the permanent staff and guards that would occupy the palace even when Dahnai wasn't on Karis.

Secondly, she was going to attend the first Paladins match of the IBL season with Jason, which was something of a break of tradition. The Empress usually attended the first match of the IBL season for the reigning IBL champions, which was the Karvectos Blades, and there was a big hoopla over it. The second match she attended was the Draconis home team, the Immortals. But Dahnai had decided to attend the holo-cast of the Paladin match *after* attending the Blades match, where they defeated the Arctus Dreadnaughts 16-15, mainly because she was coming to Karis anyway. There was some grumbling back in Dracora because she wasn't attending the Immortals match second, but they were playing away for their first match, which was a tradition as well because the Empress always attended the home match of last year's IBL champion. It was a break that she'd be attending the Paladins match second, but she'd still be there for the first Immortals home match of the season.

Thirdly, tomorrow morning, Dahnai was having a cyberjack implanted.

Three days ago, he'd gotten the official sign-off from Songa, and yesterday, all the relevant data for cyberjack technology was released to the public domain archives of the Academy's mainframe. It was public domain data that explained what they were, how to build them, and how to install them. Songa had already trained a team of Academy doctors in the implantation procedure using non-Karinne technology, utilizing microscopic remote probes that would lay the datafibers without damaging the surrounding brain tissue, and they'd mapped out implantation

procedures for every race in the Confederation except for the Prakarikai... which Jason would rather prefer them never getting it, but that wasn't really his decision. The prototype jack implanted in Yila had passed all the tests, and Yila had completed her assimilation training nearly a week ahead of schedule. Like Kyva, she displayed a natural aptitude for the jack. Yila was fully jack-capable, the jack was operating perfectly, and that was all they were waiting for to release the data to the general galactic population via the Academy.

As promised, Jason scheduled Dahnai's procedure right after releasing the data, and also as promised, Overseer Brayrak Kruu would be Songa's third non-Karinne patient. Brayrak was also on Karis and would attend the batchi match in the owner's box, but he'd arrived almost five hours ago.

Brayrak wouldn't be the first Moridon with a jack. Every single Moridon in the house already had a jack, and Mahja Siyhaa had been the first. Like the Overseer, she *immediately* saw the potential of the devices, and within 15 minutes of the jacks being offered to the Karinne population, Siyhaa had her appointment to receive a jack.

She hadn't been the first to get a jack, though. Every single member of 3D except for Jason and Myleena had been jacked, *including* the Faey members, and they'd been literally waiting in line to get jacks when Jason authorized jack implantation to be opened to the house. Tom was officially the first person to get a non-prototype jack, and Luke had been the second recipient. The jack implantations had caused a little bit of a slowdown over at 3D because they all had to undergo assimilation training, but in Jason's mind, that was time they'd get back once the advantages of the jack started seeping into the way things worked over there.

The first non-3D house member to receive a jack was Chirk. The jacks were actually much easier to implant in a Kizzik due to their brain architecture and the fact that the jack could mount directly onto the exoskeleton, and in a way, the jack suddenly made all that work Jyslin did on the scent-language translators obsolete. Since the interface attached to that jack had a microphone and speaker, could "hear" and "speak," it was directly feeding sound to Chirk's brain through the parts of her brain that processed *smell*, allowing her to "smell" sounds just like the translators did, and allowed her to speak through the interface without need of using her

scent-language, by using command thought, something that the old scent translators that emulated interfaces couldn't do. Where it became a big deal was because the jacked interface was allowing her to "hear" without her translator unit, which was a tiny bit bulky due to the scent cartridges it had to carry. The work Jyslin did to create the vocabulary for the sounds made her work not entirely pointless, but Chirk no longer needed the scent-translation unit thanks to the cyberjack. It was doing all the work the translator did and was doing it a little better since they'd had plenty of data to refine the programs and upgrade to make them more effective. And Chirk finished her jack assimilation training in *eight days*, proving that Kizzik were far, far more than even the Imperium ever thought they were.

It was almost funny how fast those things had caught on within the house. They'd only been offering them to the house for about 16 days, and already, the Karinne Medical Service had a 31 day waiting list for jacks, and Songa was almost in a frenzy to certify more doctors to perform the procedure, which was only keeping up with growing demand. They were implanting jacks over at the annex 29 hours a day, 10 days a takir, in a nearly assembly-line procedure where the operating table was unoccupied only long enough to prepare it for the next patient. A doctor would work his 10-hour shift and be replaced by another doctor, keeping the 80 implant procedure theaters in the Medical Annex in constant operation and occupation. Songa was also having to convert more and more examination rooms into implant theaters, because the waiting list for jacks grew almost exponentially by the *hour*, including opening implant theaters in satellite hospitals and clinics all over Karis. As more and more house members read about the jacks and understood what they could do, they were signing up for them. The C540 cost was in no way a deterrent, either.

It got so bad that Jason had to prioritize appointment slots based on need. Those who would get jacks for free because they qualified as "critical need" for jacks were given priority in the Medical Annex, where they had the most doctors that could perform the procedure, further prioritized so KMS members had priority over civilian critical need cases, and it would stay that way until Songa got more theaters up and running and trained more doctors to perform the procedure. Songa's goal was to make it so every doctor in the Karinne Medical Service could perform the procedure,

and for the next few years, she estimated that it would be their most commonly performed medical procedure.

And much to Jason's relief, the Faey in the house were not avoiding them in the numbers he feared they would. Some Faey wouldn't get a jack for fear of damaging talent, no matter how many times they were reassured, but Faey were putting themselves on the list for jacks in large numbers. Jason had a feeling that the first time many of them saw a picture of Kyva, with that jack socket behind her left ear, it assuaged a lot of their fears. And she'd been happy to let them take that picture to show the Faey in the house that it was safe. It was safe enough for Ducal Champion Captain Kyva Karinne to get a jack, and she was still a hero in the house to a whole lot of people.

Kyva had been the first Faey with a jack, and in just 16 days, she went from unique in the KMS to merely somewhat rare. The entire command staff in the KMS had jacks. Most of the ship captains had jacks. Virtually all the engineering departments on KMS vessels had jacks. Fighter pilots and exomech riggers were almost fighting each other in their meeting rooms over who got the earliest appointment times for jack implantations, and there had been a bit of wheeling and dealing going on where enterprising individuals were selling their appointment slots to others, at least until Jason stamped that out.

Jason was glad that assimilation training wasn't a one-on-one experience, that a single assimilation trainer could train an entire room full of students. Most of it was software interaction, with the trainer there to answer questions and troubleshoot problems.

Assimilation trainers were having the same problems that Songa was... too many students and not enough trainers. Every class was standing room only, but they'd created a CivNet version where students were taking the classes over CivNet, which seemed to be working out fairly well. The trainer simply made himself available for viddy chat as students worked through the training regimen, and the students were scoring just as if they were attending the physical classes.

Dahnai would be the second non-house member with a jack and the first one getting a non-prototype model, and that fact had actually caused some problems for her with the *Siann*. Several of the most conservative members

and a few of the Highborns objected to the *Empress* allowing someone to tinker directly with her brain, as if the Karinnes were installing a mind control device in her. The idea was laughable, at least until it became apparent that it was *exactly* what several Grand Duchesses of the *Siann* believed. They thought that Jason was going to use the jack to turn Dahnai into a puppet—some of them *already* thought that Jason had some kind of control over Dahnai anyway—and it was feeding some paranoia in the *Siann*.

Dahnai, never one to be denied something she wanted, solved the problem in a rather clever manner. When the Grand Duchesses started to confront Dahnai over her plans, she retaliated not with decrees or angry ultimatums, but with *science*. She arranged with Jason to have a large contingent of doctors from the Medical Service to go to Karis and learn about the jacks, how they worked, and more importantly, how to implant one using the techniques that the Karinne branch of the Medical Service had pioneered for outside medical personnel to use. When they returned, Dahnai called up doctor after doctor in open court and had them give testimony about the jacks, and every single one of them stated in court, before the entire *Siann*, that it was physiologically impossible for a Faey brain to be controlled by a jack. They didn't connect to any part of the brain that would allow it to be controlled, and they were designed in a way that made it impossible for them to erase memories already in place within the mind, so the concept of *delete and reprogram* also didn't go anywhere. The Grand Duchesses fell grouchingly silent after three straight days of over 100 highly experienced and respected doctors from several medical fields all standing before them and saying the same thing. Some of them didn't believe it, some of them didn't *want* to believe it, but if the Medical Service said it, then they believed it. And not even the Grand Duchesses had the balls to go up against the Medical Service.

That was something that needed to be done anyway. Only Songa had the skill to teach other doctors how to implant the jacks without using Karinne technology, since she was the one that invented the procedure. She'd trained some 200 doctors from the Imperial Medical Service, and they would take that back to the Imperium along with the equipment that Songa had invented, as well as the specs so the Imperium could build new implantation hardware themselves.

*[Is everyone else there?]*

*[Yes, except for Dahnai and you,]* Jyslin retorted. Jyslin was already at the stadium with some of the front office and most of the strip girls, their husbands, and the kids, while Frinia was at Menos to attend the game in person. Yila was at the home game of her own team, but they did have a couple of extra visitors who had come to their inaugural game. Secretary Moon and Anya Suralle were already on Karis and were probably either at the stadium or going to the stadium. Miaari, Kiaari, and Kemaari would also be there, much to Jason's delight. Everyone in the family adored Kemaari, including Miaari, though she would never admit that in front of her youngest sister. Kemaari was a total sweetheart, gentle and kind, and didn't seem to have the right temperament to be going into the family business of spying. But she was a very determined young Kimdori, and playing the game was what she wanted to do with her life, so here she was. Aura would also be there, and that would more or less fill up the owner's box, as well as the two boxes to each side of his, which would be filled with his cabinet and the winners of a raffle in the KMS, much akin to the raffle that Mikano had won that allowed her to attend Rann's birthday party. Twenty officers and enlisted had won the drawing to attend the game's holocaust and got to sit in the luxury boxes. But unlike last time when someone he knew won the raffle, this time he didn't know any of the winners.

Jason checked in with the range control officers only long enough to make sure they didn't need him anymore, then he joined Shen and Suri. They escorted him to the Naval corvette *Brekanne*, one of the combat variants, and its crew of four pulled up from the barren, desert-like landscape of untterraformed Virga and started south. Jason started taking off his armor back in the gunnery compartment as he talked with someone he knew very well, Marine Colonel Jaxira "Jax" Karinne. She was acting as an observer in the corvette instead of commanding her Marine corvette, the *Ranger*, one of the Marine corvette captains that had been temporarily assigned to the Navy to train Naval corvette captains in Marine procedures and get Naval training in using a corvette as an attack craft, since the Marines were adding more and more combat variant corvettes to their fleet. The captain of the corvette, Ilmari Soyanne, was also sitting with them back in the gunnery compartment as one of the gunners sat up in the cockpit to

give them room. *I see you pulled observer duty, Jax,* Jason sent as Shen and Suri helped him take off his armor. A comfy tee shirt, pair of jeans, and sneakers were waiting for him in the carry bag Shen had been toting around. *How's it been going?*

*So far so good, your Grace,* she answered, brushing her straight silver hair out of her pretty face. *I won't bore you with all the tedious details.*

*Good. I'm not here to listen to you whine,* he replied with a grin, which made her laugh. *How's the shop doing?*

*Just fine,* she replied with a smile. *I'm making even more money now. Seems decorative overlays on interfaces has become something of a fad, and it's something we can make cheaply and easily.*

*Long as they don't break them,* Jason sent easily as Shen and Suri pulled his backplate and breastplate apart, and he put on his tee shirt. *And how have you been, Ilmari? I see they haven't pried you out of your corvette yet.*

The tall, willowy, middle-aged woman laughed, her voice light and musical. Ilmari was one hell of a good singer. *As if you didn't know, I'll be moving up next takir,* she answered. *I'm taking over the destroyer Aurora.*

*Actually, I didn't know,* he replied. *I have so much junk in my inbox that I probably just haven't gotten to it yet. Congratulations.*

*Thank you, your Grace,* she smiled. *I almost turned down the offer of command. I've been a fighter jockey too long.*

*I'm sure you'll do great,* he assured her.

Jason was decked out in casual attire by the time the corvette landed on the VIP pad behind the stadium, where Jyslin and Brayrak Kruu were waiting. Again, the Moridon Overseer surprised Jason quite a bit with his attire, since he was wearing a pair of multi-pocketed shorts and a Terran style tank top with the Paladins logo on it, which Jason saw was probably one of the few pullover style shirts a Moridon could get on with those horns. Jyslin was wearing a Paladins tee shirt that showed her growing baby bump and sexy shorts, as well as a baseball cap with the Paladins logo on it. Jyslin would be moving to maternity wear very soon. She gave him an excited hug when he got off the corvette, then hung off him a little bit as he

shook hands with Brayrak. “I see you still know how to dress casually, Overseer.”

“I am not here in any official capacity, so I will dress entirely for comfort,” he replied with a slight smile. “And did your errand go well?”

“I got my ass kicked, but I still had fun,” he replied.

The box upstairs was very crowded with kids, girls from the strip, and the overly tall Moridon who remembered all of the kids from the birthday party and engaged them in conversation as he sat on a modified seat sized for him. It was even more crowded because Aya had sent 12 guards to stand watch in the box and in the passageway that reached it, and Marine Honor Guard units were posted all around the stadium for additional security. It would get even more crowded when Dahnai arrived with her family, which his gestalt told him had just transited to Draconis and were making the cruise from the Karvectos gate to the Karis gate. Jason had already warned Dahnai that they weren’t going to greet them at the pad, that the guards would escort her straight to the box, mainly because Dahnai would arrive only about 15 minutes before the start of the match. The holocaust below on the pitch showed that the teams were doing their warmups, and the stadium speakers were blaring Faey goth. The video was from the stadium on Menos, but the audio was all local, including the PA and play by play announcers. That way they didn’t have to listen to the Menos announcers get excited when the Predators players did something good.

“Ah, this should be fine,” Kim said eagerly as the teams trotted off the field for their final conferences before they were formally introduced. “And this holographic system is amazing, Jason. They look entirely real, even on vidy,” he added, pointing at the flat hologram showing a camera view of the pitch, which let those in the luxury box see more than just tiny figures running around on the distant pitch.

“Myleena cooked it up in about four days. That woman is just too smart for her own good,” Jason chuckled as Rann bounced up and down on his lap in anticipation. “How are the Warriors doing in New York?”

“Still not a very good team, but they still sell out the stadium,” he replied. “They’re even more popular now than when they moved to Terra. If I recall, they’ll play your Paladins on Terra next month.”



“Yeah, and I’m going to be there for that one,” Jason replied. “I can’t pass up a chance to go back to Terra.”

Aya gave him a short look from the side of the box.

“I don’t often have the time to attend the matches, but they’ve certainly taken their place with the other major sports teams in the city. New York now has the second highest Faey population on Terra behind Los Angeles, and I suspect the Warriors are part of it,” he chuckled. “They moved a small army of club workers here when they moved from Arctus. It was their entire operation.”

“Blame Maeri for that, or maybe thank her,” Jason laughed. “It was the Trillanes being dicks that made Herri move the team.”

Herri Melanne was a truly unique case. She owned the Warriors, and she was the only IBL owner that *wasn’t* a noble. Herri Melanne was the richest commoner in the Imperium, owner of a multi-empire corporation that bought and sold foodstocks and textiles, with offices in every empire in the sector, including tiny satellite offices on Zyagya and Moridon. Her corporation specialized in importing unattainable foods and textiles into neighboring empires where there was a demand. She was entirely self-made as well, growing up in the slums of Trekatos City and climbing higher up the ladder than any commoner had ever managed to go with a combination of intelligence, foresight, guts, and taking advantage of opportunity when it presented itself. She was also well known to keep her corporation strictly and utterly neutral in all things when it came to politics. Melanne Imports was in the business of importing foods and textile goods into empires where they weren’t usually available, not playing politics. This made her an enigma in Faey society, a woman who had immense wealth, but didn’t use her wealth in the pursuit of power. Herri was content in her business ventures, and as far as Jason was concerned, was damn smart to stay well clear of any form of politics.

Herri had caused something of a firestorm in the Arctus system when she pulled a move akin to the old Baltimore Colts...she moved her team without warning, literally in the dead of night. Arctus had *four* IBL teams in the system of three inhabited planets and five inhabited moons around two gas giants, more than any other system by *far*, and that had been a point of personal pride for the Trillanes, Emalles, and Ivannes, the three noble

houses that called the Arctus system their homes. Even if the Trillanes only owned the Arctus Dreadnaughts, the fact that the Joliki Berserkers who were owned by the Highborn house of Emalle, the Plora Centurions who were owned by the Highborn house of Ivanne, and the then Hakra Warriors also played within their capitol system had been more than a little source of boasting for Maeri in the *Siann*. Arctus wasn't wholly owned by the Trillanes, but they'd been the largest and most powerful of the houses that called the Arctus system home. The Emalles and Ivannes were actually splinter houses of the Trillanes that had achieved Highborn status themselves, and the other two habitable planets in the system had been apportioned out to those new houses when the Trillane house split into three houses.

Which was a lesson in how cunning the Trillanes were. That had happened 450 years ago, and at the time, the entire *Siann* thought that the Grand Duchess Trillane was absolutely nuts, but time proved how smart that move turned out to be. the Grand Duchess wasn't thinking in terms of herself or the immediate future, she made those moves with her eyes two or three generations of Grand Duchesses down the line, and that foresight paid off. Both of her identical twin daughters were so intelligent and suited for the throne that instead of awarding the house to just one, she created two new houses for them to rule and made her next eldest daughter her heir, who was herself easily as intelligent as her sisters. She divided the house's holdings between herself and her daughters, with the Trillanes naturally keeping the lion's share, but deft political maneuvering by all three houses working together had turned the two splinter houses into Highborns within 100 years, made the Emalles and Ivannes powerful houses within the *Siann*, and gave the Trillanes a solid roster of allies on the Highborn Council. Since all three houses were descended from the same family, they were a solid power block within the *Siann* with which the others had to contend.

But even family loyalty had limits. When the Trillanes tried to take the throne, the Emalles and Ivannes supported them right up until Maeri's duplicity was made public, then they dropped her like a cold fish.

Herri had her Warriors based on the moon of Hakra, but after the Trillanes pulled their little stunt, Herri decided that she wanted to move her team somewhere a little more stable and a little less apt to get involved in a war with the Empress. So she picked up her entire organization, loaded it

onto transports in the six-day long night of Hakra as it passed behind the gas giant it orbited, then moved everything to New York City, seeing the potential of bringing an IBL team to Terra given how sports-crazy Terrans were. She moved the team before she even had a deal with the city, since no city would be insane enough to say no to an IBL team. The governor of Hakra was righteously pissed off by the move, but there was little she could do. Herri owned the stadium the Warriors played in outright and had no binding contract or lease with the moon, so she had the right to move her team whenever she pleased. After moving out her team, she moved in one of her two D-league teams to use the stadium and at least put some good batchi back in Hakra City. It wasn't IBL, but D-league was pretty competitive. After the Faey of Hakra got over their hissy fit about the Warriors leaving, they did start attending the D-league games...because it was D-league batchi, the second best batchi in the Imperium.

“Often a bad decision has repercussions beyond the immediate,” Brayrak intoned.

“That’s the truth,” Jason agreed, setting Rann down when the stewards arrived with trays of food, both Faey and Terran stadium fare. Fire-roasted *ruga* roots, grilled *goya* flanks, *oye* flavored shaved ice, *kauka* links—which were a type of Faey sausage made in bite-sized links that tasted almost identical to bratwurst and was grilled in much the same way—and baked Menos sugar chutes shared space with hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, french fries, and nachos on the heavy trays the two stewards delivered. The two poor stewards almost got mobbed by kids and hungry pregnant women, and those trays were almost half-empty by the time the stewards managed to make their escape. Jason put in an order for two more trays to be brought up via gestalt, as well as making sure the trays for his guests had been delivered to the other boxes.

The three Threxst sisters arrived right after the refill trays of food, Kiaari with her arm around her youngest sister as Miaari marched in with a little more decorum. Jason kissed all three of them on the muzzle as the reached their seats. “It’s about time, you three. What were you up to?”

“We were a little delayed over at Jaxtra,” Miaari replied.

“Because?” he prompted.

“It’s not your concern, cousin,” she replied primly.

“Non-stuck up Handmaiden translation?” Jason asked Kiaari, which made her laugh.

“We were fawning over her cubs, cousin,” she grinned in reply. “She has to show them off every time I come to Karis to rub my face in it.”

“Yeah, that’s Miaari alright,” he nodded, which earned him an elbow to the ribs.

“They are adorable,” Kemaari said. “And now I understand why I was accepted into her office.”

“Babysitting?” Jason asked, and when Kemaari nodded, he laughed. “You are *such* a bitch,” he accused, looking lightly in Miaari’s eyes.

“At least I let her settle into the office before I conscripted her for babysitting duty,” she replied shamelessly. “I *trust* my cubs with my sister. She will either look after them to my specifications, or I’ll bite her. Then I’ll fire her and send her back to Kimdori Prime in disgrace.”

“Totally a bitch,” Symone agreed as she walked behind their chairs.

“And what about your parents? They’re living in Jaxtra now.”

“They are too busy overseeing the clan to concern themselves with my cubs,” she replied.

“Bull, I know for a fact that your parents adore your cubs,” he challenged.

“She has to all but guard her cubs against our parents, Jayce,” Kiaari laughed. “When they have them, they don’t want to give them back. I’m strongly suspecting that you won’t be the baby in the family for much longer, sister,” she grinned at Kemaari.

“Denmother make it so,” she replied fervently.

“Aren’t they about at that phase where they start getting into anything and everything?” he asked curiously.

“Yes, which is why I installed a force field to keep them from getting out of the nursery,” she answered, which made Jason burst out laughing.

Dahnai arrived about ten minutes before the match started, her and her family rushing in with their guards, and she brought Saelle and Evin along with her. Jason gave Dahnai a long, fond hug and kiss before hugs and kisses got passed around half the box. “About time you got here, silly woman, the match is about to start,” Jyslin laughed as she hugged Dahnai.

“Blame him for that,” she answered, pointing at Kellin, then she put on her Karis interface after Aya handed it to her. Dahnai was wearing a casual thigh-length robe that almost looked like a jacket and thick wool-like leggings, her baby bump almost as prominent as Jyslin’s, and Kellin was wearing a thick outer robe of dark blue that reached his knees and stout leggings of the same color. Sirri was wearing a very Terran-like red hoodie with a logo of some sort on it and black pants, and Maer was wearing a hooded ankle-length tan robe with a bit of fur trimmed around the collar and hood’s edge. Karvectos was a bit nippy this time of year, so they were all dressed for it. “Where are our summer clothes, Kati?”

*They’re on their way up, your Majesty,* one of her white-armored guards answered.

“Good, cause it’s a bit warm in this now,” she said, plucking at her jacket-like shirt. “When does the match start?”

“In just a few minutes,” Jyslin answered.

*[About time I got you back home, woman,]* Jason told Saelle as he gave her a fond hug. *[Are things going alright in the palace?]*

*[Yup, things are fine,]* she replied with a smile. *[Things have calmed down since I came back.]*

*[The new security working out?]*

*[Oh yeah, I feel completely safe, and Raisha should be well protected.]*

*[That’s all I needed to hear.]*

“Where’s Symone?” Kellin asked as he picked up Rann.

“She and Tim are around here somewhere,” Jason replied. “Knowing them, they’re making out in some corner somewhere.”

Dahnai laughed. “I don’t doubt it. There’s my baby girl!” she said with sincere love vibrating in her voice as she picked up Shya. “How are you,

my little pippy?”

“I’m doing great, Mommy!” she replied. “I love it here! Thank you again for letting me move here!”

“It was a hard decision for me, baby girl, but I’m happy that you’re happy,” she replied, rubbing her nose against Shya’s with a loving smile. “Are you ready to come to my new palace after the match?”

“Yup, Mommy, we’re all packed,” she replied.

“Good. Now, as soon as we get changed, and Jayce gets some food up here more befitting an Empress, we can enjoy the match. I’m starving.”

“There’s a tray right there, woman,” he pointed, which made her give him a short look. That made Shya giggle. “How are you doing, Maer?” he asked as the Faey boy reached his seat.

“I’m doing fine, Uncle Jason, thank you,” he replied with a smile. “I’m looking forward to being here for a while. I really like it here.”

“No cameras following you around, no crowds, no politics. Yeah, I can see why,” he chuckled, which made Maer smile and nod.

“I do like that,” Sirri agreed as she climbed into Jason’s lap after he sat back down. “I get to wear anything I want and play outside and do all kinds of things I can’t do back in the palace.”

“And that’s why I’m always happy to have you here, pips, so you get a chance to just be a kid instead of an Imperial Princess,” he told her, putting his arm around her and kissing her under her ear, which made her laugh and squirm away from him.

“I love it here, and not just because of Ranny,” Shya agreed. “I never knew how much I hated being an Imperial Princess until I came here and didn’t have to be one anymore.”

“Don’t rub it in,” Dahnai smiled at her. “Besides, I hear that you have plenty of your own lessons here.”

“Yeah, but it’s about being a Grand Duchess and a Karinne, not about being an Empress.”

“And what have you learned about being a Karinne, baby?” Dahnai asked curiously.

“That it’s almost as serious as being the Empress,” she replied honestly. “That the Karinnes have a lot of secrets that we have to keep away from everyone else because they’re not ready for them yet, and that it’s our job to teach everyone in the galaxy everything we *can* let them know. Daddy Jason says that our biggest job is to protect Cybi, because she’s the only one of her kind in the whole universe. Those, um, Consor-tum people want to take her from Karis and take her apart, and we can’t let them do it.”

“Where is she, anyway?” Dahnai asked, then she laughed when that pseudo-nude hologram wavered into view just by the table. “There you are. How are you doing, Cybi?”

*“I am just fine, your Imperial Majesty.”*

“Don’t call me that when we’re in private. My name is Dahnai.”

*“Dahnai,”* Cybi smiled with a nod. *“How was the batchi match on Karvectos?”*

“Pretty exciting,” she replied. “The Blades won 16-15 on a goal in the last minute.”

*“That’s fairly high scoring for the Blades. Defense has always been their primary strength.”*

Dahnai’s family changed right there in the box once their clothes arrived—not that showing skin mattered to a Faey—and they settled in just in time for the start of the match, when the referee threw the ball into the air for the two center midfielders to try to control. Jason had watched batchi on viddy before but seeing it in the luxury box was much different. A batchi pitch was larger than a football field by about ten yards in width and 20 yards in length, so it was a lot more ground for the players to cover. That ground was mainly covered by the ball, however, as the players passed it back and forth. Jason started to understand why batchi players were in such incredible shape as he watched the first division, much like soccer in that the players had to run at high speed up and down the pitch. The game was similar to soccer in that the game didn’t stop unless there was an injury, but unlike soccer, the clock *did* stop if there was an injury. The coaches could also call one time out per game, and substitutions took place with the clock

running and the match progressing much like hockey. A player had to run back to the player area before the replacement could enter the field, which made substituting a potentially dangerous and strategic maneuver. No substitutions were allowed during time-outs except in one case, and that was at the beginning of the third division, which meant that a player taking the place of an injured player wasn't allowed to come onto the field until the clock restarted and play resumed. It was a testament to the skill of those women that they passed the ball dozens of shakra with pinpoint accuracy, and Jason started to understand why that center midfielder position was so important. Emala Kivalle could see everything in front of her due to the size of that half of the pitch as she advanced up the pitch with the ball, and it was her vision that let her see how the opposing players were set up and allowed her to call the play. That was the job of the midfielders outside of acting as the back-line offense and falling back on defense, to recognize opposing defenses and set the offense to try to take advantage of it. The holo-cast was just perfect, the holograms on the field looking so much like the real thing that Jason started wondering why the pitch wasn't being chewed up by their cleats a few times.

Batchi matches were 80 minutes long, separated into four 20-minute divisions, what Jason would call a quarter, but they didn't have a halftime. The end of a division was basically a short time out to give the players a breather, and play resumed five minutes later. There was no halftime, but after the second division, the teams switched sides just like in football or soccer, so any advantage one side of the field gave was given to both sides. Since there was only one time out barring injury and the division breaks were only five minutes long, a batchi match rarely lasted longer than two and a half hours. Most injury time outs only lasted a moment or two, time for the medical team to run out, pick up the injured player on a hover-stretcher, then jog off with her.

It was a very exciting game. The free agents the Paladins had picked up in the offseason made a big impact on the pitch, turning the Paladins into a much more dangerous team than the Predators were expecting. Unfortunately for the stadium, the game didn't end with a victory, however. The Paladins lost 9-8, but Jason saw that they fought to the very end, and *almost* tied the match in the last minute.



Jyslin seemed to mirror his opinion. “It may have been a loss, but it’s a *major* improvement over last year,” she declared as the stadium began to empty, the fans a little crestfallen, but nobody could deny that it wasn’t a great match. “I bet by the middle of the season, the Paladins are gonna be scaring the piss out of everyone in the division.”

“They did look good,” Dahnai agreed as she stood up. “And the first few games of the season are always a bit shaky for teams that overhauled their rosters the way yours did.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to gauge where they are until they actually play a match against someone other than the practice squad and each other,” Jyslin agreed. “But what I saw down there makes me *very* hopeful for the season. We might get back to a winning record this year instead of next year,” she said with a bright smile.

“Now then, let’s go see my new palace!” she said eagerly. “My staff should already enough of our stuff moved in for it to be habitable.”

Jason, Jyslin, Tim, Symone, and Rann and Shya boarded Dahnai’s luxury transport rather than go home, a huge dropship that was more than big enough for 60 passengers, but was set up inside to cater to the Empress, her family, and a few guests, as well as be armed to the teeth in case it was attacked. It was nearly the size of the sub-orbital frigates the INS employed for ground support and flew like a lazy whale, slow and ungainly. They took off with an entire squadron of Wolf and Raptor fighters escorting, as well as two Marine corvettes flying high overhead to serve as aerial recon to search for airborne threats. Jyslin and Symone held court with Kellin by the wet bar, which was staffed by a handsome young bartender, while Sirri showed off her budding telekinetic ability to Rann and Shya, picking up a small ball and lifting it to her eye level with a look of intense concentration on her face. Jason and Dahnai stood by one of the windows, looking down over the Karsa Sea as they flew out to Dahnai’s private island. It was almost due north of Karsa, about 500 kathra up the coast and about 45 kathra off the northeastern tip of the continent, a fairly large island of 4.25 square kathra—a little over four square kilometers or about two square miles—which would be a trip of only about 20 minutes in a high near-orbital arc. The artificial gravity and inertial dampers in the transport were pretty hardcore, making it almost impossible to tell that the ship’s bow was angled

up about 40 degrees. The view outside the window made that clear, but it felt to Jason like the inside of the transport was perfectly level. A system that strong was almost ridiculously expensive, but this was the *Empress' personal transport*, so cost was no issue when it came to her comfort.

*When do I go to the annex for the implantation?* Dahnai asked.

*Songa's just waiting for you to tell her when you're ready. You sure you're ready to go through with this? I heard how the Siann threw a fit when they found out.*

*I have them all firmly in hand, she replied with a smile. Trelle's garland, a few of the Grand Duchesses are even interested in the idea now, since I had the docs from the Medical Service explain everything to them in exhaustive scientific detail.*

*That might have more to do with Yila. They know she has one.*

*True. And I still can't believe you gave her one before me.*

*She was the test subject, hon, and the test was successful. So you should be thanking her instead of being a jealous nit.*

*I am not, she protested, a little too vehemently, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a tart look.*

*Riiiiight.*

She smacked him on the shoulder, and given how strong Dahnai was, he certainly felt it.

It had been the first time Jason had actually been to the island, so he was more than a little interested as the transport landed on the pad behind the house, of which they got a great view when the pilot did a very slow flyover of the property. All the amenities Dahnai wanted were there, from the private gardens to the pool to the play areas for the kids. They'd built a beautiful white sand beach on the shore facing the main house, and there was a natural beach on the northwest side of the island, which was the windward side of the island most of the time and thus had some pretty high waves, almost perfect for surfing. The external buildings were all up and working, as were the island's defenses, which were all concealed. But the plascrete bunkers ringing the housing compound told anyone familiar with combat engineering that those were retractable gun emplacements. The

island was fitted with an armada of MPAC and rail weaponry, but it also had a powerful hard shield that would cover the entire island as an extremely potent defense. To prevent spying, all the weapons and systems on the island were stock Imperium technology, though the shield system was Imperium tech boosted a bit by Myleena's tinkering to make it more powerful and more resilient. The only thing on the island that wasn't stock Imperium tech was a biogenic node, which wasn't actually *on* the island so much as it hovered over the main house about 1,000 shakra overhead, linking the island to both the biogenic network and to CivNet.

Dahnai was almost as giddy as a little kid as they entered the house through the patio entrance, which opened to a secondary foyer nearly as grand as the main foyer in the front of the house. The house was huge, the size of a large hotel, and it was built to house just one family. It had 12 large and roomy apartments for Dahnai's present and future children and 14 additional luxury bedrooms for guests, and she had also included two luxury apartments for Jason and Jyslin and Tim and Symone, making it clear that they were welcome in her summer palace. Dahnai had had all the furniture she wanted for the summer palace sent in advance, and Red Horn had just placed it all after they finished construction. Dozens of servants scurried around, part of the staff of 30 that Dahnai had chosen to occupy the island full time...which was the ultimate cushy job. They only had to do real work when Dahnai was there, and the rest of the time, they basically got to sit around and enjoy all the amenities of the island as long as they kept things clean. A contingent of 80 Imperial Guard had also been dispatched to the island to serve as its permanent protection, who would be taking their job *far* more seriously than the staff, along with ten members of the KMS Marine Honor Guard that served as liaisons between the Imperial Guard and the KMS...and served as Jason's presence on the island to ensure it wasn't being used as an espionage outpost. Captain Viya and her guards had arrived on the island some ten days ago to ensure all the security had been properly installed and was in working order, and they were here waiting for the staff when they arrived on transports to move Dahnai's things into the palace. Viya and Aya also happened to be old friends, and it gave both of them a pool of additional Imperial Guard to call upon in a pinch.

“Just the way I wanted it to look,” Dahnai crooned, actually kneeling down and sliding her hand over the soft white tiling in the rear entrance foyer. “Viya, show us around,” she ordered.

Viya gave them a full tour of the house, going to every room, then walked them around the compound of 16 external buildings, some of them staff buildings, some of them for Dahnai and her guests. When they inspected the last building in the compound, the large and spacious barracks for the Imperial Guard, Dahnai nodded to herself in satisfaction. “Everything is *exactly* the way they promised,” she declared. “But they’re Makati, I shouldn’t have expected anything less,” she added with a chuckle.

*This barracks might be perhaps a bit too large and lavish for us, but I’m sure we’ll make do,* Viya noted, which made Dahnai laugh.

“Hey, you get dispatched offworld, you get compensation for it,” she replied lightly. “So you and your girls get big apartments and all kinds of perks for having to spend most of your time sitting on this island protecting it. They *do* have travel rights to the mainland, right?” she asked Jason.

“Only in small groups,” he answered. “Captain Viya already has all that information, she can explain it to you later if you want.

Viya nodded. *We will not be prisoners here, your Majesty.*

“Are all the security measures installed and working?”

Viya nodded. *I’ve also inspected the emergency bunker. It’s more secure than we originally asked it to be. The Makati buried it nearly into the mantle, and it has multiple security systems.*

“When it comes to protecting my in-laws and my *amu dorai*, I don’t fuck around, Captain,” Jason declared, which made her smile at him.

After the tour, Dahnai’s family settled into their individual apartments as Jason, Jyslin, Tim, and Symone checked out the east beach, which was built by the Makati engineers...but it was indistinguishable from a natural beach. They’d dredged up some pristine white sand and spread it out on the shore, creating a nearly 100 shakra wide beach that transitioned sharply from lawn to beach thanks to a short set of hand-built stone steps that came down onto the beach. They’d even built natural-looking sand dunes at the edge of the beach to protect the lawn from storm-driven waves; hurricane-

like storms were not unknown in this part of Karis. But, if they had a hurricane blow over the island, they could always turn on the hard shield. It would protect the island from the wind and from the high waves and storm surge, since the shield would extend all the way to the sea floor about 65 shakra from the water's edge on this side of the island. The shield would trap the water already inside within the shield when it was activated. And since it wasn't a Teryon shield, they'd be able to fire their heavy MPAC ground batteries through it in case the palace was attacked.

*This is how we should be living*, Symone sent as she kicked her foot through the sand just above the border between wet and dry sand.

*Feel free to move off the strip whenever you please, baby*, Jason replied easily as he put his arm around Jyslin's shoulders.

*What, you feeling constrained on the strip, love?* Tim asked.

*No, it's just not a luxurious palace filled with servants that cater to my every whim*, she replied cheekily, grinning at Jason.

*As soon as you make your millions, you can build your own*, he told her evenly. *But given I know how much a Major makes, it's gonna take you a while.*

*You just suck all the fun out of being important, you know that?* Symone accused playfully.

*A fact Dahnai reminds me of daily*, he replied dryly.

*Well, Tim-Tim, you're gonna have to use your secret spy things to get us a palace*, she told him.

Tim laughed. *I'm an analyst, you silly goose. The secret spy stuff is what the people do that bring me the information I go through. You'll have to talk to Miaari about that but given how much of a tightwad she is when it comes to pay and pay raises, good luck getting a credit out of her.*

Jason had to laugh at how right he was. Miaari had a huge budget given how critical security was on Karis, but she watched the expenditure of that budget like a hawk, making sure every credit was spent *exactly* the way it was meant to be spent. Tim was exaggerating a bit about the pay, though. Miaari actually paid her staff very well, since a well-paid staff was much harder to bribe.

*Pfft, I'll just hang out here when I want to be pampered, Symone declared, her thought both playful and a touch naughty. I'm sure Dahnai will let me come over and drown in all the sensual delights she has hidden here.*

*Stop thinking like Kumi, girl,* Jason chided, which made the other three laugh.

*[Jason, you asked me to remind you when you had ten minutes before the meeting,]* Cybi called.

*[I lost track of time, thanks, Cybi,]* he answered. *Dahnai, we have a council meeting in ten minutes. Are you ready?* he called, sending privately.

*Yeah, we can use my office,* she answered. *The Makati installed all the security and crypto, and Viya even told me they didn't put any bugs in the system.*

*Why should they?* he protested. *I don't need to spy on you. I already know what you're gonna do.*

*Oh really,* she answered dryly.

*Yup, you've gotten predictable in your old age, hon.*

Jyslin and Symone both burst out laughing. Symone was a listener, but Jyslin could hear him because they were touching, so there was more or less no way he could block her out, even though he was sending privately. They were too intertwined into each other's thoughts. *She's gonna get you back for that one, baby,* Symone grinned.

*Old? Old?* Dahnai protested. *Why don't you come up here and say that to my face, buster?*

*That's why I said it when I'm down here and you're up there,* he replied cheekily. *And you wouldn't dare punch me in front of the rest of the council.*

*I'm here for six days, you little punk,* she sent darkly. *See, this is why I shoulda never let you go. You've gotten way too sassy since you broke away from the Imperium.*

*It's certainly been liberating,* he replied grandly.

Ten minutes later, Jason had to laugh as he fended off several attempts by Dahnai to punch him when he came to her private office, which was decked out in all the latest security equipment to make her communication secure, including having a private crypto uplink back to Draconis via tightbeam. It ended with her wrapped in his arms, and naturally, that was when the council appeared on an array of holograms in front of her desk. Zaa wasn't in attendance, she had an aide sitting in for her, Kim wasn't attending because he was off for today, probably out shopping in Karsa, and Brayrak also wasn't attending, he had his primary advisor sitting in from Moridon, which told Jason that he was probably over at the Annex getting his jack implanted. Hraga, the Leader of the Zyagya, was attending in person today, which was notable. Sk'Vrae gave a hissing sound akin to clearing her throat, which made Jason laugh and let her go. "And what are you two fighting about this time?" Magran asked lightly.

"Just a point of contention about her Majesty's age," Jason replied with a plucky smirk in Dahnai's direction.

"So you are on Karis, Dahnai?" Grayhawk asked.

She nodded as she sat behind her desk. "I've taken possession of my summer palace and will be here for six days to settle in and take a short vacation," she answered. "But I'll be available if you need to contact me."

Jason sat in a chair she'd pulled around to her side of the desk and basically drifted through most of the session, which was mainly about logistics. Admiral Dellin gave a nearly hour long briefing as he updated the rulers on all the action going on in Kosigi, including organizing shipyard space for the Ogravians and the Jun. Even the Jun could see the incredible advantages Kosigi offered as a shipbuilding facility and had secured a modest amount of space where they could build their largest ships. They'd still build most of their ships in their home territory, but to build their battleships and capitol ships, they'd requested space in Kosigi. That was actually something of a pattern. Most of the empires using Kosigi were only building their larger ships there and using their own docks for their destroyers and cruisers, because the bigger ships were harder to build and Kosigi made it *much* easier with its atmosphere, facilities, and quick and easy access to supplies and materials.

And the idea of it had spread. Miaari had mentioned in her last report that Shakizarr had proposed to his engineers a project to do the same thing, to either hollow out a moon in one of his star systems or build a vast shell around an existing shipyard and pressurize it. It would take them a couple of centuries whichever way they tried it, but Shakizarr seemed quite serious about it.

There was something that got his attention, when one of the Confederate bureau ministers gave a report about the Imxi. In the two months since they'd conquered the Imxi, things had gone much smoother over there than Jason had expected. There had been the anger and hostility to be sure, but a surprising number of Imxi had accepted the new order of things, where their empire was chopped up and owned by a bunch of different empires. There were now Imxi in every original member of the Confederation except the Kimdori and Karinnes, and in several of the empires, the Imxi were assimilating quickly. It varied from empire to empire based on that empire's basic philosophies, however. The fastest assimilators were in the Shio Federation, because it was a democracy. Those Imxi were Federal citizens and thus had the right to vote, and the idea of it had at first shocked many of those Imxi with the idea that they had the power to have a voice in their government. Never before had any common Imxi had the power to guide his government through the power of his vote, and many of them were quite inspired by the idea of it. As a result, the Imxi in the Federation's piece of the pie were enthusiastic and willing to be part of the Federation. To Jason's surprise, the other ruler having an easy time of it was Sk'Vrae. The Urumi had many similar traits to the Imxi in personality, and that meant that they understood Sk'Vrae's governing style. The Imxi king was a dictator, and while he could be severe, he wasn't a tyrant. And that more or less perfectly described Sk'Vrae. She was stern, she was strict, she was a little harsh, but she was *fair*. The other empires had had a little trouble, but nothing major, except for the Faey. Like most races, the Imxi had a deep distrust of their new Faey overlords due to their telepathy, but that telepathy prevented any shenanigans. The Imxi in Dahnai's control weren't resisting, but they certainly weren't very enthusiastic about being the new eighth race of the Imperium. Like most races, they'd have to adjust to the idea of the Faey and their telepathic gifts. But over time, they'd be like the Makati, they'd simply accept it as the way things were and it wouldn't bother them that much.



It was interesting to see how some of them handled it. Of the original empires, only the Alliance and the Imperium had more than one species within it, so they already had a lot of experience dealing with different racial personalities and psychologies. The Shio, the Colonists, the Skaa, and the Urumi all now had to deal with another species within their empires, and that meant that they had to adjust to the idea that how they did things for their own people might not work with the Imxi. But, to their credit, all of them seemed to be handling it quite well. Magran had had long talks with Ba'mra'ei over how the Alliance deals with their five races and their many differences, and Jason was honestly surprised that Assaba and Vizzie seemed to be handling the Imxi as well as they were, given the Skaa's racial disregard of the individual. The Skaa way of doing things was probably the most *alien* to most other races, because of their vast population. In the Skaa system, the needs of the individual were outweighed by the needs of the group, where the suffering of a small group mattered little in the overall grand design. It seemed callous and cruel, but when one took a step back and saw the vast, endless sea of individuals in the two Skaa empires, how that outlook could have come to be made a lot of sense. The common Skaa were stoic about this outlook because they believed in it as well, for the commoner's outlook was *I may suffer today, but it's another Skaa's turn to suffer tomorrow, so I will simply endure until tomorrow*. It also incited intense motivation, since a Skaa might have to compete with some 5,000 other Skaa for a job, so the hiring company or the government could be very, very picky. Only the most determined, most motivated, and most gifted Skaa rose out of that sea of population to distinguish themselves. The Imxi in the Skaa's control were going to have to adapt to that if they wanted to get anywhere, but to their credit, the Skaa were showing at least a *little* latitude to the Imxi now in their empires.

Jason drifted through Lorna's report, as she declared that the last of the CCM's ships had completed repairs and they were back to full strength, and that ship had been the *Iyaneri*. It had taken a very long time to repair it because its computer core had been partially damaged, and a biogenic mainframe the size and complexity of the one in a command ship was *not* a quick and easy repair when it was damaged.

"If I might have the council's attention?" Undersecretary General Sophia Yelsev spoke up. She was the "vice president" of the United

Nations, the post created after Terra was given its independence, and was Kim's second in command. She was a hawkish looking Russian woman that would be pretty if she didn't wear her hair so severely, but she was brilliant and very capable.

"Speak, Undersecretary," Sk'Vrae answered. Sk'Vrae had the gavel this takir, so she was the one in charge.

"I just received word," she said, holding up a handpanel, "that another empire intends to petition for entry into the Confederation."

That made the Kimdori aide's brow rise. Usually they knew before anyone else, but if this was news to the aide, well, it *really* had to be a recent decision—until another Kimdori appeared in the aide's hologram and handed him a handpanel, whispering hurriedly in his ear in the Kimdori language.

"I have just received this as well," the aide said. "I will summon Denmother to take her place in council." His hologram winked out.

"Sometimes I think Zaa doesn't take these meetings too seriously," Kreel said lightly from his office, throwing what looked like a baseball up into the air and catching it over and over.

"Look who's talking, Kreel," Dahnai replied sweetly, which made him laugh and wink at her.

"Who seeks entry?" Sk'Vrae asked Sophia.

"I...hold on, this is written in English. I don't read English very well," she said, then she tapped on the panel, probably to translate. "It's the Rathii."

Jason's eyes widened a little bit. The Rathii were a humanoid species in the Kypan sector, which was almost completely dominated by the Kypan Void, and yet another race that tended to prove Gora's Law because they were highly similar to Terrans, Faey, and Shio. They were one of only four spacefaring races within the Kypan sector, and they were way out on the far outside edge of the sector, nearly out at the edge of the galaxy. Their empire was actually within the Kypan Void way out on the other side, which made them completely isolated from most other races. It was a minimum 9 day jump between the two closest points of Rathii space and any other territory,

which was another remote civilization called the Kirri, who were even *further* out than the Rathii. It was a 29 day jump from the closest Confederate point, which was in the Ogravian empire, to the closest point in the Rathii empire. It was a 54 day jump from Rathii space to Terra, so that was a *major* journey for their students. They had students in the Academy, which was really the only contact they had with most anyone. They were so far out, so remote, that they really only had extensive contact with the Kirri. But, despite their remote location, they seemed friendly and highly intelligent, given how highly their students scored in the Academy.

The Kirri...he had some kind of proposal from them in his inbox. He'd have to take a look at that when he got home.

"That's a surprise," Dahnai noted, leaning back in her chair beside him. "I think the only contact any of us have with them is through the Academy."

"We have contact with them, but it's mainly diplomatic," Shevatt called. "It's so far to jump to their empire that it makes trade difficult. We do trade some important goods back and forth, things they desperately need for things we need, but that's the extent of it. The Rathii empire only numbers six systems and is very poor in resources."

"Which might be why they're petitioning for entry," Kreel noted. "Membership does give them access to some infrastructure."

"Or perhaps they wish to protect our galaxy from the Andromedan invaders," Gau countered. "If any reasonable leader reads what the Kimdori have gathered, they would waste little time petitioning for entry. Only together can we repel the Consortium and the Syndicate from our galaxy."

"That's a fair point, Gau," Sk'Vrae agreed. "It may be that simple. Is there any other information, Undersecretary?"

"Not at this time, your Majesty," she answered with a shake of her head. "We only know because their ambassador at the Academy asked the Confederate Bureau of Diplomacy how an empire would go about petitioning for entry."

"I assume they explained the process?" Sk'Vrae asked.

"Of course, your Majesty."

“Shevatt, you know the most about the Rathii. What are they like?” Shakizarr asked. “We have almost no contact with them.”

“Well, they look almost identical to the Shio, except their skin is a darker shade of green and their ears are pointed like a Faey’s and are very long,” he began. “We have long speculated that the Rathii might be related to the Shio somehow. Their empire is a cluster of six close systems at the far end of the Kypan Void, within the void, actually. They’ve long struggled to make do with the limited resources within the void, and we trade heavy metals and other industrial supplies to them in exchange for food, which they seem to have in abundance. They are a very polite and friendly race and have always been honorable in all trade dealings.”

Jason posted up an image of a Rathii for the council via hologram, showing a race that did look much like the Shio, except for the ears. Their ears were pointed and *very* long, nearly reaching to the tops of their heads, and it was long Rathii custom to have studded earrings up the length of those long ears. Their faces were very attractive to Jason, and thus to Shio and Faey, and his gestalt supplied to him that they weren’t a splinter race of Shio because their blood wasn’t green, it was actually blue, but it *was* still copper-based. Their blood used a different copper molecule in the oxygen-carrying cells than the Shio did, which reminded him of some crustaceans from Terra which also had copper-based blue blood. The blue blood darkened a naturally green-tinged skin to make them a darker green. The really long pointed ears made them as elf-like as the Faey and the Prakarikai.

“I can see why you’d think they’re related to us,” Grayhawk chuckled. “But a very handsome race.”

“Only to you, Grayhawk,” Kreel said with a buck-toothed smile. “There’s a serious lack of fur and whiskers to make him even a quarter as handsome as a Grimja.”

“Let’s all put down the vanity mirrors,” Jason spoke up, which made Kreel and Grayhawk laugh.

“There’s really not much we can do until they formally apply, but I do thank you for the advance warning,” Sk’Vrae told Sophia.

Zaa's hologram winked on, showing that she was in her home office in the Hearth. "I have just received this news. We don't keep many eyes in that corner of the Kypan sector because there is little reason to," she said calmly. "The Rathii and the Kirri are so remote that little of consequence happens out there."

"As I just told the Undersecretary, Denmother, there is little we can do until they formally apply. There is little to talk about, given how remote they are."

Jason was about to say something, but Cybi got his attention. *[Jason,]* she called.

*[What is it?]*

*[The Parri have contacted the White House. They wish you to come to the village immediately. Alone. They specifically said that you had to come alone, to not even bring your guards. This seemed quite important to them.]*

*[Alone? What—never mind. Have them tell her I'm on my way right now,]* he replied, standing up. If the Parri *shaman* had gone to the trouble of asking him to come, then that meant that it was important. "If all of you will excuse me, Cybi just alerted me to something very important. Friends, Dahnai, I'll have to go."

"What is it, Jason?"

"It's house business," he said firmly. "Do me a favor and keep my family entertained until I get back."

"I hope it's not serious," Kreel said.

"I don't know yet. I guess I'd better go find out."

Alone meant *alone*, and that got him into the equivalent of a shouting match with Shen and Suri. They weren't going to let him leave, at least until he hung both of them naked off the roof of Dahnai's palace, climbed into his Wolf fighter he'd called from the house, which had flown over via remote, and flew directly to the Parri village. The female apprentice to the *shaman* padded out and rose up on her hind legs as he approached. "I got your message. What did you need?"

“The *shaman* awaits you in her hut, Jason Karinne,” she replied, pulling on his hand as she waddled backwards awkwardly.

She led him to her hut, which was in the center of their radially designed village. She was sitting inside, her eyes closed, and there was no sense of her to him at *all*, as if she’d turned off her brain. “I don’t—what’s wrong?” he asked the apprentice.

“Nothing. She bade me bring you here upon your arrival.”

“Well, does she know we’re here?”

“Of course she does, Jason Karinne,” she said, even as the *shaman* opened her eyes. She regarded Jason calmly, and motioned for him to sit before her. He did so, and he was a bit surprised when she reached out and touched his gestalt, then took hold of its edges. He hastily shut it down as she started to pull, and once it was deactivated, it unbonded from his skin and allowed her to pull it from his face.

“What’s the matter, *shaman*?” he asked.

She gave him a long, penetrating look, saying nothing, then she glanced to the side. “Tea for our guest,” she said in that lilting voice of command. “There is a task you must perform for the Parri, Jason Karinne, one of which you must not ask questions. Will you trust that what we do is for the best for all?”

“Of course I would,” he replied immediately. “I *trust* you, *shaman*. I trust the Parri.”

“Even with things which you do not understand?”

“Especially with things I don’t understand,” he told her, reaching out and taking her hands. “You have ever been a wise and true friend to me and to the Karinnes, *shaman*. I would trust my life in these paws,” he said with heartfelt sincerity.

She looked to her male apprentice and nodded, and he scurried out of her hut. “What is fear, Jason Karinne?”

He gave her a surprised look as the female apprentice returned with a crude clay kettle and cups on a tray. “Fear? It’s...it’s being aware of danger, I suppose.”

“And that is all?”

“No,” he said, thinking about it a bit. “Fear can be more than an awareness of danger. Some people fear things that can’t hurt them, like some people being afraid of bugs or speaking in public.”

“But they *can* hurt them, Jason Karinne,” she replied calmly as the apprentice. “Not all injury is physical. The wounds of the mind and the wounds of the heart are the greatest of injuries, for they cannot be seen by the casual glance and they run all the way into the soul. The wounds of the body are paltry by comparison.” She picked up her cup, blew on the steaming tea, then took a drink. He did the same, and for a moment he forgot the question because of just how delicious Parri-made *oye* tea was. Ayama tried, but she couldn’t come close to how tasty it was when the Parri made it. “Of all emotions, fear can be the most dangerous. No emotion can inflict harm nor cause rash and unwise acts such as fear. Fear does not rule within your heart, Jason Karinne, so you cannot fathom the lengths to which it drives those without the strength of your heart.”

“That’s not true, *shaman*. I feel fear all the time.”

“But you do not let it master you, Jason Karinne. You have learned the fourth of the ten lessons, that fear can never be allowed to guide your heart’s direction. Yours is the courageous heart, a courage born of the powerful love you hold for your family, your people, and this planet. Your love conquers your fear. But others do not have the courage of your heart, Jason Karinne. The fear within causes them to make unwise decisions, for the fear clouds their judgment.” The male apprentice returned, carrying a small pot. “Within this vessel is a seed, Jason Karinne. You must plant it.”

He was a bit at a loss...she called him here just so he could plant a seed? That was *it*? He looked at her in confusion, then banished it with a cleansing breath. These were *Parri*, he reminded himself. They didn’t see the world the same way anyone else did. There was no doubt that to the *shaman*, this was *serious fucking business*, especially since she looked so sober, nearly grim. It had to have some kind of mystical meaning to her, something Jason wouldn’t understand no matter how hard he tried. And he wasn’t about to tell her no. Even if he didn’t understand her, he trusted her. If she needed him to plant this seed, then that was exactly what he was

going to do. "I will do as you ask, *shaman*," he told her as the apprentice set the pot beside him, which was filled with dirt. "Where will we plant it?"

"That is *your* decision," she told him. "Take the pot with you. Find the place where your heart tells you that the seed must be planted, then do so. That is where it *must* be planted, Jason Karinne, no matter how strange or silly that place seems to be. Do you understand this?"

"I...I guess so, but this is a big planet, *shaman*. How will I find this place?"

"You already know where it is, Jason Karinne, in here," he said, reaching out and putting two fingertips to his chest. "Return to your iron bird and allow your heart to guide you. Do not rely on your senses. Do not think. *Feel*. Your heart will not lead you astray. But after you finish your tea," she added, giving him a slight smile, seeming much more like usual herself.

"I don't understand, *shaman*, but I'll do as you ask," he replied.

"It is important, Jason Karinne. It could be the most important thing you have ever done or may ever do."

"Planting a seed?"

"A seed becomes a tree, Jason Karinne," she replied, then she took another drink of her tea.

"That's an *oye* seed?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes," she replied. "It is the first seed borne on this world, *of* this world, and it has great importance. And only you can find the place that it must grow. Remember, Jason Karinne. Do not think. *Feel*. *Feel*. Your heart knows where this seed must be planted."

"I'll...I'll do my best," he said, setting his cup down and picking up the pot. It was filled with rich, musty-smelling dirt, and he could just barely make out a tiny little beige seed, the size of an apple seed, nestled in the rich, dark earth. "How many times a day do I water it? I've never cared for a seed before, just my sapling."

"*You* will not care for this seed, Jason Karinne. The people of this world will," she replied. "This tree will belong to us all. As long as it is shown



love, it will grow.”

“Alright.” He finished his tea and set the cup down, picked up the pot, and stood up. “I’ll go right now to plant the seed, *shaman*. Thank you.”

“It is we who must thank you, Jason Karinne,” she replied. “Now if you will excuse me, I must return to my meditations.” She drew up her feet a little, put her hands in her lap, closed her eyes, and then her brain just *turned off*, almost instantly. Just like *that*. Jason could meditate, but he could *never* achieve a state like that that incredibly fast. He marveled at her a moment, then left her hut and returned to his fighter.

He put the pot up in the cockpit, climbed up the retractable ladder and got into the coffin-like pilot’s box, put his gestalt back on and endured that not entirely pleasant feeling of it entwining into this thoughts, then he brought up the fighter by communion. He almost immediately got yelled at by Myri, by Jyslin, and by Aya for running off without warning and taking off his gestalt, which made him disappear off the biogenic network, but he told them he’d explain later and turned off his comm.

He lifted the fighter up off the ground as the Parri watched, then closed his eyes. Don’t look, don’t listen, don’t think, the *shaman* said. Don’t think, feel. The seed had to be planted, and she felt confident that he’d know where. If he didn’t think about where he was going, only thought about the seed, then perhaps the fighter would go that way by itself. If his heart really could guide him to wherever it had to be planted, then all he needed to do was turn off his navigation, turn off his comm, even turn off the cameras, leave on only the basic aeronautic instruments like altimeter and speed indicator and the Collision Avoidance System to warn him if he was about to fly into a mountain

Don’t think. Feel.

Don’t think. Feel.

Don’t think...feel. *Feel*.

What was he supposed to feel? The place where the was to be planted? Some strange force that would guide him like a Ouija board?

No. He knew what to feel...after all, love was the most powerful force in the universe, the Parri always said. He had to move in the direction he

felt his love take him.

The fighter stated to move. He had no idea which direction it was going since he had the compass off, but it was definitely moving. He didn't think, he just concentrated on his love. His love for his family. His love for the House of Karinne and for the amazing, wonderful people that had come to Karis to restore it to life. His love for the planet itself, this world in such need of his attention to restore it to the life-giving jewel it had been before the Merranes annihilated all life on the planet in the Third Civil War. His love seemed to tug him in a certain direction, and that was the direction the fighter went, almost as if it wasn't him guiding it.

He had no idea how long he'd been flying, but suddenly, he felt the impulse to *stop*. Here. Here. Right here. He turned all the systems back on and found that he was surrounded by nearly 20 Wolf fighters and six corvettes, and to his surprise, he was directly over the city of Karsa. He descended into a construction site, the land cleared, and a building being prepared to be raised in the location, and he wasn't entirely sure which building it was, since he hadn't looked at his location. He landed the fighter right in front of an excavator, surprised Makati scrambling around as the swarm of Wolf fighters and corvettes descended over the area, and Jason rotated his cockpit box and opened the doors. He dropped down to the ground, then opened the upper cockpit and used his talent to lift the pot out of the seat and down to his waiting hands. Aya boiled out of a landed corvette and ran over to him, and she very nearly slapped him right in front of everyone working the site. *Are you insane? You have to be!* she raged, clenching her armored hands into fists and giving him a furious, ugly look.

"I can't explain it, Aya," he said in a calm, almost bemused voice as he walked around under his fighter, looking for *the spot*. He stopped suddenly when he felt that impulse, then immediately knelt down. "Right here," he declared, patting the ground. "Who's in charge of this site?" he boomed, looking up.

An older Makati scurried up. "I am. Who are you?"

"I'm the Grand Duke Karinne," he replied, which made the Makati gasp and give a hasty bow. "What is this place? What's being built here?"

“It’s the site for the CBIM installation, your Grace,” he replied. “Where they’re building the new one. We’ll be starting construction on the main installation tomorrow.”

“It is?” he asked, blinking, then he looked up and around. He saw the buildings around the area and realized that it *was*. But why would he need to plant the seed here, where they were going to install the new CBIM? “Where exactly is this spot in the plans?”

The Makati touched his interface and brought up a one-way hologram. “This spot? It’s about 60 shakra outside the front door, about halfway from the front door and the surrounding fence. It’s where we were going to put a sign.”

“Change your plans. You’re going to put a small garden here, centered around this,” he said, holding up the pot.

“What is it, your Grace?”

“It’s going to be an *oye* tree,” he answered, setting the pot down. “I want you to cordon off this spot so nobody can trample the area. Mark the exact location of the seed and make sure you give the seed a good 10 shakra of clearance when you plant the garden, because as the tree grows, it’s going to get bigger.”

“Aye, your Grace. I’ll bring in a small mobile hard shield and place it over the site, so it doesn’t get trampled while we build the installation. Will that harm the seed?”

“As long as you tune the shield to allow the full spectrum wavelength of sunlight and air molecules to pass through, no,” he answered. “Someone bring me a spade or a shovel.”

In seconds, he had his pick of several digging tools. He picked a hand spade from a Makati’s toolbox, whose hobby was gardening, and dug out a sizable hole. He carefully scooped out the seed in a handful of dirt and set it aside, emptied the dirt in the pot into the hole, then hollowed out a niche and dropped the seed and the handful of dirt into it. He then covered it and patted it down, then watered it with water out of a Makati’s drinking canteen. “There. What’s your name?”

“I’m Frodak Rull, your Grace, Master Builder and site supervisor of this project for Red Horn Construction,” he said proudly.

“Do you garden, Frodak?”

“I’ve had a hand in it from time to time,” he replied.

“Good. Frodak, caring for this seed just got added to your list of duties for your crew,” he said. “It doesn’t need much, just water it once a day and it should be fine,” Jason declared to both the workers and to Aya and her guards, who were clustered around him. For that matter, all work at the site had stopped, the Makati crew gathered around to watch the strange little scene. “Just make sure whoever waters it loves to garden, Frodak. That’s important. They have to *want* to water the seed, not be *told* to water it. So only volunteers can water the seed.”

“I’d be honored to oversee care of the seed, your Grace,” he declared, puffing his chest out a bit. “I’ll make sure you have an *oye* tree here that’s as beautiful as the installation I’m building for you. But, if you don’t mind me asking, your Grace, why plant it *here*?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he answered. “The Parri asked me to plant it here, so I planted it here. What they did tell me is that this seed is the first seed produced by the *oye* trees here on Karis. It’s the first *Karis oye* tree, and the Parri had this idea that it had to be planted in this most particular spot,” he said, pointing down. “I think they believe that since this is the first seed produced on Karis, that it means that this particular seed is very special, so it has special needs that only the Parri really understand. They also told me that it’s the members of the house that have to care for it, not only me, that’s why I need you men to care for the seed while you build the installation. It will need your attention to grow. I don’t understand the Parri most of the time, but I do trust them. If they say it had to be planted here, then it gets planted here. So, we’ll have an *oye* tree here growing over the installation in a few years,” he chuckled.

“I’ll go talk to the Parri and ask them exactly how to go about caring for the seed, your Grace.”

“Just be ready to not understand most of what they say to you, Frodak,” Jason chuckled as he stood back up. “And I hope you like *oye* bark tea.”

“I do indeed,” he smiled.

“Alright then. I’ll leave it to you, Master Builder. Send my office reports on the seed’s progress. When you see it sprout, let me know and so forth.”

“I’d be happy to, your Grace.” He turned around. “Alright, boys, I need volunteers willing to care for the seed, come up to my office after your shift and I’ll work out a schedule! Pora, you took aesthetic landscaping in Academy, draw me up a nice garden plan for the area around the seed! Hebarr, go fetch a mobile multi-setting hard shield from the warehouse! Murdik, you and your crew stay here and protect the seed until the hard shield gets here! And the rest of you lazy dirt-lickers, back to work!” he barked with a grin, which caused a few good-natured calls in his direction before the Makati broke up.

Aya glared at him as he walked back over to his Wolf. *Put it back in your pants, Aya*, he told her as they approached the fighters. *The Parri told me to come alone, and that means alone.*

She scowled at him. *We’ll talk about this in private, where the commoners won’t see you being beaten like a naughty kree.*

*I’ll have Songa meet us at home so she has her medical kit handy*, he replied cheekily as he communed with his fighter and had it lower the ladder. *We’ll head to back Dahnai’s palace.*

*She’s at the Annex*, Aya answered. *After the council meeting, she decided to go ahead and get the jack implanted while you were busy.*

*Then let’s head to the Annex.*

*Not in that you won’t*, she ordered, pointing at a nearby corvette. *In. Dera, fly his Grace’s fighter back home and join us at the Annex.*

*Yes, Captain*, she nodded, then she used the engine in her armor to lift up into the cockpit.

Aya almost herded him over to the Marine corvette *Toraki* and smacked him on the back of the head lightly with her armored hand, which made the corvette crew laugh as the ladder raised. *You are worse than a little boy!* Aya snapped, sending openly.

*I told you long ago that I’m easy to order around but hard to control*, he grinned in reply.

*Well, I'm going to fix that,* she warned with hard eyes.

*Better women than you have tried,* he answered flippantly as he flopped down at a sensor station chair in the back of the corvette. *Take us to the Medical Annex, captain,* he ordered easily, putting his feet up on the console to further dig on Aya.

Aya did calm down enough to have him explain exactly what he was doing as they flew the five minutes from the CBIM site to the Annex, landing on the roof, then they headed down into the building. Songa was doing the procedure, so that meant they were using her private operating theater. He arrived in the viewing room off her theater to see Kellin, Jyslin, Symone, and Tim there, all watching as Songa stood by Dahnai's head with three other doctors all of them watching a hologram as she slowly and carefully pushed a tool behind Dahnai's ear. Dahnai was sedated, asleep, and looked both beautiful and peaceful. Dahnai's white-armored guards were inside the theater and along the walls, watching with very sober looks. *It's about time, I was wondering, Jason dear,* Songa sent as she glanced at him through the window.

*I had something come up. How is she?*

*She's fine, and we're almost done,* she answered. *The datalines are already laid and attached, and we're implanting the jack itself right now. The jack will anchor into the bone, Doctor Alara,* she sent openly to the woman beside her, a name Jason knew. Alara was one of Dahnai's personal physicians. *The jack has only a small moleculartronic chip inside that will run off her Majesty's bio-electricity, which serves to instruct any computer to which her Majesty connects in how best to organize its data to match it to her unique brain architecture. This achieves maximum data transfer speed, retention, and eliminates the possibility of sensory ghosting from sensory data. We use a special interface that actually does most of the work that plugs into the jack, acts as the bridge between her Majesty and the device she's controlling, which also hides the jackport from view,* she added, which was important to the Faey. They would see the jackport behind the ear as something not of the body, something not natural, and thus something quite ugly. *Of course, the interface isn't required. Her Majesty can directly jack into a computer using a dataline and a standard RM-12 jack plug, but the interface does allow remote connection using its gravband transceivers.*

*Since it is specifically built to work with a jack, it provides extra functionality that makes it almost invaluable. Once you get a jack and experience what it can do, you wonder how you lived without it,* she chuckled.

*Quite a clever invention,* the doctor sent, quite impressed by the texture of her sending. *I am of a mind to have one implanted myself.*

Songa reached up and took off her interface, pulled her hair to the side and showed Alara the gleaming metal jackport behind her left ear. *I highly recommend them,* she sent with a smile. *I speak from experience.*

*And there is no chance this device can be used to control her Majesty?* one of the guards asked.

Alara shook her head. *I've studied the devices extensively since the Karinnes released the data, Lieutenant, and I observed the implantation personally. It's absolutely impossible for the jack to be used to control her mind. It doesn't connect to the necessary parts of the brain to do it.*

*If you say so, Doctor,* the guard sent with a nod.

*Anchoring complete, Doctor Songa,* one of the other doctors declared.

*Alright, let's seal the skin and tissue around the jackport and activate the jack,* she nodded as she put her interface back on. She sat on a stool by Dahnai's bed and turned her head to the side just a bit, then smeared a clear paste around the edges of the metal rim of the jack, which caused the blue skin around the jack to contract, pull in around the rim. She then slid a long metal probe with a bent end into the jack, which was the manual way it was turned on, by literally hitting an "on" switch in a recessed area at the bottom of the well of the jack. It was impossible to hit that switch without using a specific tool for it, either designed or improvised. A bent paper clip could do the same thing, after all, there wasn't anything special about that probe except it was made just for what Songa was using it for. A hologram winked on over Dahnai that showed the jack booting up, and Songa plugged up a dataline to Dahnai's jack that connected to the medical mainframe, which would test the jack's I/O hardware. *The jack's on. The first thing it will do is build a map of her Majesty's synaptic patterns, which will be the template that the interface will use to send data to her brain. Each brain is unique, and the chip's primary function is to tell any computer that plugs*

*into it the best way to “talk” to Dahnai’s brain, as it were. It will also step in and block data that doesn’t use Empress Dahnai’s personal template. In that way, it serves as a limiter that makes sure that only data her Majesty’s mind can understand gets past it.*

*Most clever, Alara sent with a nod. You were definitely the proper choice for heading the Karis division of the Medical Service, Doctor.*

*Thank you, Doctor, Songa answered modestly.*

*Imprint procedure complete, Doctor, Songa’s assistant called. The I/O test was successful. The jack is fully operational.*

*Then this procedure is complete, Songa declared. There might be some discomfort or minor irritation in the tissue around the jackport for a few days, Doctor Alara, she sent as she unplugged the dataline from Dahnai’s jack. Until her Majesty’s body adjusts to the jackport. And some patients complain of headaches for up to a takir after the procedure. During the assimilation training exercises, sensory ghosts for several moments after a training session are not uncommon. If her Majesty complains of severe headaches or suffers sensory confusion or the inability to focus her eyes on small print, then she must return here so we can examine her. Some small percentage of our patients have suffered those side effects, but they are correctable.*

*I’ll be examining her daily for the next takir, Alara replied.*

Songa glanced over at her bioboard, which had all Dahnai’s vital signs on it, and she must have issued a command. Dahnai’s eyes fluttered open, then she yawned and focused her eyes on the three doctors hovering over her. “Well, good morning, doctors. Are we done?”

“We are done, your Majesty,” Songa smiled. “The jack is implanted and in perfect working order. Can you not feel it?”

“I...I’m not sure what I’m supposed to feel.”

“What feels like a lingering fingertips brushing across the back of your mind. That is a common sensation for patients for a few hours after the jack implantation. That is the jack’s control chip maintaining a passive connection to your brain when it’s not in use.”

Her eyes turned distant for a moment. “I...yes, I feel it,” she answered.



“The sensation fades, your Majesty.”

“It’s not uncomfortable, just a little weird,” she smiled as she sat up, baring those lovely breasts of hers, then she put a very tentative finger on the metal rim of the jackport behind her left ear. “So, I’m all set?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Songa replied. “I’ve told Doctor Alara everything she needs to know to care for you while you go through assimilation, but I’ll also tell you. You might feel some irritation and discomfort in the skin and tissue around the jack for a few days. You might also suffer mild headaches for up to a takir after the implantation. Those are minor side effects, and nothing to worry about. Initially, as you learn how to manage the artificial sensory input, you may suffer sensory ghosts and hallucinations for a moment or two afterwards. This is quite common and goes away as you gain more experience with the jack. However, if you suffer severe headaches, suffer sensory ghosts that last more than a few moments, or find yourself unable to read small print, inform Doctor Alara immediately,” she warned. “Those are signs of a very rare but serious side effect. We can correct it easily, but we have to know about it to do so,” she prompted.

“Yes, Doctor, I will,” she said with a nod, again showing that Faey deference to doctors. “Oh, hey babes. Glad you made it,” she said, smiling at Jason through the window.

“Sorry I didn’t make it sooner, but I had a rather weird house problem,” he replied.

“Oh? What?”

“The Parri being Parri,” he replied, which made her laugh. “They called me to the village so I could plant a seed.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it. It seemed awfully important to them, so I did it. The *shaman* said it was the first seed produced on Karis, so they were really, really serious about it being planted in a very particular spot, which happens to be in the middle of Karsa. So in a decade or so, we’ll have an *oye* tree looming over the technical district,” he laughed.

“They’re Parri,” Dahnai shrugged, which made her bare breasts jiggle a tiny bit. They’d expanded a little with her developing pregnancy. “Okay, what now, Doctors?”

“You rest for a minimum of twenty hours before you begin jack assimilation training,” Songa answered. “Your brain needs a little time to adjust to the new connections. After the rest period, you’re free to begin the training. You’ll also need to eat a hearty meal and drink plenty of water, since we’ve used bio-accelerant on you. So, your Majesty, after you dress, you go straight to the Annex cafeteria or a nearby restaurant,” she ordered.

“Sounds great, since I was hungry when I got here,” she replied, swinging her legs over the operating table. “Inji, tell my chefs to start dinner, we’ll be returning to the summer palace,” she ordered one of her guards. “And make sure there’s some snacks waiting for me so I can hold out until dinner’s ready,” she added with a grin. She stood up, and Jason again had to admire her amazingly sexy body, which was showing the twins she was carrying inside her. But despite the bulge around her belly, her abdominals still had a little definition, they were just distended from the pressure being put on them from the inside. Her pregnancy seemed to just make her *glow*, and that made her even more attractive to him.

Jason related his adventure with the seed to them as they flew back in Dahnai’s dropship, going into a little more detail. *Huh, so you had to just know where the spot was?* Dahnai asked.

*Sorta. I can’t explain it. When I flew over that spot, I just knew.*

*Don’t go all mystic on me, babes,* Dahnai grinned.

*I’m starting to think that what we call mysticism is actually something much different,* he sent seriously, looking out the window. *The Parri have some documented ability that our science can’t explain, like when they blinded the clairvoyant energy being. I once told the Gruug chief that what he thought was magic was actually just knowledge, and more and more I think that in this scenario, we’re the Gruug looking at the “magic” of the Parri without understanding the knowledge behind what they do.*

*That’s a pretty interesting thought,* Jyslin mused, tapping her chin. *So, when you found that spot, you were thinking like a Parri?*

*More like I wasn't thinking like a Terran, he answered. I can't explain how I knew where to plant that seed, but I know that I planted it in the right place. He laughed. The shaman once told me that I should take training in their shamanic traditions, that I could see what others couldn't. Maybe I've got a Parri in my distant family tree.*

*I will not have a daughter with a furry tummy, Dahnai declared in a lofty tone, which paralyzed the entire dropship with laughter.*

*Raira, 4 Romaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 2 September 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raira, 4 Romaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House, Karsa, Karis*

This was so *not fair*.

He was supposed to be relaxing right now, sitting on a beach with his family and the families of his *amu* over at Dahnai's summer palace, but *nooo*, his inbox had gotten so full that he'd had no choice but to come in and knock some of it down. But he also had a cabinet meeting and a meeting with the general staff today as well, so he was more or less stuck coming in anyway.

So far, Dahnai's visit had been quite fun. She'd settled into her palace—she *loved* that palace—and was just relaxing after spending two days getting everything just so, going through every room and making little tweaks to the décor to make it just *perfect* in her eyes. While she was doing that, Kellin was studying for the next semester at the Academy, where he took courses by remote, and Maer and Sirri were enjoying being out of the spotlight for a little while. Maer had decided to try bodyboarding on the northwest beach, while Sirri was just relaxing by the pool or on the beach almost all day every day. She couldn't sunburn on Karis due to the planet's atmosphere filtering out the UV rays that made Faey and Terrans sunburn, so she was enjoying just laying out in the warm sun for hours on end, sleeping for most of it.

So, the last few days had been pretty busy, but filled with nothing of real importance. As usual, Dahnai had claimed her rights on Jason while they were there, so Jyslin was entertaining herself with Kellin, and Dahnai's palace had seen quite a few people come and go, like Myleena and Aura and Kumi and Yila. Tonight, Dahnai was hosting a big beach party, and she'd invited about all of the Grand Duchesses of the *Siann* except for Maeri Trillane to the party, along with Symone and Aura. She did have the right to invite outsiders to her palace, it was spelled out in the agreement that split the Karinnes from the Imperium, so there was little Jason could say or do about it. The Grand Duchesses were all aflutter about it, that was for sure. Only Anya and Yila had been to Karis, and Yila sure loved to rub their noses in it when she was at court, just *happening* to mention how beautiful Karsa was, and so on and so on. Yila may be a thug and a pirate, but she was Faey to the roots of her hair when it came to lording it up over other Faey.

Off Karis, things had been progressing in what Jason felt was a satisfactory manner. The Rathii had formally applied for entry into the Confederation, and the formal vote on them would happen tomorrow. Jason found it unusual that the larger empires in the sector cluster hadn't yet applied, like the Aggjat or the Farguut, but he felt it would just take a little time for them to be sure that the Confederation was exactly what it said it was. Gau had done some serious thinking before applying, and most of it was making sure that the Confederation would do what it said it would do. Then, there was also the possibility that a few of them had the idea that the Confederation would repel the Andromedans, but be so weakened that the member empires would fall to an invading empire that had saved its military resources for *afterwards*.

Three guesses who'd thought of that one first. Anavan had quite the little plot going on, which would be clever if not for the Kimdori. She was going to have her empire build *two* fleets, the one she showed the Confederation and her hidden, secret fleet, which would be there to expand Prakarikai influence after the Confederation had served its purpose, at least from her point of view. The Prakarikai forces she'd devoted to the Confederation did do their jobs and did them well, but she was doing her best to hide the true size and composition of her fleet from her new allies.

Meya and Myra had found another absolute jewel of a star system, RJ-44. It was a system with *sixteen* habitable moons orbiting a gas giant, and five had aspects about them that made them highly valuable. Two of the moons would be farming powerhouses, planets with ideal climates and conditions for farming, and both the same size as Draconis, which gave them lots of space to farm. One of them had incredible amounts of metal deposits, and since it was an arid, desert-like planet with very little indigenous life, it would be an ideal planet to build a lot of factories there and turn it into an industrial center. The fifth of the noteworthy planets was completely covered by water. It was a planet just slightly larger than Terra, and it had no land mass larger than the island of Tasmania back on Terra. The planet's surface was 91% water, and that 9% land consisted of archipelagos of small islands scattered across the surface. The planet wouldn't be much worth as a farming planet, mining planet, or industrial planet, but it would be one *hell* of a vacation planet. The rest of the habitable moons were decent as things went, but those five were the most valuable of the lot.

And the best part: not one of the moons had a sentient species occupying it, which made every single moon available for colonization.

Jason barely had to read Meya's recommendation before he dispatched an interdictor, Stargate, and colonization team to RJ-44.

The next report raised his eyebrow a little...it was about the Rakarri. The Kimdori had investigated the Merranes and found that they actually hadn't been meddling, that the Rakarri were doing what they were doing on their own, and boy were they moving. The king of the largest kingdom had succeeded in his efforts to convene a council of kings of every kingdom on his continent, and Zaa had gotten one of her Kimdori into that council as a servant, and he'd been sending detailed reports about their deliberations. They were having very long and very reasoned debates over the Faey on the planet "next door" as well as the trade they'd done with both the Karinnes and the Merranes. They talked about who they were and what they were doing, but also talked about efforts to increase trade with them, to get them to teach them some of their knowledge in exchange for the foodstuffs that the aliens seemed to crave. There was, naturally, quite a bit of debate about how safe the Rakarri were, since the aliens had such amazing machines that they let them fly through space and the Rakarri would be all but defenseless

against their amazing machines if the aliens decided to attack, but all in all, the debate was about how to best use this new diplomatic contact to better the Rakarri people *as a whole*. Not just one kingdom, but all Rakarri everywhere. They felt that the aliens had so much that they could teach the Rakarri about so many things, and they were starting to discuss pursuing that hidden knowledge in a unified manner, with all the kings cooperating.

The appearance of the Merranes on QMC-202-3 had caused a seismic shift in planetary Rakarri society, since even their most remote settlements now knew that there were *aliens* living on the planet closest to them. And Jason was curious to see where it took them.

The Merranes. Jason looked at a starmap of the QMC sector, where there were now two little red dots that marked Merrane-owned star systems. Dahnai had exercised her rights under their agreement and had claimed QMC-312 for the Merranes, which had two viable planets in the system for colonization. One was a sub-arctic moon orbiting a gas giant with sizable mineral deposits, and the other was a very hot terrestrial planet just on the edge of habitable which happened to be a wet, steamy jungle planet. They could farm there, but it wasn't going to be all that fun for the Merranes assigned to it.

Jason flipped through a bunch more reports, at least until Chirk opened the door to his office and stepped in. She had opted to place her jack directly on top of her head, behind and between her antenna, and her custom-made interface attached to her head almost like a little crown. *"Revered Hive-leader, it's time for your meeting with the military command staff,"* her interface intoned over its speaker.

"Alright, thanks, Chirk," he said, turning off the holograms, then he stood up. Shen and Suri joined him out in the outer office and followed him as he walked down to the headquarters for the KMS, which many called the War Room. The four commanders of the KMS were arrayed around the center console, in discussion about something, and Admiral Dellin was also there in person, which was a little unusual. Dellin rarely left Kosigi. The dayshift for the command center surrounded the center console, carrying out the day's duties and assignments.

"You're right on time, Jason. That's unusual," Myri drawled, then the five of them laughed when he raised the back of his hand in Myri's

direction.

“So, what’s up that you’d schedule an official meeting rather than just tell me to come down?” he asked.

“This,” Juma replied, touching her interface. The starchart over the center console vanished, and in its place was a holographic diagram of a ship Jason had never seen before. It was very long and very narrow, almost built like an arrow, with very stubby wings at its aft section and its bow sloping down to a definite point. “This is a little something that our research and engineering teams have been working on for a while, Jayce,” she said.

“What is it, a new fighter?”

“No, it’s a line vessel, but it’s an entirely new class,” Navii replied. “We started the design for it not long after the first battle here at Karis, after analyzing Consortium tactics and capabilities. We felt that a new ship class would help counter Consortium ships, much as we researched and developed the tactical battleships. Well, we shelved this research project after our existing assets proved to be effective after the Consortium began to move, but with the coming of the Syndicate, we restarted the research on the project.”

“This is a *frigate* class ship, Jayce,” Myri continued. “It’s about half the size of a destroyer. It carries a crew of 26 officers and enlisted. This ship was designed to be the smallest ship possible that carries hyperspace jump engines and a particle beam projector,” she explained when he gave her a curious look. “The ship is literally built *around* the particle beam projector, and it has little room for additional systems. The other main system it has is a CMS system,” she told him. “This ship is designed to be a *stealth* ship, Jayce, to sneak in, hit hard, then fade away. The ship is the smallest possible ship we could design to carry a particle beam projector, but it’s also the *largest* ship class we could design that can use the original specs you designed for the CMS.”

“The huge ships the Syndicate use will be vulnerable to this ship class, Jason,” Navii said. “And since they are so small and easy to build, we can build *thousands* of them.”

“So, you want to take us the route of the Skaa picket ships.”

“Numbers yes, frailty no,” she answered. “I said before that our destroyers were important in the upcoming war against the Syndicate, Jason. It is more effective to build 20 destroyers than one battleship, because you can deploy more overall firepower. These frigate class ships take that to the next level. We can build upwards of 50 of them in the same time we can build a single cruiser. That’s *fifty* particle beam projectors we can bring into a theater, placed on small, highly mobile, and extremely fast ships that have the ability to cloak to further protect themselves. The CMS will preclude the need to fill the ship’s hull with defensive systems, for the Syndicate can’t easily hit what they can’t see, and what doesn’t show up on their scanners. The frigate can’t fire its particle beam projector while cloaked, but it can use its cloak to get in position to only need to fire one shot. I still advise that we increase our number of large ship classes, but I also advise that we build this new ship to bolster the sheer firepower we can bring into a theater, as well as having a complement of ships that can cloak that we can use for surprise attack missions.”

“We all do,” Sioa added. “This ship will increase the capability of the KMS, Jayce.”

“You have the ship fully designed?” Jason asked.

Dellin nodded. “Lady Cybi helped us with the last stages of design, and we’re ready to build a prototype and field test the design,” he answered. “I can build two of these in a destroyer dock at a time, and it won’t require very much specialized equipment. We designed it to use most of what we already produce for destroyers, with only the hull and the CMS outer skin requiring special tooling from factory space to produce.”

“What kind of sims does it run?” he asked.

“Very good ones,” Myri replied. “The ship is as fast as a corvette because of its engines, highly maneuverable, and of course, it has the particle beam, two rail batteries, and three pulse batteries for offense. It has a standard carapace covered with a CMS skin and Teryon shields for defense, but there’s no room inside for a shockwave generator or defensive missiles. The engines and particle beam take up almost every cubic tikra of space inside the hull, to the point where the living quarters for the crew are a little cramped and scattered about, placed anywhere we could find room for them. In combat simulations, the ship was *very* effective against the data



we have about the Syndicate the Kimdori brought us. It can uncloak, fire, and recloak in a 12 second cycle, and cloaking will be its primary means of defense. The Syndicate can't detect CMS, and that will let these ships move around freely when they aren't actively firing their weapons."

"Huh," Jason mused, leaning on the console and looking at the graphic of the ship. It sounded almost like the old A-10 ground attack fighter from the American Air Force, a plane literally built around its 30mm Gatling gun. This frigate class ship was literally built around a particle beam projector, and took up some 40% of its internal volume, with the engines taking up 40% more. That left very little empty space inside for anything else, but they'd managed to squeeze in some shields, extra weapon batteries in case the particle beam couldn't fire, and the CMS while still giving the crew somewhere to sleep. It would be a very cramped ship to serve on, like a submarine, but Jason could see the potential in it. It was a ship capable of jumping hyperspace, that was carrying a particle beam projector, that could *cloak*. That made it *fucking dangerous*.

"Build it," he declared in a strong voice. "And I want it on high priority. I want to see the prototype coming off the dock as soon as possible."

"I knew you'd see it our way, Jayce," Myri grinned.

"You're right. Building 200 of these puts 200 particle beams in a combat theater, and I'd be an idiot to say no. Besides, we could send a squadron of these ships into enemy territory to conduct surprise attacks against critical targets, since a ship can run CMS in hyperspace. They'll drop into normal space cloaked, which'll make them pretty damn hard for the enemy to counter."

"And that is *exactly* why we went with the CMS over stealth field technology," Navii nodded. "Because CMS operates in hyperspace where stealth field technology does not."

"Send the specs to my office so I can look them over, at least when I have time," he grunted. "My inbox is so full I think it'd explode if it was real."

"Well, that was faster than I expected," Juma chuckled. "I thought we'd have to talk you into it a little more than that."

“Jason has enough training to see the value of these ships, Juma,” Navii smiled.

“Yeah, I can see that they’re worth building to test out,” he replied. “We’ll see how it performs in reality. If it pans out, we’ll add it to the fleet. Since I have you here, how are things going up in Kosigi, Dellin?”

“Everything’s on schedule, your Grace, for us and our guests. I have 16 ships coming off the docks today alone, from nine different militaries. Of note is that one of those ships is the next battleship.”

“I thought that was slated to come off the docks tomorrow.”

“We finished it a little early,” he answered. “We have it parked for now, Juma hasn’t finished assigning the crew.”

“It’s a battleship, Jayce, I only assign veteran personnel to a command-level ship,” she said when he looked at her.

“Who’s taking the chair?”

“Admiral Farea Karinne,” she answered. “She’s going to rotate out of the command staff and back to ship command, which she’s been almost begging for the last few months. She said she intends to name it the *Ijani*.”

“What about the carriers? Don’t we have two about to come off the docks?”

Dellin nodded. “Both come off the docks in three days, and they already have captains.”

“Ravai and Kirai,” Juma said.

Jason laughed. “You got them to split up?”

“I know, they’re worse than fucking Lyn and Bryn,” Myri grunted. “But we gave them the *Sevi ultimatum*, and that was enough. I don’t know what they’re going to name them, they’re still suffering from twin separation shock.”

“What about the Stargates, Dellin?”

“We have two more coming off the line tomorrow, which gives us three pairs in reserve,” he answered. “The next pair comes off the line in eight days.”

“Two pair in reserve,” he corrected. “Just before I came down here, I deployed two Stargates. One’s going to RJ-44.”

“Where is that?”

“Meya just sent me the scouting report this morning, it’s so good I already ordered a colonization team to deploy. You should be getting the request from the KES for a towing ship anytime now.”

“Has she forgiven you for grounding her on Karis yet?” Myri asked lightly.

“She’s still a bit pissed about it,” he replied, which made them all laugh. “She really enjoyed doing the actual exploring herself. I told her she could still go on missions, just not *all* of them. She and Myra *do* run the KES, and they can’t do that if they’re crawling around half the galaxy. She’s scheduled to deploy with the next scout mission, to QMK-102. That’s a relatively short mission since they can leave from Exile, which means she can get home in time to do the paperwork that comes with the nameplate on her office door.”

“I think that’s why Farea asked to return to ship command,” Juma chuckled. “She enjoyed being on a ship so much, I think she missed it when she moved to the command staff. She’s a fantastic command staff officer, but she’s better suited to sitting in the chair of a very important ship anyway. It’s her calling.”

“Farea is the Admiral we’ve slated to captain the third command ship,” Navii told him. “When it’s complete, she’ll transfer to it. I think she decided she couldn’t wait until her command ship was complete and asked for the next battleship to come off the docks. We were happy to grant her request.”

“Then I guess she can work the rust off sitting in the chair of the battleship,” Jason chuckled. “I haven’t checked on that command ship lately.”

“It will be done in five months, three days, Jayce,” Dellin supplied. “It’s actually 16 days ahead of schedule as of two hours ago.”

“Sounds good. Alright, let me go back upstairs and try to put a dent in my inbox,” he said with a forlorn sigh.

He *knew* he had something from the Kirri in his inbox. He came across it about an hour after coming back up, a long treaty that, after reading, made his eyebrow raise. They wanted to hire Karinne freighters to haul cargo out to their empire, because it was a 63 day jump from the closest Kirri system to the closest system of their non-Rathii trading partners, and they were willing to pay well for the service in the form of food exports to Karis. The Kirri suffered the same problems the Rathii did, their empire was on the very edge of the galaxy and within the Kypan Void, which gave them very few options and very little resources. They were about as far as any empire could get in the sector cluster from Karis and still be in the sector cluster. The Kirri had 10 systems in their empire, and like the Rathii, they were rich in food but poor in industrial resources. The proposal said that Jason could contact the leader of the Kirri, which was an elected member of a council of leaders, who then chose the council member to lead themselves. They were a Republic in most respects, but their council only had 17 members, one from each inhabited planet or moon in their empire. Those council members jockeyed with each other to get the most resources for their planet or moon, so there was quite a bit of political maneuvering and wheeling and dealing in the Kirri government. That seemed to be a racial bent, the intel on them said, that they were quite gifted orators, merchants, and bargainers, as glib as a Beryan. So, it was a bit odd that they'd offer to hire Karinne freighters without trying to bargain over it, to get the best deal possible.

He had Chirk try to contact the Kirri Council as he considered the idea. He wasn't much against it, as long as the Kirri were willing to bend a little on the security of his ships. His freighters would be jumping with armed escort, since they would be leaving Confederate territory and the engines in those freighters had great worth to anyone trying to break the hyperspace relativity barrier. The Kirri had a very small and technologically inferior military compared to the KMS, so a single destroyer would be more than enough protection for a freighter.

Chirk managed to get through, and a *very* cute foxlike face appeared on a 2D hologram just on the far side of his desk. It was a decidedly *female* face, with amber eyes and a delicate muzzle but with human-like cheekbones, much like how the Grimja looked like human-chinchilla mutations. This female Kirri was Krirara Krarou, the leader of the Council of Kirri, whose title, oddly enough, translated to Moderator in Faey. She

had reddish-orange fur on her face except for under her chin, which was a white ruff that trailed down her neck, and she had very long, thick, luxurious auburn hair with her furry fox ears poking out of the top, the tips of her ears black. “Grand Duke Karinne, it’s good to hear from you,” she said in pretty good Faey in a silky yet husky voice, a voice that just *oozed* sensuality...but the fangs exposed when she opened her maw to talk made it clear that she was very well armed, in her own way. “I take it you’ve read our trade proposal?”

“Moderator Krarou,” he nodded to her. “Finally, you wouldn’t believe how full my inbox is,” he added with a grunt, which made her chuckle. “You want to hire freighters?”

She nodded. “Given how impossibly long it takes to jump just about anywhere except to our Rathii neighbors, can you not see why we’re so intent on hiring an outside cargo hauling service which can do it in real time?” she said simply. “Getting our trade goods in real time would vastly improve the quality of life of my citizens, because it would allow us to engage in much more trade. Many empires won’t trade with us simply due to the amount of time it takes to move goods back and forth. So, would you entertain our proposal?”

“With some conditions,” he replied. “The number of shipments will have to be restricted based on my freighter load. We’ll fit in your shipments around our schedule, but I can’t overstress my freighter fleet running our own runs and yours. Additionally, no freighter jumps to Kirri space without a military escort.”

“As long as you can give us advance warning of when we can schedule cargo deliveries, your terms are more than acceptable,” she said immediately.

“Then I think we can do business, Moderator,” he said easily, leaning back in his chair. “Have your trade delegation contact my office of State to work out the details. Orrrr, you could consider joining the Confederation, and have your empire added to the Confederate transport system, which includes a Stargate from Terra directly to your home territory,” he said easily.

She chuckled huskily. “Which I have been trying to do, but I don’t rule the council like a queen, Grand Duke,” she said. “Thus far, a majority of the council has not yet voted to do so, but I *am* trying. I can see the value of it, but what is more, I agree with what your Confederation is doing. I’ve read the reports released by the Academy. I know what kind of monsters the Andromedans are, and I know that it is our duty as citizens of this *galaxy* to protect it from these brutal invaders. But sometimes, not all Kirri can see the tree the prey uses for cover over the prize, and so they run head-first into the tree trying to grab the prey.”

“I think I can understand what you’re saying,” he said. “I’ve seen that same phenomenon in any number of others.”

“But, I think that when the council members see what boons the Rathii gain from membership, they might be swayed,” she noted, putting a finger on the side of her muzzle in a gesture that looked almost Kimdori. He’d seen Miaari do that many times. “I would ask in advance for one arrangement, however.”

“What?”

“I would like to arrange to have the Kirri Council visit the Academy to tour it. The vast distance has made that quite impossible, but if we can arrange passage on a Karinne ship, it would be feasible. All of us have a great desire to see the Academy in person,” she said with an earnest smile. “Pray tell, your Grace, could we trouble you to charter a transport to take us to Terra, then return us home?”

“I’d be happy to arrange that for you, Moderator,” he said with a smile. “You just tell us when you want to leave and when you want to return, and I’ll dispatch a battleship to Kirri’arr to bring you Terra, then take you home. I will insist on a KMS battleship, Moderator,” he said when she was about to speak. “You are heads of state, and your safety demands that you be escorted back and forth on a ship that can protect you. If you trust me enough to travel to Terra on a KMS ship, I’ll be happy to dispatch one at your convenience.”

“I was only going to say that I would enjoy the chance to tour a Karinne vessel while aboard,” she smiled.

“They can’t show you much, but I’m sure you’ll like what they can show you,” he replied.

“I’ll speak to the Kirri Council and arrange things. Might I contact you again as soon as I have a schedule?”

“My secretary Chirk will keep an open connection for you.”

She glanced to the side. “That was a Kizzik, was it not?” He nodded, and she shuddered a bit. “I’ve never seen one live before. She is...creepy.”

Jason laughed. “She’s a sweetheart once you get to know her,” he replied.

“I guess it only exposes our remoteness,” she chuckled. “That I have never met a Kizzik before.”

“Kizzik don’t often work in jobs where they greet people over vidlinks, Moderator, due to the fact that they can’t speak,” he chuckled. “Chirk is a special case, thanks to her vocoder.”

“Yes, I saw that device. Is the vocoder operated by the cyberjack which I read about from the Academy archives?”

“Yes, her vocoder does work from her jack, but a jack isn’t necessary for a Kizzik vocoder to work. That’s a different piece of technology that doesn’t actually rely on the jack,” he answered.

“Ah. Well, let me call the Kirri Council to meet so we can arrange our trip to Terra. I will contact you when we have an itinerary for your approval.”

“I look forward to it,” he said honestly. He rather liked this Kirri.

“Be well, Grand Duke Karinne.”

“Be well, Moderator Krarou.”

Her hologram winked out, and he barely leaned back in his chair before he got the ball rolling. *Yeri, you’re about to get a request for council from the Kirri. They’re going to bargain over hiring Karinne cargo transports to move Kirri goods. I’m compiling everything I have on it into a file and sending it to your interface right now, including how far you’re allowed to*

*go. Talk to Jrz'kii before you start bargaining so you know our transport schedules.*

*Okay, Jayce. I'm waiting for it. I'll get the diplomatic corps moving as soon as you send it to me, and I'll call Jrz'kii right now.*

*Good, he sent, then changed his focus a bit. Myri, take a battleship off the board until further notice, I don't care which one. The Kirri have asked for us to carry them to Terra so they can tour the Academy, and I don't have the schedule yet. So I want a battleship on standby and ready to leave at a moment's notice to jump to Kirri'arr and pick them up.*

*I'll put the Victory and two cruiser escorts on standby, she answered. Umm, the Aravalo and the Defiant. All three are on standby already, so it's not taking anything off the board.*

*Sounds good. [Dahnai.]*

*[Yeah babe?] she asked.*

*[Didn't take you long to get the hang of using the biogenic comm network,] he noted.*

*She laughed in his mind. [It was the first thing I had them teach me in assimilation,] she answered impishly. [What's up?]*

*[I'm gonna be a little late getting back,] he warned.*

*[That's fine, I'm still in my training session. I'm learning how to separate jack-fed sensory feed from my natural senses. It's kinda weird, like flipping between two channels on the vidy.]*

*Jason laughed. [Yeah, but you'll get the hang of it. The fun part is when you start practicing the overlay trick, where what your jack feeds you is in front of what you're seeing with your eyes, and you can kinda look at both at the same time. There's a trick to it to keep from getting confused.]*

*[Looking forward to learning it,] she responded. [I managed my first merge today,] she added proudly.*

*[Grats, hon. Awesome, isn't it?]*

*[It was! I merged to one of those little shakra high robot units your people sent over for me to practice with and walked around the room*



*merged with it. It was awesome! And I had no idea how big my furniture looks when I'm looking at it from the point of view of a vulpar,]* she added clinically.

He laughed. *[Try it from the vantage point of a Gladiator, it's an entirely different experience,]* he told her. *[You actually feel like you're that tall.]*

*[I have got to try that!]* she declared eagerly.

*[It sounds like you're moving right along in your assimilation training, though. I'm glad to hear it.]*

*[I do not regret getting this jack, not one tiny little fucking bit,]* she declared emphatically. *[Oh, how old does someone have to be to get a jack?]* she asked.

Jason laughed again. *[It depends on the species. The brain has to be fully grown and developed before we can implant a jack, else the growing brain rips out the datafibers connecting to it and causes damage,]* he answered. *[We have a strict age limit policy on jacks on Karis, a recipient has to be considered an adult by their species' reckoning to be able to get one because it's such an important decision. So no, I won't be allowing Songa to implant a jack in Maer until he's 25. If he were Terran, he could get one at 18, but since he's a Faey, it's 25.]*

*[And you prove you know my kids, babes,]* she told him lightly. *[Maer is already doing his best to talk me into letting him get one. I'm glad I can just point at you and tell him it's out of my hands.]*

*[I'll be happy to be the bad guy in this case,]* he answered, which made her laugh. *[I better go, hon. The sooner I knock out some of this paperwork, the sooner I can come back.]*

*[Then get to work, you slacker,]* she replied teasingly.

# Chapter 6

*Raira, 8 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 10 October 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raira, 8 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*KMS Aegis, docked within Kosigi Lunar Station, Karis*

Jason was sincerely looking forward to this.

He stepped off a KSV-30 personnel dropship rather than a corvette and into the main landing bay of the *Aegis* along with Jyslin, a contingent of 30 guards, Kumi, and enough luggage to hold him over for the 20 days he was going to be away from Karis. He was about to embark on quite an unusual fast-paced state visit, where he would visit Terra and seven outside empires in those 20 days. It had been rather hastily planned, but Jason was taking advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves.

Their first stop would be Kirri'arr, the homeworld of the Kirri Republic, but he'd only be there for about an hour. He'd changed his plans to coincide with the Kirri Council's trip to Terra to visit the Academy. Jason decided to simply ride along on the *Aegis* as it picked them up, talk a little while with Moderator Krarou and the Kirri Council, and then begin his four day stay on Terra. There, he'd talk a little with Kim, attend the batchi match between the Paladins and the Terra Warriors, and then Jyslin would go back to Karis and Jason would be going on to Shio. He would spend three days there touring the reconstruction efforts and having some talks with Grayhawk and his government—Grayhawk was only the foreign minister of sorts in his government, akin to the Secretary of State, the assigned role of the original royal family that ruled the planet when it was a kingdom. After that, he was going to go to Alliance territory for five days and visit two planets, Trieste and Stevon, to tour the damage caused by the destruction of the moon

Go'jur'mi, have a few conferences with the Alliance Council on Trieste, whom Ba'mra'ei led as the High Staff, and also receive a citation of appreciation from the Stevak race for his devotion to the defense of their home planet with their Budding coming very soon.

After finishing there, Jason was traveling to the Verutan sector to visit Imbiri, to attend an annual summit between Gau and Shakizarr with Mesaiima serving as host and arbitrator—they weren't changing that tradition even with both of them belonging to the Confederation and the Imbiri present as neutral observers—and have more boring talks with them about Verutan sector politics. He would be on Imbiri for two days, and then depart for a short one day and largely ceremonial visit to Ogravan, the home planet of the Ogravians. Shevatt had invited him to dinner, which was a serious ceremony in their culture, so he'd arrive, sit down to dinner with Shevatt and his family, then get back on the *Aegis* and move on to the next destination.

That would be all the way over in the Grimja sector. Jason had scheduled four days to visit the Grimja Union, which would probably be a lot of drinking in bars around the Congress building in Grimjaka. He was supposed to have several conferences and tour a few systems to see how the Karinne transportation system was working for them, but he knew Kreel and he knew Grimja as a whole, so he doubted he'd get very far out of Kreel's favorite pub.

Finally, and most surprisingly, Jason would travel to the homeworld of the Jun, Jun-ara, for one day and attend the graduation of the newest class from their empire's most elite military academy, the Jun's version of West Point. Afterward, he would be permitted to give a speech before the Senate, their unicameral governing body. It was almost unheard of that the Jun allowed *anyone* to visit their empire, and to allow Jason to come into their system in an armed warship was even more surprising. The very name of their home planet showed much of their racial mentality, for it translated to *Divine Gift to the Jun*, reflecting their belief that the 16 star systems the Jun occupied were theirs by divine providence. Jason would be the first outside ruler to be allowed to set foot on the mysterious Jun homeworld. They allowed a few outsiders to come to their empire, mainly Moridon bankers and a few corporate representatives, but it was a major change in Jun policy to allow the leader of an outside civilization to come to their home planet.

Jason was honestly looking forward to it, but Aya was a little worried about it. She'd signed off on the visit after discussing security with the Centurions, the Jun security forces, but it still made her nervous for Jason to go to the Jun homeworld.

Then again, she'd been hating him with a passion since he cobbled this whirlwind tour together. She'd spent quite a few sleepless nights in contact with the security organizations of other empires, arranging Jason's security and securing permission for his detachment of Imperial Guard and Marine Honor Guard to escort him, who would be protecting him on his trip. She *really* hated the idea that he wasn't going to be wearing armor on his trip, but she'd also arranged to have powerful protection close to him in the form of Aya herself. She was wearing a brand new suit of Crusader armor that carried a tactical gestalt, and she'd be right behind or beside him every moment he was off Karis, giving him access to the tactical in case he had to protect himself. He didn't have to wear it to access it, it just had to be relatively close to him...and Aya wasn't about to let him out of her sight until they set foot back on Karis.

*I've never been so far from home before*, Kumi noted eagerly as they came down the steps of the personnel dropship, carrying their luggage. Kumi was going to talk to the Kirri face to face about some trade deals, because some of their indigenous food plants were in high demand in the Imperium, as was a type of large emu-like flightless bird that had a very rich flavor, *way* better than that rancid, nasty *grua* meat. There was also an indigenous giant lizard whose meat tasted almost identical to beef. Kumi wanted to get her foot in the door with the Kirri before anyone else, even Yila...which would no doubt irk Yila something fierce. They came down into the landing bay, where some 200 of the ship's high-ranking officers were arrayed in rows to greet him, with Palla and her XO standing in front of them. They stood at attention as Jason stepped down off the ladder and onto the deck.

*Bullshit, you've been all over the sector cluster*, Jason challenged as Jyslin came down behind him. She'd moved to maternity clothes, wearing a very Faey robe that ended at her upper thighs...and nothing under it, which gave him all kinds of interesting things to look at any time the robe hiked up. When she was pregnant with Rann, she developed an intense dislike of panties, shorts, pants, anything that she said made her feel constricted, so

she'd probably spend the rest of this pregnancy wearing short robes and smocks with nothing underneath them. Her belly was noticeably larger than when she'd been pregnant with Rann at this stage, but that was understandable since she was carrying twins.

*Yeah, but never so far out, she replied. I've never been to Exile or PR-371 or RG-118, dink.*

*I've been to Exile, but Mommy here won't let me go anywhere else, he sent, pointing at Aya. Kumi and Jyslin laughed when Aya slapped him lightly in the back of the head, being careful because she was wearing her gauntlet.*

*I never said you couldn't go to PR-371 or RG-118, Jason. I just said you couldn't go so long as the Consortium had a presence in this galaxy. If you want to go, we'll talk about it.*

*Well, we're gonna talk about it, he told her as Palla stepped up with a smile. She saluted, then laughed and gave him a fond hug. Hey you, how you doing?*

*I'm doing fine, Jason, she replied with a bright smile. Are you ready to wander around like a rootless vagabond?*

*Oh yeah, I'm really looking forward to this, he sent eagerly. I've been cooped up way too long, thanks to a certain someone, he added lightly, glancing his eyes in Aya's direction.*

*Don't make me paddle you in front of the entire Aegis command echelon, Aya warned, which put a lot of smiles on officers standing before them.*

*We're all ready for the trip, Palla told him. We'll have a task force of two heavy cruisers and six destroyers escorting us for most of the journey, at least until we go to Jun-ara. When we go there, we have to go with just the Aegis.*

*Have you read up on the protocols to use when we enter other empires?*

*We'll be using CCM protocols mostly, she replied as Jason shook hands with Palla's XO, Captain Maile Karinne. Since she held the rank of Captain on a ship where she wasn't the commanding officer, she was never addressed by her rank out of respect for Palla, who was the captain of the*

vessel even though she was an Admiral by rank. Maile was instead addressed as XO Maile, which was the *only* time the title of XO was used as an official rank title. It was perfectly acceptable to call any XO by the title, but never in combination with their name. It was either *XO* or *Commander so and so*, for example. Only the rare circumstance when a Captain by rank occupied the XO position was it allowed to use XO as a title of rank rather than a title of position. Maile would be leaving the *Aegis* to take over command of a battleship on their return to Karis, and a new XO was going to be promoted from aboard ship, Commander Jiyi, who was the second ranking officer on board. She'd get a nice promotion to Captain out of it to boot, since only a Captain could serve as XO on board a command ship.

The 200 KMS officers arrayed before represented the upper command echelons from every department on the ship, but a young, pretty Terran Ensign Junior Grade, the lowest officer rank in the KMS and nicknamed EJs, directed a crew of yeomen as they unloaded the luggage from the cargo compartment. She wouldn't be an Ensign Junior Grade long, Jason mused. OTS students were Ensign Junior Grades during OTS and were promoted to Ensign on graduation. She was in the last phase of OTS, where she was placed in the KMS in a three week internship style training course, seeing how things worked in practice instead of learning in a classroom and given the chance to do real leading of real KMS enlisted...whom always approached EJ's with a mixture of amusement and condescension.

Jason and Jyslin kissed quite a few cheeks in the gathered officers, since they knew many of them personally, then they were shown to what would be his quarters for the next 20 days, a large stateroom suite just past amidships and close to the port wing, but nowhere near the outer hull, a strategic location within the ship that offered the occupant a great deal of protection. He'd be sleeping aboard the ship, returning to it after every meeting, so Palla had made sure to arrange the largest and most luxurious visitor's stateroom for him, reserved mainly for visitors of his rank. Sk'Vrae, Dahnai, Grayhawk, and officers from the CCM's command staff had been quartered in the stateroom in the past, and for the next 20 days for him and the next five days for Jyslin, it would be their little home away from home. The EJ was directing the yeomen in putting his and Jyslin's

clothes and equipment away for them as he and Palla caught up a little bit. “I was hoping that you were bringing Rann, Jason,” she chided a little.

“He can’t miss that much school,” he answered. “I trust Ayama and Surin to watch him and Shya for a few days, while Jys is on Terra. Lord knows, they’re all but his foster parents as it is.”

“Besides, Maya’s going to be keeping him over at her house most of the time anyway,” Jyslin injected. “To save Ayama and Surin’s sanity if nothing else,” she added with a chuckle.

“His Grace’s Wolf and Gladiator are being secured in landing bay nine, Captain,” Maile relayed, a finger on her interface. Having those two mecha on board and available for Jason to use in a crisis was one of Aya’s many security demands. If things totally went to hell, Aya demanded that both be available for Jason, since both had tactical gestalts in them. The tacticals in both mecha would be active at all times and available for Jason to access, since that landing bay was the closest to his stateroom and within his range.

“Very good, XO,” she replied with a nod. “Are all supplies loaded and secured?”

“Aye, Captain, we’re ready to leave at your order,” Maile answered.

“The Kirri didn’t give us a hard arrival time, so I guess we can leave whenever you’re ready, Palla,” Jason told her as Jyslin hurried to the bathroom.

Palla nodded. “Alert the rest of the ships in the task force that we leave in fifteen minutes,” she ordered. “Alert Kosigi control.”

“Aye sir,” she said, her eyes turning slightly distant. Jason was a little surprised to hear her order call over the ship’s internal biogenic network.

“I didn’t realize you set up a local biogenic network,” Jason said.

“It seemed a logical thing to do, Jason,” Palla smiled. “The ship’s mainframe does well organizing all the traffic based on who needs to hear a command or instruction, much better than sending.” She glanced at the bathroom. *Has Jyslin received a jack yet?* she asked privately, touching the interface on her ear pointedly. Like virtually all upper command officers of the KMS, Palla was jacked, and had completed her assimilation training.

Songa was still running around like a wild woman trying to get the entire KMS jacked by the end of the year, that was her target date.

*She's thinking about it, he answered privately. She hasn't made up her mind yet, and I'm not going to push her. It's an intensely personal decision, Palla.*

*I'm a little surprised. If anyone would appreciate what a jack can do, she would.*

*True, but she's also a little nervous about it. She doesn't need a jack, so whatever she decides is fine with me.*

*True.*

Palla and her XO filed out, as did Aya, leaving Jason and Jyslin with the guards she posted in the stateroom, going to oversee the quartering of the rest, leaving Jason and Jyslin to settle in a little bit with only Dera and Ryn with them. Jason would be allowed to wander the ship without a guard, since Aya did more or less trust that the ship's crew wouldn't hurt him, but two guards would be in his stateroom at all times and Jason *would* have guard escort if anyone not in the KMS was aboard, even if it was just one person. Jyslin sat on the bed and bounced on it a little bit, then leaned back and sighed. *I'm going to enjoy this, it's almost like a vacation.*

*Yeah, but it'll be weird without Rann and Shya.*

*I know, but to be honest, I'm looking forward to a little you and me time, baby, she sent honestly. We haven't had any of that for, what, two years?*

*I understand what you mean, and no, it doesn't make you a bad mother,* he smiled at her, cutting off that inevitable question. *No matter how much we love our kids, even we need a break from them from time to time.*

She laughed. *I guess so. We're lucky we can just dump Rann and Shya on Maya,* she added impishly.

*Wow, we've been assimilated.*

*What do you mean?*

*Rann and Shya. She's part of the family now.*



She gave him a look, then chuckled. *Yeah. I think of her like my own daughter now.*

*Hey guys, wanna go grab a bite in the cafeteria?* Kumi asked from the stateroom beside theirs. She was going to be staying on the *Aegis* for a couple of days, while she did some negotiating with some trade delegations that were going to meet her at the Academy. Since they couldn't come to Karis and Kumi much preferred making any good-sized deal face to face, she did a lot of traveling. *I'm hungry.*

*Why didn't you eat before you left, you goofball?* Jason chided.

*I did, but I'm hungry again,* she replied tartly. *I'm eating for two here.*

*Jyslin's eating for three, and she doesn't eat half as much as you do.*

*That just proves my baby's gonna be better because she's well nourished,* she replied loftily.

*We're jumping soon, so you'd better hurry,* Jyslin added.

*I'll arrange a light meal to be brought to Secretary Kumi's stateroom,* Ryn offered.

*Awesome! Make it rich and spicy, Ryn, I've been craving spicy lately.*

About the time they were settled in, the *Aegis* was on the move. Jason has a flat hologram on the wall projecting a camera view of the outside, with the eight escorting ships in a loose formation around the gigantic command ship, moving between the KMS shipyards and the Imperium shipyards, both of which were blurred and indistinguishable in the hazy gloom. Ever concerned with security, Miaari had light scramblers and a hard shield with two windows for cargo to pass in and out along the border so the Imperial shipbuilders couldn't see in, to see how the KMS ships were constructed and what equipment was installed in them. Every empire had similar security measures around their cordoned area within Kosigi, to protect their shipbuilding secrets, and it was about the only external security equipment Miaari allowed inside Kosigi. The escorts moved out from the flanks of the command ship, the cruisers ahead and the destroyers behind as they approached the capitol door tunnel, because the *Aegis* was so big that the escorts wouldn't have room to cruise beside it when they entered the tunnel

*[We've cleared Kosigi and are navigating for Kirri space, Jayce,]* Palla called over the ship's local biogenic network. *[We'll be jumping in about 25 minutes.]*

*[We'll be ready,]* he answered.

*Ryn, you bitch!* Kumi sent angrily. *I said hot and spicy, not Makati uda gruel!*

*Why Kumi, uda is good for an expectant mother,* Ryn replied, her thought rippling with malicious amusement, and that made both Jason and Jyslin laugh.

"She's gonna get you," Jyslin grinned.

*I'm so afraid,* she sent with scathing disregard, her thought so controlled that it didn't leave the room.

"Poor Kumi, tormented by everyone around her. No wonder she's so angry all the time," Jason said, then he laughed again.

It was a 121 second jump from Karis to Kirri'arr, which they took in one fell swoop just to get it over with. Jason opened his eyes and shook off the last of the sensory hallucinations as the blue and green planet of Kirri'arr blinked onto the hologram on the far wall, which pretended to be a window. The planet was 60% water and 40% land, 1.0924 gravity, .9899 pressure, 26.171 hour day, and was considered in the cool temperate zone in its orbit around medium-sized star, a little cooler than Draconis and Terra by average, with an atmosphere slightly richer in greenhouse gases to raise the planetary temperature more in line with those planets. The planet had large deserts in its interior continents due to how far they were from the oceans and very volatile seasonal patterns. Their summers were very hot, their winters very cold, and their spring and fall seasons were rife with savage storms that raked across the planet.

The Kirri themselves were well adapted to the volatility of their homeworld. They were an extremely hearty and rugged breed, able to comfortably handle a very wide array of temperatures, from arctic cold to sweltering jungle heat. Their unusual biology gave them ability to hold their breath for upwards of 40 minutes, which made them well adapted to water-based activities, because the Kirri had symbiotic microorganisms in their lungs that consumed the carbon dioxide they exhaled and converted it to

oxygen right in the air sac, microbes that had evolved almost exclusively to live within the Kirri's lungs and were unable to live in any other organism. The Kirri had several other microbes in their bodies that had evolved similarly symbiotic relationships, which gave them some unusual capabilities. The Kirri could incite the microbes with physiological states that caused them to respond, and those responses boosted the Kirri's natural abilities. Kirri could trigger short bursts of incredible strength and speed, mental states of high acuity and responsiveness, which gave them reflexes as fast as a Shurai, and episodes of great mental clarity and concentration where they could remember absolutely everything they could detect with their senses, all states incited by chemicals the microbes in the Kirri's bodies gave off in response to a Kirri's physiological state. The symbiotes actively protected their Kirri hosts, responding to their fear, their worry, their unease, boosting them to protect the host, thereby protecting themselves. Over many generations of symbiotic evolution, the Kirri had learned how to control the symbiotic microbes to trigger specific effects. As a result, a Kirri was a *nasty* opponent in a fight, because they could boost their abilities for short periods to outmatch their opponents, be it with claws and fangs, a rifle, a fighter, or sitting at a diplomatic table.

Needless to say, Myleena had demanded some detailed passive scans of the Kirri while they were on board and their curious symbiotic existence with the microbes, to see if spiders could emulate some of their capabilities.

Because the symbiotes reacted to physiological states triggered by strong emotion, the Kirri strove to control stray emotional impulses. They weren't emotionless like Vulcans, and indulged in positive emotions like happiness, but they learned to rein in their negative emotions like fear or anger to prevent accidentally triggering one of their boosted states, since the microbes reacted to the physiological changes those kinds of emotions triggered in a Kirri's body, boosting their host's abilities to protect it, and thus themselves. The states only lasted a few moments, and it "exhausted" the microbes within them, which only gave them a limited ability to benefit from a boosted state. Because of that, they controlled their emotions to save the boosted states for when they were needed, and it also gave the Kirri a great deal of natural self-control. They were a highly disciplined race, like the Kimdori or the Moridon, because a lack of control made their symbiotes burn up their energy and left them vulnerable when the time finally came

that they *needed* a boosted state, but their symbiotes couldn't trigger them due to exhaustion.

*[Kirri'arr control has contacted us, Jayce. Their council will be coming up in a shuttle as soon as we reach orbit,]* Palla conveyed as Dera helped Jason out of his jump restraint.

*[Sounds good. We should be ready.]*

It took them nearly a half an hour to achieve orbit, which gave Jason just enough time to put on his formal robes. As usual, Jyslin fussed with the way he wore them, and while she was tugging at the lapel of his outer robe, he wondered why he was wearing them in the first place. They were an Imperium tradition, and the Karinnes were no longer part of the Imperium. He was the Grand Duke, he could wear whatever he damn well pleased... and he realized that the formal robes were the only *ceremonial* clothes he owned. He didn't have any Terran suits in the closet, nothing nice enough to greet the ruling body of another empire, just the robes.

It said a lot to him that all he had were the robes, in many ways. He'd often joked at how much Jyslin and Dahnai had changed him, but the truth of it was, they *had*. They had completely pulled him into Faey society, to the point where he almost didn't feel like a Terran anymore. He hadn't spoke English or French in *years*, not in any extensive capacity. He didn't even think in English anymore, he thought in Faey now. He hadn't been back to Terra for longer than a couple of days since he left Terra to move to Karis, except for when they held the summit at the Academy. He didn't really feel like a Terran anymore—he didn't feel like a *human* anymore. The very fact that he no longer even called his own people *humans*, only thought of them or called them *Terrans*...well, that said a whole lot about where he stood now. About the only way he wouldn't bow to Faey customs was he wouldn't let anyone put makeup on him, which men often did in Faey society, nor would he wear the robes Kellin favored in public that left his penis exposed, and had the robe frame it to draw attention to it. He'd been converted into a nudist by his Faey wife, but he wasn't going full into exhibitionism.

But, to be fair, he was the Grand Duke Karinne, leader of noble house of the *Siann*, and he'd had to embrace Faey customs and culture in order to be taken seriously by the *Siann*. He had to *act* Faey in many ways, both within

the Imperium and on Karis, because it was necessary. Being the Grand Duke Karinne had required him to embrace the position and what it meant, but in its own way, it had also caused him to discard his *humanity* in favor of *Faeyity*.

So, he was the one that made the rules around here...and there was nothing that said he couldn't stop wearing formal robes and wear a nice tailored suit. He'd save the robes for very, *very* special occasions where he represented the House of Karinne as both its ruler and the keeper of its rich traditions and history...and to be fair, one of them would be greeting heads of state. So, in this case, he'd be wearing the robes no matter what.

He'd be on Terra for four days. That was plenty of time to find out where Kim got his suits made and order a few of them. Kim *always* wore suits that were both very handsome and perfectly tailored for him.

*There, now you look proper,* Jyslin sent warmly, smoothing the red sash around his waist with her fingers, then patting him on the chest.

*I'm so glad I pass your inspection,* he sent dryly.

*You'd better, or the conclusion letter will be on your desk when you get home,* she sent playfully.

*Bull shit. I own you, woman. You're never divorcing me.*

*I'm the one who owns you, you silly man,* she winked. *And that means I can throw you away the moment you no longer amuse me.* She burst out laughing and squirmed when Jason grabbed hold of her and tickled her, then protected herself by throwing her arms around him and giving him a deep, loving kiss.

*The shuttle is on the way up, your Grace,* Ryn reminded him.

Jyslin wasn't going to meet the Kirri with him due to Kirri customs, but she'd meet them when they sat down and talked later. In Kirri custom, the mate of a leader was never put in a position where they could be abducted and held for ransom, and the first meeting between the heads of state of different governments was a potentially dangerous situation. It was purely ceremonial and based on an ancient Kirri custom of holding family members of important people for ransom, but it was an ingrained Kirri custom. None of the Kirri Council were bringing their spouses on this trip

because of that very custom, and Jason couldn't bring Jyslin with him to meet the Kirri, else they'd think he didn't care about his wife, and thus was untrustworthy.

The Kirri's shuttle, which was an Ogravian-built shuttle, landed in the main flight deck with an honor guard of KMS in their dress uniforms arrayed before the large, bulbous shuttle, and all four of Jason's regular guards behind him, wearing their "dress armor," Crusader armor that was inlaid with all kinds of ceremonial designs to make it look more majestic, but fully operational and armed Crusader armor. The KMS honor guard stood at attention and saluted when the door opened, and Moderator Krirara Krarou stepped out of the hatch. She was surprisingly tall, about five shakra tall, or about six feet or a bit under two meters, and she wore no clothes, which was the Kirri custom. Unlike the Kimdori, the Kirri had *digitigrade* legs, with an elongated foot that forced them to stand on their toes, which gave their legs the illusion that they had an extra joint...and also allowed the Kirri to drop down on all fours and run nearly as fast as a horse could. Unlike the Parri, who also had digitigrade legs, the Kirri were fully adapted to walking only on their legs and were quite comfortable and graceful when standing and walking erect. Kimdori had human-like legs, which were called *plantigrade*. The female Kirri, oddly enough, only had two breasts, which was very different compared to other canoid or vulpoid species in the sector cluster, and the fact that Krirara Krarou's breasts were pronounced, like a Faey or Terran woman's breasts, was a physical indication that she'd had children. Kirri females didn't have pronounced breasts until they had their first child, when the breasts developed and became permanently pronounced. It was a weird evolutionary thing unique to the Kirri, but then again, there were a lot of weird evolutionary things unique to the Kirri. That their females wouldn't grow breasts until they had children, which would then remain permanently pronounced, was just another mark in the "It's a Kirri, move along" column. Those breasts were covered in white fur except along the outer edges, where the white ruff that started under her chin went all the way down her torso and ended at her crotch, but the nipples on those breasts were exposed and prominent, since no fur grew in the area Jason would call the areola on a Faey, Terran, or Shio woman. She also had a long, luxuriously thick and meticulously groomed tail, which trailed down to her ankles and was quite poofy and bushy, ending in a white tip. Her long, thick auburn hair was almost slapdash and tousled in comparison to

her tail. The fact that Jason was standing at the base of the stairs of her transport and thus he was looking up at her gave him a fleeting glance of very humanoid-like female genitals, but it bothered him to see it about as much as it bothered her to show it, given his long exposure to Faey custom.

“Moderator, it’s nice to meet you in person,” he said in the Kirri language, which was filled with growls, barking sounds, and canine yips.

“I had no idea you speak Kirri, your Grace,” she said with an honest and surprised smile.

“I learn fast,” he said dryly as he took her wrist in the Kirri fashion, digging his nails into her wrist as she dug her short claws into his. She won that little competition, since Jason didn’t have claws. “We have staterooms ready for your journey to Terra so you can relax as we cruise out to jumping distance, and we’ll have dinner in the formal dining room before disembarking so we can talk.”

“You did research Kirri customs,” she smiled, showing her sharp teeth.

“It’s only polite to show consideration to one’s guests, Moderator,” he said mildly.

*But it’s also polite to bow to the customs of one’s host, Krirara sent, demonstrating her telepathic ability. Miaari had mentioned it in her research report to Jason before he left, so it wasn’t a surprise. However, since I’m the only talented member of the council, your Grace, it would be best if we spoke.*

*Of course, he sent easily.*

Jason met each of the sixteen other members of the Kirri council, nine males and seven females, and after Palla introduced herself, she escorted Jason and the group of Kirri out of the landing bay and towards the staterooms. The Kirri were looking everywhere at once, and seemed to be quite interested in the ship, even the mundane parts of it like the walls of the companionways. “It will be a 130 Kirri *muara* jump to Terra from Kirri’arr, honored council members,” she told them. “We’ll be jumping in approximately 15 *hraru*. Once we arrive at Terra, you will be offered a tour of the *Aegis* before your meal.”

“Secretary General Kim of the Terran United Nations has asked to attend the meal,” Jason supplied.

“Of course he may,” Krirara Krarou said immediately.

“Also, Eleri Karinne from my trade department wishes to speak to you about potential trade opportunities, so she too would like to attend the meal.”

“We would most *definitely* be willing to hear what she has to say, your Grace,” one of the male council members said behind them. He was Krivar Krero, Council Member of the planet Korri’arr.

“Most definitely,” the Moderator agreed.

“After your meal, Secretary General Kim will escort you down to the Academy so you may settle in to your accommodations,” Palla continued. An aide scurried up to them when they reached a lift and gave Palla a box, then headed off down the companionway. “We have your interfaces here, honored Council members,” she said, holding up the box. “I apologize we didn’t have them when you arrived, but we had some sizing issues. Most of our interface models are designed for beings with ears *here*,” she said, touching her left ear delicately, which made a few of the Kirri chuckle. “These interfaces are the only means by which you can operate any equipment on this ship, honored Council members. There are no manual controls anywhere on this ship. They work by direct thought at the device. For example, think *open* when you stand at a door, and it will open. Think *on* at a light, and it will turn on. You have to be quite forceful in your intent when doing so,” she warned. “You have to, in a term, think very loudly to make the interface respond.”

“Ah yes, the interfaces,” Krirara said brightly as she took the one Palla offered her, then reached up and set the half-oval device around her ear, and she put it on right without really trying, setting it so the holographic emitter faced forward. The interface bonded to the fur there, which ensured it wouldn’t slide off. “Like this?”

“That’s fine, Moderator,” Jason nodded. “The interface is already on, so you’re ready to go.”

“And I take it the interfaces will not open any doors we should not be opening?” one of the other council members asked, Arikra Roukri, council



member of the moon Akorri'arr.

"Precisely, honored Council member," Jason said with a slight smile and a nod. "The interfaces will make sure you don't wander into a part of the ship you're not supposed to be in."

"Clever," she said approvingly.

"The interfaces are equipped with a one-way hologram that will project in front of you to view images, and they're loaded with a basic tutorial of an interface's function, as well as visitor's maps of the ship. Just think *map* at the interface, and it will project it for you, showing you where you are. It can also show you the path to where you want to go if you think of the place you wish to visit."

"Map," Krirara said aloud, and the interface's holographic emitter activated, making her flinch slightly. "Quite clever! It's even in the Kirri language!" she said with a surprised laugh.

"Well, you prove that you have no problems using an interface, Moderator," Jason told her easily. "It can take a little practice for some."

"I can see why, we have *nothing* like this," she said, her eyes moving as she looked at the map that only she could see.

Palla returned to the bridge after escorting the council members to the four large and spacious staterooms, with couches, tables, and chairs within for them to relax during their visit, staterooms with windows so they could see outside. Jason stayed with Moderator Krarou in her personal stateroom as heavy shutters closed over the windows, one of the first stages of the ship's preparation to jump. Ships jumped with all hatches closed as a basic precaution, just in case they jumped into something messy at their arrival point, like an uncharted meteor swarm. "We will be jumping in four minutes," one of the comm officers called over public address. "Four minutes. All crew and visitors to your jump restraints."

"How long is this minute?" Krirara asked Jason.

"About two and a half *hraru*," he replied, using her government's time measurements.

"Ah. Not long, then," she said. His guards helped Krirara into jump restraints, then they put him in the chair beside hers, Dera pulling down the

bar and making sure it was secure. *The Ducal party and Moderator Krarou are secured and ready to jump*, Dera sent strongly back to the bridge.

“You are an *Imperial* guard,” Krirara noted aloud when Ryn leaned over her, tugging on her jump restraints, looking right at the scar on Ryn’s throat.

*I am*, Ryn replied with a nod, sending so that all of the Kirri could hear her.

“What circumstance does the ruler of a house that has split from the Imperium have Imperial guards?”

*Because his son is married to Princess Shya Merrane Karinne, daughter of Empress Dahnai Merrane. We protect her Highness and her family, which includes him*, she answered, pointing at Jason.

“Ah. That does seem practical,” she said approvingly. “And explains why the Karinnes remain so close to the government from which they declared independence.”

“That was business, Moderator,” Jason told her honestly. “It wasn’t based on enmity. The Karinnes needed to maintain their strict neutrality, and independence was the only way.”

After jumping to Terra, the shutters opened to show the familiar moon of home, though the planet itself wasn’t visible from their view. The moon hung in the distance as Jason helped Krirara from her jump restraints. “If it’s alright with you, my mate Jyslin would like to come with us on the tour,” he said.

“Of course, your Grace,” she told him. “We welcome her among us.”

Jyslin’s introduction to the council caused something of a row, but in a good sense. Since she was obviously pregnant, it made the Kirri *very* friendly and accommodating to her, since Kirri considered a pregnant woman to be a very, very important individual, worthy of respect and protection. The Kirri word for *female* translated literally to *life-bearer*. Jyslin gave Jason a couple of short looks after the sixth time one of the Kirri asked her if she was tired as Palla showed the council one of the fighter bays, filled with menacing Wolf fighters and sleek, elegant Gladiator exomechs. Consideration for a pregnant woman obviously included a bit of good-natured overprotectiveness for the Kirri. *I swear, if I was a Kirri, I’d*

*have killed my husband after a month*, she fumed privately to him as one of the ship's riggers climbed into a Gladiator to demonstrate it to the council. Faey women were very independent and didn't take that kind of mothering very well...and did Jason ever know that.

*If you were a Kirri, you'd expect him to act like that*, he countered.

Palla showed the council a part of the engineering department but didn't let them see the engines, showed them the main sickbay and the interior hydroponic farms, let them tour one of the shopping concourses for the crew; a capitol ship was literally a moving city, with everything inside required for the crew, including shopping opportunities. But the council was most interested in the industrial replicators Palla showed them as they toured a rail cannon emplacement, the replicator programmed to replicate the slugs the cannons used, which were then coated with titanium by external molecular sprayers. The entire process only took about fifteen seconds and a rail cannon had six replicators feeding it ammunition, allowing a rail cannon to fire about as fast as it could be loaded. "I notice that your replicators are capable of replicating iron," one of the council members said, the male Irkouri Kriourr, council member of the moon Hirriki'arr. "That is much different from the replicators we buy from the Imperium."

"We've advanced replicator technology a little," Jason replied. "But I'm afraid we don't sell these types of replicators outside of the house, honored Council member. They contain Karinne technology, and we haven't yet found a way to produce the replicators using commonly available technology. But we *are* researching the matter," he said.

"When you succeed, we would be very much interested, your Grace," he said. "The lack of mineral resources in our empire is our greatest shortcoming."

"But you do sell replicators capable of producing complex molecules," Krirara noted.

"Yes," he said with a nod. "That's a different kind of replicator, mainly used for producing something that you *might* call food," he said wryly, which made several of them laugh. "It's edible and nutritious, but it tastes

like wet sand. We sell them mainly to the Skaa and the Grimja to help them with their food shortfalls.”

“Can these replicators produce exacting molecular patterns?” Irkourri asked. “Say, to replicate something like a dinner plate?”

“We’re researching that too, but we haven’t had much luck,” he replied. “The complex molecules the replicators produce can’t be placed that precisely, unlike the basic shapes that standard replicators can produce. The replicators are good at making an irregular pile of a material, but not creating precise shapes. The food they produce pours out of the replicator like a thick soup,” he told them. “The replicator can produce the material to *make* the dinner plate, but it can’t make in the *shape* of a dinner plate.”

“Ah,” Krirara noted. “So it’s used to produce raw materials.”

“Yes,” he nodded.

After the tour, they sat down to a meal, which was a long-standing Kirri tradition, to eat good food and talk of affairs. Most Kirri negotiations took place at a dinner table, much as they took place at the bar of a pub in the Grimja Union. Kim and Kumi joined them in the formal dining room inside the ship, a formal room for ceremonies that was easily converted to a dining room by the crew. The Kirri greeted Kim as a head of state, but were just as attentive to Kumi as they’d been to Jyslin, and one of the Kirri males seated her at the table as the galley staff came in carrying platters of Kirri dishes, which were heavy in meat, cheese, and dairy, but with quite a few vegetables as well. Every dish had meat or cheese or milk in it, which accented the dishes that were primarily vegetables. The chefs had clearly studied Kirri cooking traditions, because the Kirri looked quite impressed as they tasted the dishes placed before them. Kumi wasted little time starting to talk trade with the Kirri, offering Karinne raw materials for the most popular crops produced by the Kirri, as Jason got directions to Kim’s tailor in New York City. Jason listened as Kumi fenced with the Kirri, and it was clear that she was holding her own against the four Kirri that seemed to be their main trade specialists.

By dinner, Kumi got up from the table with a trade agreement, 75,000 *benkonn* of assorted Karinne refined heavy metals, primarily tungsten and Ardantium, which was a catalyst used to produce shocked titanium, and

1,000 industrial replicators for 155,000 *benkonn* of choice Kirri crops, a flock of 500 live *krikra* birds, and a couple hundred *konn* of seeds and bulbs to plant the crops themselves. It gave each side some immediate materials and the ability to produce more on their own, replicators for the Kirri and seeds for the Karinnes. The Kirri proved their bargaining skills at the table, but Jason had a feeling that the fact that Kumi was visibly pregnant made them a little more giving than usual.

Krirara, however, didn't let Jason get away. After the meal, which lasted nearly two hours, she came up behind him, put her hands behind her back modestly, and walked with him as he made his way to the bridge. *I would pose a question, your Grace*, she sent with impressive power and subtlety, demonstrating through her sending that not only was she a powerful telepath, but also very well trained.

*I think we can dispense with the titles, Moderator*, he replied.

She smiled. *You do know Kirri customs, Jason*, she sent with approval.

*We've shared a meal, that allows us to be a little less formal*, Krirara, he replied easily.

*As I told you, I've been lobbying the council to join the Confederation*, she told him as several crewmen passed by them, Dera and Ryn following at a discreet distance. Krirara gave a Beryan a curious look, who in return gave her an appraising and not entirely appropriate smile. A Kirri would probably be quite attractive to a Beryan. *Was that a Beryan?*

*We have many species in the House Karinne*, Krirara, he replied with an audible chuckle. *But no Kirri as of yet, despite us having a recruiting center on Kirri'arr. None of your people seem interested.*

*You've studied my people, so that shouldn't surprise you*, she answered.

*True*, he nodded. Because they were so dependent on the symbiotes in their bodies, the Kirri were very reluctant to live anywhere those microbes did not exist. They'd spread to 16 additional planets by seeding the ecosystem with the microbes nearly a decade beforehand and seeing if they would be able to thrive there. If they could, the Kirri colonized. If they didn't, the Kirri would mine the planet for its mineral resources, but none would live there permanently. In fact, no Kirri would spend more than a continuous Kirri month in a place like that, rotating back to a *habitable*

planet every 20 standard days, which was a Kirri month. Much like oil workers on offshore rigs back before the subjugation, Kirri workers worked “20 on and 20 off” at such mining outposts. The Kirri at the Academy had set up eco-domes holding an atmosphere with the symbiotes present so they could feel comfortable staying there for the three to eight years it took for them to pursue their educations.

Which, of course, had caused the symbiotes to escape into the Terran atmosphere, and according to sensor sweeps, they seemed to be reproducing and thriving in the Terran ecosystem. The symbiotes were harmless to all other forms of life, though they were parasitic to most other hosts, invading fat cells and consuming the stored lipids and consuming the free glucose in the blood, but they were unable to boost other forms of life to which they had not particularly evolved to live within, since other forms of life didn’t have the Kirri’s unique biochemistry, and that was how the symbiotes boosted their Kirri hosts. They couldn’t reproduce to such numbers that they threatened a Terran, however, since Terran immune systems attacked them as invaders, something Kirri immune systems did not do. They posed a risk to people with immune deficiencies if they reproduced in such numbers that their glucose consumption threatened the host, but when that happened, the symbiotes stopped reproducing and literally killed each other until their numbers posed no threat.. They were sensitive to their hosts and tried not to cause damage, unlike most microbes. The symbiotes *cared* about their host and did not want to do it harm. The symbiotes weren’t a biohazard to most inhabitants of Terra and the fact that the symbiotes seemed compatible with Terra was causing some of the Kirri students to consider living outside their eco-dome.

There was no definitive proof that living on a planet that didn’t have their symbiotes would do a Kirri harm, since they already had the symbiotes inside them and they reproduced within their bodies just fine, but millennia of tradition and superstition worked against that rationality.

*Anyway, I would like you to address the council on your return from your state trip, and speak to them in honest terms about what is coming, as well as what the Confederation can do to extend our reach out of the most remote corner of the sector cluster and into the mainstream of trade and politics. We have much to offer the other empires beyond the void, Jason, and you can help us bring it about. I think they would listen to you. They*

*seem quite inclined towards you. So, if possible, after you complete your visit to the Jun, I would ask that you return to Kirri'arr and speak to the council. We'll be back by then. Your KMS will take us home in 12 days, after we've had time to tour the Academy and enjoy a bit of a respite here on Terra. We rarely get a chance like this, to visit a planet so far from home, and we intend to take advantage of it, she sent eagerly.*

*I can do that, Krirara, he assured her. If it's alright with you, I'd also like to bring my mate and my cubs. Kirri'arr is a place that they'd love to visit. I've seen holos of it, and it's absolutely gorgeous.*

*We'd be honored to have them there, she smiled, for Jason had just put a whole lot of trust in the Kirri, at least from the Kirri perspective, if he was willing to bring Jyslin and his children there. Now, after we tour the Academy, where do you suggest we go to relax a little?*

*He chuckled. That depends entirely on what you want to do, he answered. If you want to experience Terran nature, there are plenty of places on Terra similar to your planet, and even more much unlike your planet. If you're looking for culture and society, some place where you can shop and take in plays and other shows, then I suggest New York City, Paris, Melbourne, Berlin, Tokyo, Los Angeles, or London. If you're looking to tour historical sites and landmarks, then you should go to the middle East, Greece, Rome, and China, where most of our ancient history took place. If you're into music, then New Orleans is the place you want to go.*

*Hmm, something for everyone, she mused, tapping her muzzle. We're not all staying together once we finish our tour, we have different tastes, she told him. I think I might try out several of your suggestions. It barely takes a kurin to get anywhere on the planet from the Academy, she noted, using a Kirri time measurement about equal to 74 minutes. The Kirri didn't use the standard time measurements prevalent through most of the home sector.*

*I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself, he sent as they reached the lift. I'm afraid we'll have to part here, Krirara. Not even I can get you on the bridge, he sent wryly.*

*But you're the Grand Duke.*

*In the KMS, Captain Palla outranks me when I'm on her ship and it's deployed on a mission, Krirara, he chuckled. She is the ultimate authority*

*on the Aegis at times like this.*

*A curious convention.*

*It makes a whole lot of sense if you think about it, he told her as he stepped onto the lift, Dera and Ryn stepping around Krirara and in with him. I'll be going down to the Academy with you, so I'll see you in a little bit. I have my own things to do there.*

*Alright. Be well, Jason.*

*Be well, Krirara.* The doors closed, and Dera gave him a playful look. *What?*

*I can't believe you actually learned something, she teased.*

*And just what did I learn?*

*That even you answer to your betters, she replied.* Ryn wheezed that voiceless laugh when Jason smacked Dera's armored shoulder, then fanned his hand with a hiss of pain, since he wasn't wearing armor himself.

*Koira, 27 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Friday, 29 October 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 27 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*KMS Aegis, orbiting planet Grimjar IV, Grimjar system, Grimja  
Union*

Kreel...was going...to *die*.

Jason sat on the edge of his bed with his head between his hands, feeling like it was about to explode any minute. It had been a *long* time since he'd gotten that drunk, but that damned *fucking* Grimja had pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed, and he finally managed to get Jason so drunk that most of last night was just a hazy blur. He had this ephemeral memory of dancing in a circle with quite a few members of the Grimja



Congress, singing some old Grimja folk song whose words he didn't really know, but surely singing with as much passion and gusto as those who did.

Jason could admit one thing, though...the Grimja sure as hell knew how to party.

He blearily looked up as Doctor Meria Elanne of the KMS Medical Service passed a handsensor over his forehead, giving him a reproachful look. *I would almost say that you had alcohol poisoning, your Grace,* she sent disapprovingly. *From this scan, at the height of your inebriation, you had a blood alcohol level that would be toxic to a Faey. Thank Trelle you Terrans are a bit more resilient than we are when it comes to alcohol.*

*Blame that god damned fucking Grimja, I think he switched my beer for Makati ale. And I don't remember much after that.*

*Oh, you were very entertaining, your Grace,* Aya sent smugly from the side, her arms crossed against her breastplate and indulging in that merciless female need to lord it over a man with a hangover. She even had her serves you right face on. *I had no idea you enjoyed singing so much. Or falling down while you were dancing. Or hitting on Grimja females. I never knew you were into fur, whiskers, and buck teeth, Jason,* she sent with a wicked tilt to her thought.

*You're supposed to protect me, you treacherous bitch,* he accused. *You should have stepped in when you saw how drunk I was.*

*I've told you before, Jason, we protect you from everything but what you make for yourself,* she replied haughtily. *You drank that ale, you live with the consequences.*

*Aya. Fuck you.*

Aya wheezed that voiceless laugh, grinning at him.

*You have a couple of fairly nasty bruises on your thighs, as well as a welt over your left eye. How in the world did you get those drinking in a pub?*

*I honestly have no idea.*

*His grace tried to demonstrate several of his Aikido moves when he could barely stand,* Aya sent, even more smugly than before. *I've seen him*

*do demonstrations before, but it was the first time I'd ever seen him throw himself. It was quite a display of martial prowess.*

*Aya, one more snarky comment out of you and you're walking home. You understand me?*

*Of course, your Grace, she sent with venomous honey all but oozing through the cracks in her thought.*

*I'm going to have to do something about this welt, your Grace, Meria told him, holding his chin as she peered at him intently. The swelling is quite noticeable. The bruises on your legs, we can let those go, but you can't go around looking like you got into a bar room brawl, now can we?* she asked with a slight barb in her thought.

*Meria, I don't care if you are a doctor. I'll make you walk home too,* he warned, which made her laugh.

*I don't have the equipment here to reduce this swelling, your Grace. I'm going to have to take you to sickbay.*

*At least give me something for the headache so I don't die trying to get there,* he sent pleadingly.

She rummaged through her bag, then pressed an injector to the side of his neck. He felt a little pinprick, and almost immediately his headache started to ease. *Thank you,* he sent with honest gratitude, gingerly touching his temples.

Up until the hangover, he'd had a very good trip. He'd gotten a whole lot done, shook a lot of hands, enjoyed watching the Paladins defeat the Terra Warriors 11-8, got to tour quite a few interesting places, and had even managed to talk a major breakthrough out of the Alliance. He'd managed to convince them to allow the Karinnes to place a Stargate from Terra to their capitol system, Faroll, and they'd install a gate system from Faroll to their other systems when they had them built. The only reason the council agreed to it was because they would be *Karinne* Stargates, not Imperium Stargates. Jason knew better than to try to cheat Dahnai out of the gate fees, so he would split the fee revenue with her evenly, and his part of it would cover the maintenance and staffing costs for the Stargates.

Trieste...it hadn't fared well. They'd destroyed the planet killer, but the destruction of Go'jur'mi had blasted the surface with thousands and thousands of pieces of the moon, resulting in pretty significant damage to both the planet's infrastructure and its climate. They'd had to run air scrubbers to try to clear the dust and smoke from the impacts out of the air to prevent a "nuclear winter" effect, and the fires had burned in some of the remote forests for weeks until firefighters and natural rain finally put them out. The entire planet looked like it had gone through a decade-long global land war from all the craters, burned areas, and destroyed buildings from meteor strikes. The casualties had been very low because of the advance warning, thank god, and the Bari-Bari who made up the majority of the population had been working their butts off to repair the damage since. And in a true showing of cooperation, aid workers and work crews from the two Skaa empires, the Imperium, and the Colonies were also on Trieste helping with the recovery efforts, running terraforming units to smooth out craters and plant fast-growing indigenous plants to prevent soil erosion.

The summit on Imbiri had been very nice. Imbiri was a *beautiful* planet, like Middle Earth from the *Hobbit* stories, a place of ancient forests, flowing grasslands, snow-capped mountains, blue seas, and it was carefully preserved by the Imbiri to keep it so. The Imbiri had such a small footprint on their planet that it almost looked uninhabited, since they only had two major metropolitan areas where they performed industry. The rest of the planet was made up of small towns and hamlets and modest farms, which impacted the surrounding wilderness as little as possible to retain the planet's natural state. Gau and Shakizarr had met in Mesaiima's palace to talk about Haumda-Verutan relations while Mesaiima took Jason on a tour of her planet, then Jason joined them the next day to talk about increasing trade with all three of them, as well as lobby for Stargates. Neither were quite ready to go that far yet, but they did promise to study Jason's newest proposals carefully.

Then it was the rather interesting formal dinner with Shevatt. For one, Jason had no idea his family was so huge. Shevatt had fourteen wives and 43 children, and every single one of them was there, as well as quite a few Ogravian bigwigs. The formal state dinner was a major deal in their society, and it lasted nearly five hours, filled with engaging conversation, live music from a 70 piece orchestra, and poetry readings between musical

performances with their empire's most popular current poet conducting a reading of his latest work just before dessert. It was a chance to get to know Shevatt outside of council, and the huge Ogravian proved that he was every bit as intelligent and insightful as he seemed to be. He had a strong grasp on the inter-council politics, the rivalries and the alliances, able to see the cogs turning behind the scenes, and able to navigate that minefield with a deft hand.

That was the truth. As more empires joined the Confederation, council was turning more and more into a political grudge match, where cliques were forming among the rulers. Dahnai and Assaba had been subtly working against each other since the Skaa joined, jockeying for position more than anything else, but the intrigue had ramped up when the Verutans and the Prakarikai joined, for different reasons. Shakizarr was every bit as powerful and important as Dahnai and Assaba, so he represented a threat to their supremacy, where Anavan was basically out to screw everyone else and walk away with everything she could take from the Confederation. The smaller empires had banded together to stand with the big ones, with the Shio and the Colonies being the most apparent and the most effective. The Jobodi tended to work with the Alliance, the Ogravians moved easily yet carefully among them, the Prakarikai pretended to be everyone's friend, and watching it all were the Karinnes, Kindori, Zyaga, Moridon, and Imbiri... and often lamenting to each other how silly the others were being. Jason hadn't watched and learned enough to see where the Rathii were going to fit in, since he hadn't been attending council during his tour, but he had little doubt they'd get pulled into council politics just like everyone else.

After the state dinner—where Jason ate *entirely* too much—it was off to the Grimja Union. And to be fair to Kreel, the first two days *were* all about work. They toured several Grimja facilities where the Kizzik had come in and reorganized everything, turning their logistics network into a paragon of efficiency, linked together by Stargates to the most important systems and with transports moving goods to and from the outlying systems from those hub systems. It was so efficient that it had cut Grimja transport costs by 30% without firing anybody, simply by maximizing cargo carrying efficiency with well-organized schedules that got goods to and from just about anywhere in the Union quickly and efficiently.

But, after those two days, things got informal *real* quick. Jason had addressed the Grimja Congress that morning, giving a relatively short speech before the entire assembly of some 3,500 or so Grimja Councilors, and afterwards, Kreel dragged Jason out of his formal robes, into a tee and jeans, and down to Kreel's favorite pub, the Dripping Whiskers, which just happened to be a short walk from the Congressional Complex. Grimja law forbade a pub being on public property, else no work would *ever* get done. And *that* was about where Jason's memory got a little hazy. The Dripping Whiskers was a surprisingly small and cozy little tavern that happened to serve alcoholic beverages from about every empire and civilization in *their* sector cluster, which included the sectors on the far side of theirs from the Karis sector, which had their own civilizations and empires in them...and most of which had students at the Academy. Some 79 unique empires or civilizations had students in the Academy now, which were mainly from the sectors surrounding the home sector.

From what Jason recalled, the empire that had students in the Academy that was the furthest out was the Ujjo, who were four sectors removed from Karis...and the hyperspace trip for them to reach the Academy had taken 356 days... just over a *standard year* in hyperspace!

But his time with the Grimja was technically over. He'd scheduled four days here, but unless he just wanted to go sit around and get drunk again, there really wasn't much more for him to do, and Kreel didn't have anything official planned either. They'd gone through the entire itinerary in three days, which gave Jason something of a down day...which was almost half over, since it was nearly midday by Karis time, under which the ship operated.

After getting the welt and bruises cared for in sickbay—and threatening blanket demotions to anyone who so much as giggled in his general direction—Jason was back in his stateroom with half a day to get over the hangover and little to do, so he decided to tackle what was turning into a nearly insurmountable pile of reports in his inbox. Chirk had reorganized his inbox for his trip so he was getting the critical reports, but everything else was stacking up, so he went through those first, and it was generally good news. The new frigate class prototype would be finished in six days, and they'd completed three new full battleships, four new tactical battleships, and the next carrier from the big ships queue, with a goodly

number of smaller ships finished as well, including a new crop of 23 destroyers...most of which would be put in reserve until crews were trained for them. Staffing was becoming an issue. Juma now had more ships than she had trained crew to man them, she noted in a separate report, which included a request to pull Marine and Army personnel into the Navy, stating that *her* service was clearly the most important.

Good thing she sent that in a private report, else Sioa would punch her in the nose.

Myleena had sent him a report from 3D, which basically just said that things were moving along. She couldn't go into details, but the wording of the report made it clear that nothing was *behind* schedule, which meant that the various research projects hadn't suffered any setbacks.

Songa sent him an updated report on jack implantation. She'd managed to achieve her goal of getting the entire KMS jacked who wanted them—which was some 90% of the KMS—and what was even better news, she reported to him that Commander Justin Taggart was ahead of schedule in his rehabilitation and would be reinstated to active duty in eight days. He wasn't ready to have his flight status restored, he needed more rehabilitation, but he would be well enough to return to the *Dreamer* and at least do the desk job part of his duties as the squadron commander of the 76<sup>th</sup>. He'd complete his rehabilitation on board the *Dreamer*, where Songa estimated he'd have his flight status restored in about a month.

Jason dug up an older report about Justin and refreshed himself on the status of the training software for the Wolf fighters being controlled by jacks. Justin had been well enough to help them with that and combined with the Gladiator data he and Kyva had supplied, they had a Wolf training program in place for the pilots. As of yesterday, 6% of the fighter pilots had finished both jack assimilation and had rated for jack control on a Wolf, but some 350 were rating every day, so that number was increasing steadily.

Jacks were starting to catch on in the Confederation, and even beyond. Doctors from every Confederate empire had come to the Academy to be trained in the procedure, and the Annex at the Academy had a two-month waiting list for appointments for jack implantation, and a whole lot of them were Moridon. The Overseer had just been the vanguard, since it seemed like the entire Moridon race wanted a jack. They'd sent some two thousand

medical experts to Terra to be trained in the procedure, and between the Moridon coming to Terra to get jacks now and those doctors going back and doing it on Moridon, they very well might manage to jack the entire adult population within six months.

And Yila's little project on Tamiri was starting to show significant progress. With Cybi's help, they'd designed most of the hardware they needed, but they'd still not managed to build a moleculartronic device that could encode emotional states. So, Yila was moving forward with phase one of her plan, and was currently in pre-production of 16 different simsense movies, half of them porn, three action movies, two dramas, two romance movies—though they were nearly porn themselves—and two comedies. She'd sit on the finished products until there were enough jacked people to consume the media, then spend a whole lot of credits promoting the breakthrough new form of entertainment and release all 16 simsense productions within a 20-day window. She'd even gone so far as to create simsense broadcast units for people who wanted to watch the movies in a theater instead of direct consumption using the jack, watching it in their mind's eye internally, to allow movie-goers to receive the simsense feed of the movie while non-jacked spectators watched the “normal” version. She had even managed to produce equipment that could encode artificial sensory impressions, which wasn't nearly as easy as it sounded for a moleculartronic device. A biogenic device could do it relatively easily, but it wasn't nearly as easy for a moleculartronic unit. It wasn't nearly as refined as sensory data encoded from an actor, but it was fairly convincing if obviously artificial, and Yila intended to use it to “simsensify” existing entertainment programs like the *Huntress* series, encoding sensory data into the reruns to add a new dimension to it.

Yila had sent him some of the successful simsense test scenes recorded with the moleculartronic equipment, recording off the technicians and engineers who were playing the acting parts for testing purposes, and Jason could admit that it was nearly biogenic-level quality. Yila had produced ten huge studios' worth of recording equipment on top of stocking them with more conventional recording equipment, which was a very expensive thing to do. Yila had probably spent around C4 billion creating her companies, researching and developing the moleculartronic simsense encoding technology, building it in the necessary quantities to fully stock her movie

production companies and then sell to licensees, designing and producing decoder units or software to work with computers with the built-in ability to decode that would work with a jacked consumer to allow them to experience simsense, which she then had to produce in mass quantities and store in warehouses until she was ready to release the innovation to the public, and now she was spending money preparing to produce the simsense movies by building sets and so forth. Now they were just waiting for their actors already cast in those movies to finish assimilation training and start building the sets for the scenes, and her production company would be in full production mode on those movies...at least the live-action ones. She was also producing several serial “TV programs” that were completely computer-generated, in the genres of adult animation—not porn, but animation with adult themes much like anime—and CGI-style productions like the old *Avatar* movies where it was made to look completely realistic yet was all computer generated and using artificially encoded sensory data. Computer-generated movies were cheaper to produce, but even in the ultra-high-tech world Jason lived in, a great many people in many different species far preferred live actors over computer-generated animation. The Colonists especially had a tremendous preference for live actors, mainly because their primary means of enjoying shows was through plays, and in many of them, Colonial empaths projected emotional states to the audience to heighten the experience of the play, and was probably where Yila got her idea for simsense in the first place.

The Colonists had the largest number of empaths by percentage of population, far, far outstripping any other species. For that matter, empathic powers were extremely rare in any species *except* the Colonists. Some 28% of Colonists had empathic ability, where the only other race known to demonstrate empathic capability was the Faey, and they were nearly as rare as precognates. There were probably only about 10,000 empaths in the *entire* Faey population. Most species had no empathic ability at all, making empathic ability something of a unique Colonist trait.

Funny how psionic abilities were species-segregated like that. The one ability that seemed most common and prevalent was telepathy, where most species in the known galaxy had at least some members with telepathic ability. Telekinesis was the next most common, with most species demonstrating telepathic ability also demonstrating telekinetic ability, but



after that, the varied documented psionic abilities got very rare and only appeared in certain species. The Faey were the only fully telepathic race known in the galaxy, and one would think that it would make Faey more apt to have other psionic capabilities, but that was not the case. The Faey did demonstrate more abilities than any other race, but when one took into account that the Faey that did demonstrate abilities like empathy or precognitive ability were so utterly tiny compared to the population that it could be statistically correct to say that the abilities weren't truly *natural* to the species. Some rare few Faey were telekinetic as well, a scant few had some empathic capability, and a tiny, tiny number of rather unlucky Faey had demonstrated precognitive ability that had then driven them insane, but that was it. Empathic or precognate Faey were almost mutations, aberrations from the racial norm. The number of Faey with abilities other than telepathy was very small percentage of population, and the vast majority of those were telekinetics who could barely move an object with the mass of a postage stamp without fainting from the effort. Colonists had a large number of empaths and a very small number with some telekinetic ability, but they had no documented precognitive ability among them. The Shio had the highest number of people with precognitive ability by percentage, which was still tiny—precognitive ability was as rare as it was unreliable—even fewer with telekinetic ability, and a very small number that had the ability to “read” objects to see images from their past, an ability known as *psychometry*, but they had no empaths. A good 20% of Jakkans who had telepathic ability also had the ability of *clairvoyance*, the ability to see into places where their eyes couldn't see. It was the ability that energy being possessed, but with a *much* smaller range. That energy being could see across the entire galaxy, but a clairvoyant Jakkan could only see maybe into the next room with his gift, so it wasn't very useful except for entertainment purposes. It might be useful for spying, but a Jakkan was just a *little* ostentatious wherever he went, so a Jakkan would be a terrible spy. No one species seemed to have developed all the known psionic abilities, but a few of them had developed multiple psionic capabilities, mainly the Faey, Colonists, and Shio. It was a curious display of how different species had evolved in different ways.

There was one interesting commonality, however. No species that documented any psionic capability failed to exhibit telepathic ability. It almost seemed to be the baseline for psionic ability; if the race didn't have

any telepaths, then they wouldn't have any psionic ability at all. The Terrans were a great example of that, for no Terran that was "pure," the ones that *didn't* have Faey ancestors, showed any telepathic or psionic capability.

He was about to start on the next report, but an urgent request for comm beeped on his gestalt from Miaari. He accepted the query, and a hologram of her winked on in the middle of the room, a full 3D hologram. "Cousin," she said.

"What's up, Mee?"

"As you know, we've tagged the Prakarikai spies Anavan sent to Kosigi to keep an eye on them, so she didn't try to get new ones past us. It was easier to simply locate the ones already here and keep watch on them from a discreet distance, allowing Anavan to believe that they escaped detection. Well, we just detained two of them that attempted to steal biogenic chips from the main quartermaster warehouse on the central core," she informed him. "They managed to dominate two maintenance workers that had clearance to enter the warehouse to repair a faulty power conduit. Petty Officer Jacob Masterson and Sailor First Class Janet Harmon, both of which work in engineering on Kosigi. The domination was detected by our packmates working security at the warehouse. They alerted me, and I authorized them to permit the workers into the warehouse so the Prakarikai believed that their plan had succeeded. They were to steal a crate of the most advanced biogenic chips stored in the warehouse and deliver them to the Prakarikai section of Kosigi. We replaced the workers with Kimdori agents and pretended to carry through with the plan so we could catch them in the act. We arrested them as they came out to accept the box from my agents."

Jason swore. "Alright, that's it," he growled. "I'm sick and *fucking* tired of Anavan. Mee, get your clan ready for a major move." [*Aegis command comm.*]

[*I hear you, your Grace,*] came the answer, obviously a Faey woman. [*Your orders?*]

[*I want Admiral Dellin on BGI comm now,*] he replied sternly. [*And I don't care if he's balls deep in his wife. Now.*]

*[Yes, your Grace,]* came the startled and slightly amused reply.

“What are we to do, Jason?” Miaari asked.

“You’re gonna round up every god damned fucking Prakarikai in Kosigi and confine them to their quarters, and get ready to ship them to Terra,” he replied with a dark frown. “And I’m gonna go to Prakarika in person and punch that midget bitch in the mouth,” he added, which made Miaari laugh. *Captain Palla*, he sent openly, and with enough power to tell every talent on board that Jason was *pissed*.

*Yes, your Grace?* Palla answered, *very* formally.

*Plot a jump to Prakarika III and get us to jump distance now.*

*At once, your Grace. Helm, come to heading 121 mark 36 and increase to full. Navigation, begin calculations for a jump to Prakarika III. Comm two, contact Grimjar control and warn them we’re leaving orbit to achieve jump distance, she sent openly. Comm five, relay the order to the task force. All hands, begin preparations for jump, she added.*

“We’ll be jumping to Prakarika in a little bit,” he said, which made Miaari smile. “Get the clan on it, cousin.”

“I already have. Kemaari is handling it,” she said, wagging her tail a bit.

Dellin appeared on a flat hologram projected on the wall of his stateroom. “What is it, Jason?”

“Miaari just intercepted two Prakarikai spies that tried to steal biogenic chips from the main biogenic warehouse on the core,” he relayed, which made Dellin’s eyes widen. “I just ordered her to round up all of those little bastards and confine them to quarters. What I want you to do is start preparations to evacuate all Prakarikai assets out of Kosigi, but don’t act on it yet,” he said. “I’m gonna go kick Anavan in the face, and unless she *really* convinces me not to evict the Prakarikai from Kosigi, that’s exactly what’s gonna happen,” he warned.

“I’ve been keeping just such a plan in reserve, your Grace,” he said with a grim kind of smile. “Just in case.”

“I knew there was a reason I put you in Kosigi, Dellin,” Jason said without much humor. “Get it ready. Odds are, I’ll be calling you back in a

few hours to activate it.”

“Where do you want me to put their assets?”

“Dump them in orbit of the Terran moon, they can go there and pick them up. And you don’t have to be neat about it. Just tossing their stuff out the window like a scorned lover seems quite appropriate in this situation,” he replied, which made Dellin laugh and Miaari smile.

“I’ll take care of it, your Grace,” Dellin assured him.

“Get to it. I’ll be available if you need to contact me.”

Dellin nodded, and his hologram winked out.

*[Your Grace, we’re getting a diplomatic channel hail from Grimjar. High Councilor Kreeel wishes to speak with you,]* the Faey working as command comm relayed.

*[Put him through.]* “Kreeel,” he said audibly to Miaari, and the wall that held Dellin’s face a moment ago held Kreeel’s. Both of them looked at the whiskered Grimja.

“Jason, what’s up?” he asked, speaking very good slang Faey. “I was just told you’re about to leave.”

“I’m going to Prakarika and having a little *chat* with Anavan in person,” he said in a dark tone, flexing his fingers in an ominous manner, and that made a slow grin bloom on Kreeel’s face.

“What did she do this time?”

“The one thing that she never should have,” he replied.

“If you want some advice, friend, you’re doing the right thing by going to Prakarika, but when you get there, go over Anavan’s head,” he said.

“Anivor has control of all aspects of internal Prakarikai affairs, and you showing up unannounced falls within his realm of control, if you know what to do. When you arrive, demand an official state meeting. Anavan deals with the other rulers in conference, but when it comes to a state visit in Prakarikai territory, that’s Anivor’s side of the *igri* field. You’ll bypass the bitch and get straight to Anivor, and that is what you *want* to do.

Anivor’s a little more reasonable than Anavan. I *much* prefer dealing with him.”

Jason nodded. “Good advice, friend,” he agreed. “I’ll do it.”

“Just don’t expect him to be *too* reasonable,” Kreel warned. “He’s more level-headed than the bitch, but he *is* a Prakarikai. He’s just more pragmatic. If he knows you’re as pissed off as you look, he’ll yank on Anavan’s leash to keep what he sees as a good thing going.”

“Thanks for the warning, friend,” he said. “I just hope Anavan *is* there. High gravity or not, I’ll have enough strength to kick her in the face.”

Kreel burst out laughing. “Kick her a few times for me. Anyway, I’ll let you get to it, friend. See you soon,” he grinned, and his image winked out.

“You’ll need a gravity inducer, cousin, Prakarikai’s gravity is lethal to beings with your gravity tolerance,” Miaari reminded him, then she looked around. “Where are your guards?”

“There’s one built into my armor, it’s standard equipment since the mark three upgrade,” he shrugged. “As for the guards, I don’t need them on the ship, so they don’t babysit me. Sec, cousin, lemme talk to Aya.” *Aya*, he called.

*Oh, now you remember to send to me*, she replied.

*Put a sock in it*, he retorted. *Get my armor ready, and tune its internal inducer for Prakarikai gravity.*

*You’ll be wearing a secondary inducer in case the armor’s inducer fails. Prakarikai’s gravity is deadly to beings used to standard gravity, Jason. We take extra precautions.* That was true enough. Jason would weigh over three times what he did in standard KMS ship gravity, which was slightly heavier than Karis’ gravity. That put tremendous strain on the joints and the circulatory system, and it would kill people that weren’t very fit. Compounded to that was that Prakarikai’s air pressure was nearly double standard as well, so Jason would have to wear his helmet unless he wanted to go through decompression when he got back to the *Aegis*. The pressure was within Faey and Terran tolerance, but it would be like breathing with wearing a corset that was laced too tightly. The muscles in his diaphragm weren’t conditioned to deal with that much pressure trying to push his ribs in. He could survive in that pressure, but it wouldn’t be all that fun breathing in it. But he’d be wearing his helmet anyway, to avoid having decompression issues when he returned to the *Aegis*.

*No argument here. Go track one down for me.*

*I'll have everything ready before we reach jump distance.*

Dera and Ryn filed into his stateroom, a gravboard holding his armor. Jason started taking off his clothes without preamble as he saw the “window” holo change, as the ship began to turn away from the planet Grimjar and towards deep space, to get far enough away to execute a jump. He sat down on the edge of the bed and allowed the two guards to help him get his armor on. “Mee, it might be a good idea to pass what I’m about to do along to the Kimdori babysitting the other empires, and perhaps have the Denmother contact the members of the council. I have no doubt Anavan’s gonna pitch a hissy fit, so let’s warn everyone it’s coming.”

“I’ve already sent it on to the Denmother,” she assured him.

Aya came in carrying a different helmet, then replaced it on the floating platform holding his armor. It was one of the helmets with the full transparent titanium faceplate rather than his usual armor that only had visor-like transparent titanium over the eyes, and that was tinted so his face couldn’t be seen. She pushed Dera aside and joined Ryn in putting his back and breastplates over his head, attached at the shoulders, then set it down over his head. He stood up and settled it into place as they attached the two sections at his sides. “Catch me up on Prakarikai protocols for me dropping in unannounced.”

*They don’t really have any, Prakarikai don’t like surprise visits, Aya answered. Most likely, they’ll try to go through their usual ceremonies for a visiting dignitary of your rank. They take about two days.*

“Oh no, we’re not going through *that*,” Jason growled. “I guess I’m just going to have to be rude.”

“Tread lightly if you do so, cousin,” Miaari warned. “The Prakarikai take mortal offense to those who do not follow their customs when standing on their own soil.”

“I’m not going there to be nice,” he replied with a growl. “I wouldn’t even put up with this shit from *Dahnai*, and she’s the Empress and my *amu dorai*.”

It only took them a couple of minutes to get him fully armored, and he stood up and tugged a bit on his right gauntlet to get it in place as Aya seated his new helmet behind his head, attaching it to the slots on the neck of his armor. “You go ahead and go, Mee, I know you want to look over Kemaari’s shoulder while she’s working,” he said, which made her give him a slightly amused expression.

“I look over *everyone’s* shoulder, Jason,” she told him, wagging her tail a bit, and her hologram winked out.

*I demand the entire complement of guards if you go to the surface, Aya* sent strongly.

*Add enough Tarks to give me a company of fifty,* Jason replied with a nod. *And I want all of them armed to the fucking teeth.*

*Good,* Aya sent with an approving texture in her thought, then she opened her sending to reach across half the ship. *Lieutenant Hara, have the entire Ducal guard detachment minus those currently on duty with the Grand Duke assembled in landing bay Nine in full combat armor in ten minutes. Commander Braela, I want twenty of your best Tarks assembled in landing bay Nine in full combat armor in ten minutes, they will be reinforcing the Ducal guard for the deployment to the planet’s surface,* she ordered. *I want experienced Tarks, Commander, this will not be a ceremonial display. Make sure your Tarks have a secondary inducer in case their armor inducer malfunctions.*

*At once,* Captain Aya, Braela, the chief of security on the *Aegis*, responded. *I’ll have an MIT-20 jumper deployed to landing bay Nine for the Grand Duke.* The MIT-20, short for Mobile Infantry Transport, was a troop transport dropship, also known as “jumpers” because they only landed long enough to deploy their troops, which had a troop capacity of 100 along with all of their battle gear. That was more than large enough to hold Jason and all of his guards. It was also heavily armed and armored, with a compressed Neutronium armor carapace, Teryon shields, a shockwave generator, and sporting six batteries of pulse and rail cannons that were arrayed so the gunners could lay down a full 360 degree field of fire if necessary, so it was more than capable of defending itself if attacked. The MIT-20 was designed to fight its way down to a planet’s surface, either deploy or recover its infantry, then get back in the air.

*You just read my mind, Commander,* Aya responded.

*[Fifteen minutes to jump. Fifteen minutes to jump,]* a general broadcast came over the ship's local biogenic network, then it was repeated over the PA speakers.

Jason spent those fifteen minutes privately seething. He was not surprised at *all* that Anavan had tried this stunt. They weren't the only empire in the Confederation thinking of itself, but at least the others were willing to put aside their individual ambitions in the short term to deal with the tremendous threat the Andromedan invaders posed. Anavan, on the other hand, was all about using everyone else to protect the Prakarikai from the Andromedans, then after the Andromedans were permanently driven off, her plan was to turn around and conquer her former allies while they were weakened from the war. The only reason Jason and Zaa had not objected was because the Prakarikai *were* going to fight, and they needed everyone they could get to match the endless numbers of the Consortium... but right now, Jason wasn't sure they were worth the headache. Barely four months after joining the Confederation, Anavan had made an espionage attempt against the Karinnes, demonstrating just how much she didn't give a shit about anyone else.

Well, what the council did wasn't really his concern. He had no vote and no real voice, but what he did in his own territory was *his* business. He gave the other empires dock space in Kosigi as a courtesy, it wasn't a guaranteed right.

After a very short jump to Prakarika, a pretty large system of 18 planets and 411 moons orbiting a blue supergiant, Jason stood up after releasing himself from his jump restraints and took a quick drink of water to clear an eerie metallic taste out of his mouth, a lingering sensory ghost from the 34 second jump. Almost immediately, Palla's face appeared on his holo. "We are being hailed by the Prakarikai, your Grace," she informed him.

"Oh, put them through," he said with a slight hiss, his eyes narrowing. Palla looked slightly amused as her image winked off.

A dandied-up Prakarikai male wearing a nearly ridiculously fancy uniform, his chest almost overloaded with medals, cleared his throat. "Oh-ye, oh-ye, stand forth and identify yourself before the Prakarikai, visitor,"



he said, speaking in a very formal and steady cadence, almost reciting his words like they were lines of a play.

“I am the Grand Duke Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne,” he replied in a stiff voice. “And I demand immediate counsel with the High King Anivor of the Prakarikai on an urgent matter.”

The Prakarikai looked slightly insulted. “We will allow your convoy to orbit the planet while His Majesty considers your request.”

“Let’s get right to the point. When my ship reaches orbit, I’m coming down to the palace, I’m going to walk straight to the throne room, and I’m going to talk to His Majesty,” he declared. “If you don’t like that fact, then shoot me down. You tell his Majesty exactly what I said, word for word,” he said.

“Why, I never! Such a thing is beyond inconsiderate!”

“I don’t have time to be nice,” Jason replied. “This is a matter of grave importance, so grave that I *will* do exactly what I said I would do. So, you can either warn his Majesty I’m on my way, or you can declare war on the House of Karinne. That’s *your* decision,” he said, then he cut the comm. *Palla.*

*Yes, your Grace?*

*I want you to activate the GRAF cannon and stage it, but don’t open the outer doors.*

*I—yes, your Grace. May I ask why?*

*Simple. I just told their comm officer that the only way to stop me from coming down was to try to shoot me down. I want them to see the energy output of the Aegis, they’ll know it means the GRAF cannon is active and ready to fire. I want them to really think about the possibility of a hundred kathra wide crater where their capitol city used to be if they get any cute ideas.*

*Yes, your Grace. I’ll begin the ignition sequence in 21 minutes, so it will be ready to fire when we reach orbit. It will take the cannon about seven minutes to finish the ignition sequence.*

*Long as all you have to do is charge the cannon and open the outer doors when we get there, how and when you do it is your decision, Captain,* he answered. *Stop with the evil eye, Aya, it's the only way to get Anivor's attention to the point where he'll ignore all their stupid ceremonial bullshit,* he told his glaring guard captain. *If I'm willing to start shooting if they don't talk to me, it sends the proper message.*

The Prakarikai weren't ready to start a war, so when the *Aegis* and its escorts reached orbit, the MIT-20 carrying Jason and his small army of guards was not challenged or impeded. Prakarikai control supplied landing vectors for the jumper that would have them land on the pad just by the palace, but there were some couple hundred Prakarikai wearing those silly uniforms standing in formation in front of the pad, the beginning of those silly ceremonies Jason wasn't about to go through. But a zoom showed that Anivor and Anavan themselves were standing outside to greet the dropship, much to Jason's surprise, so he saw that this wasn't going to take long at all. He hadn't expected them to meet him at the dropship.

When they landed, Jason put on his helmet. *Aya, with me. Everyone else stay in the jumper,* he commanded, then he ordered the jumper to activate its airskin to keep the higher pressure out and open the port hatch. He and Aya stepped out and down the stairs to blaring music from a live band, and the diminutive High King Anivor stepped forward, wearing an even more gaudy uniform than the others with layers of medals that almost looked like metal scales on his chest. Jason stepped up and stopped so Anivor wouldn't have to crane his neck up at Jason like he was a child, to at least give him *that* dignity. "We welcome the Grand Duke Karinne to the Royal Palace of Prakarika," Anivor said in a strong, rich voice. He was probably one hell of a good singer. "Pray tell, for what reason do you arrive unannounced and with great, nearly reckless haste?"

"I have just ordered the immediate eviction of all Prakarikai workers from Kosigi," he said in a very loud, very powerful voice, not just telling Anivor that, but all the assembled guards and lackeys from the palace. Anivor gave a shocked look, but Anavan glared viciously at him. "The reason for this is because two Prakarikai agents from your intelligence service telepathically attacked two of my people and dominated them, trying to get them to steal Karinne technology on their behalf."

“That is a strong accusation,” Anivor said with a growing frown, realizing that they were outside and in public, and Jason had just called him out without so much as a platitude or a warning.

“It is fact, not an accusation,” Jason retorted. “Here’s a little bit of extra information for you we didn’t release with the rest of the data, High King. A cyberjack monitors the brainwave patterns of its host and can detect telepathic domination from the change in brainwave patterns after the domination has been seated,” he said artfully. “The instant my people were attacked, their jacks sounded a silent alarm that warned my security forces, and they responded. We caught the Prakarikai in the act of trying to receive a crate of biogenic chips from their dominated victims.

“Because of this act of espionage, I hereby rescind my offer of access to Kosigi for shipbuilding,” he continued. “Your people will be deported to Terra and all Prakarikai assets will be placed in orbit around Terra’s moon for you to collect. A full and complete inventory of all assets will be made available to you and the process will be monitored by a bonded and licensed Moridon Notary Public who will oversee the return of Prakarikai property, to make sure we return absolutely everything that is yours,” he declared in a strong, seething voice.

“Now hold on, your Grace, surely—” Anivor said, but Jason cut him off.

“There is only one way you can change my mind, your Majesty,” he said. “First, you replace every Prakarikai in Kosigi with ones that *are not* telepathic. All of them. Every single one,” he began. “And every one of them will submit to telepathic inspection to *ensure* they are not telepathic, and they are not agents of your intelligence service. It was a telepathic Prakarikai that attacked my people, so if you want to stay in Kosigi, you *will not* have any telepaths there. None.

“Second, I will hear High Queen Anavan stand before the Confederate Council and read a formal declaration of apology into the council record for this act of espionage,” he said, looking right at her.

If looks could kill, then Jason’s entire family some twenty generations back would have never been born in the first place.

“Third, you sign a formal letter stating that you fully understand that if I *ever* catch your people doing anything like this again, that a formal state of *war* will exist between the House of Karinne and the High Kingdom of the Prakarikai,” he added in a cold, nearly dead voice. “I came here in person to make it very clear to you, your Majesties, that I *will not* tolerate this kind of behavior. I seceded from the Imperium because of it, and only my personal relationship with Empress Dahnai saved *her* from war with the Karinnes. You will not receive half as much latitude,” he warned, glaring at them through his helmet’s faceplate. “I have been generous. I have opened Kosigi to you despite needing to keep Karis a closed system and I provide your people with my technical and logistical professionals, because we must all stand together against the coming of the Syndicate and the next wave of Consortium colonizers. And against my better judgment, I’m willing to forgive this attack against my house and continue helping you build your navy, because you need us and we need you.

“But my generosity has limits, as does my patience, so let me make this very clear, right here, right now, in your own language and in the simplest of terms that cannot possibly be misconstrued.” He switched to speaking Prakarikai. “If I ever catch the Prakarikai trying to conduct espionage against the House of Karinne again, the only warning you’re going to get that your attempt failed is the attack fleet jumping into your system. I won’t be civil, or honorable, or merciful. I will jump my fleet here, and I will *eradicate you*.”

Anivor drew himself up, and Anavan put her hands on her hips and looked about to retort, but Jason turned his back on them and marched right back towards the jumper. The arrayed Prakarikai lackeys and guards looked at Jason with shock, suspicion, and a little horror as he climbed up the steps and to the hatch, then he turned around and looked at the two angry rulers. “You have received your only warning, your Majesties. If you wish to keep building ships in Kosigi, her Majesty will read her apology to the Confederate Council during tomorrow’s scheduled meeting. If she does not, then you can pick up your people, your equipment, and your ships from Terra at your convenience. That choice is yours,” he said strongly, then he turned and followed Aya into the jumper.

As soon as the hatch closed, Aya almost broke her face grinning at him after she took off her helmet. *You know how to issue an ultimatum, your*

*Grace*, she sent admirably, but sending both privately and quietly, so not even a listener outside the ship would hear her.

*I meant every word*, he sent openly, and with just enough power that anyone with talent outside the jumper would hear him...which knowing the Prakarikai, was most of them. Jason did not want Anavan to think that he was joking in any manner, or that the threat was an empty one. The powerful conviction in his thought made it clear to any telepath that could hear him that he was *dead serious*.

The jumper took off from the landing pad, and his guards and the additional Tarks started taking off their helmets and standing down. *Pilot, call the Aegis and tell them to be ready to break orbit as soon as we're aboard. I don't care where we go, but we're not staying here.*

*Aye, your Grace*, the pilot answered.

"Sorry I pulled you girls out of your duties for no reason," he said aloud to the Tarks. "But I wasn't expecting them to meet me at the landing pad. I figured we'd have to go inside, and I wanted lots of veteran girls around me to deliver that ultimatum in their own throne room."

"That's alright, your Grace, you know we love to keep that handsome body of yours safe," one of them replied with a playful smile.

Back in his stateroom, he got both Miaari and Zaa on holograms, and relayed his very short meeting with the High King and High Queen. Zaa chuckled huskily when he told them about the ultimatum, and since she was on a flat hologram, he could see the Hearth behind her; she'd taken his call from her private residence, which was a little unusual. Denfather was visible in the background, reading from a handpanel. Miaari was in her office, sitting at her desk. "That was the exact thing you needed to do, cousin," Zaa told him. "Only the threat of the Karinnes attacking Prakarika is going to dissuade Anavan in any manner, and even that won't make her stop. It will just make her move very, *very* carefully. "

"Though, Anavan is the kind that will hate you for all time because you are making her humiliate herself before the Confederate Council," Miaari said thoughtfully, tapping her muzzle. "You have made an enemy today, Jason, and a vindictive one."

“I never liked her in the first place,” Jason snorted. “And I actually don’t really expect her to. I’ll bet ten credits that she’d rather pull her shipbuilding operation from Kosigi rather than read that apology.”

“That decision is not hers to make,” Zaa said. “*Anivor* is the one who has control of their navy, as it is considered a domestic affair. Anivor can *force* Anavan to read that apology. He will probably do so. I have no doubt that he is furious with her right now and will make her read the apology as punishment.”

“Furious that she got caught more than anything,” Jason grunted.

“True. But making this very public is the proper course. The entire Confederation needs to see what will happen if they attempt to steal Karinne secrets. The object lessons of the Prakarikai and what happened between you and Dahnai should be enough to make them very reluctant to try.”

*Five minutes until jump, Jason, Aya* warned him from the door of the stateroom, and then the PA mirrored her warning.

“Alright,” he said aloud, looking in her direction. “We’re about to jump, so I need to wrap this up. Mee, go ahead and finish deporting the Prakarikai. I want them all out of Kosigi by tomorrow morning local time. Just drop them off at the New York City starport,” he said, which made her grin. “Dellin should have his plan for getting all of their junk out of Kosigi ready, and if Anavan doesn’t apologize, he’ll be carrying it out.”

“I’ll arrange with the clan to screen the replacements, since I expect them to continue in Kosigi,” she told him. “No telepaths will be allowed in, as per your orders.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll contact Dahnai and tell her about this and allow her to spread the word through the council unofficially,” Zaa added as Miaari’s hologram vanished. “That way there are no surprises during tomorrow’s conference.”

“Record it for me, Denmother.”

She chuckled. “That you will not even be there to witness the apology is both a mercy and a further taunt,” she said lightly. “Anavan will be relieved she won’t have to face you, but then again, she may feel that you deem her

not important enough to face her, which will make her very angry. She is a very egotistical creature.”

“How she feels does not concern me in the slightest, Denmother.”

“Which will make her even angrier,” she said with a sly smile. “Enjoy the rest of your trip, cousin.”

“Just the Jun left, and I’m not entirely sure how that’s gonna go,” he said as Aya made him sit down in his jump restraints.

“I’m sure you’ll find it quite interesting. The Jun are an intriguing species,” Zaa said, then her hologram winked out.

*Raira, 28 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 30 October 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raira, 28 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*KMS Aegis, orbiting planet Jun-ara (Jun II), Jun system, Jun Republic*

This was going to be a first.

Jason tugged a bit at the *very* uncomfortable uniform he was wearing, an authentic Jun Fatherland Military Academy uniform, which was made of a very stiff fabric not unlike canvas that was dyed a navy blue. The epaulets held the crest of Karinne like a symbol of rank, and there was a silver tasseled rope that attached to it and looped under his left arm. Several medals were along the right chest of the jacket, all of them actually correct in military heraldry, for they were the medals awarded to all those who took part in the two battles at Karis against the Consortium. The pants were flared at the thighs and had a wide black leather-like belt with a silver buckle, and the boots were black, knee high, and polished to a mirrored shine. The Jun had made the uniform for him to attend the graduation ceremony of this year’s class of new officers, and they’d done their homework with the medals, getting the icons and the color patterns on the ribbons that supported them correct. It was tradition for the guest of honor

at the ceremony wear an honorary Academy uniform, but the uniform itself crept Jason out just a tiny bit, for it struck a vague resemblance to a Nazi SS uniform in both color and the cut and style of the trousers and boots. The jacket was very different, but the trousers and the boots...they were similar enough for Jason to notice.

But while the Jun showed a similar merciless attitude in some respects to the Nazis of old, they were *not* Nazis. They called their home territory the Fatherland, the territory granted to them by their god, but their focus was on *defending* it, not conquering beyond the borders of their 16 systems. The Jun were absolutely no threat to anyone who did not try to invade their territory, and never fought a war where they were the instigator. They had never started a war in their entire history, but they *finished* them.

Jason would be the first non-Jun in the history of the ancient and prestigious Fatherland Military Academy to serve as the guest of honor. He would give the commencement speech and would review the cadets as they paraded by the grandstand, armed with pikes and sabers rather than rifles, following the ancient tradition of the Academy. It had been established back when Jun still used melee weapons, and in this graduation ceremony, they would wield the weapons which were used back then, the pike and the horseman's cavalry saber. They wouldn't wear the old uniforms, but they would carry their pikes and sabers. For that matter, every Jun officer carried a cavalry saber gifted to him upon graduation as a badge of station, and like the old Samurai, the swords often became heirlooms passed down from generation to generation. Many of the cadets in the graduating class would be presented with the sabers that belonged to their father before him, and his grandfather before him, and his great-grandfather before him.

*This thing is nearly as heavy as formal robes,* Jason complained as Dera tugged a bit on his lapels.

*I have to protest one more time, Jason. You should be wearing armor, not this,* Aya protested.

*I understand your concern, but overruled,* he answered. *They're showing a lot of trust inviting me to their homeworld, and I'm going to honor it by not acting like they're going to try to kill me. Zaa's Kimdori said they're being sincere, and I trust her operatives. Besides, you'll be there,* he told her. The Jun had only allowed the *Aegis* to come to their homeworld,



but they had no problems with Jason bringing as many guards as he wanted with him. Jason had opted for six, his usual complement, Hara, and Aya. *Palla, have they given me clearance to depart yet?*

*I was about to call you, Jason. They gave us a departure time and a course vector for your dropship to follow down to their school.*

*Good enough, he replied. When do I leave?*

*Twenty minutes, she answered.*

*Plenty of time, I'm dressed and ready to go. Mostly, he chuckled as Hara adjusted the outer belt on his jacket, which went over his waist. It had a large and gaudy silver belt buckle with the crest of the Jun Republic etched into it, and was purely decorative, since he had another belt on under the jacket for his trousers. This Jun uniform is more intricate than we anticipated.*

*We're done enough, I suppose. Let's go to the landing bay.*

Jason went down and boarded a KV-10 Executive Dropship, a small but upscale skimmer class ship used to ferry executives and VIPs around. It was unarmed but carried strong Teryon shields and had carapace armor, so while it couldn't shoot at anything, it was heavily armored and would be very hard to shoot down. His six guards boarded with him, and the two pilots were already in the cockpit, which was open and visible to the passenger compartment. A Beryan was in the pilot's chair, sitting on a booster seat, plugging a hardline datafiber into his interface as his Faey copilot sat in the right chair. "We'll be leaving right on time, your Grace," the Beryan said in a confident voice as the hatch closed and the engines started up. "We have the course programmed into the nav. It'll be a 16-minute trip down, and we'll land on a pad just by their parade grounds. The *Aegis* will be keeping a weapons lock on us the entire trip down."

That was standard procedure. By locking onto the skimmer, it would allow them to quickly change targets if anything threatened it during its descent, since all their weapons would already be pointing right at that area.

"Sounds good, Lieutenant," Jason replied as Aya pointed imperiously at his restraints. He stuck his tongue out at her and buckled his shoulder straps at his chest. "So, you're the first Beryan pilot I've come across. When did you graduate OTS?"

“Four months ago, your Grace,” he said easily. Beryans were not afraid to talk to important people, they were a very smooth-talking race. “I know that we’re fairly rare, since the Shurai dominate the Alliance Navy in most pilot positions. Half the reason I’m here is because I wanted to be taken seriously as a pilot,” he grinned lightly, looking back at Jason. “I was a transport and cargo pilot in the Alliance Navy, so I’m just picking up where I left off here.”

“Staying in the field or moving to line navigation?”

“I start helm training on the destroyer *Sora’s Pride* in two days,” he replied, glancing back. “But I do like piloting the smaller ships. There’s something more, more *intimate* about it.”

“What’s your name, Lieutenant?”

“Lieutenant Junior Grade Kerak Gr’vrran, your Grace.”

“How would you like to start your helm training on a prototype line vessel about half the size of a destroyer? It’s small enough to fit your style, yet still a line vessel.”

“Why, I’d be honored, your Grace,” he said with a sincere smile.

“I think a Beryan would be perfect for it,” Jason told him.

“Then I look forward to helping the KMS test the design,” he said easily.

“You’ll help in more ways than one. The ships are rather cramped, and you being a Beryan will make it much easier for you.”

He laughed. “Sometimes being small has its advantages, your Grace,” he said smoothly.

“Startup diagnostics complete, Lieutenant,” his Faey copilot relayed. “We’re good to go.”

“As usual,” he said easily. “*Aegis* control, this is Karinne One, ready for departure on countdown zero.”

“*Karinne One, you are cleared to depart at time mark. Follow programmed flight vector to destination and maintain gravband contact with control at all times.*”

“Understood, control,” he replied as he took hold of the posts to each side of his chair. Those posts were literally there just to give a pilot something to grab to resist trying to fly the ship with his hands. “Hangar deck boss, I’m turning us around to face the outer doors.”

*“You’re cleared,”* the hangar’s deck boss answered. The Beryan showed a light touch on his mental controls as he picked up the skimmer and turned its bow to the open hangar doors, which showed the Terra-like planet Jun-ara on the far side of the airskin shield, taking up the entire view. There was a fairly large storm system visible out of the cockpit window, creeping across a large continent in the northern hemisphere. Their destination was on that continent, but well ahead of that storm system. The Fatherland Military Academy was on the southeast coast of that roughly rectangular continent. The Academy had to be on the coast because it trained its officers to serve in all military disciplines, from army to old-fashioned waterborne navy to space navy. One of the tests the cadets had to take to graduate was to sail a two-masted sailing ship from their academy to the capitol city and back, a ship that had no modern technology on it whatsoever, not even refrigerators. They sailed it as their ancestors once did, honoring their military’s ancient traditions, and from what he’d read, the cadets thoroughly enjoyed it. Where they were going, it was sunny and warm, with light winds, which would make it a good day to be outside.

Jason chatted with his guards as they waited for their departure time, and then the ship exited the landing bay and started for the planet Jun-ara. The Beryan proved he was a damned good pilot by bringing the ship down into the atmosphere with barely a shudder in the fuselage, navigating the differing air layers and turbulence with practiced ease. When they neared their destination, Jason went over the itinerary Quord had sent him. He would first give his speech, then the formal presentation of the officer’s saber would be conducted, where Jason would present each graduate with his officer’s saber, which were all carefully labeled so ancestral heirloom sabers were given to the right cadet. After the formal presentation of sabers, the school staff and guests would review the cadets as they marched in parade for the staff and the visitors, with the graduates leading the formations of their former fellow cadets. Afterwards, the now-Grade One Lieutenants would sit down for a dinner in the dining hall with the staff and guests, something of a congratulatory meal, which was always catered to be

sumptuous and extravagant, fare the new officers hadn't had since entering Academy some six years before. After the dinner, the graduates would be given their initial duty assignments—they wouldn't know what they were until moments before they boarded transports to go to them—and then they'd board transports and leave to begin their military careers without even a break, which was also Jun military tradition. They'd have time to celebrate with their families after reporting to their initial duty assignment, where they would be given leave to go home to attend the boisterous graduation parties.

After the dinner, Jason would go on to the Senate building and address the Jun Senate, then he would go straight back to the *Aegis* and jump to Kirri'arr to talk to the Kirri Council So, the day was going to be fairly busy, at least for him.

Prime Senator Quord was standing by the pad when the skimmer landed, along with four other members of the Republic Senate, three men and a woman, all of them wearing similar uniforms to the one Jason was wearing. All attendees to a graduation ceremony wore the Academy uniform. They all saluted in the Jun fashion when the hatch opened and Jason stood out, tugging a bit on his outer jacket, then he put on the cap and returned the salute. He shook Quord's unusual two-thumbbed hand when he came down the stairs. "I'm honored to be here, Prime Senator," Jason said in the Jun language, downloaded into his gestalt the night before. Four hours of enunciation practice let him get the unique sounds of their language down to where he at least was understandable.

"The honor is ours, Grand Duke Karinne," he replied as Jason shook the hand of the next Senator. "May I present Senators Edrun, Quen, Huel, and Lorit of the Jun Senate. Each has a family member graduating today, and it has long been the privilege of a Senator to be allowed to attend their graduation."

Jason shook all four of their hands in the Jun style, then adjusted his cap once again.

"You wear the Academy uniform well, your Grace," the Jun woman, Lorit, noted, looking him up and down.

“I hope to cause no offense to say that it’s not entirely comfortable, but it does look striking,” he chuckled.

“It’s not supposed to be comfortable,” Quord said. “It’s a constant reminder to all who wear it to never become complacent, for the highest of responsibilities rests on their shoulders.”

Jason gave him a curious look, then nodded. It did have a certain kind of logic to it. The Jun were like that, they were a surprisingly subtle people, as well as pragmatic.

“Let us introduce you to the Headmaster of the Academy and the school staff, then we’ll begin the ceremony.”

And it was quite the grand ceremony. The Jun cadets were young, some just teenagers, but they were highly disciplined, standing in perfect rows before the grandstand. It began with a nearly ten minute prayer to the Jun god—the Jun were a very religious people—and was followed by Headmaster of the school giving a short speech, praising the graduates for their accomplishments and their devotion to the Republic, then Jason took his place.

“It’s a great honor for me to be allowed to stand before you and address you,” Jason began, putting his hands on the sides of the lectern. “It is my honor to be the first non-Jun to serve as the guest of honor, to present the graduates with your saber, and it is one I take very seriously.

“It’s a sign of change, cadets, both within the Republic and in the sector. Even beyond it. As most of you know, invaders from the Andromedan galaxy are coming. They are coming in large numbers, tens of thousands of warships with hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and the Jun have joined with the other empires in the sector cluster to stand against these invaders together, to match their numbers with our numbers, and to defend the Fatherland from those who would conquer it. That honor is now yours, graduates of the Fatherland Academy,” he called in a strong voice. “Today, you will take up the sabers of leadership and stand tall and resolute against the coming armadas of our common enemies, to make them crash against the wall of your fortitude and show them that the Fatherland is a fortress which not even *they* can breach. It is a fortress built of the stones of your

love for the Fatherland and cemented together with your discipline and your determination.

“But you will not be alone in the defense of the Fatherland, cadets,” he said in a powerful voice. “The Jun are part of the Confederation of Allied Empires, and now we shall stand with you to protect the divine territory against these barbarians. And that is how things are changing, cadets. Some of you might find yourself serving outside of the Fatherland, aboard ships that will join with the other war fleets of the Confederation to sally forth and destroy these invaders before they can threaten the Fatherland, as sacred Jun traditions permit when it is beyond doubt that the Fatherland is under imminent threat. Make no mistake cadets, that these invaders *are* a threat. They are governments that span each half of the galaxy of Andromeda, and their only reason for coming to our galaxy is to conquer us. Their motives are beyond doubt. Their savagery is beyond sensibility. Have no doubts or reservations about this, for it is so plain and so apparent that it has caused the Jun to take the unprecedented step of joining the Confederation. Your Senators know what monsters they are, and they are taking the precautionary step of allying with your neighbors for mutual protection against these invaders. In this, we all stand together,” he proclaimed. “Jun and Grimja, Bari-Bari and Skaa, Verutan and Prakarikai, Faey and Rathii, Colonist and Beryan, Haumda and Jakkan, Stevak and Shio. We all stand together in common defense of our different traditions and our histories, of our cultures and our sovereignty, we all stand in defiance of the arrogance of these Andromedan invaders who believe that their might gives them the right to conquer others. We will show them that might is *not* right, that honor and duty and courage can defeat mere *numbers*. They fight to conquer. We fight to *protect*, and that gives us a great advantage over them, for we have something far more precious to fight for. We fight for our families, for our children. We fight for our homeland and our traditions. We fight to preserve what is good, where they fight to destroy what they covet, and that is why we will win,” he stated in a powerful voice. “Stand tall, cadets, and face it with the courage and bravery that is all but legendary throughout the entire sector cluster. No race who has heard of the Jun doubts your courage and your devotion to the defense of the Fatherland. Know that you are held in the highest regard far beyond the borders of the divine territory.

“And that’s the unpleasant part,” he said in a less formal voice, smiling a little. “War is an ugly business that neither the Jun nor the Karinnes undertake without great thought and consideration, but I can say that one *good* thing has come of the threat of these invaders. It has given me this unmatched honor, to stand before you and address you, to show you that while you are justified in the defense of the Fatherland, you are *not* alone. We stand with you, loyal defenders of the Jun Republic, in more than just the interest of defense against a common foe. It is my hope that after the Andromedans are vanquished, that an era of peace and understanding blooms between the Jun and your allies in the sector cluster, a golden age of peace and prosperity where all species in the sector cluster work together for the common good. What brings me to say this to you is this, cadets. It is my hope that as you serve beyond the divine borders with your Confederate allies, that you listen, and you learn, and you consider. Talk to your allies. Come to know them. Consider their faults and their good qualities, and if you find them worthy, befriend them. There are many of us beyond the divine borders that wish to be friends with the Jun, and it is my hope that the trial before us, protecting ourselves from a common enemy, brings us all together in an era of peace. There is nothing more noble to strive for, cadets, than peace. To me, it is the most beautiful word that can be spoken in any language. It is the cornerstone of Jun philosophy, to live in peace within the divine borders, and it is my hope that you come to learn that it isn’t only the Jun that seek peace above all things.

“Am I saying that all your allies within the Confederation are as peaceful as the Karinnes? No,” he said, tapping the lectern. “But that is why I want you to listen, to watch, and to learn. Learn who shares your love of peace and who does not, and do not be afraid to befriend those that share your desire for peace. In them, you will find stalwart companions in your quest for peace within the Fatherland.”

He glanced to the side, then stood at attention. “Cadets, *atten-shun!*” he barked in a voice that would do a drill sergeant proud. The 12,000 cadets before him did so in a nearly perfectly uniform movement. “As is my honor as master of the saber for this ceremony, I call forth those who have earned the sabers of leadership! As I call your name, step forth and receive your saber!”

There were 556 graduates of the Academy that year, and Jason called every single one of them to the grandstand, where he presented their officer's saber, saluted, then shook their hands in the Jun manner before they returned to the formation immediately in front of the grandstand, which held the graduating class. The cadets gave a single barking call and struck the butts of their pikes on the parade ground in unison every time Jason saluted, calling out "*Irinjo!*" which meant *congratulations* in the Jun language. It took nearly two hours for him to present each graduate with his saber, and when they were done, the spectators gallery to the side, filled with parents, siblings, and guests, stood and applauded. The 30 Jun and Jason on the grandstand then stood and spent another two hours watching as every single cadet in the Academy paraded by, each formation led by a graduate, who saluted with his saber as they passed by the grandstand in review. After the last formation marched by, holding the first year cadets led by a strikingly handsome Jun woman who held her saber high in salute as she passed by the grandstand, Jason called the formations to attention once again, and gave the final command. "2,246<sup>th</sup> class of the Fatherland Military Academy, *dis-missed!*"

A forest of pike heads and sabers rose into the air as the cadets gave the final ceremonial action of raising their weapons over their heads and screaming at the top of their lungs, much akin to Terran graduates throwing their caps in the air, then the 556 individual formations fell out and the cadets started walking back towards their campus. Quord stepped up to him as Jason stepped back from the lectern, a slight smile on his face. "A very short speech," he noted.

"I'm not one known for listening to myself talk, Prime Senator," he said, which made the other four Senators and the Headmaster chuckle.

"But an appropriate one," Quord said. "You said a great deal with what words you did use, Grand Duke Karinne."

"Thank you. Now, I've heard that the graduation feast at the Academy is an experience that those lucky enough to attend remember for the rest of their lives," he said with growing enthusiasm.

Quord smiled. "They spend months planning it, your Grace, and only the best chefs in the Fatherland may prepare the meal. Given Terrans and Jun have identical taste in food, I'm sure you will find it exemplary."



And it was. It would have done any formal state dinner in any palace proud, with only the finest food prepared by the finest chefs, and all done in appreciation for the 556 new officers that were about to start their military careers. It showed the dedication the Jun had to their military officers and enlisted. Soldiers were among the most respected members of Jun society because they devoted their lives to conducting war that all Jun found quite distasteful to protect the rest of their people. There was a saying in the Academy, *we fight so that other Jun do not have to fight*, that said almost everything about the self-sacrifice the new officers were demonstrating. The Jun as a people detested war, hated war, and never wanted to engage in war, so there was *real* sacrifice for those who served as the permanent military of the Jun Republic. And the people showed their appreciation for the sacrifice of those who devoted their lives to the defense of their territory by honoring them.

That paradox showed most in Quord. Like all Senators, he was a graduate of the Academy—military service was a requirement for high political office—and had the Jun mindset about war. Quord was a highly educated and civilized man with a love of opera and music, and he hated war with a passion, but when the time came to fight, he would throw every fiber of his being into it to get it over and done with as quickly as possible and return to his more civilized pursuits. That was how the Jun saw war, as a terrible and disgusting thing, but something that simply had to be done. And if it must be done, then it would be done right the first time.

It was, quite simply, one of the best meals Jason had ever had. Jun and Terrans did have identical taste in food, so while he couldn't identify most of the food on the table, the smells and the tastes reminded him of beef, of chicken, of pork, of tomatoes and beans and peas and beets and many other Terran foods, all prepared with masterful precision. The nearly 600 people in the dining hall talked and joked and enjoyed themselves immensely, since the graduates had just finished eight years of grueling work to get through Academy.

After the meal, the graduates went right back to duty. The staff went around and handed each graduate his orders, printed out on paper, that told him or her where to report immediately after the dinner, and it was tradition for a graduate to immediately stand up, salute the Headmaster, and then leave the meal once orders were received. The class valedictorian was the

first to receive her orders, and it was usually to a very good job, since she was first in her class, so it was her honor to be the first graduate to formally begin the first duty assignment. Jason didn't stay for all of it, though, since he had an appointment at the Republic Senate.

But they didn't allow him to leave empty-handed. As they prepared to leave, the Headmaster presented Jason with his own honorary officer's saber, a *very* intricately etched saber, highly decorated and ornate, but the blade was pure Adamantium and it was sharpened to a monomolecular edge. Though it was meant to be ceremonial, it was a very *real* weapon. It was so sharp that the scabbard had to be specially made to hold it, else the blade would slice through the scabbard every time it was drawn. The scabbard as well was highly ornate, wrapped in black leather with intricate designs gored into the leather, and the crosspiece of the saber held the crest of the House of Karinne on one side and the standard of the Jun on the other.

Jason was quite taken with the saber, and he had it hung on the bulkhead of the skimmer when he flew to address the Senate, changing out of the Academy uniform and into his formal robes.

That address wasn't much unlike the speech he gave to the cadets. Jason stood at the podium of the Prime Senator, the man in charge of the Senate, and addressed the 640 members of the Senate, talking about cooperation and the opening of relations between the Jun and the other members of the Confederation, but also advising caution in dealing with some of the other empires, but he also talked about trade, about shipbuilding, and about interdictors, explaining how they worked and how it was his hope they allowed him to install them at their 16 systems before the Syndicate arrived to further protect the Jun home territory from possible attack. The Jun hadn't done that yet, since they didn't want to rely on outside help to move their goods between systems. He then went over the basics of the treaty he had with the Grimja, installing Stargates at hub systems within their territory to streamline the movement of goods and people in their territory.

That was mostly the reason Quord invited him to speak to the Senate, so he could describe the interdictors in person and explain how the Karinnes could help protect their territory, if only they demonstrate a little trust in the Karinnes that *all* they would do would be to tow Jun freighters around

within their territory. Quord wanted interdictors, but the Senate hadn't been sold on the idea. So Quord, being the wily politician he was, brought Jason there to lobby for the idea, allowing the house that invented the interdictors to be there to explain how they worked and answer any question the Senators had.

Jason stood there for nearly four hours after giving his speech, answering questions from the Senators about the interdictors, the supply networks, and even general questions about the Confederation, the Syndicate, the Consortium, and sector cluster politics in general. While the Jun were isolationist by policy, they knew quite a bit about their neighbors, the Prakarikai, the Grimja, the Farguut, and the Morbods, and they seemed to delve into Jason's impressions of them, which he answered honestly. Jason didn't really know much about the Farguut and the Morbods, but he knew the Grimja and the Prakarikai very well, and he let his opinions of them show in his answers. The Senators had little doubt that Jason liked the Grimja and didn't like the Prakarikai after the first response, which seemed to please the Senators quite a bit.

He was fairly tired after the long day when he and his guards boarded his skimmer and returned to the *Aegis*. He'd been at the Academy for nearly eight hours and at the Senate for another five. *See, I'm still alive, and I have all my fingers and toes*, he told Aya as he flopped down into the seat of the skimmer. *I told you coming here wasn't worth worrying that much.*

*It's my job to worry*, she replied calmly as she sat in the seat facing him. *But I admit, the Jun are nothing like what I expected. Their reputation hides who they really are.*

*I figured that out the first time I met Quord*, he nodded. *Why do you think I've been lobbying so hard for them to drop at least a few of their isolationist policies? They have a lot to offer to the rest of the sector cluster. And I'm gonna hang that saber on the wall of my office*, he sent with pride shimmering through his thought, looking at the ornate weapon in its scabbard.

*Just don't play with it, or you will lose a few fingers*, Aya warned with a slight smile.

Back on the *Aegis*, the guards helped him out of his robes as he talked to Myleena, who was on a flat hologram projected on the wall. She was at her desk in the 3D warehouse, so they were using BG1. It was absolutely uninterceptible by anyone but the Kimdori, so Jason had no problems with her calling him from that most secure facility. However, the call had nothing to do with work, they *never* talked about 3D operations any way but face to face in a secure area. “So what did Songa say?” he asked as Ryn and Shen helped remove his outer robe.

“What we suspected. Siyara’s fully expressed,” she said with a proud smile. “Yana and Songa helped me with a few exercises I can use to calm her, since it’s a very scary thing for her to sense other minds, and even start teaching her once she gets used to it. She’ll be like Kyri, babes, able to understand Faey from birth,” she grinned. “She’ll have a good three months of education before she’s born where she’s literally my captive student, and I’m gonna take advantage of it.”

“Anything understandable?” he asked curiously.

“Not yet, just basic impulses. But I can sense that she’s very smart, babes,” she told him. “The first time I touched her mind, she remembered how I did it and reached out to *me*, doing it in a focused manner rather than just untrained flailing. I’m going to start teaching her the basics of closing her mind and sending once we establish a basic mental vocabulary.”

“And the lording-over is about to begin,” he accused, which made her laugh.

“You bet your ass I’m gonna rub Yana’s face in it,” she replied shamelessly. “Siyara’s gonna be born with *more* skill than Kyri had, and more education.”

“Let the girl have a childhood, woman, sheesh,” Jason protested, which made her laugh. “And remember the limits. You can’t just start teaching her *everything*.”

“I already had that long talk with Songa,” she assured him. “I know where I can go. Language skills, sending, social interaction, a little basic information about the outside world, so she won’t freak out when she’s born.”

“Good. So, you both healthy otherwise?”

“Yup,” she replied.

*[Ten minutes to jump. Ten minutes to jump,]* the warning came over the local biogenic network.

“Gonna have to wrap it up, hon, we’re gonna be jumping in a bit,” he said.

“Coming home?”

He shook his head. “I tacked on a return trip to Kirri’arr to talk with the Kirri Council,” he answered. “Though it’s the middle of the night there right now. I’ll at least be able to get a little rest before I talk to them.”

“Nice. I need to get off here anyway, I got tons of stuff to do. Oh, that reminds me. I need you here the morning after you get back,” she told him. “I have stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Stuff,” she nodded with a smile that told him it was good news.

“I’ll be there,” he answered.

“Cool deal, babes. See you when you get back,” she said, then her hologram winked out.

*I think I’ll have Ryn speak with Myleena, Aya noted mentally. A mind that young will not be easy to teach, since they don’t have the experience to comprehend subjects that we take for granted. And given her parents, she might be too powerful for Myleena to easily control if she gets agitated. Ryn’s training might be useful.*

*I think that’s a damn good idea, Jason agreed. You mind, Ryn?*

*Of course I don’t mind, Jason, she replied, giving him a slightly tart look.*

*Just checking. I know what kind of primadonnas you Imperial Guards are. After all, I’ve seen what goes on behind the gates, he sent teasingly, then laughed when Aya slapped him lightly on the back of his head.*

*We need to get him back to Karis, Captain, before he has an accident, Ryn noted.*

*I've been thinking the same thing myself, Sergeant,* she replied, which made Jason laugh again. *Now get in your jump restraints, your Grace.*

*But we're not even at the five-minute warning! I'm not even out of my robes!*

*Tough,* she replied firmly, pushing him down into a jump chair, reaching down, and yanking down the restraints, making him wheeze a bit when they slammed into his ribs.

*Oh, is that how it is? Jason sent tauntingly. Fine. After we get to Kirri'arr, I demand attendance when I bathe,* he told them. *And I want the full package. Shave, trim, massage, and tamirin serenade while you treat me like the Grand Duke that I am,* he sent swaggeringly.

The guards looked at each other, then they all fixed a predatory grin on him.

*Keep looking at me like that and I'll demand conjugal time. I haven't slept with my wife or my amu for almost two takirs, and I don't think I can wait for Jyslin to get here,* he sent challengingly. *You're starting to look sexy in that armor, Aya, and I bet you'll be much sexier sitting naked on a stool in the bathroom playing your tamirin.*

Aya gave him a glare, and when Jason winked at her, she burst into helpless, silent, wheezing laughter.

Despite the joke, they *did* attend him in the large bathroom attached to his stateroom. Shen and Suri trimmed his hair a bit to get rid of 20 days of growth and gave him a shave before he got into the soaking tub, and they did what attendants do, sat appealingly nude on the edge of the tub with their feet dangling in the water, engaging him in light but brisk conversation. After a relaxing bath that worked some ten hours or more of running around out of him, Suri treated him to a deep muscle massage, her strong yet gentle fingers working out quite a few knots. Jason often forgot that they had this kind of training, to attend the Empress, her family, or their charges in their daily needs. He didn't have them do things like this often, but he certainly appreciated it when they did. About the only regular service he enjoyed from his guards was that it was Shen that cut his hair for him. For that matter, she cut the hair of Jyslin, Rann, Shya, Symone, and Tim as well, acting as their personal stylist, and she was *very* good at it.

And despite the half-hearted threat, one of the guards *would* sleep with him if he was serious about it. That too was a service they provided to the Empress' family and their other charges. But Jason hoped he never got *that* desperate, that he'd resort to demanding sex from one of his guards. He hoped he had a little more self-control than that.

*[Your Grace, the Moderator is making contact,]* one of the comm officers warned.

*[It's not even dawn where she is yet,]* he replied. *[Put her through on audio only.]*

"Jason," Krirara's voice called over the external speaker.

"Krirara. Please excuse the audio only, but I'm not properly dressed and a touch indisposed at the moment. I wasn't expecting you to call."

"I don't sleep very much, your Grace," she replied with a light chuckle. "And I think you can understand that the fact that you aren't dressed means very little to a Kirri."

He laughed. "I suppose so," he said, then enabled video. A hologram of her in her private residence winked into the air before him, as Suri continued to massage his shoulders.

Krirara laughed softly. "You weren't kidding when you said you weren't dressed," she noted. "You look very indisposed."

"I've had a very long day, and Suri here is helping me relax. Terrans and Faey enjoy massage as a means of relaxation."

"Kirri prefer fur grooming," she replied. "If you would, could you arrive at the council building in three *kurin*? We have a little business to conduct before we're ready for you."

"That's fine with me, Krirara," he replied, closing his eyes as Suri went back to work.

"Where is your mate and children? We have a tour of the council building prepared for them to enjoy while you speak to the council."

"They're on the way right now aboard another ship," he answered. "Or at least they should be."

*They are. They'll be here in about an hour,* Suri supplied.

“Suri says they'll be along in about three quarters of a *kurin* or so.”

“Good. I very much like your mate, Jason, and I look forward to meeting your cubs.”

“I'm sure they're looking forward to it. They don't get to do this often.”

“That sounds familiar,” she smiled. “I will let you get back to your relaxation. Until we meet.”

“Until we meet,” he mirrored, and her hologram winked out. *I didn't know you spoke Kirri, you sneaky thing,* he noted lightly to Suri.

*Oh come now, you think we'd allow a security risk like that?* she challenged. *We were inserted with every native language we might encounter on this trip.*

*Ouch. I bet you were dizzy for a good hour after that.*

*We're used to it,* she replied.

Jason was in a light robe and slouched on a couch watching viddy when Jyslin arrived with all his kids and Shya, being herded along by Maya and Vell, who had stowed away to be babysitters. Jason gave Jyslin a long, deep kiss before greeting the kids, who were animated and excited about the idea of going to an entirely new and mysterious planet. None of them knew much of anything about Kirri'arr or the Kirri, so it was a major deviation from the “norm” of school, lessons, and the familiar confines of the strip. *How was the jump?*

*Mercifully short,* Jyslin replied as Jason rubbed his nose against Kyri's, making her giggle.

*It wasn't bad at all, Daddy,* she told him. *But Zachy almost threw up.*

*I got all dizzy,* he protested.

*You just seem to have bad luck in hyperspace, little man,* Jason sent to him compassionately. *I don't think you've had a single good jump yet.*

*Nope. I don't like it, I don't like it, I don't like it,* he affirmed.

*Zach might be a little more sensitive to hyperspace exposure than normal,* Aya speculated. *But I'm afraid there's little we can do about it but*



*limit his jumps and give him anti-nausea medication beforehand.*

*Usually children don't jump at all before growing up, but these are special children,* Maya smiled down at them.

*Just one of the burdens that comes with the title,* Jason agreed. *I don't like jumping either, but you gotta do what you've gotta do. Anyway, we've got about three hours before we go down to the planet. It's not even dawn yet where we're going, and the Kirri have to do a few things before we come down. So, you guys settle in and get something to eat. I'm going to be a little busy,* he declared. He took Jyslin by the hand, and she laughed in anticipation when he pulled her towards the door leading to the bedroom.

Twenty days of abstinence ended in thoroughly enjoyable fashion, Jason took a shower and just enjoyed some time with his kids, then they all dressed in their formal robes, even Maya and Vell, and climbed onto the KSV-30 in the main hangar bay and headed down to the planet's surface. The 17 members of the Kirri Council were standing at the pad waiting when they arrived, and in typical Kirri fashion, they wore neither clothes nor jewelry, making no extra effort to "doll up" for his visit. That wasn't the Kirri way. Jason took Krirara's wrist and dug his fingernails into her fur in the Kirri greeting when he came down the stairs, then he introduced the Kirri Council to his children, Maya, and Vell. "Duchess Maya and Duke Vell will be helping Jyslin with the children," he explained. "They can be a bit...rambunctious."

"As is only proper for a child," Krirara smiled, kneeling down on her odd digitigrade legs and taking Zachary's wrist. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Zachary Karinne," she said in a nurturing voice, speaking very good Faey; Krirara had cubs of her own, so it was clear she knew how to talk to children.

"You too, Moderator," he replied, wincing a bit when she dug her claws into his wrist, but he didn't flinch. He then had a Danelle moment. "This means you have babies, right?" he asked, pointing at her developed breasts.

"Yes it does," she replied without a hint of discomfort. "You know much of my people, Zachary. It flatters me."

"Are we going to meet them?"

She chuckled. “My children are teenagers and are currently in boarding school, so I’m afraid not,” she replied with a toothy smile. “That is also a custom of my people. When our children enter what you call primary school, they leave the home to get their first taste of independence, living in a boarding school and learning the skills they need to make it on their own. They return home for three days out of every eleven for rest and recreation, and to spend time with the family. A *weekend* I believe you call it.”

“Oh. That sounds practical.”

“We are a practical people,” she told him with a gentle look.

Fortunately, none of the other kids were quite as potentially tactless as Zach had been, meeting Krirara and the other council members, then they split up. Jason followed the council into their chambers while aides took his family, Maya, and Vell on a tour of the council building, which was literally also a museum, since it held many artifacts from Kirri history. The council chambers consisted of a long U-shaped table where the 16 council members sat and a desk on a raised dais where Krirara sat. Krirara offered her desk to Jason, and she stood beside it when he sat down and looked at the 16 council members. “Alright, where would you like to begin?” he asked, looking over at Krirara.

“Let us begin with the Syndicate, your Grace,” she replied. “Several of the council want more information about what is coming.”

That started nearly six hours of constant discussion. Jason went over the Syndicate and the Consortium in detail, getting access to their computer to pull up images from the Academy public archive to illustrate his points, explaining exactly who they were and what they were doing. They then discussed the differing motivations between the two empires, their different technologies, and the different tactics they’d use on the Syndicate. They then talked about how the Confederation and the Karinnes could help the Kirri, as Jason lobbied hard to get them to consider applying for membership, stressing at how it would open the Kirri to the center of the sector cluster and allow them to be more than the most remote and isolated empire in the sector cluster, really on this side of the quadrant. Krirara had said that the Kirri had much to offer others, and that was correct. The Kirri had such a surplus of food that it was almost criminal, even more than the Prakarikai, and that food was worth its weight in Neutronium on the

galactic markets...if only they could get their crops out of the Kypan Void. Jason showed them how membership would allow them to gain access to Confederation logistics, to get their goods into the markets, to get a Stargate to link Kirri'arr directly to Terra, to get lucrative deals on heavy metals and the mineral resources they lacked, as well as shipbuilding space within Kosigi for building up their navy.

And Krirara certainly lobbied on his side. "Look at what they have done for the Rathii," she said, pointing at a hologram. "They are now part of the Confederate logistics network. They are receiving a Stargate at Rathimar to give them direct access to the neutral hub world of Terra, from which the entire sector cluster opens to their trade delegations. And all they ask for in return is that we do what we should be doing in the first place, fight against these Andromedan invaders, who come here for no reason other than to conquer and enslave all of us. It is very little to ask in return for such boon," she said.

"But to do so compromises our independence," Krivar Krerro said dubiously. "The Kirri have never entered into any agreement where we might be told what to do by another. It is against our way."

Jason had to laugh. "If you think the Confederation can tell you what to do, might I suggest that you sit in on a council meeting," he said. "Trust me, that's the *last* thing that's gonna happen. Every other empire on the council thinks the same way you do. The only way the Confederation really exerts its influence on the member empires is when it comes to deploying military resources. The Confederate Combined Military has command of some of each empire's military resources, to create a singular military command structure that all member militaries follow and comprised of flag officers from every empire that forms the main command staff. *Some*. Not *all*. Each empire holds back some of its forces for its own use and dispatches the rest to the CCM. But right now, there's really not many ships dispatched to the CCM except for training purposes, since there's really not much for them to do," he noted. "But that'll change when the Syndicate gets here. We'll need every ship we can scrape together to face them."

"I have read the Articles of Confederation, Krivar," Krirara told him. "Nowhere in them does it say that the Confederation has the right to intrude itself into the affairs of its member states. The Confederation's purpose it to

bring together each empire's military in common defense, to oppose the Andromedan invaders and provide communal defense for all member states, and to open lines of supply to each empire so they may help one another to build up their individual military forces. That is why it exists."

"And what of after the threat passes?" Krohrari Kirkra, council member of the moon of Irkri'arr, asked. "What happens then?"

"Then the Confederation will dissolve," Jason replied. "But it's my hope that many of the trade agreements currently in place remain after the need for the Confederation is gone, and the transportation network we're trying to build. It benefits *all* empires to have the Stargates linking us together. It increases trade and encourages peace. When it's more profitable to have peace than war, then there will be no war," he said simply.

"You are a clever male, Grand Duke Karinne," Krirara said with a smile.

"I'm a peaceful man, Moderator," he said simply.

"A trait we Kirri can admire," Krivar said.

The council asked him a whole lot more questions about the Confederation, digging for his insight about not only how it worked, but the political machinations that went on behind the scenes, and he did his best to answer them as honestly as he could without divulging secrets. But he was honest about the maneuverings of the rulers on the council, and he couldn't help complaining a bit about the Prakarikai. The Kirri had no contact with the Prakarikai at all, so it was as much friendly warning as it was him venting. They broke for lunch and then returned to the council chamber and spent another two hours discussing the potential ramifications that might come from the Kirri joining the Confederation. Again, Jason was very honest with them, describing the possible consequences that would come with being a much more involved empire. In Jason's opinion, the Kirri had a good thing going with their isolation, at least in some ways, since it distanced them from the ugly politics that happened in the center of the cluster...and primarily around the Imperium. The Kirri were keenly aware that their vast distance from the center of things was as much an advantage as it was a hindrance, and they'd be trading some of its benefits for some of the headaches that would come with being more involved in things. The

Kirri would suddenly *matter* in sector politics, and that would invite some attention that they may not appreciate.

Finally, however, they decided to wrap it up. Jason walked out of the council chambers with the members talking about much less important things. “How long do you intend to stay, your Grace?” Krirara asked.

“At least a day or two,” he answered. “If you’ll have us. I really want to go see some of the places I looked at on those holopics of your planet. Your world is one of the most beautiful I’ve ever seen when it comes to nature, Moderator. The Ice River, Longtail Bay, the Sleeping Giants, the Black Moor, Mount Kranhraki, I want to visit all of them.”

“We would be happy to host you, your Grace,” Krirara smiled. “You have our blessing to remain as long as you wish. I just hope that you allow some few of us to join you on your tour of our planet’s beauty.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Moderator.”

# Chapter 7

*Maista, 32 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 3 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 32 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*New Trakira, RG-118-3A*

That...was...weird.

Jason looked up and saw the smaller sister planet to RG-118-3A hanging near the horizon, undergoing its “planet-rise” as 3A rotated, 3B taking up nearly a quarter of the sky and close enough to make out some of its higher mountain ranges. The smaller planet was arid to semi-arid, so it was a tan ball with a few strips of green and blue and only a few fronts of clouds, in a three-quarters phase due to the angles to the sun.

New Trakira looked nothing like that. Much like New Karsa on Exile, they’d built it in the middle of a very large grassland, the result of a cataclysmic forest fire that had burned through the area some 10 or so years ago, a huge flat prairie of some 200 square kathra that was surrounded by lush hardwood temperate forest on three sides and the ocean on the fourth. New Trakira had been built almost exactly in the middle of that grassy prairie, and it was surrounded by the first farms they’d set up, all of them growing crops. Jason didn’t have time to stop, because the clacking of Grik’zzk’s legs on the plascrete tarmac reminded him that he wasn’t alone. His Kizzik agriculture secretary was giving him a tour of the “pop-up city” of New Trakira, built of modular buildings and fast-setting plascrete, where some 2,700 Karinne workers did their daily labor before heading back to Karis. Nobody lived here yet, everyone commuting back and forth, but eventually someone would decide to just move here as they did New Karsa. That was a bustling city of some 12,000 people now, where New Trakira

was still just a large collection of warehouses, maintenance shops, mess hall and rec center, and research facility for the scientists to study the planet's life and features.

And was there ever life on this planet. It was classified as a Gaia, a rare jewel in the galaxy whose every little feature was not only conducive to life but was welcoming of it. The atmosphere, chemical composition, climate, axis tilt, speed of rotation, everything was just *perfect* for the development of life on the planet. It was .96 gravity, 1.16 pressure, 27.6-hour day with a 260 day year, and 98% of the planet's climate was either temperate or sub-tropical, with sub-arctic conditions existing only right at the poles. The planet only had a 9 degree tilt on its axis, so what little seasons they had here were very gentle and gradual, and the fact that it had such a short year meant that it traversed through those gentle seasonal shifts quickly and smoothly, which drove much of the rainfall that kept the land lush and rich. The planet had no permanent ice caps, where even the land at the poles was habitable, with a climate much akin to Alaska.

Grik'zzk clacked along on her four legs as Jason and Kemaari walked with her. This was Kemaari's first real assignment off of Karis, sent out to tour and inspect Karinne territory outside of the Karis system so she had strong familiarity with all Karinne holdings, which fell under the jurisdiction of Miaari's office. Kemaari had spent two days on Exile before coming here, arranging it so she simply came along with Jason as he got his first look at the newest Karinne territory. She walked along beside him, her hands behind her back, her unusually long tail swishing a bit behind her as workers loaded a megaplow in preparation for it and five others heading out to plow more tracts.

It was a welcome break from the tedious paperwork that his job had become, where every day was a mountainous inbox that mocked him for his inability to clear it out, but the last few days had been...interesting. Anavan now wanted to gouge out Jason's eyes with a rusty spoon, because Zaa was right in that Anivor *forced* her to stand before the Confederate Council and issue a public apology. Jason wasn't there to see it in person, but the recording had so much baleful death fixated in Anavan's stare at Yeri that if it had been Jason on that hologram, he very well may have spontaneously combusted all the way over at Karis. Because of the apology, and against his better judgment, Jason had reversed his decision and allowed the

Prakarikai to build ships in Kosigi...just with an entirely new crew. Miaari had reported, somewhat surprisingly, that not a single spy was in that new crop of Prakarikai shipbuilders, which meant that they were just hidden pretty damn fucking well. Jason did *not* believe for a second that Anavan had not sent at least one agent to Kosigi to replace all the telepathic Prakarikai Jason had kicked out.

Along those lines, Jason had struck up friendships with both Quord and Krirara. The Jun had truly appreciated his visit and his candor, saw that Jason *understood* the Jun in ways that many other outsiders did not, and as a result, they were debating in the Senate Jason's plan allowing the Karinnes to interdict Jun territory and supply Stargates to all 16 of their systems, with Jun-ara serving as the hub system for the network. They hadn't made any decisions yet, but the fact that they were considering it was progress. On the other side of the things, Krirara was keeping him in the loop in her attempts to rally the Kirri Council to join the Confederation. She'd managed to sway over two more council members, and only needed to convince three more to get the majority needed.

That, Jason wanted to see. Krirara was highly intelligent, calm, and rational, and her reasoned approach to things would do well to moderate the rough and tumble Confederate Council. Sometimes they needed someone around that could look past emotion and see the *logic* of a problem, and that was exactly what Krirara could do. Krirara's title in her government was Moderator, and like Mesaiima, she could bring those diplomatic skills to the Confederate Council to settle things down a bit. In Jason's opinion, Krirara Krarou was *exactly* the kind of ruler he wanted on the council.

"Looks like you've got things right on schedule, Grik'zzk," Jason noted as they walked past the megaplow.

*"This planet makes holding to my schedules difficult,"* she answered.  
*"The soil is so fertile that the crops are growing at an accelerated rate."*

"That's a good problem to have," he said easily. "What are you planting with the new tracts?"

*"Those planters will be planting Shio Inikki bulbs,"* she answered.  
*"The indigenous plants have striking similarity to current crop species, and*



*we have been collecting seed from indigenous plants to begin planting them in numbers.”*

“I’m looking forward to that,” he said honestly. The planet had a *staggering* number of edible plants, with most of them fruits and seed pod-producing vegetables, even vegetables with edible leaves and stalks that produced sweet fruit-like pods. Jason had sampled some 120 different RG-118-3A plants and found every one of them to be delicious. “Any problems from the Rocs?”

The Rocs. As would be expected from a Gaia-like planet, this planet had a tremendous number of animals on it. But what made it different from many others was that this planet had *megafauna*, dinosaur-sized animals roaming around in addition to more normal sized animals. There were also giant versions of the common smaller animals. Unlike the plants, many of which were not dangerous, there were a *lot* of carnivores stalking this paradise planet, and some were the size of the mega-plows they were loading. The planet had a huge diversity of different animals, and all of them had mega-sized members. There were hovercar-sized newt-like amphibians in the forests not far from New Trakira, as well as giant reptiles that almost looked like dinosaurs, and giant mammals that were both herbivores and carnivores, and that included some giant birds and flying reptiles and mammals. Much like Terra before the age of man, many of the animals here had adapted the “size as defense” strategy for evolution. The Rocs were giant eagle-like birds indigenous to this area that were considered the main hazard, because they were hunters, they flew, and they had a 50 shakra wingspan, or about 60 feet or a little under 18 meters, which made a Roc just a little smaller than a Wolf fighter. A Faey or Terran would look to a Roc like a squirrel would to a hawk back home, and that was why there were Wolf fighters patrolling the skies overhead, to scare the Rocs away. The Rocs were the main predator that patrolled the grasslands, hunting for grazers and other “small” game they could swoop down and snatch.

They were coined Rocs because of one of his research biologists, a Terran named Phillip Dawkins. Rocs were giant eagles from Terran mythology, and he’d started calling them that...and the name stuck.

They'd chosen New Trakira for their first farm because it was in a place where most of the animals were forest-dwellers, so many wouldn't come out into the open, and those that did tended to be herbivores. They had no contact with Faey or Terrans and thus had no fear of them and were quite brazen. Some of them even roamed the complex, deer-like antlerless animals the size of an elk that were nosing around curiously. They had no fear of anything in town except the Wolf fighters, exomechs, Sticks, dropships, and the megaplowes, things big enough for them to consider to be potentially dangerous. But aside from that, they were almost a nuisance, because they were intensely curious and surprisingly intelligent animals that liked to look inside almost everything they comprehended wasn't solid. It was just their luck that Grik'zzk had not yet authorized harvesting them for food yet. After that, they probably *would* start fearing Faey and Terrans, when the hunting parties started going out to round them up for domestication or for harvesting.

That was the upside of a planet that had predators the size of a corvette running around, the fact that they *were that big*. There were animals out there the size of a blue whale on land, and even bigger ones in the ocean, where just one of them could feed several hundred people for almost a takir. As soon as the biologists gave the green light to start exporting native meat, there would be overly curious elk on some dinner tables on Karis.

*"So far, no, revered Hive-leader," she answered. "They fear the Wolf fighters and stay well away from New Trakira. The fighters don't chase them all the way out of the grassland, however. They depend on the animals in the grassland to survive, and we will not starve them. Since they only eat animals, they are no threat to our planted crops. They actually help us, since they attack the animals that do eat our planted crops."*

"That's the best way to do it, let the Rocs chase out those elk things," he said, looking at two of them that were walking along the street between two warehouses, what looked like a mother and its fawn.

*"The main problem is with a burrowing rodent animal the size of a giruzi," she replied. "They are quite destructive."*

"Well, if they're tasty, we can solve that problem," he said lightly, which made Kemaari smile a bit. "But everything looks like it's at peak

efficiency, Grik'zzk. Which is no surprise when it comes to your office. The agriculture department never fails to impress me."

"*Your praise humbles me, revered Hive-leader,*" Grik'zzk replied, looking down modestly.

"Are you coming with me as I look around?" he asked.

"*If it pleases you, I have other duties to attend,*" she answered. "*The key to maintaining the efficiency you expect is vigilance.*"

"Crack that whip, Grik'zzk," Jason chuckled, which made the Kizzik clack her mandibles together in amusement.

They separated at a corner, as Grik'zzk returned to the coordination center, leaving Jason and Kemaari to wander around a bit on their own...at least mostly. Shen and Suri were shadowing them from above, each of them in a Wolf fighter; after all, the main threat here was from the Rocs, not anything on the ground, while Ryn and Dera followed at a discreet distance behind him. Jason just meandered around talking to the workers, chatting amiably with most anyone who had a moment, answering his questions and just shooting the breeze. The subjects of House Karinne were fully aware of their leader's penchant to just stop and *talk* to them, which was one of the reasons he was so popular among his people. They never thought he felt he was too important or too busy to talk to most anyone in the house, even the people doing the dirty jobs. And New Trakira showed how the house was becoming more and more and more diverse. Faey used to completely dominate the house, but now they were only about 65% of the population, and that 35% was comprised of most every species in the sector cluster except the Kirri and the Jun. He even had about 2,000 *Morbods* in the house now...not that everyone else was particularly happy about that, but that really wasn't the Morbods' fault.

Morbods were reptilian creatures that were smaller than a Skaa, a little shorter than Terrans on the average, but with a similar basic body shape. They were a little more erect than a Skaa, much leaner and lithe, but they also had a muscular tail and were definitely lizard-like with their scaled hides. Jason always thought they almost looked like a velociraptor evolved to a more humanoid body, complete with very nasty claws on their hands and feet, and they were *extremely* intelligent. They weren't unattractive as

reptilian species went, but the problem was that Morbods had natural musk oil-producing glands that exuded a powerful stench—at least a stench to every other species in the sector cluster except for a Morbod, and Morbods didn't have control over those glands. They produced that god-awful smell continuously, and it was as lingering as it was powerful. That smell was detectable from nearly a hundred shakra away, and the oil that produced it retained its pungent potency for *days* if it rubbed off a Morbod's skin. The Morbods, bless their scaly hides, understood that their smell made them very unpopular among the other species, so they were very gracious about the lack of enthusiasm most others had at meeting one face to face. The Morbods in the house wore special armor or suits that contained that smell, since the glands that produced the musk were on the shoulders, hips, and back, which could be contained inside a suit of Crusader armor or a specially designed E-suit. As long as they wore those suits, the Morbods didn't smell like a rotting carcass sprayed by skunks and then set on fire with diesel fuel mixed with feces. They had to put a special simulated oil on the exposed scales to keep them healthy, however. The musk oil did have a very important function, spreading from the glands and coating the scales to keep the scales and skin clean and healthy.

Jason spent nearly an hour going only about four blocks, stopping and talking to just about anyone that had a moment, enjoying one of the parts of his job that he'd been all but robbed of when Aya put the screws down on his movement and access. He chatted with a Shio and Bari-Bari loading one of the megaplaws, then had a chat with the Jakkan maintenance worker that was closing up an access panel, the Jakkan in his radiation suit to protect everyone else from the radiation he emanated. He joked with a group of Faey women clustered around a Stick, a group of transport pilots that had dropped off equipment and seeds and were in a rest phase before returning to Karis, then enjoyed a nice conversation with one of the newest members of the house, an Ogravian agricultural expert that was in Grik'zzk's department. He did finally manage to make it back to the Marine corvette *Jerimin*, flanked by two Red Warrior Gladiators wearing engine pods. The two Gladiators had flown all the way from Karis using those external engines, had even traversed the Stargate, which was a capability the external pods gave the rigs. Kanri and Ibri were in those Gladiators, one of them leaning a hand on the side of the corvette, in a very casual pose with the mecha's ankles crossed, sending to each other as they waited for Jason

to finish his tour. *Hands off the corvette, woman, it's not a couch*, Jason chided.

*We ready to go, Jason?* Ibri asked.

*Yup*, he answered. *Grik'zzk gave us the grand tour, which took all of about an hour. I've just been wasting time before going back, since I don't have to be at Kosigi for another hour. We should get there just about on time.*

His appointment at Kosigi was to tour the brand new KMS *Javelin*, which was the prototype frigate. It had been finished yesterday, and he wanted to look around before they sent it out for a shakedown cruise and testing to see if it was worth producing. It had taken a little longer for them to produce than Dellin expected, running into a few unforeseen hitches during construction, but they'd ironed them all out and got the frigate finished. And now that they'd built the first, they'd be able to build more much faster, since they'd have the proper tooling for mass production of the unique parts for the frigate and had worked out an efficient building method. They just had to find out if they were worth adding to the fleet. Jason climbed into the corvette and sat back in the tactical area with Kemaari as the crew closed up the ship. "So, I heard you moved," Jason said to Kemaari.

"Yes, sister Miaari demanded I live closer to her den," she said, a tiny bit of frustration in her voice. "It's a larger den, but I'd just gotten settled into the apartment I had."

Jason chuckled. "Better stand up to her now, or she'll be coming over to make sure you don't have any food in the kitchen she doesn't like."

"I wasn't against sister Miaari using her clout to get me a larger den, but we are approaching that point," she said artfully. "Sister Miaari has always been a bit...overprotective of me. I am not entirely surprised."

"Baby sister syndrome," he said with a grin, to which she nodded. "Well, at least you won't be the baby for much longer."

"*Finally*," she said with an explosive sigh. Constantly babysitting Miaari's cubs had caused her father to decide to breed, and since he was the clan leader, his mate couldn't say no. That was his right. So, as of about three days ago, Faar had impregnated Raali, and the next litter of cubs

would be along in several months. Kemaari would be the baby in the family only for a little while longer. The fact that Kemaari was an “only child” of sorts, the sole cub born when a Kimdori female usually had from two to four cubs, probably made Miaari even more protective. It was very rare for a Kimdori female to only have one cub. “But I must admit that she is just as nosy when it comes to sister Kiaari.”

Jason laughed. “Miaari was born nosy, Kem. It’s a good trait in a Gamekeeper, but it can drive everyone else nuts.”

“That’s the truth,” she agreed emphatically.

They traversed the Karinne-built Stargate, and the corvette changed course and headed for Kosigi while its four escorts continued on to Karis. They wouldn’t be needed now that they were in Karis space. The corvette entered through the smaller doors and flew past the Imperium and the Urumi construction areas, where larger cruisers and battleships were being built, then they entered the Karinne area, passing through the anti-surveillance jammers and sensor pods. Dozens of docks of various sizes hung in the gloom, closer together now that they had so many more of them, including them passing by the half-finished superstructure of the next command ship, so big that it didn’t have a dock so much as it *was* the dock. Dozens of small platforms and several floating mobile warehouses were parked by the skeletal-looking ship, which had hundreds of workers operating robotic assembly devices, assisted by automated units. And even there, the jacks were making an impact. A jacked construction worker was 36% more efficient and effective than a non-jacked worker, due to a much more refined and exacting control of the assembler units they operated.

After nearly ten more minutes, passing by the docks assembling carriers and battleships, they moved into the small dock area. The *Javelin* was off its dock, hanging in the gloom just outside of it, its running lights on and several support ships, skimmers, and zip ships flitting around it. It looked just as it did in the holosim, a sleek, narrow-beamed vessel about half the size of a destroyer, the particle beam projector prominent on the leading edge of the bow. Its very narrow aft wings, angled downward by about ten degrees, widened stern to hold the engines, and a very slight flare in the bow just behind the projector lens to hold the particle stage accumulator,

made it look like an arrow. “That is a very sexy-looking ship,” the pilot noted as Jason and Kemaari looked on from behind. “Sleek and elegant.”

“We’ll see if it’s all show and no action when we get back the results of its shakedown and wargame tests,” Jason answered. “But just going from looks, it does look fast and agile.”

“Very,” the pilot agreed as she began to decelerate. Jason saw Juma, Myri, and Navii on a flying platform not far from the ship, and Dellin was stepping onto it from a saucer, a tiny one-person flying platform for someone to get around without using the engines in their armor. It looked eerily like the flying disc the superhero Static Shock used in the comic books. Jason didn’t have his armor on, so the corvette pulled right up to the platform, the pilot proving her skill, and Jason stepped from the corvette to the platform with a wide step. Kemaari followed him, and the corvette pulled back and away. “She looks good,” Jason complemented as Dellin came up to the console of the platform.

Myleena would usually attend something like the shakedown of a prototype, but she was at the annex getting a very important checkup, and Songa did not brook her patients blowing off their appointments. Not even Myleena was willing to risk the wrath of Songa.

“It took long enough to get her together,” Dellin grunted. “I can’t believe we had so many problems getting the projector into the ship.”

“It’s a prototype, Dellin, these things happen in prototype stage,” Jason told him soothingly. “You still got it built pretty damn fast despite the setbacks. I’m quite pleased.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” Dellin replied. “Ready for a tour?”

“You bet I am,” he replied. “The crew on board yet?”

“No, it’ll just be us. The ship’s online but in standby mode right now, and the engines are hardlocked and the computer core locked out by the Kosigi mainframe as per standard procedure, to prevent a remote hack or hijack attempt.”

“Glad to see you still do that,” Jason chuckled.

The ship was as cramped as Jason expected. They had been forced to squeeze the crew’s space in between and around the systems, so the

companionways were narrow, a little twisty, and a little low—no Bari-Bari was serving on one of these ships with a ceiling low enough for Jason to reach up and touch—and the ship's rooms and bays were as small as they could possibly make them and still make them usable. The ship would have a crew of 26, and while they managed to follow Faey custom to give everyone their own quarters, those quarters were barely the size of the closets on the *Aegis*. The bridge was as cramped as everything else, only holding a crew of five in standard duty rotation; the captain, navigator, co-navigator, tactical officer, and comm officer. There wouldn't be an engineer's liaison on the bridge of this ship, and the XO didn't have a station, just a chair with jump restraints beside the captain's chair. Like all KMS ships, it had no manual controls, and because of the size constraints, there was only one master holographic board showing telemetry from each station for the captain, which was just to the right and forward of the captain's chair. Each station was a simple chair, and everything that bridge officer needed to do would be directly fed to them by interface by one-way holograms or jacked video feeds. Only the captain, XO, and the tactical officer, whose station was directly behind the captain's chair, would be able to see the feeds from every station on the bridge. There was a main viewer holographic projector on the forward bulkhead that everyone on the bridge could see, but it wouldn't be used for station feeds.

Cozy, Jason sent as he looked around. *What's different that I can't see?*

*We've installed all the cutting-edge tech on this ship, Jayce, Dellin replied. Everything we've upgraded or tweaked is on this ship, before they get refitted into the fleet during the staggered refit/inspection cycles. The most recent computer advances, the new metaphased anti-striation filters to reduce reactive dissonant decay in the power system, the upgrades to the singularity plant control system, the most recent upgrades to the spatial masking module, and we're using the new focusing lens and accumulator upgrades 3D developed that gives the particle beam another 380 milliseconds of firing time before it has to cycle, and cuts the reset cycle by 620 milliseconds. This ship will be testing those upgrades to see how they perform in the field.*

Nice, Jason sent approvingly. It was those upgrades that Myleena revealed when he went to 3D after getting back from Kirri'arr, which was a significant upgrade to the particle beam. It let it fire slightly longer, but



more importantly, shaved over half a second off its recharge cycle before firing again. *What about the CMS?*

*Installed and ready to go, he answered. We haven't installed a CMS on a ship this big since we converted those Kimdori scout ships to CMS. But converting those gave us a system for doing it large-scale. The outer hull is just a skin of layered laminated Neutronium covering the CMS emitters and serves as the conduits for the CMS matrix, and underneath it is the compressed Neutronium carapace. That gives this ship a tiny bit more armor, since the layered laminate is pretty damn strong for being so thin. We had a few issues with the Teryon shields interfering with the CMS when the shields were on standby, but we ironed that out. We still can't raise the shields with the cloak engaged because of the power drain, but now we can at least bring the shield generators online and in standby mode without messing with the CMS. That was the last major glitch the development team had to work out, and it took them bringing in Myleena to fix it. But she fixed it in three days, Myri chuckled audibly. That woman is a marvel.*

*Tell me about it. So, we're using the standard destroyer engine in this ship?*

*Mostly. Cybi helped us with a redesign to make the engine as compact as possible, since the original Karinne designs did leave the engines a little roomy for ease of access for maintenance. We took that out to save space. The engineering department's not gonna like it, but it's the only way we could get the engine in the hull.*

*What are the specs for the redesign?*

*We did have to sacrifice some output to get the engines on the ship, but still gets about 80% of a destroyer's engine output, and they're capable of full phased translation cycling, they have the upgraded spatial masking module installed to hide the ship from mass variance sensors while the cloak's running, and they're capable of jumping hyperspace freely through the interdiction effect. If the math is right, it'll make this thing so damn fast and agile it'll almost be ridiculous. We had to install some hull reinforcements and inertial compensators where the math says the ship is too fast for its own superstructure, Myri answered. That's how we designed it. Since it doesn't have the same defenses as other line vessels, it's going to rely on its speed, agility, and its CMS for protection. This ship is nothing*

*but an engine, a cloak, and a gun, Jayce, with just enough space left over for the bare necessities*

*Sounds good. Now let's get the crew on board and have them get the ship ready.*

Since it was a prototype, most of the crew were veterans in the KMS with years of experience, with just one exception. Lieutenant Junior Grade Kerak Gr'Vrran was one of the navigators assigned to the ship because he was a Beryan, and a Beryan wouldn't find the ship nearly as cramped as a Faey would. He had received his initial line navigation hands-on training on the frigate simulator, which would give him a unique perspective of never having piloted anything else. The engineering department was all Makati, again because their size would make it easier for them to do the job, and the rest of the crew were Faey except for a single Terran telepath, Ensign Randy Morris, who would be working comm. Jason and the admirals returned to the flying platform, then moved to Dellin's command center as the crew arrived and boarded the ship, and just as Jason got to Dellin's main holo display, the face of Luye Vorarre appeared over the console. She was a Commander by rank—Commanders usually were the captains on the destroyers—but was Captain when she was on board her ship. She was a Jeraman Faey like Palla, with cerulean blue skin, and her hair was a mellow tawny color, like a lion. She was also cute as a button...even her voice was cute. "Luye, good to see you," Jason said after she appeared. "You ready to take it for a test drive?"

"Ready and eager, your Grace," she replied in her insufferably cute voice, grinning at him. "We're removing the hardlocks on the engines right now and are waiting for Kosigi command to send the activation code for the central computer."

"I'm having them unlock the computer now, Captain," Dellin answered. "Your shakedown orders should be loaded and ready."

"I remember them from the briefing, Admiral," she replied confidently. "Computer status?" she asked, looking to the side.

"Computer lockouts are removed, Captain," a male voice replied. "Engineering reports the engine hardlocks are disabled and the engines are online."

“Sounds like we’re ready to go,” Luye said, leaning back in her chair a bit.

“First stage is basic operations,” Dellin said, mainly for Jason’s benefit. “You’ll jump to the edge of the system and back, then do some maneuvers to test the engines running in standard mode. After that, you’ll jump out to the gunnery range at planet five for combat stress testing. After that, you’ll join a task force for a shakedown cruise.”

“No change from the briefing, then,” she replied with a nod. “We’re ready to go, Admiral Requesting permission to disembark.”

“Granted,” he replied. “How are the prototype’s telemetry feeds?” he asked one of his operations controllers.

“Working perfectly, Admiral,” she answered. “We’re getting all four channels with no problems.”

“Helm, ahead at dock speed, make for the doors on vector A,” Luye said to her navigator. “We’re on our way, Admiral,” she said, looking back at the holo.

“Good luck, Captain. Kosigi control out,” Dellin said, and the hologram winked out.

They watched as the frigate entered the transit lane and headed for the smaller doors, but Jason was watching the ship’s telemetry more than the ship, watching its power output and engine data. The ship was purring like a vulpar, everything running just where Jason would expect to see it, the power plant and engines stable and steady. The frigate moved out into open space and sped up a little, getting out of the strict speed limit area for ships inside the docks, passing an Imperium cruiser as it turned towards Dahnai’s sector of the shipyard, coming in for a refit...refitting its engines so the ship could jump in real time.

Once the frigate was outside, the ship increased to flank and made for deep space, testing the engines at maximum output, and *holy fuck* did that little ship move! All ships using gravometric engines were capable of reaching a speed just below the speed of light, but it was how fast that little ship accelerated that made Jason’s eyes widen. It had an acceleration curve nearly twice as fast as a destroyer! The frigate achieved jump distance in only four minutes, and then it screamed to a near-halt, paused barely half a

second, then vanished in a shimmer when it jumped out of the system. Jason checked the starchart and saw the ship's icon appear about half a light year past the system, proving it could jump outbound, then it turned and jumped after only about 80 seconds, the minimum time the jump engines needed to recharge, jumping back to exactly where it jumped out, almost to the millimeter. Jason studied the engine telemetry and saw not even a tiny deviation from what he expected to see. The engines were running perfectly for jumping operations.

Luye then did some programmed evasive maneuvers, which were designed to test the ship's ability to turn, accelerate, and decelerate in stress situations, and Jason was even more impressed. That frigate almost looked like a Wolf fighter, slipping and sliding and corkscrewing, turning hard in scissor patterns, executing rapid deceleration and acceleration maneuvers while turning to make it even harder for enemy ships to hit it, and the telemetry showed that the hull superstructure was handling the incredible stress those moves were putting on the hull like a champion. The ship was small, but it was heavily reinforced and ruggedly built to allow it to handle that stress, and from the looks of it, the ship was very, very well designed. The frigate was nearly as maneuverable as a corvette, and it was five times bigger than a corvette. About any fighter but a Wolf or a Warhawk would have a hard time keeping up with the frigate if they were trying to shoot it down.

The ship then slowed down and tested its defensive systems. The Teryon shields came online, and Jason saw that they came up quickly and smoothly, showing no problems. Luye left them on for about a minute to let them have some uptime, then the shields came down, the ship turned slightly, then it shimmered and vanished as the CMS came online. The ship was a black silhouette in space, vanishing off every sensor but the mass variance sensor, a hole in space backlit only by the stars behind it. And when the ship started to move, it was almost impossible to keep track of it with the naked eye. The ship then vanished off the mass variance sensor when Luye initiated the engine modification that masked the ship's mass, what was called "stealth mode," the engines "filling" the depression the ship's mass caused in the fabric of space. The ship couldn't move as fast or turn as hard while the engines were masking the frigate's mass, but it allowed the ship to virtually disappear to every known sensor technique

save manual optical scanning...*looking* for it with the eyes. There was still a bit of a ripple on the MV scanner, but only a trained sensor officer would see it as artificial. It almost looked like a gravity ripple, a somewhat common natural phenomenon.

It was very hard to see it, but then the ship then jumped again, jumping directly to planet 5 and the gunnery range, testing the ship's ability to jump while cloaked. Jason watched the telemetry as Dellin watched the sensors, and they saw that the ship executed the jump and came back into normal space without the CMS coming down. The ship couldn't run its engines in stealth mode during a jump, but the engines returned to stealth mode barely two seconds after dropping back into normal space, which would make it harder to see coming.

Luye turned the ship's bow as the CMS was disengaged, and Jason saw the particle beam projector powering up. They looked at the cameras along the gunnery range as Luye entered the course, saw the particle beam charge to firing power a good half second faster than he was used to seeing, then the projector fired. A sizzling white bar of coherent particles lashed out from the focusing lens and struck one of the dummy targets, shearing it in half as the beam raked from top to bottom across the metal shell, just a piece of shaped titanium about the size of a destroyer, then the beam went offline as it entered its recharge cycle. The power built back up very quickly, and it fired again as Luye increased to attack speed, lunging into the gunnery course, shearing another target dummy apart. The ship then turned along the course path and fired its pulse weapons, twin lines of blazing white bundles of Teryon energy lashing out from just under the lens on the bow, slashing across space and into a small series of metal discs about the size of a city block, targets that could be made cheaply and easily. The ship then tested its rail cannons, blowing apart more of the target discs along the gunnery course, then fired its particle beam once again, slicing a dozen of them apart in a continuous beam. The ship then turned away from the target line, looping around to return to the beginning of the range, the particle beam system powering down and the CMS coming back up in an almost exact 12 second cycle, just as the math predicted.

"Not even a ripple," Jason said with approval as he studied the engine output as the ship returned to the start of the course.

“It does look good, your Grace,” Dellin agreed, the two of them standing side by side. “I think Lady Cybi’s redesign of the engines is going to pan out, but we’ll hold judgment until we get some uptime hours on them.”

“And the CMS and particle beam cycle time is right at the projection,” Jason added.

“We were very careful to really crunch those numbers, since it’s so important to the frigate’s survivability, Jason,” Navii supplied from the side.

Over the next hour, the four of them watched the frigate take several runs through the gunnery course, putting the ship through its paces, working the weapons, the CMS, and the engines, often at the same time. The true test of a ship was a combination of its steady performance in optimum conditions and its ability to operate in combat situations, stressing the systems to the limits of their operational parameters and even beyond, and the KMS always stress tested the ship first, *then* did the time-consuming duration testing. Stress testing immediately exposed any hidden flaws or issues long before they showed up in the less stressful “normal operations” test, though it did come with a small element of risk. But, more often than not, if something was going to fail, it was going to happen in the stress test. And it was best to find that out quickly, rather than have the ship have a six-day leisure cruise during its shakedown period and then them finding out something was wrong when it got back. Jason studied the telemetry for most of the hour, and he liked what he saw. Everything was operating just as it should, well within tolerances.

“I think the ship’s engineering team is acquitting itself,” Jason said as the frigate left the gunnery range and joined a task force of 12 other KMS ships that had finished the stress test themselves, then the group organized into a formation and turned towards deep space to begin the continuous operation phase of the shakedown.

“I believe so, Jason,” Navii said, leaning on the central console and looking at a holo of the task force just as it jumped out in perfect unison. “The stress test matched the simulations almost exactly. The frigate is fast, agile, and packs a serious punch. And with the CMS, it is a stalking predator, ambushing its victim,” she chuckled.

“Dellin, organize factory space to produce frigate parts,” Jason said. “The instant the frigate passes final inspection, I want them to start producing them.”

“I’ve already worked out a conversion for some of our destroyer docks to change them into dedicated frigate docks,” he answered. “We’ll be building two per dock.”

“Good call,” he agreed with a nod. “How’s everything else going?” he asked, turning and looking at the main board.

“Nothing has changed enough to warrant a report,” he replied. “The next two battleships come off the docks tomorrow, and the last two carriers the day after that. We’ll be cycling them to tactical battleships after each dock builds two frigate docks during its down cycle.”

“We have the Wolf fighters to stock those carriers?” he asked Juma.

She nodded. “We’ll still have nearly a thousand Wolf fighters in reserve after creating the new fighter squadrons for the carriers, but we won’t have pilots for them for about four months, so the carriers will be put in reserve until we have full complements to crew them. Where we’re starting to run short is in Gladiators. We’ve adjusted our production cycles to get back on schedule. And I’ve seen that Symone’s trainees are rating pretty high on initial tests,” she noted with a sly look.

“Yes they are,” he agreed with pride in his voice. “Symone’s a damn good instructor. Her charisma makes her students listen to her. But she’ll be off the rotation starting tomorrow.”

“She’s getting jacked?”

Jason nodded. “She’s been on classroom and simulator instruction only since she got too big to fit in her armor, but she decided to just go ahead and take leave and get jacked. That way she doesn’t have to deal with assimilation training while she’s also dealing with a newborn,” he chuckled. “Aaand, Jyslin decided to take the plunge with her. They’re getting it done together.”

“So, Jys finally caved in,” Juma chuckled.

“She wasn’t against getting a jack, but she wanted to wait until after she had the twins. She had this irrational idea that getting the jack might disrupt

the development of the babies somehow...you know how irrational women get when they're pregnant," he said with a sly smile, making sure he was out of slapping range from both Myri and Juma. "Well, Symone convinced her it was a better idea to get the assimilation done first, and Songa finally beat it through her skull that getting a jack wasn't going to hurt the babies in any way. So, tomorrow morning at ten, Songa's going to do the implantation for both of them."

"She'll love it," Juma smiled. "I don't know how I lived without my jack," she added, touching her interface unconsciously.

"Something I'll never know," Jason chuckled. "Like I *need* a jack."

"Rub it in, why don't you," Juma smiled.

"Speaking of rubbing it in, I should be heading home," he noted. "Meya should be getting off work anytime now."

"And what does that have to do with rubbing it in?"

"Didn't you hear? She's pregnant," he said with a laugh. "And she wasn't trying."

"Yours?" Myri asked.

They laughed when Jason gave her a short glare. "No, it's not *mine*. I don't father every child in Karsa, you know."

"You certainly try," Juma said lightly.

"And you're complaining how? That you haven't had a turn?" he asked pointedly, which made Myri and Navii burst out laughing.

"Why Jason, I had no idea you thought that way about me," Juma grinned.

"I don't," he replied immediately, which made Myri laugh even harder. That was a serious dig when it came to a Faey woman, that she wasn't sexy enough to catch a man's eye. Juma frowned and put her hands on her hips, but she laughed helplessly at Jason's sly expression.

Jason boarded the corvette and left Kosigi, but instead of returning to the house he instead had it drop him off in downtown Karsa. Much to Dera and Ryn's objections, Jason wandered around the business district in his tee



and jeans, taking full advantage of the fact that Aya wasn't here to make him go home, getting a little shopping done with blissful anonymity. Dera and Ryn did attract some attention since they were wearing armor, and a couple of people did recognize him, but nobody made a big fuss over it.

*This* was what it meant to be the Grand Duke, at least to him. Not sitting on the throne chair in the White House and lording it up over everyone, but partaking in the everyday things that made him the same as everyone else, seeing and meeting the house members in average, everyday surroundings, *being* with the people he both ruled and was ruled by. He may be the ruler of the planet, but he came from simple, humble origins, and he never allowed *what* he was to change *who* he was. Jason was a tee shirt and jeans kind of man, and he always would be.

It did present the occasional unique encounter. Jason was about to board a public tram that would drop him off within walking distance of the strip, when a young voice called out his name. That made everyone on the platform turn and stare a little bit, when someone called for the Grand Duke Karinne, and Jason found himself looking at a KMS Sailor First Class, a very young Faey woman in her duty uniform. She wore the duty insignia of a *mariner*, meaning she was assigned to a Naval line vessel. Jason doubted she was more than 27, barely an adult, and had probably enlisted in the KMS right out of primary school. "Your Grace, your Grace, wait up!" she called as she all but ran towards him.

Jason stopped, and his two guards pulled a little closer to him defensively. The very young Faey woman, who had fairly dark blue skin and glimmering, bone-white hair, ran right up to him and then bowed a bit awkwardly. "I'm Sailor First Class Rilari Indarre, your Grace."

"What can I do for you, Sailor?"

"I'm an engineer's apprentice, your Grace, and I've been having an awful time with jumping. It makes me really, really sick. Well, like any engineer, when you see a problem, you solve a problem," she said, looking up at him in admiration. Everyone knew that Jason wasn't just a Grand Duke, he was also a highly skilled engineer who had invented many devices, many of which were used in the house. "I'd been working on some way to make me less sick when I come out of hyperspace and hadn't been getting very far. Then I got this," she said, touching her interface, indicating

the jack underneath it. “Your Grace, I wrote a program to temporarily disable the limiter and then I play back some of my own sensory recordings while I’m in hyperspace, and now I don’t get sick.”

Jason stopped dead and gave her a long, steady look. “Not at all?”

“Not at all,” she replied, looking a little more confident. “The playback overrides the sensory ghosts a whole lot, makes them much weaker, and now I don’t get sick. I’ve been trying to show it to the engineering department on my ship, but they don’t seem very interested. Since you’re such a good engineer, I thought you might want to look at what I’ve done so far. I think you could make it better. You know a whole lot more about the jacks and stuff than I do.”

“You have the program?”

“It’s in my interface memory,” she answered. Jason immediately queried her interface for access, and she granted it. He downloaded her program into his gestalt.

“I’ll take a look at it. For now, Sailor, I *will* order you not to disable your limiter. That’s in there for a *reason*,” he warned. “Without the limiter, the sensory playback could get too strong and cause your brain to react to it in ways you don’t want to have happen. I’ll look at your program and what it does and see if there’s a way it can be tweaked so you don’t have to disable the limiter, okay?”

“Okay!” she said with a bright smile.

“And thank you for bringing this to me. Rest assured, if I can make something of it, you *will* get credit for bringing it to me.”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all, your Grace!” she almost gushed.

On the tram, Jason picked through the TEL code in the program, and he saw what she was trying to do. She was trying to make the jack completely override her own senses, disabling her limiter so the playback sensory data “screamed in her ears,” so to speak, drowning out the chaotic sensory ghosts caused by hyperspace exposure.

But she was *seriously* on to something. The way she was going about it was all wrong, but she had a good idea, and by the time the tram stopped near the strip, he had something of an idea of how the program could be

rewritten to do what she was trying to make it do...not by drowning out the sensory ghosts, but by *ignoring* them.

*Myli!* He sent with full power as he got off the tram, then remembered she was still at work. *[Myli,]* he communed.

*[Yeah, babes?]*

*[Are you busy at the moment?]*

*[When am I not busy, Jayce?]* she replied, a bit caustically.

*[Well, are you not so busy that you can't spare me about ten minutes?]* he asked.

*[Now that I can do,]* she answered. *[What's up?]*

*[Sec, I need Songa too. Songa,]* he cast out into the public biogenic network.

*[Yes, Jason?]*

*[Okay, I got both of you,]* he said, then to Ryn and Dera's surprise, he sat down on the sidewalk in front of a nice Faey-style house. *Give me a minute, girls,* he told them, then he closed his eyes. He built a construct in his mind and then merged to it. *[Both of you query my gestalt and merge with the active construct I've put in its public domain. I want to do this face to face, as it were.]*

Almost immediately, Myleena appeared in his construct, which was built to look like the workshop in the house. Myleena didn't appear looking pregnant, since how she appeared was how she saw herself, and she didn't *see* herself as pregnant; that was a temporary condition, after all. It took Songa longer to do it, since they weren't quite as used to merging as Generations were, and certainly not used to merging with a computer or construct on the biogenic network. It was a bit of an advanced application of the ability. Within the construct, Myleena looked like she wasn't pregnant, but Songa looked just as she always did, wearing her red medical coat. *[Alright, girls, on my way home, a KMS member gave me a program she said she uses to reduce the effect of hyperspace on her. Seems she's got the same problem Zach does, she's really sensitive to hyperspace. She says it works for her, but how she's doing it is a little dangerous. She's disabling*

*her limiter and playing back recorded sensory data while in hyperspace to drown out the ghosts.]*

*[That's going to damage her brain,] Songa said immediately. [Who is she? I want her in her unit sickbay as soon as possible to check to make sure she doesn't have any injuries.]*

*[Rilari Indarre,] Jason answered, and Songa's construct made a handpanel appear, tapping on it to send down the order for her to be called to sickbay. [How she's doing it is dangerous, but she does have an idea. She doesn't know enough about how the jacks work to do it safely, that's all. Instead of drowning out the sensory ghosts, what if we just completely turn them off?] he asked. [The jacks are designed not to completely disable the natural senses so people don't so totally merge that they miss something like their hair being on fire. Well, hyperspace ghosts are strong enough to overcome the threshold and it makes them intrude, even if someone is merged to a computer while in hyperspace. I know a few sailors that do it, they try to focus on something like Banyer's Maze while in hyperspace so they can try to ignore the sensory ghosts. Well, we can disable that feature of the jack, so the jack can completely shunt off the recipient's natural senses in favor of the jack's own input.]*

*[What do you mean, Jason?] Songa asked, but Myleena's eyes widened.*

*[Babes, that's brilliant!] she declared. [And it's so fuckin' easy, why didn't I think of it? We just shunt sensory feed from natural senses in favor of an artificial source! The jacks can do that if we add a subroutine that disables the routine that prevents a jack from completely shunting off natural sensory feed! We set it so it can only do that in hyperspace, then have the jack feed the people data from their interface's camera!]*

*[Exactly,] Jason agreed. [The camera doesn't suffer from sensory ghosting, so it's going to see just fine. The jacks connect to the sensory parts of the brain in a way that allows them to completely block natural sensory data, but they're not programmed to allow that to happen. Well, we tweak that programming.]*

*[I think I see what you mean,] Songa said with growing enthusiasm. [If we replace a sailor's natural senses with artificial input while in hyperspace, something that can't suffer sensory ghosting, then it will*

*significantly reduce the chance of our sailors suffering jump shock. The ghosting happens at the point of sensory interface. In the eyes, in the nose, on the skin, in the flesh. The jack's connections to the brain allow it to be in a position where it can stop those ghosts, since the signals the body are sending don't get to the part of the brain that processes it. Instead, it processes feed from a camera and a microphone, sensory units that don't suffer ghosting. The interface will convert the raw data into sensory encoding and send it on to the brain, allowing the sailors to see and hear while within hyperspace. It won't allow them to use their other senses, but at least they'll have that.]*

*[That's exactly what I'm getting at,] Jason nodded. [How hard will it be to do it?]*

*[Hard? Jason, babes, it'll take me a fuckin' hour to write the patches to the interface and jack's operating system!] Myleena told him with a laugh. [Like I said, the fix is so fuckin' easy, why didn't I think of it? I almost feel stupid now.]*

*[You've got a lot on your mind, and nobody else thought of using a jack like this either. At least no one but Sailor First Class Rilari Indarre, because hyperspace makes her sick.]*

*[Give her a fuckin' commendation and a promotion, babes!] Myleena said immediately. [She deserves it!]*

*[So, you wanna work on it now or later?]*

*[I can take a break from what I'm doing and do this, while it's fresh in my mind,] Myleena replied. [Give me until tomorrow. I can write the upgrade in an hour but given how delicate where this is going is gonna be, I want to do some extensive beta testing before we try this on a live subject. So, babes, tomorrow I'm gonna need a ship's crew willing to test this.]*

*[I'll find us some test subjects,] Jason nodded.*

*[Songa, we're gonna need some doctors to be on board to make sure everyone's good after we test.]*

*[That goes without saying. I'll be there myself to conduct the exams.]*

*[Good. I'm gonna go home and take a break. I've been running around almost all day,] Jason declared. [Keep me updated.]*

They broke up, and Jason stood back up with his guards giving him a curious look. "I'll explain later," he said, a bit enthusiastic. If this panned out...then *finally*, someone will have solved the hyperspace jump shock problem. Jason could already see that it would *only* work for someone with a jack, it wouldn't work for a Generation...but there were only 412 Generations in the entire universe, and a good quarter of those were under the age of six. It would still kinda suck for Jason to have to endure hyperspace, but if this worked, then his crews wouldn't suffer from jump shock anymore. They'd be able to jump long distances safely, which would be *critical* in the upcoming wars against the Syndicate and the Consortium, able to jump from their home territory directly to the battlefield without having to jump in stages and possibly be seen coming by enemy sensors. It would give his girls a decided advantage in what was coming, and he'd take every advantage he could get.

But he couldn't get ahead of himself. He'd get giddy when Myleena and Songa worked up the fix, applied it, then tested it.

At home, a *very* pregnant Jyslin was piddling around the house. She was only about a month and a half from delivering now, and like a typical Faey woman, she ballooned up quickly in the last few months. Faey had a very different gestational cycle than Terrans. A pregnancy lasted nearly a full Faey year, some 340 days on the average, which was much longer than a Terran female. But a Faey baby didn't develop quickly until the last stages of pregnancy. They developed much more slowly than Terran children in the first five months, then they accelerated, catching up quickly, then even going past a Terran baby...then they slowed down again. The result was that a Faey woman only showed a *little* pregnancy until month 5, then the baby grew quickly and caused her stomach to swell. She then stayed *very* pregnant until she gave birth. The baby, however, was viable, so a premature birth for a Faey woman wasn't nearly as dangerous for the baby as it would be for a Terran. It was almost like the Faey woman carried the baby an extra month *just to be sure*, since the baby could be born and do just fine if it was born in the last 40 or so days of the pregnancy. The baby's growth actually slowed down in those last 30 or so days, so the birth didn't put undue stress on the woman, a time when the baby almost seemed to prepare to grow once it was born. Faey women seemed to be in little hurry to give birth, where a Terran woman gave birth almost as soon as the baby

was developed enough to be able to make it outside the womb with little trouble. Faey women seemed to have personal biochemical triggers that could incite an early birth once the baby was at the stage when it was viable, depending on the woman's health, diet, stress levels, and outside conditions like temperature and humidity, giving birth at the perfect time to give the baby the best chance of survival. In that way, Faey women were very different from Terran women, who gave birth as soon as the baby reached a certain stage of development. Faey women would hold back on bearing the child until conditions were optimal for the baby, at least up until they reached the end of term, when the baby was born no matter what... when the woman could wait no longer to deliver the child without risking harm to herself. Faey called that period the *window*, the last month or so of pregnancy when the baby was completely ready to make it outside of the womb but the mother had yet to deliver, waiting for that perfect moment that would maximize the baby's chance of survival after birth. As could be expected, Faey women tended to deliver early in the window during summer and late in the window during winter, but that wasn't an absolute. It was just a tendency.

Those little differences were clear indications that Faey and Terrans *were* separate species. They were capable of interbreeding, like horses and donkeys or lions and tigers, but luckily for them, their offspring weren't sterile.

The fact that the twins she was carrying were part Terran didn't seem to affect their development. They were developing along *Faey* expectations. She and Dahnai looked like a Terran woman in her eighth or ninth month of pregnancy, and unfortunately for them, they'd stay that way until they gave birth. Dahnai was predicted to give birth in about 20 days, and Jyslin in 50, but Dahnai was in that window, and could give birth at any time, to the point where there was a dedicated channel that Dahnai and Kellin could use to call him anywhere he was. And for Dahnai, giving birth very early in the window was not unusual for her...in fact, it seemed to be her normal. She'd had both Sirri and Shya early in the window but had carried Maer very nearly to term.

It was weird, but for the Faey, it worked. And that was what mattered.

*Hey love, Jason sent as he came in, then hissed in pain when Dera smacked him on the back of the head. What was that for?*

*Just doing it now so Captain Aya won't have to, she replied lightly. You know she's not going to be happy when she finds out you broke security protocols...again.*

*She should be used to it by now, he replied flippantly as Jyslin laughed. And I'm surprised you didn't rat me out.*

*What could she do if we told her?* Ryn shrugged.

*What were you up to, baby?* Jyslin asked.

*Just did some shopping in Karsa, he replied, holding up the shopping bag. I bought Meya a tee shirt declaring her pregnancy that reads Knocked Up, Father Unknown. Was It You?*

*Jyslin burst out laughing. She's gonna kill you!* she retorted. *Of course she knows who the father is!*

*Well, who?*

*Jenn, she replied, which made Jason whistle.*

*As in that Jenn?* he asked, pointing towards Jenn's house, which was just on the other side of the fence on the far side of the strip, down by Temika and Mike's house. That Jenn also happened to be Danelle's father.

*The very one. She happens to really like him, goof. They've been dating for nearly a month now. It's just luck that he's a Generation, that's all.*

*Well, I'll be, Jason mused. I'm seriously behind on my strip gossip.*

*You were away for nearly a month, baby, and you've spent the last five days all but glued to your work panel catching up on the paperwork. Things can change in a month.*

*Well, moving fast is Meya's style, Jason noted. She thinking of something more permanent?*

*MeYa? Jyslin asked with an audible laugh. That'll be the day. She was born to be single.*

*Hey, you just said things change in a month. You never know, she just might find a guy that'll make her settle down. Maybe I should make sure*



*that happens, it'll keep her at her fucking desk, he grunted, which made Dera and Ryn smile. She did four exploration missions while I was on my tour. And Myra did six! That's not running the KES!*

*They're just doing what you wish you could do, Jyslin teased.*

*Well yeah, but I've got a big enough club to make them do as I say and not as I do, he retorted, which made all three of them laugh.*

*How was the frigate test?*

*Impressive, he answered as Ayama came into the living room, carrying a glass of oye juice. She handed it to Jyslin and returned to the kitchen. That little ship is as fast as a scared chabi and hits like a Mack truck. The CMS and particle beam cycles just the way the simulators said it would. I already ordered Dellin to begin production the instant the uptime target hours are reached for its systems. If we don't find any problems, they're added to the fleet.*

*Sounds good. What are they like inside?*

*Like living in a small can, he answered. There's almost no extra space anywhere. But given what those ships can do, I don't think the crews will complain too much.*

*Just staff them with Makati and Beryans, Jyslin sent easily.*

*The prototype's entire engineering staff are Makati, for that very reason, he nodded. I might even put the Prakarikai that joined the house onto the frigate once they finish PTS training. They're even smaller.*

*I still can't believe they passed the screening.*

*Just goes to show you, not all Prakarikai are pricks, Jason noted, which made Jyslin laugh. Miaari almost couldn't believe it when she told me they passed Kimdori interrogation. They're sincere. And hell, if they're sincere about wanting to be in the house, we'll take 'em. I'll give them the chance.*

*How many are telepaths?*

*All of them, he answered. And they're pretty fuckin' strong. Miaari thinks they joined the house just to get away from Anavan's secret service. They volunteer the strongest telepaths to serve as spies, and that's not everyone's cup of tea.*

*Kinda like the Imperium, Jyslin noted. If you're capable of mindbender training, they make you do it. You just make sure you wash out. Most of us Marines are mindbender wash-outs.*

*Yup. Miaari thinks they joined the house before Anavan came looking for them. All of them are very young, barely out of their primary school.* Amber bounded in, and Jason picked her up before she tried to climb up his pants leg. He held the tiny vulpar in the crux of his arm, petting her absently as she settled down; Jason was her second favorite person in the house behind Rann. Amber was very much a daddy's girl. *Anyway, the most interesting thing that happened today came right out of the blue.* He related his chance encounter with Rilari Indarre and the program she gave him. *If it works, then it'll all but completely stop jump shock in the KMS,* he told her. *I'm just glad I decided to go shopping today. The girl said she'd been trying to get her engineering department to take a look at it, but they wouldn't bother. Maybe I'll set up a contribution site on CivNet for things like that,* he mused. *I have one for general suggestions, but not one for formal submissions of inventions and such. It might be a good idea.*

*I'd say so. If not for blind luck, we might not know about it,* Jyslin agreed.

*Well, most of our girls have jumped long enough to have a tolerance for jumping. I guess it took a new recruit sensitive to jumping to put the spotlight on it, someone who had motivation to try to do something about it. I'll admit, I never thought of using a jack like that, and I know how they work better than just about anyone but Myli and Songa.*

*Too bad I'll be in my jack procedure, I wouldn't mind seeing how that goes.*

*And I'll be right there waiting for you. Myli can handle it,* Jason said. *You're just a tiny bit more important, you know.*

*She gave him a sly smile. I'd better be.*

*You are. Only by a tiny fraction, but we won't quibble over the numbers.*

*Jyslin laughed helplessly.*

Amber kept Jason company as he sat in his home office and tried to knock down the size of his inbox, napping on his lap while he went through

boring report after boring report. There were only a couple of things in there that caught his attention. Lirren sent a missive telling him that Teria City had reached the target population to open the rest of the Teria province, so they were preparing two more cities there for inhabitation. Rund sent him a report warning him that several major sections of the power distribution network had to be taken down for annual inspections, so sections of the power grid would be running on backups from time to time as the primaries were taken offline and inspected. He also reported that the broadcast power conversion had been completed, and now 100% of the planet had access to broadcast power, even those parts that had yet to be terraformed.

The terraforming process was moving right along, he noted. They'd started terraforming operations up on the Virgan continent, and thus far, 2.3% of the continent had been transformed into grassland, the grass holding down the enriched soil and allowing other forms of life to take hold. They'd plant forests on top of that grass in some places. The ocean project had just introduced Terran sardines to the ocean, to feed on the plankton and krill that had started to really take off, now in sufficient numbers to support something feeding off of it. When the sardines reached a threshold number, they'd introduce a larger fish that would then feed on the sardines. They'd also introduced three separate species of birds, raptors to help control the rabbit population, which was getting beyond the ability of the foxes, coyotes, and vulpars to keep down. One was a Terran species of hawk, the other two were hunting birds native to Draconis. Lirren projected that the terraforming project would be complete in 31 years... provided nothing happened, Jason would live to see the day when Karis was restored to at least something approaching its original condition. It could never be exactly as it was since 99% of the native life on the planet had died out in the destruction of the planet, but they could at least turn Karis into something much like the house itself, a hodgepodge of species from all over the galaxy that lived on the planet in harmony.

*Oh, ha, ha, ha,* Meya called across the strip, aimed in Jason's general direction. Jason had given the shirt to Jyslin to give to her.

*Truth in advertising,* Jason replied cheekily. *Congratulations, by the way. Maybe now you'll stay at your desk,* he stressed.

*You'd better have some chains handy, baby, she retorted lightly. That reminds me, they finished the survey of RJ-126. Not much there, but while we were there, we got some interesting long-range scans of RK-02. I've put it on the board for tomorrow. I think it might be inhabited by an intelligent species, from the sensor readings.*

*What about QME-37?*

*Not much there either. At least we can survey in peace. I sent a survey team to PS-229, and they passed six different scout ships from other empires making for the system. I can almost see those ships trading fire once they reach the system.*

*They better not, Jason grunted. Was there anything there?*

*A habitable desert planet that could do well with some extensive terraforming, but not much else, she answered. They moved on to PT-12 to investigate possible heavy mineral deposits in the system.*

*Sounds good. So, at least you are doing your paperwork.*

*I can do my paperwork from the bridge of a scout ship, she replied primly.*

*This just means I'm gonna pay more attention, he warned lightly. The first time you send me bad reports, guess who's getting chained to her desk.*

*I love it when you talk dirty, baby, she retorted, which made Jason laugh aloud.*

*Down, girl. And you're coming over for dinner tonight.*

*Works for me, I hate cooking.*

Jason leaned back in his chair and stroked Amber's soft fur. "My, we're affectionate today," he told her when she started to purr. "And what put you in such a good mood?"

She didn't answer, not even in her usual ways. Amber *could* communicate, if one took the time to learn her language.

"Well, be that way, you silly thing," he chuckled, scratching her behind and between her ears. "I should find another vulpar to keep you company while Rann's at school."

That got her. She dug her claws into his hand and growled softly, which made him laugh. “Point taken,” he told her, patting her on the back. “Jealous.”

She gave a shameless little yip, then put her head down and immediately went back to sleep.

*Vesta, 33 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Thursday, 4 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Vesta, 33 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis*

Rann was way more nervous than anyone else.

Jason’s son kept himself all but glued to the observation window, watching with worry and concern as Songa stood at the control panel, observing as about ten thousand automated spiders laid datalines inside Jyslin’s skull. His very pregnant wife was asleep, her face composed and beautiful as she lay on the table, her head turned slightly to the side as delicate gossamer-like fibers of silicon were slowly pulled from spools hanging overhead and down into the hole Songa drilled into Jyslin’s head, just behind her left ear and along the ridge of bone that was prominent there for both Faey and Terrans. The spiders weren’t pulling that fiber through Jyslin’s head, they were snipping it off just inside and carrying it into her brain, then laying it like old-time workers laying railroad tracks. The spiders then annealed the pieces together, carefully laying them so the fibers caused no damage and didn’t interfere with the operation of Jyslin’s brain in any way, threading them along capillaries and between neurons. The spiders would then temper the fibers to make them very elastic but also as strong as steel, so they couldn’t be broken in case Jyslin suffered a concussion. The fibers had more than enough slack to allow them to easily stretch and bend in case Jyslin suffered a major concussion, enough play in the fibers to keep them from tearing the brain tissue where they entered the brain. The status hologram showed that the spiders had already laid about half the fibers and

had connected them in to Jyslin's brain in her sensory processing areas, and were other spiders were just about ready to start wiring the fiber into the memory centers.

*Are you sure Mommy's okay, Daddy?* Rann sent, worry rippling through his thought.

"She's just fine, pippy. Songa's done this a few hundred times, she knows what she's doing. And let's not exclude Cybi, silly," he replied comfortingly. "Right now, the spiders are connecting the fibers to certain places inside Mommy's brain. When they're done, Songa will install the jackport behind her ear and then they'll button everything up." Rann had been so worried that he refused to go to school, demanding to be there, and Jason had relented. They weren't alone, however. Symone was sitting in a chair, reading something she was projecting from her interface, and she was quite relaxed. Tim was sitting beside her, working on something on a handpanel, probably something from work. Cybi was also in attendance, her hologram hovering behind Rann, her phantom hands on his shoulders.

"Don't worry, pips, Mommy Jyslin's just fine," Symone added. "It's not dangerous at all. That's why both of us are doing it."

"But they put a hole in Mommy's head."

"That's where the jack's going to go," Symone told him. "The hole doesn't go all the way through, silly. Mommy's brain isn't going to ooze out of the hole."

"Oh. Okay," Rann said with some relief.

Jason had to smile a bit over Rann's head at his *amu dozei*. Sometimes Symone's insight into how a child's mind works was surprising. "Where are we at, Songa?"

"Nearly there, she replied. "The spiders will be finished with the fiber implantation in about five minutes. Let's go ahead and prepare the jack, Fiya," she told her assistant.

Rann stayed right by the divider and watched as the spiders finished their work, then severed the datafibers, which was Songa's cue to install the jack. She and her assistant then implanted the jack into Jyslin's skull, seating it and holding it down as Songa anchored it, then the spiders on the

inside connected the fibers to the jack. *Alright, let's activate the jack*, Songa ordered as Fiya sealed the flesh around the outside rim of the jack.

Jason watched as the jack's telemetry blinked onto the hologram, as it executed its imprinting program, mapping the unique way Jyslin's brain works so any computer that talked to it would know how to "speak her language," as it were. The imprint process only took a couple of moments, and then Songa inspected the jack carefully with a tool of some sort, then plugged a cord up to Jyslin's jack and studied her hologram. She then unplugged the cord, and Fiya smeared accelerant gel around the outside rim of the jack. *That's it, we're done*, she declared. *Jyslin's jack is fully operational. Let's wake her up.*

Within seconds of that declaration, Jyslin's eyes fluttered open, and she sat up. "We done?" she asked in a lucid voice.

"All done, Jys," Songa smiled. "The jack's implanted and working just fine. Can you feel it?"

She closed her eyes for a second. "Yup, it's there, I can feel it," she nodded. "See, little man? I'm just fine," she smiled at Rann.

"And now it's my turn!" Symone said eagerly, standing up.

"That only took about fifteen minutes," Jason chuckled.

"*She's done this enough to have it down to a science*," Cybi supplied, which made him nod.

Jyslin was helped into a hoverchair and sent out to the observation room as the equally pregnant Symone all but jumped onto the table and leaned back. She hugged Rann and put him in her lap as best she could as Songa put her hand on Symone's forehead, holding it down as her assistant prepared the spiders, suspended in a saline solution that they would inject into the hole Songa would drill into the bone behind Symone's ear. "Drill" wasn't exactly correct, though. What Songa would do was use a tool to cut away the flesh and bone and then simply remove it, leaving a perfectly sized hole for the jack housing. The tool would cauterize the flesh to prevent bleeding, leaving a neat hole in the side of Symone's head.

"Feeling okay, love?" Jason asked.

“Just fine, not even any aching,” she replied. “But now I understand what you were talking about when you described gestalts,” she said, touching her left ear tentatively. “It’s like little fingers running through the back of my mind.”

“That feeling will pass,” he told her.

“I know, love,” she chuckled. “Hurry up, Songa, I’m hungry!” she called.

“That’s your fault,” she replied with a slight smile as Symone’s eyes closed. “We ready, Fiya?”

“Ready, Doctor,” the young aide replied.

“Alright, Symone, time for you to take a nap,” Songa declared.

“Let’s do it, Songa,” she answered, then she almost immediately relaxed. The sleep inducer in the chair did its work on her as quickly as it had Jyslin.

Tim finished what he was doing and joined them at the window, watching as Symone was implanted with a jack. It took Songa about fifteen minutes to do it, having *really* gotten it down to a routine, where she cut out the hole, injected the spiders, fed them the data fibers, let them do their work, then implanted the jack. The spiders would be pulled out when Songa hooked up the diagnostic fiber, which would both test the jack and remove the spiders, and then they’d be done.

And at that moment, other doctors were performing the same procedure all over Karis. Songa estimated they were implanting 3,000 jacks per hour at all the various medical annexes, since at any given time about 1,000 to 1,200 of her doctors were doing jack implantations and they could implant two or three per hour—they’d been doing it assembly line style for the last month—and that number averaged out to about 3,000 an hour. It had evened out once every doctor in the Medical Service qualified to perform invasive procedures had been certified to implant jacks. 3,000 per hour... that was 87,000 jacks implanted a day. There were already 1,127,580 jacks implanted by the last reported figure, and given the house currently had a population of about 19 million, it was only going to take about seven more months to get every house member that wanted one a jack.



It was *exploding* outside the house. The last report Jason read said that the Imperial Medical Service at the Academy was *swamped* with both jack implantation requests and training doctors from other empires in the procedure. From Songa's estimation, the number of jacks would increase *exponentially* in the galactic population every two months, and Kumi was being forced to lease out factory space in other empires to manufacture the jacks and the jack implantation equipment. They simply didn't have the factory space to produce it locally or in the Imperium anymore, not without cutting into producing vital equipment for the war effort. The lay galactic population with access to the Academy could see the potential in the jacks, as could the rulers, and they wanted them. The fact that the entire adult Moridon population was all but fighting over who got their jacks first told many of the others just how useful they could be.

And yesterday, Songa finished mapping Kirri brain architecture to allow them to receive jacks.

In just 14 minutes and 33 seconds, Symone's jack was implanted. She woke up as chipper as she'd been when she went to sleep, touching the jack and grinning at them through the window as she sat up. "Alright! Now let's go get something to eat and we can start learning how to use these bad girls!"

"You'll start learning to use them *tomorrow*," Songa stressed. "You need a little time to acclimate. But you do need to get a good hearty meal, both of you. You're not on any kind of restriction activity wise except for not plugging anything up to your jacks until 09:00 tomorrow morning. *That's* when you can start your assimilation course."

"Aww, nuts," Symone grunted as she swung her legs over, ignoring the hoverchair.

"You're the patients, you get to pick the restaurant," Jason told them.

Symone grinned. "Then let's head downtown, I feel like something hot and spicy."

They ate in one of Symone's favorite restaurants, which served Terran Thai food, then Jason and Tim went back to work as Symone went home and Jyslin took Rann back to school. Jason didn't head for the office, he instead headed up to Kosigi in a skimmer rather than a corvette, and he

landed by Dellin's command center. Myleena met him there, and the smile on her face gave him hope. *So?*

*So, we're all done,* she answered. *The Resolute crew volunteered to test the program, and they're already upgraded and sitting at jump distance waiting for the go signal.*

*Any problems?* he asked as they walked into the command center on the central core.

*With the changes to the jack's programming, nope. Songa signed off on it as medically safe about four hours ago, but it did require the crews to go to the Kosigi sickbay and have the chip in their jacks replaced. The old chip version wasn't compatible with the new programming.*

*Ouch. I hope you've ordered upgraded chips for all the new jacks?*

*Not yet, but I will the instant I know it works,* she replied. *The crews don't have to do anything extra, as soon as the new chip imprints, it's good to go. That takes all of five minutes after it's installed. So, if this pans out, the entire KMS will have to cycle through sickbay for a jack upgrade. It'll be easier for moleculartronic jacks, she added. Those jack chips can upgrade with just software. It's just the biogenic chips that weren't compatible. So the upgrade's only gonna affect us, if we release this to the others, anyway.*

*Of course I'm gonna release it,* Jason told her. *Everyone's gonna need this ability, Myli, not just us. You have the moleculartronic program ready for release?*

*Not yet, but I will by tomorrow,* she answered. *I'm just gonna include it in the TEL code and release it as a new version for the new jacks, but people with jacks already that want the ability will have to go to a medical annex to have their chip programming updated. That can't be done remotely. That's the way we designed it, to make the jack processor immune to remote hacks.*

*If it works.*

Myleena elbowed him, which made him laugh. *If it works?*

*Okay, okay, when it works,* he corrected lightly.

Songa and Cybi joined them via hologram when they entered Dellin's control room, and Dellin, Myri, Juma, and Navii were also in attendance. They knew what was going on, and they wanted to be there to see the results personally. "Alright, let's get started," Myleena declared as she reached Dellin's main console. "Someone get the captain of the *Resolute*."

"Contact the *Resolute*," Dellin ordered one of his controllers.

It was an unusual face that appeared on a flat hologram to the side of the main console. Captain Vael Karinne's handsome face became visible, one of only six Faey male ship captains in the KMS. He was married to Jezzi, one of the most powerful of the Generations, who also happened to be Jenn's sister. Jenn and Jezzi were fraternal twins. "Vael, good to see you," Jason said. "You ready to test the upgrades?"

"We have our doctors on board and ready to observe," he answered, leaning back in his chair. "We're ready to jump as soon as you give the order."

"The jacks should automatically enter jump mode as soon as you enter hyperspace," Myleena told the handsome red-haired Faey. "Everyone needs to be wearing an interface for it to work, Vael. If you don't have an interface jacked, the jacks won't enter jump mode. They have to have feeds from the interface's sensors to enter jump mode. And remember, this is a test, not a victory lap, Vael. Everyone should stay in their jump restraints."

"We were going to do that. How long of a jump do you want?"

"Plot a jump that lasts ten seconds to start," Myleena replied.

"You heard Duchess Myleena, navigator. Calculate a jump that lasts ten seconds. Just jump us in the direction we're facing."

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "I should have a jump solution in just a few seconds."

"Everyone into jump restraints, we're jumping in just a few moments," Vael said, speaking to his crew. "Everyone *must* be wearing an interface to test the jack upgrades, so if you don't have your interface on, put it on before you report your jump readiness. Sections report jump readiness to comm two."

“Jump coordinates locked, sir, we’re ready to jump,” the navigator called.

“You’re good to go, Captain,” Myleena told him, bringing up a series of telemetry feeds from the ship, accessing individual crew members by their jacks to passively monitor them. It looked like she picked crew members at random.

“Alright, as soon as I have green lights across the board, we’ll be jumping,” he told them, pulling down the jump restraints of his chair.

About four minutes later, the *Resolute* executed its jump. It vanished from its position at jump distance from Karis and reappeared in deep space between three star systems, Karis being one of them; Karis was in something of a mini-void of empty space, with the nearest star system being some 12.3 light years away. Vael’s face reappeared on the holo as soon as they dropped back into normal space, and he was grinning *hugely*. “It works!” he declared. “I had no sensory ghosts at all!”

“That’s *you*,” Myleena said professionally, quelling cheering or applause in the control room. “Have every single member of your crew report in, and we’ll see how *they* fared.”

Five minutes later, the doctors on the ship reported their findings. Every single member of the crew had jumped without sensory ghosts, and as a result, not a single one showed any detrimental effects from jumping. No disorientation, no sickness, no lingering sensory ghosts. “Good,” Myleena said, looking at her board. “Now give me a fifty second jump.”

“Navigation, calculate a fifty second jump in whichever direction makes us appear in the most unoccupied space,” he ordered.

“That will take us out of Imperial territory, sir,” the navigator replied. “I’ll calculate a jump that will put us not far from Uruma. We might want to warn the Collective Navy of the jump.”

“Comm three, contact Uruma Control and warn them we’re jumping a ship into their territory as part of a field test of a new system,” Dellin ordered, looking to his bank of 20 comm officers.

“Aye, Admiral,” the Faey woman replied, turning to complete the task.

“While you jump, Captain, I want you to try to do something other than sit and wait for the jump to finish,” Myleena told him. “Talk to someone, read a report, see if you can perform an activity while in your jump restraints.”

“I can do that, Duchess,” he nodded. “I’m fairly sure I won’t have a problem with that. It was a little weird seeing and hearing through my interface, but it wasn’t terribly distracting. What was most distracting was the numb sensation, like my skin didn’t work anymore,” he chuckled. “I think if I practice merging to my interface, I can get the hang of it pretty quickly.”

“Part of what this does is just that, Captain. Jump mode is your jack more or less merging you to your interface, at least enough for it to override your natural senses with your interface’s camera and microphone. A full merge wouldn’t change it very much, but it *would* acclimate you to the sensation.”

“Ah, okay,” he nodded.

“Jump calculations complete, sir.”

“Uruma control has authorized the jump into their territory, Admiral,” the comm officer reported.

“Then jump as soon as you’re ready, Captain,” Myleena ordered.

“We’re still in jump standby, so we’ll be jumping in just a moment,” he ordered.

When the ship jumped out, Jason glanced at Myleena. “Why do you want him to perform a task?” he asked curiously.

“To see if he can,” she replied. “If I did it right, his ability to think and interact with the outside world shouldn’t be affected very much. I don’t suggest we let them get up and walk around, but he should be able to sit in his chair and read a report without any issues.”

“Why not walk around?”

“Balance,” Myleena answered. “Songa already warned me about that. Shutting down the senses removes your sense of balance, and it’s too delicate for me to try to write a balance subroutine into an interface.”

They're safer just sitting in their jump restraints. If they try to walk around, they'll look like fresh graduates after an all-night celebration," she said, which made Myri laugh.

"That's a good reason," Myri agreed.

*"It would be possible, however," Cybi speculated. "We'd have to add a gyroscopic sensor to an interface to give it the ability to detect attitude and motion and include an upgrade to the interface's programming to allow it to keep its host balanced."*

"Too much work," Myleena said dismissively. "It's not like they'll be spending hours in hyperspace."

*"True."*

When the *Resolute* returned to normal space, Vael smiled. "No problem, Duchess," he told her. "I was able to both read a report and talk with my XO. I could even send, which I usually can't do in a jump because of all the sensory ghosts."

"Good, Captain," she said with a little more enthusiasm. "This time, I want you to jump ten minutes out."

"Ten minutes? Yes, my Lady," he said confidently. "You heard the Duchess, navigator. Calculate a ten-minute jump. Aim us so we don't enter anyone's territory."

"Aye, sir," came the response.

The *Resolute* jumped out just moments later, and while they were waiting for it to return to normal space, Myleena tapped on the console. "Alright," she said, when the destroyer was about four minutes into the jump. "Contact the *Resolute*, let's see if they can answer while *in* hyperspace."

Myri's eyes widened a bit, and Juma grinned.

A moment later, Vael's face appeared on the holo, looking entirely normal. "Yes, I can hear you, my Lady," he said with a growing smile. "It's a little weird, but it's working."

"Well, cut me from Trelle's hair, I never thought of that," Myri said.

“Teryon comm *will* work in hyperspace, Myri,” Myleena grinned. “Our ships and probes do it all the time. We just never used it to contact the crew because the crew wasn’t capable of answering. Well, *now* they can.”

“We’re reading you loud and clear, my Lady,” Vael told her with a smile. “We’re four minutes into our jump, and I feel just fine. In fact, I haven’t got a single report of anyone suffering any ill effects.”

“We’ll see how you feel at ten minutes, Captain,” Myleena told him.

When the *Resolute* appeared in normal space, Vael just grinned on the holo. “We’re back in normal space, and not a single report of anyone having any problems,” he declared.

“Alright, time for a real test, then, Vael,” Myleena told him. “Give your crew a few minutes to take care of personal business, then jump directly to Exile. That’s a 28-minute jump from your current position. Do it in one jump but keep in contact with Kosigi control and also listen to your doctors. The instant any one crew member reports any problems, drop into normal space. See how far you can go.”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied.

“One jump?” Jason asked.

“If they can make it all the way to Exile, then I’d say that the new chips are a success,” she answered.

“I’d say so,” Juma agreed.

They all stood at the console for the entire jump, as Vael reported in every five minutes, each time sounding entirely normal, maybe even a little chipper, clearly excited about the idea of being able to function while in hyperspace. He did do one dumb thing, however, he released his jump restraints and tried to stand as a test...and didn’t even make it halfway out of his chair. He almost fell to the side, gripping the arms of his chair in hands that couldn’t feel, proving that he had absolutely no sense of balance while the jack was shunting off his tactile senses. He wisely got back in his chair and locked himself down.

The ship made it all the way to Exile. It dropped out of hyperspace at jump distance, the blue and green planet hanging in the distance on his viewscreen, and Vael stood up as soon as they were out of hyperspace and

gave them all a huge grin. “We are at jump distance at Exile, Kosigi control,” he declared in a happy voice. “And we have no crew member reporting any sort of indisposition. I’d say that the test of the jack upgrades is a smashing success.”

“Yes!” Myleena said, clenching a fist. That was the cue for the control staff to applaud. “Bring the ship back through the Stargate, Captain, and dock at the central core. I want every one of your crew to undergo an exam at the Kosigi annex. If all of you pass the checkup, *then* I’ll declare the test a success.”

“Navigator, make for the Stargate, ahead full,” he ordered, grinning in that direction.

“Yes, sir!” came the enthusiastic response.

When Vael’s face vanished, Myleena gave them all a huge grin. “I have a good feeling about this,” she declared.

“I think we’d better order those chip upgrades, Myli,” Jason chuckled in agreement. “And arrange a schedule to have everyone get their jack chips replaced.”

“It shouldn’t take long. It takes maybe five minutes max to replace a jack chip,” she replied. “The jacks were designed that way. A destroyer’s medical team could do the entire crew in just a couple of hours. The trick’s gonna be growing the chips to meet the demand. We’ll need about a hundred thousand chips to replace the chips we’ve already installed, and that’s *only* for the KMS. I’m not offering this upgrade to the civilians unless they’re in a job or a position where they have to jump. They don’t *need* the upgrade anytime soon. We’ll just replace their chips in stages when they come in for annual checkups.”

“Then I think we’d better go talk to the Shimmer Dome,” Jason said easily.

Without warning, Kellin’s face appeared on a flat hologram. “Jason!” he said in excitement.

“What’s wrong, Kellin?”

“Dahnai’s gone into labor!” he declared. “It’s the real deal, the docs say so!”



“Already? She’s not even in the window!”

“She’s had them early before,” Kellin told him with a growing, eager smile. “So get over here, Jayce, our daughters are gonna be born soon!”

“I’m on the way right now,” he said. He gave a whoop of excitement and hugged Myleena. “Tell Jys and the others. Myri, I need a ship right now!”

“The *Iyaneri* is in Kosigi, so go jump on it,” she told him with a bright smile.

News of Dahnai’s labor spread like wildfire from the control center, so much so that Haema almost dragged him off the zip ship that docked. “We don’t have all day, your Grace!” she chided him as she pulled him towards the door leading directly to a rather well-appointed waiting room.

“What are you so excited over, woman? It’s not your daughter,” he teased, then laughed when she smacked him on the shoulder.

“I just got word that Lady Jyslin and your family are on a ship and on the way up,” she said. “We’ll be departing as soon as they arrive.”

His entire family joined him about twenty minutes later, eight of his guards herding his children along with Jyslin, Symone, and Tim. For the first time in a very long time, Amber had decided to actually go somewhere, which surprised Jason. She almost never left the strip and didn’t like to travel, but it seemed that today, she felt up to a trip, cradled in Rann’s arms. Aya made sure to bring everyone’s armor, and the guards started making them change into armor as the *Iyaneri* started for the capitol doors. Not even Jyslin and Symone got away with it, for Aya had had armor made for them to fit their pregnant bellies. The armor plating around their bellies wasn’t nearly as strong as it would normally be, but Aya was willing to give over on at least that much just to get them in armor. Aya was utterly serious about not letting *any* of them go without armor anywhere off the planet’s surface that the Karinnes did not completely control. His kids were very excited about the surprise trip to Dracora, fidgeting enough to make it a chore for the guards to get them armored up, at least until Aya threatened to stop the ship and make it stay there until all of them had armor on.

As they left Kosigi and turned for the Draconis Stargate, Jason kept in touch with Kellin, who was in the room with Dahnai as she started labor.

Labor was a very predictable affair for Faey medical science, and once they got some baseline biorhythms, they were able to predict when she would deliver to within three minutes. Faey medicine could predict delivery in Terrans and Shio as well, with nearly as much accuracy. Jason and the family would arrive about an hour before she delivered according to Kellin's latest update, given over Dahnai's angry shouting behind him. Faey women believed the natural course in more than just conception. A Faey woman would never use drugs to relieve the pain of childbirth unless it was a medical necessity, not even Empress Dahnai Merrane.

"The media know now, Jayce, so we're diverting you to the private pad so you can avoid the reporters."

"Sounds good to me," he said as Saelle appeared in the hologram. "Hey cousin!"

"Hey Jayce," she smiled. "Me and Evin are here and waiting. It'll be good to see you!"

"You know it," he agreed. "Who else is there?"

"Everyone you'd expect. Maer and Sirri are around, and the Grand Duchesses are gathering in the throne room for the official presentation of the infants to the *Siann*. The Highborns will be coming in in a little bit. They get to be present for the birth."

"That'll take the fun out of it," Jason noted, which made Saelle laugh and nod.

"They already agreed to declare that they witnessed seeing Miyai born first, you know, just in case it doesn't happen," Kellin told him. "But the doctors said that there's a 75% chance Miyai will be born first based on their placement in the womb. Either way, it won't bother me. I won't care," he smiled.

"That's why she married you, Kellin," Jason chuckled as Jyslin pushed her way into the image for them.

"Hey Kellin! Ready to be a daddy?"

"A natural one? Oh yeah," he replied eagerly. "This'll be my first child. I was never lucky enough to get a girl pregnant before I met Dahnai."

“You were saving your best for the right woman,” Jyslin winked, which made him laugh.

“And when will you be gracing us with your twins?”

“Another month or so,” she replied. “I enter the window in 14 days, but I carried Rann nearly to term, so I’m not holding my breath I’ll deliver early in the window. Symone’s already in it by some six days. Since this is her first pregnancy, we’ll see how she tends to go with Lyra.”

“I thought she was further along than that.”

“Nope,” Jyslin replied. “It just seems that way since Dahnai’s giving birth so early, almost *too* early. I think she’s not even in the window.”

“Actually, she is, but only just,” he answered. “She entered the window just two days ago.”

“Well then, it just means Miyai and Raisha are healthy and ready for the world,” Jyslin grinned.

“Woops, she wants me, gotta go,” Kellin said, then he hurried to Dahnai’s bedside. She was in the guest bedroom of her apartment, converted to a delivery room. Saelle grinned as she watched him go, then looked back at them. “How long you staying?”

“No idea,” he replied.

Saelle gave Jyslin a close look. “Jys! You got jacked!” she declared.

Jyslin laughed. “Just today,” she replied, touching her left ear. “I was going to wait until after I delivered, but Symone convinced me that going through assimilation training *before* I give birth might be the better idea.”

“A good one,” she grinned. “So, what’s it like? We don’t really need them, you know.”

“I don’t know yet. I can’t plug anything up to it ‘til tomorrow, not even an interface. I’ve been carrying around an interface and just holding it up to my temple to work things,” she laughed. “Wearing a normal interface puts pressure on the jackport, and it’s still tender. I just got it today, it hasn’t healed yet.”

“Ah, okay. I was wondering,” she grinned.

*We're five minutes from the gate, your Grace, Aya reminded him. They'll be putting the ship in gate passage mode soon.*

"We're coming up on the gate, so I'd better cut this short, cousin," Jason told her. "I'll see you when we get there. Maybe half an hour."

"We'll be here," she told him, then the hologram winked off.

It took nearly the five minutes to get the kids all in jump restraints for the passage through the gate, which was a requirement on a ship as big as the *Iyaneri*. The ship then powered down for gate passage and was yanked through, and Haema turned them for orbit over Dracora at very nearly flank, probably scaring the piss out of the smaller commercial traffic, seeing a ship that big moving that fast so close to the planet. They got back on the KSV-10 that brought his family up and disembarked as soon as they made orbit. Aya piloted them down with Shen in the copilot's seat, but Jason was too busy to notice. Dahnai contacted him using the comm in her personal interface. *[Where are you?]* she demanded.

*[We're in a dropship coming down to Dracora right now. How you holding up, hon?]*

*[Docs say I'll deliver in about an hour,]* she replied.

*[That's not terribly bad,]* Jason told her, a bit soothingly. *[We should be there in about twenty minutes. Just don't crush Kellin's hand before we get there.]*

*[He'll live, just get here so I can crush yours too,]* she replied tersely, which made Jason laugh aloud.

*[Aya has me in armor, baby. You're free to squeeze my hand as hard as you want.]*

*[Well that just takes all the fun out of it.]*

*[Only for you,]* he replied, a bit cheekily.

When the dropship landed, six white-armored Imperial Guard, wearing white custom Crusader armor, escorted them into a private entrance on the side of the crystal-spired palace. Jason knew all of them and was a bit surprised that the overall commander of all Imperial Guard, Colonel Jayi Feranne, was among the guards with them. Jayi was nearly elderly, with

streaks of blue in her reddish-blond hair and faint lines around her eyes, but she was still tough as steel and a woman that no sane person wanted to cross. In the five years since Jason had taught Dahnai the basics of Aikido, Jayi had gone out and gotten four black belts in various martial arts and had a hardback copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* on the nightstand in her quarters. Despite her duty, however, she was a jovial, witty woman with a vast, nearly encyclopedic knowledge of multiple fields of study and a nurturing personality. She defended the Imperial family, but it was also her duty to teach them, to watch over them, to care for them and to help them become the best they could be. She took those parts of her duty just as seriously as she did their physical protection. Jayi had never had children of her own, but the Imperial family *were* her children, in a way.

*It's good to see you, Jayi,* Jason said as the six guards joined the eight black-armored guards in herding Jason's family towards the palace. *How is Dahnai?*

*Close,* she replied. *The doctors say another fifteen to twenty minutes tops. We were starting to worry you weren't going to make it in time.*

*I started for Draconis the second Kellin called,* he sent defensively. *Is she holding up well?*

*Empress Dahnai is a tough woman, your Grace. She's doing fine,* Jayi answered. *She's more annoyed you're not there than anything else.*

*Well, we'll fix that in just a moment,* Symone sent impishly.

They reached the apartment just in time to hear Dahnai give a growling half-yell, caught up in a contraction. Jason rushed in and saw her on the birthing chair, which was a reclining seat-like device that allowed her to lean back and put her legs up, but also allowed gravity to help assist with the birth. As was custom for a Faey woman, she was nude, her blue skin sheened in sweat and her eyes shut tight and her teeth clenched as she held Kellin's hand...or tried to crush it. But Kellin was a very, very strong man, and was able to withstand Dahnai's vice-like grip. Jason reached the side of her chair and put his armored hand on her shoulder. *I'm here, love,* he sent richly. *We all are. We got here as fast as we could.*

*It almost wasn't close enough!*

*Well, it was. And it's your fault for going into labor so early in the window,* he replied.

*Don't blame me, you ass!*

*But it's fun,* he replied, grinning at her. She gave him a murderous look, which made him laugh. *There, now you're thinking about something other than the contraction.*

Few people could tease Dahnai like that, and Jason was one of them. She panted through her teeth as the contraction eased, then she punched him on his armored bicep. *Why do I even love you, you jackass?*

*Bad taste,* he replied urbanely, which made Jyslin and Saelle laugh.

"It's time to bring in the Highborns," the doctor called. "The Empress will be delivering in just a few minutes."

Jayi nodded to the guards by the door, who left to fetch them. The kids came over to see Dahnai now that she wasn't giving growling hisses of pain, Rann even showing Amber to her. Then the eleven members of the Highborn Council filed into the room, which was the only time they were allowed in Dahnai's apartment. The women were all in formal robes, ten Grand Duchesses and another of Maeri's daughters, her youngest Hadri, serving as the representative from Trillane. They stood by the walls and watched silently as the doctors made the kids back off but allowed Jason and Kellin to stand to each side of Dahnai, holding her hands as another contraction hit her. "She'll start delivering on the next contraction," the lead doctor declared. "Are all in attendance?"

"We're all here," Semoya called.

"The fosters are here," Saelle added.

"Who's being delivered first, Doctor?" Carissa Luralle asked.

"Miyai will be delivered first," she answered.

"Well, at least we won't have to lie about it," Emae noted dryly.

Within minutes, it began. The three doctors attending Dahnai didn't have to do very much, since this was her fourth delivery, one doctor ready to receive Miyai as the other two kept watch on Dahnai's vital signs on a holographic board behind the chair. Within just a moment of starting a

crown of nearly white hair appeared to Jason's vantage point at Dahnai's side, and barely fifteen seconds later, the doctor was cradling a wet and very annoyed newborn baby girl, who began crying lustily. Even with her not cleaned up, Jason could see Kellin's face in Miyai, and she looked like she was going to be a very, very lovely young lady.

"She's beautiful," Kellin told Dahnai as she panted to recover. "She's beautiful, my love."

"Her name is High Princess Miyai Saenne Merrane," Dahnai intoned formally, though a bit breathlessly. "Second in line for the Imperial throne."

The doctor put a tool against Miyai's foot. "She is in perfect health, your Majesty," the doctor declared. "With your permission, I will give charge of her to Saelle while you deliver Raisha."

"She is the foster," Dahnai replied, tilting her head back against the rest. "One more time," she grunted.

"It's halfway over, love," Jason told her, stroking her bronze hair back from her face with his bare hand. He'd removed both his gauntlets. "Just a little more."

"Now why couldn't you be like this a few minutes ago?" she demanded.

He grinned at her. "I told you what you needed to hear, not what you wanted to hear," he replied.

"Letting you go was *such* a bad idea," she complained, which made him laugh.

She didn't have to wait long before she was again in childbirth. Just two minutes later, she started another contraction, and the doctors urged her to push. She gritted her teeth and almost crushed both Jason and Kellin's hands in her grip as she did so. Raisha came along much faster than Miyai, a head full of jet black hair appearing to Jason's point of view, but what made Jason take notice was that even through the fluid, he could see that Raisha's skin was *blue*, not white like all Jason's other children. She had pointed ears like all his other kids, but it seemed that Dahnai's genes won out over Jason's when it came to Raisha's skin color. But that hair...black hair, just like Jason's grandfather on his mother's side. Jason could see his mother's face in Raisha's tiny, smeared face, the same cheeks, the same

nose, but with blue skin. She opened her eyes, and he found himself looking into lucid lavender eyes. Lavender eyes, black hair...Raisha was going to be a heartbreaker when she got older.

The doctor took Raisha to the board behind Dahnai as Saelle cradled Miyai, smiling down at her with a look of gentle, motherly tenderness, then touched the tool to Raisha's foot. "Her name is High Princess Raisha Karinne Merrane," Dahnai declared formally. "Third in line for the Imperial throne."

"She's in perfect health, your Majesty," she declared.

"Wow, look at her hair, brother," Sirri breathed.

"I know," he nodded in reply.

"She looks just like my mother, but she has your skin, love," Jason told her. "And she has black hair."

"Well, I'll forgive her for having your mother's face if she has black hair," Dahnai said with a weak smile up at Jason.

After Raisha was cleaned up and the afterbirth delivered, the Highborns filed out quietly as both infants were presented to Dahnai, cleaned up and both of them crying a bit. She cradled her daughters to her breast as Kellin put a loving hand on a quieting Miyai, smiling down at Dahnai with a father's pride in his eyes. The kids were then allowed to gather around the chair, as they all congratulated Dahnai and looked at her newborns. "Which is my new sister?" Rann asked excitedly.

"Well, both are, but this is Raisha," Dahnai smiled, tilting her head towards the black-haired infant, wrapped in a thermal blanket that kept her at optimum temperature. "And this is your stepsister Miyai," she added, tilting her head towards the white-haired infant.

"Oh. I couldn't tell," Rann said. "They both feel the same."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I can tell my brothers and sisters from other kids, but they both feel the same. It's kinda hard to tell since we're all right here and close together, but even from right here, I can't tell them apart. And I should."



Jason was about to say something, but then he realized what Rann was saying. Generations could sense each other the same way they could sense a Kimdori, and he realized in that moment that in all the excitement, he didn't notice that he couldn't tell them apart either. Both of them made his spine tingle a tiny bit.

Jason reached down and put a tentative hand on Miyai, and almost immediately, he sensed it. He sensed something that should have been absolutely impossible.

Miyai was a *Generation*.

He snapped a startled look at Saelle. *[You were holding her, cousin. Did you feel it?]*

*[What do you mean?]*

*[Touch her, Saelle! Touch her!]*

Saelle advanced and put two tentative fingers on Miyai's forehead, then gasped loudly. "That's not possible!" she blurted.

"What? What's not possible?" Dahnai asked, looking up at them.

"They're *both* Generations!" she declared, which made everyone gawk at her like she was a live snake, and made Sirri put her hands to her face, her eyes saucer wide in astonishment.

"What do you mean, they're *both* Generations!?" Dahnai demanded. "That's not possible! Miyai is *Kellin's* daughter! The DNA says so!"

"I have the DNA profile right here, your Majesty. Miyai is most definitely the daughter of you and Kellin," one of the doctors declared.

"I know, but she *is*," Jason said, sliding his finger along Miyai's cheek. "I can't explain it. But—" he said, looking up and contacting the *Iyaneri* by gestalt, which then connected him back to Cybi. He dumped everything on her in a microsecond, and he felt her reach back through the *Iyaneri* and intrude herself into the palace's computer system. Seconds later, Cybi manifested in the room—Dahnai had holographic emitters in every room of her apartment—and put her feet on the floor.

"*I can offer a theory,*" she told the room. "*But mind that this is only a theory. This is quite a unique circumstance. Raisha and Miyai shared the*

womb, Jason, Dahnai. Generation DNA is reactive to non-Generation DNA in certain conditions, and if they touched while both embryos were effectively stem cells, then the Generational segments of Raisha's DNA would have overwritten Miyai's DNA, just as the DNA was originally designed to behave when exposed to Faey DNA. Remember how the Generations began."

"Raisha infected Miyai?" Dahnai asked.

"To use a term," Cybi replied calmly. "I would venture to guess that when they were embryos, before their cells began to differentiate and before they secured to the uterine wall, they must have come close enough to touch. That touch caused the Generation segments of Raisha's DNA to imprint itself into Miyai, and since it happened before her cells began to specialize, it is as if she was born a Generation. Miyai is still your daughter with Kellin, but she carries those segments of Raisha's DNA that makes her a Generation as well. That would make Miyai unique, not belonging to any established Generation," she mused to herself, but doing it aloud. *She is the first Generation of her line, much as Sora Karinne was. I must prepare a new genealogy archive.*"

"You mean Miyai got engineered *in the womb* because Generations were originally engineered by the Karinnes?" Dahnai gasped.

"Yes, but certainly not intentionally so," Cybi answered. "It only happened because Miyai was still nothing but stem cells when they touched. That is truly an incredibly rare coincidence."

"I...I can't believe it," Kellin breathed, squeezing Dahnai's hand. "Will Miyai be alright, Cybi?"

"She will be fine, Prince Kellin," Cybi assured him with a gentle expression. "The medical scanners in the room are not as precise as those I am used to, but from what I can detect, Miyai is perfectly healthy and is perfectly fine. She will develop and grow like any other Faey, and also like any other Generation. The imprint of Generation DNA into her did her absolutely no harm. After all, that is how it was designed to happen. Even after 98 Generations, that basic behavior of Generation DNA remains. But this is about the only scenario I can compute where it would be possible for a Faey to become a Generation without either being the direct descendent

*of a Generation or exposed to the original retrovirus that turned Faey into Generations. It was the perfect alignment of chance occurrences leading to this highly improbable outcome. The odds that two zygotes would actually touch before they began differentiating is very, very remote, and then the chance that Raisha's DNA would imprint into Miyai even more so."*

Dahnai looked to her doctors. "That information does not leave this room," she declared in an intense voice despite her exhaustion. "I made a promise to Jason and to the Karinnes, and I intend to keep it."

"That makes me feel a whole lot better, love," Jason told her, patting her on the shoulder.

"It's simple protection of the Generations as a species, and the Faey too," she replied flatly. "If someone finds out what Cybi just said, no Generation would be safe ever again, *anywhere*. They'd realize that a Generation's DNA could be engineered *back* into a retrovirus to produce Generations in a way other than cloning, and if someone actually did it, that would put the entire Faey population at risk. A retrovirus that mutates the host's DNA is not something I want running around in my Imperium, no matter what it does. If it mutated beyond the way it was programmed to behave, it could become a plague that might wipe out our entire *species*. I do *not* want that information leaving this room."

*"If that is so, then the fact that Miyai is a Generation must be kept an absolute secret,"* Cybi warned. *"The Imperium knows that Raisha is a Generation already, which might give us all a convenient excuse to give Miyai the training she needs without rousing suspicion. You simply keep them together at all times, Empress Dahnai."*

"That goes without saying," Dahnai agreed. "I was going to begin my maternity tomorrow, but not now. Jayi, send to the Highborns that I'm feeling much better than I expected, and I'll be departing for Karis in about an hour. Cybi, as soon as I feel up to moving, we're coming to Karis. I want you and the Karinne doctors to give all three of us the mother of all examinations to make sure we're all healthy, we're all okay."

*"I will alert Doctor Songa right now and inform her of the situation. She will be waiting for you,"* she nodded in reply. *"And I am already building a database to analyze this situation. My analysis should be*

*complete when I receive the detailed medical scans from your exam here on Karis. I will be able to give all of you a much more detailed explanation of what happened once I have those logs."*

"I'll have a hoverchair brought for your convenience, your Majesty," one of the doctors said. "As soon as you feel ready to move to the hoverchair, we can get you to your transport."

"I'll warn Haema that she'll be taking all of us back to Karis on the *Iyaneri*," Jason added, doing so by gestalt.

"Well, this is *not* how I expected today to go," Dahnai sighed, cuddling her daughters to her breast. "But despite this headache, I'm still very happy. The two loves of my life have each given me the most precious of gifts. I'm truly the luckiest woman in the Imperium," she said, smiling up at both Jason and Kellin with love radiating from her exhausted eyes.

"You're the luckiest woman in the Imperium, but I'm the happiest *person* in the Imperium right now, love," Kellin replied, leaning down and kissing her tenderly on the forehead.

She let that tender moment linger, then looked back at one of the doctors. "Ladies, I'm going to need you on Karis to assist Doctor Songa and Cybi, so you just got a temporary assignment. All three of you are staying with me all the way to Karis, and when we get there, you'll be joining my medical staff there at the summer palace on Karis for the next five or six months. You can bring your families if you want, there's plenty of room there for them."

"Seriously, your Majesty?"

"I'm completely serious, Doctor," she answered with a nod. "I know that you just working in the palace means you passed the security screening and I can trust you to keep this quiet, but this is a bit different. Given what you know, I want *you* safe as well. If someone somehow found out what you know, you'd become targets, and I will *not* jeopardize the life of a doctor," she said vehemently. "And you can't get any safer than being on Karis, Doctors. So, you'll be staying at the summer palace for a few months, and when things quiet down, you'll return to your duties in the palace. So don't think that it's a prison sentence. I just want you three to be safe, because you just got *seriously* raised to a new security level." She

looked to Jayi. “Warn their families about the transfer and tell their husbands that they can come too if they want,” she ordered. “Tell my staff at the summer palace that I want them to have *nice* quarters, the ones with patios in the south wing. They deserve a bit of luxury for their inconvenience.”

*I'll take care of it, your Majesty,* Jayi nodded.

“Don’t worry, ladies, you’ll enjoy the summer palace,” Jason assured them. “The staff there can travel to Karsa so they can shop and relax, so you won’t be spending all your time on the island.”

“Nope,” Dahnai nodded. “You’ll be some of the rare few non-Karinnas that can travel freely to and from Karsa. That list only includes about four other names outside of the people who work at the summer palace. You’re in very rare and noble company now, ladies,” Dahnai chuckled weakly. “Now let’s forget that for a second and spend a little time admiring our new baby girls,” she smiled at them.

# Chapter 8

*Kaira, 35 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 6 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 35 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Summer Palace (Hiyaivi Island), Karis*

Things were calming down quite a bit.

Jason walked along the natural beach of Dahnai's island with a warm, steady breeze at his back, blowing across the island and out to sea, which was stunting the waves that usually crashed on the beach. The wind usually blew in from the sea in that direction, but a storm to the northwest was pushing the air against its usual pattern, and that stunted the waves that usually crashed along the beach. Jason walked along the beach nude, mainly since he hadn't really brought any other clothes and didn't feel like walking on a beach in his tee and jeans, just enjoying a quiet moment to digest the final report that Songa and Cybi had delivered to them about an hour ago.

What happened to Miyai turned out to be almost exactly what Cybi had theorized. Just after fertilization, the eggs-turned zygotes that were Miyai and Raisha had touched, and that touch had triggered the reactive aspects of Generation DNA to cross over into Miyai and imprint into the cells while they were still stem cells. A single cell from Raisha had invaded Miyai and had caused all her cells to be imprinted with only those segments of DNA that made a Generation a Generation. The stem cells of a Generation were actually somewhat dangerous because of that exact behavior, and it was one reason why Jason's family line was so vulnerable to cancer. When cells turned malignant, they turned hyper-aggressive and began imprinting the mutated cancerous DNA into healthy cells, spreading the cancer like

wildfire through his body. In that way, they acted not too much unlike the viral stem cells of a Kimdori, which were highly reactive and posed a threat to most other forms of life. As a stem cell, Raisha's cells reacted aggressively to Miyai, invaded her zygote, then rewrote all her cells to imprint Generation DNA into her. Had Miyai not shared part of Raisha's DNA through the fact that Dahnai was their mother, then Raisha's cells would have destroyed Miyai the same way a Kimdori's attack cells destroyed other forms of life. But the fact that Raisha's cells saw Miyai's cells as close enough to itself protected Miyai from her sister.

It was one of those very rare instances where the fact that there was a tiny bit of Kimdori in a Generation came to light. Kereth, who had come to review the medical findings, found what happened to be quite correct, and since he was the medical expert in Miaari's clan, his opinion carried great weight.

So, that mystery had been solved. Miyai had been imprinted with the DNA that made her a Generation without rewriting what made Miyai Miyai. She was still the daughter of Dahnai and Kellin, she just had a little extra DNA from Raisha...which in a very weird, sorta creepy way, made Raisha something of Miyai's mother as much as her sister.

The unique circumstances of Miyai's birth were not lost on Cybi. She did not consider Miyai to be part of the 98<sup>th</sup> Generation, she instead considered Miyai to be the *first* Generation of a brand new line, the mother of the line the way Sora Karinne was the mother of Jason's line, and she had already put automated programs in place to keep track of all of Miyai's descendants, to track this new line of Generations. It was something that hadn't happened for nearly four thousand years, the creation of a new line of Generations, and Cybi was almost annoyingly curious over what kind of changes it would bring to their race. Dahnai had a very strong bloodline, so much so that the Karinnes had interbred a great deal with the Merranes before the Third Civil War to include those strong genetic traits into the Generations, and there was really no telling just where Miyai was going to stand. Given her family had documented *strong* telekinetic ability without being a Generation, Cybi theorized that Miyai's telekinetic capability might be on par with Zachary's, maybe even stronger.

Miyai represented the inception of a new branch of the Generations with its own unique DNA traits, and there was really no telling just how strong Miyai would be. She lacked the engineered DNA carried by all the other Generations, which was engineered in areas beyond what made a Generation a Generation, engineering that bred true through the line since Sora Karinne was the first Generation naturally born after the genetic manipulation of the line, the inception of the Generation line that stretched 97 generations from their ultimate grandmother. Now Miyai was the inception of her own line, a new family of Generations, but a family of Generations that would belong to the house of *Merrane*.

And that was the crux of the problem that he could see. Raisha was his daughter, and thus he had at least some sway with Dahnai when it came to her future, but Miyai was *Kellin's* daughter, and Jason had absolutely no leg to stand on when it came to arguing on Miyai's behalf. Miyai's new line would hold no loyalty to the house of Karinne, and it gave Dahnai the one thing she'd secretly wanted, direct access to and control of a Generation. But he could agree that Dahnai had come to understand the danger that came with that title in the modern galactic scene, so he was confident that Dahnai wasn't going to do anything stupid. And also, Dahnai only had *half* of the puzzle. A Generation had some advantages, but they were just glorified telepaths with telekinetic ability without a biogenic unit to augment their power. The Karinnes held that half of the whole, and so long as they kept strict control over biogenics, Miyai wouldn't be able to be used as a weapon by her mother or by anyone else.

There may come a time, though, when the Karinnes might have to *do something* about Miyai's descendants. In four or five generations, when Miyai's branch of the family was far removed from the Imperial throne, the Karinnes might revisit that little...situation.

But that was a problem for another Grand Duke, not him. Right now, it was a time to be happy that Raisha and Miyai were both healthy and happy. Both were telepathically sensitive much like Rann had been just after birth, which would fade, but also hinted that both of them were going to be very strong telepaths, and they looked so *striking*. Miyai had shocking white hair and Raisha jet black hair, like her brother Zachary, and they were both beautiful, beautiful little girls. Dahnai was very much present in Miyai's face, but Raisha looked almost like a copy of the baby pictures of Jason's



mother that he'd seen in the family albums. The blue skin, that was a little different, but he wasn't going to complain. Raisha was the only child he'd had so far that didn't have his Caucasian skin...he wondered if the fact that she'd developed in the womb on Draconis had anything to do with that.

The congratulatory messages had been flooding in since news of Dahnai's delivery hit the general public, and there were also a couple of personal visits. Dahnai had the right to invite anyone she wanted to her palace when she was there, and she'd used it. All the Highborns had come to the palace to witness the crowning ceremony that took place the day after an Imperial Princess' birth, putting the girls officially in the line of succession behind Sirri, replacing Shya, who had abdicated that position to move to Karis and marry Rann. Zaa, Sk'Vrae, and Grayhawk had come to Karis to see Dahnai and her daughters personally, with Sk'Vrae was still here, and Magran and Kreel were also scheduled to arrive to congratulate Dahnai in person later today. Kreel was just looking for an excuse to play hooky from work, though. He was fairly shameless about just blowing off work when he didn't feel like it, but that was something of a Grimja racial trait...and it drove Jrz'kii *crazy*. She almost had to go to Grimja territory with a whip six or seven times a month to keep the Grimja pilots and cargo haulers on her very tight and disciplined logistics schedule. Kizzik, who were so defined by their work ethic, just could not fathom an entire race that seemed so...*lazy*.

Eh, he wouldn't mind Kreel visiting again. Jason and Kreel really got along.

It was his first chance to take a breather since they got back to Karis, since Songa and the doctors had been going full bore studying Miyai's unusual circumstance, and now that everyone knew what happened, most of the others had crashed for a nap after nearly two days of concern. Not so much worry as just concern, since Miyai was perfectly healthy. Both Dahnai and Jyslin were asleep, Symone and Tim were over in Karsa at the moment doing some shopping, Rann, Shya, and the rest of his kids were playing a game with Maer and Sirri over on the exercise court, and Kellin was...being entertained by one of the Imperial Guard, enjoying his own unique form of decompression since Dahnai was still recovering from childbirth. That gave him a chance to just relax a bit and walking on a

beautiful beach with the waves crashing and the wind blowing never failed to make him relax.

He had been keeping up on some of his paperwork, though. The prototype frigate was about a third of the way through its shakedown, and thus far it had reported no problems at all. Two more main battleships had come off the docks, bringing the number of operational main battleships up to 16...and that had created something of a problem for Juma. She wouldn't put anyone in the chair of a command-level ship that didn't have experience or tremendous natural talent, like Jeya, and the large number of main battleships built over the last couple of months had created a void of experienced officers to command the heavy cruisers and cruisers. Most of the cruiser captains had been pulled up to replace the ones pulled to the heavy cruisers to replace the ones pulled up to the battleships. Juma had already decided to "demote" tactical battleships from command level, making them the largest of the full combat vessels that wouldn't be carrying the flag in a mixed fleet, but would carry the flag in a KMS task force. That let Juma focus on putting the good *fighting* captains on the tactical battleships while putting the good *commanding* captains on the battleships. Sevi was the perfect example of that. She was born to command a tactical battleship. She was one of their best field tacticians, a nasty opponent in a firefight who knew how to not only use her ship but her supporting task force ships for maximum effect, but she wasn't all that tactful when it came to dealing with the captains of ships in other empires' militaries. And that was being *kind*. So, captains like Sevi would be on the bulldogs concentrating on fighting while the main battleship captains would be more...diplomatic. That wasn't to say that his battleship captains weren't damn good in the chair when the rail slugs started to fly, but his battleship captains often had to command ships from other empires, so Juma wanted captains in those chairs that didn't ruffle feathers...or scales...or tendrils. Or whatever.

Confederate wise, things were very calm right now. Everyone was focusing on building ships at the moment, and the Karinnes were right in the middle of it, acting like Galactic FedEx, getting everything everyone needed where it needed to be when it needed to be there. Every empire was now following Dahnai's overall shipbuilding strategy, letting her big ships be built in Kosigi for the major advantages it provided and building her

destroyers and cruisers at the shipyards in her own territory. The only ones not following that template were the Jobodi. The Jobodi, who didn't have much in the way of shipyards in their small territory anyway, so they were building everything in Kosigi. Even the Jun, who were so isolationist, were now building ships in Kosigi...albeit in a near-fortress they'd built around their section of the shipyard.

But *damn*...the Jobodi may not have many ships or sailors but were they *ever* brilliant when it came to fighting battles. The whole race seemed to be tactically adept. And that might explain why nobody fucked with the Jobodi outside of the fact that there really wasn't much in their tiny territory.

A shadow passed over him, and he didn't have to look up to know who it was...there was only one person on the island big enough to cast a shadow over his face. "Your Majesty," he said without looking as he looked out to sea.

*Sometimes I think you do that just to annoy me, Jason,* Sk'Vrae noted lightly, leaning down a tiny bit. Jason and Sk'Vrae had a somewhat quirky friendship based on mutual respect, but it *was* a friendship. What was even more odd was that Sk'Vrae and Dahnai were also friends now. They were probably the two strongest allies on the Confederate Council. The three of them had *founded* the Confederation, after all. It was the original treaty between the Imperium and the Collective that had become the foundation of the current Confederation. *What do you do?*

*Just relaxing a bit,* he replied. *The last couple of days have been somewhat hectic.*

*I noticed. I noticed that there were far more doctors here than is normal for a Faey birth, even one as august as Dahnai's.*

*I'm not surprised you noticed,* he glanced at her. *They were just being exceptionally cautious, that's all. And when will you be bearing the next Brood Princess?*

*When I find I have the patience to deal with another infant,* she replied, which made him laugh. *We have not had much opportunity to simply talk lately, Jason.*

*Blame real life for that, Sk'Vrae, he replied. Ever since we split from the Imperium, you would not believe the paperwork that's flooded my office.*

*Actually, yes, I can, she countered. Why do you think I have the Brood Princesses helping me administer the Collective?*

*Yeah, well, I've only got one planet.*

*She raised the bony ridge that served as her eyebrow, giving him a cool look.*

*He laughed. Okay, I have four planets, he admitted. The other three are just farms, though. We didn't colonize them, we just found a good place to drop some plows and set up some farming operations. Only one of them even has any permanent population, and that's like ten thousand people. You'd think that with me only really having one planet, I wouldn't be drowned in paperwork every single freakin' day.*

*I seem to recall us having this conversation once before, she noted. Didn't you increase your staff and delegate authority like I suggested?*

*I did, he protested. But the paperwork just seems to increase proportionately every time I try to foist it off on someone else.*

*Then perhaps it's time for you to call in your Kizzik and have them look over your operation, she told him. I know Chirk runs your office, but she does so under your commands. I think an outside consultant might help you streamline your office somewhat.*

*He glanced at her. You know...that's not a bad idea, he agreed. Maybe I'll have the Hive leaders from Kirga come over and look around and see if they can't offer some suggestions.*

*Then I'd say that your problems may be easing soon, she nodded. I do have to say, Jason, that I am more and more impressed every day with what I see at Bellar and Aurigae, she continued as they reached the edge of the beach and turned back for the manicured lawn leading to the house, rather than try to climb over the low, tumbled rocks that bordered the beach and served as the shoreline for most of the shore of the island. Bellar is producing more ore than ever, and Aurigae's crop yields have increased by 20% since your Kizzik went in there and reorganized the farming operations. I start to worry that you won't give them back.*

*I'll make sure of that, when the time comes, he sent firmly. Dahnai's gonna fuss over it, but I can still wring her arm when I have to.*

Sk'Vrae gave a hiss of a chortle. *Of that I have little doubt, she sent, her thought carrying an admiring texture. I wanted to warn you, I'll be having several long conferences with Admiral Dellin over the next couple of days.*

*Take all the time you need, Sk'Vrae. You're always welcome on Karis. Can't say the same for some other Confederate rulers, he noted dryly, which made her laugh again.*

*I suggest you never come within Anavan's reach. She wants to shatter your kneecaps herself.*

*I'd like to do a few fairly nasty things to her too, he replied, clenching a fist reflexively.*

*I've heard that you've been spending a lot of time in conference with the Kirri.*

*Trying to get them into the Confederation, he nodded. And, I have to admit, I like Moderator Krarou quite a bit. After all he official talks, we often spend about an hour just shooting the breeze. She's very capable, and surprisingly funny.*

*She reminds me of Denmother Zaa.*

*Then you should see why I like her.*

*True, she agreed. I notice that you do the same with Quord, she added approvingly. The Urumi admired the intensity and devotion of the Jun, and Jason wasn't the only ruler making some inroads into breaking the ice around the reclusive, isolationist Jun. Sk'Vrae had been working Quord herself.*

*I like him. He's got a few rough edges, but that's just the Jun being the Jun. Once you get past that melt your eyeballs intensity, there's a whole lot of culture and society lurking there. I think that since we don't border Jun territory, it lets us be a little less terrified of them.*

Sk'Vrae laughed richly. *I've thought that myself. The Jun don't seem to me to deserve the reputation they have, but then again, we don't have to deal with them in a local manner. Anavan and Kreel are very careful when*

*Quord is attending council. Kreel doesn't joke with Quord at all. I think that says everything that needs be said.*

*Yup, he agreed. He won't even risk the most harmless of jokes being misconstrued and starting a genocidal war. Kreel's got some self-control issues, but he knows when to pull his own leash when it's needful. He glanced at her. Who has the gavel starting tomorrow?*

*Ba'mra'ei, she answered.*

*That's not bad. I might actually show up for a few meetings if she's got the gavel.*

*Sk'Vrae hissed another chuckle. Ah, so that's what determines if you're going to be at council.*

*Just wait 'til Anavan earns gavel rights. I don't think any of us will be there for her ten days.*

*I cannot argue with that prediction, she agreed lightly. Then again, we might have only one council meeting for those ten days...lasting the whole ten days.*

*Jason laughed. That's the nightmare scenario. And what makes it even scarier is that it's feasible. Besides, here lately, I've just been too busy to really attend council regularly. Just an hour at council murders my attempts to clean out my inbox. Besides, I'm just a neutral observer.*

*A neutral observer who can sway a decision of the council with his opinion, much as Zaa can, she told him calmly.*

*If people want to listen to me, that's their mistake, he replied dryly, which made her blurt out a hissing laugh. Any word yet about the Morbods or the Farguut?*

*Nothing new. Besides, you will probably hear it first. Zaa always tells you first.*

*I've been too busy the last couple of days, he replied.*

*[Jason, you are needed back in Karsa,] Cybi called, her commune serious.*

*[What's the matter?]*

*[The KES scout mission at RK-02 has encountered a multi-system spacefaring civilization. Captain Devovich called in probes to spread through the RK sector to determine the size and scope of this civilization. They'll be in place and scanning in a few moments. It's reached the point where you may have to make a decision, Jason. The telemetry from the Broadway indicates that multiple systems in the sector are generating modulated energy readings that indicate advanced technology.]*

*[Did Rudy jump all the way into the system?]*

*[No, he followed standard procedure when investigating energy readings and jumped within long scanning range. Thus far, there has been no reaction from the inhabitants of RK-02. They either cannot detect the Broadway or they don't care.]*

Sk'Vrae was giving him a curious look. Cybi, he explained, then he increased his sending to cover most of the island. *Guys, I gotta go back to Karsa*, he called. *Something came up. Aya, can you bring my clothes to the skimmer? Dahnai, you awake?*

*She's still asleep, your Grace*, one of her guards called.

*Tell her I'll be back as soon as I can when she wakes up*, he said as he turned towards the landing pad, Sk'Vrae walking with him.

*What goes on, Jason?*

*House stuff*, he replied bluntly, making it clear he wasn't going into detail. *But nothing bad, thank goodness. They just need me back at the White House to give some orders in a place where I'm fully informed.*

*I understand that*, she nodded. *I'll return to the palace then, Jason.*

*I hope to be back in a couple of hours*, he told her, then they separated.

Jason put his casual clothes back on in the skimmer, *his* skimmer—another successful argument won over Aya—which landed on the pad at KES Headquarters about fifteen minutes later. The KES headquarters were in another building about a kathra away from the White House, but they had an office within the White House complex. They'd set it up that way on purpose. The KES was not a military organization, though it did have some armed ships and its members had a military-style rank hierarchy, so it was kept very separate from the KMS, which *did* have its headquarters within

the White House complex. Jason walked into the main operations center, where KES dispatchers and controllers planned, organized, then directed missions done by KES scout ships. Meya and Myra both were in the ops center, surrounded by their main scientists and controllers as they stared at several holograms projected on the far wall. "Cybi got word to me," he said aloud, since not everyone in the ops center could send. "Where are we at?"

"We're just getting back the first scans from the hyperspace probes," Myra answered, pointing at one of the holograms. "We're getting energy readings from 136 different systems in the RK sector so far, with more hyperspace probes on the way to investigate deeper into the sector. It's pretty crowded, Jayce," she noted as she looked at the energy readings. "We're also getting back hyperspace pings from ships in transit. Whoever they are, they're advanced enough to jump hyperspace, but they can't jump in real time."

"What does the analysis say about it? Close to Confederate hyperspace tech?"

"Ummm, they're mixed," Meya answered. "Some of their jump transit times are about 40% longer than Confederate average, but others are nearly 70% faster. That's weird. Maybe they're using two different kinds of engines."

"That is weird, and maybe you're right. They may be using older engines for low priority stuff. Comm signals?"

"We're getting readings of coherent tachyon bursts, so I think they're using a tachyon-based comm system for system to system transmissions. No gravband signals in any modulated form, no hyperspace-based comm either."

"Not real time, but not all that slow either," Jason noted. "Have they scanned for older forms of comm? Neutrino pulse? Modulated light? EM modulation?"

"Really? You want them to go back that far?" Myra asked.

"EM transmissions are just fine for planet-only communications. Terra still uses them, since they're only meant for the planet," he replied. "And it's pretty cheap and easy technology to use."



“That’s a point, Jayce,” Meya said, touching her interface as she most likely relayed that order via her interface.

“More data back, Commander,” one of the ops controllers called. “They’re getting signs of technology from a lot of systems deep inside the sector, over 400 at current count. And our furthest probes are getting long-range readings from systems on the edge of the RKA sector. Tachyon burst transmissions originating from the border systems.”

“I think we just stumbled across a populated sector cluster, just like the home cluster,” Myra noted.

“I think you’re right, hon,” Jason agreed as he looked at the first images coming from the hyperspace probes, which were in place and scanning near RK-02, hidden by CMS. The planet was a terrestrial planet, blue and green and brown with extensive cloud formations, and a very large orbital station hung in the foreground, nearly the size of a standard EC-500 cargo terminal. Hundreds of ships moved in the space around that station, moving towards the planet, moving out into deep space to get to jump distance, which was much closer for them than the Karinnes, since Karinne jump engines had a much lower tolerance for gravity wells. There were ten ships that Jason would consider to be military in orbit around the planet, ships about the size of a KMS cruiser that didn’t have a design that would be logical or practical if they were cargo or personnel transport ships. Warships had a certain look to them no matter what empire built them, because they didn’t have the same practical approach needed for commercial ships to do their jobs. These ships were narrow and long, the same basic design philosophy as the Faey, which minimized the ship’s target profile when being fired on bow-first. It was also angular like a Karinne ship, with multiple doors that looked like gunports, the angles allowing multiple batteries to fire in a single direction.

“Battle cruisers,” Myra said, and Jason nodded. “I’ll have the probe get a detailed scan of them. May as well see what we may be up against if they turn out to be hostile.”

“More scans coming in, Commander. More tachyon burst transmissions deeper inside the RL sector. We’re dispatching more probes to investigate the RKA readings, ETA nine minutes.”

“Send one probe each to the borders of the RL and RLA sectors and look for transmissions,” Jason ordered.

“Yes, your Grace,” the operator replied, turning back to her console.

“A hunch?” Meya asked.

“Our sector cluster has empires in all nine sectors. Theirs might too, at least if the RLA sector is the center of their sector cluster,” he replied. “I doubt they have something like the Kypan Void eating up entire sectors.”

“Actually, I think they do, since the RH, RI, and RJ sectors and their A sectors are pretty desolate,” Meya corrected. “That might be *their* Kypan Void. We’ve only found three systems of any interest in all six sectors, at least so far since we haven’t fully explored the A sectors, and only two of those are really worth anything.”

“We have more stringent requirements on what’s considered worth something, but that is a point,” Jason nodded as the Karinne historical map of that sector of the galaxy winked on, showing the unequally sized sectors. The Karinnes had simplified their mapping system by creating two-dimensional sector grids in a radial pattern, which oddly enough made each sector about the same size in volume. The edge sectors of the galaxy like the RK and RL sectors were very narrow vertically but very wide horizontally since they were the furthest from the core, like the rounded “crust” section of a pie wedge. As one got closer and closer to the core, the vertical height of the sector increased but its width decreased. Those interior sectors were denoted with the extra letter in the sector designation. The QMD sector was four sectors closer to the core than the QM sector, very deep into the “life zone” around the galactic rim and was much taller than it was wide. The SAR sector was halfway to the core, very narrow, but very tall. The galactic core was its own sector, called Sector Zero, but on Karinne charts, it was labeled as the 1J sector with no quadrant designation—since it was in no quadrant—39 sectors from the rim, with 40 sectors running from the rim to the core and each quadrant holding 160 sectors around the rim, which gave the outer rim of the galaxy 640 sectors around its circumference and the galaxy as a whole 25,601 sectors. Since the Faey alphabet had 30 letters, they labeled those extra 130 sectors with numbers replacing letters, so the S-“delta” sector rolled over to the S1A sector adjoining it, and the sectors in a quadrant ranged from sector A to sector 5J,

running clockwise; S5J in the home quadrant rolled over to RA in the R quadrant, R5J rolled over to PA, P5J rolled over to QA, and Q5J rolled over to SA. Seen in two dimensions, the Karinne sector map of the galaxy looked like a giant dartboard. That made a sector a very, very large piece of real estate, and really demonstrated how big the galaxy really was.

Given there were 400 billion or so stars in the galaxy, the simple average of sectors to stars would say that each sector had approximately 15 million stars in it...but that was actually wrong. The density of stars got much, much bigger closer to the core, with the density of stars in the rim sectors being paltry by comparison. Sectors near the core had millions of stars in them packed close together in ratio to the size of the sector, since those sectors were actually much smaller than rim sectors, and the sectors at the rim had, on the average, about 26,000 stars in them. As a rule of thumb, the deeper into the galaxy one went, the more dense the number of stars per sector became. But, in a reverse ratio, the deeper one went into the galaxy, the lower the chance to find viable planets capable of supporting life on them, due to the increase in galactic core radiation as one went deeper into the galaxy. The “habitable zone” of the galaxy was the rim sectors and the A through E interior sectors. QMD-202 was actually very, very deep into the habitable zone. Starting at the F ring of the galaxy, the chance of finding life in the sector decreased exponentially as one approached the core, though there *were* viable systems in the F ring of the galaxy...just not nearly as many as in the D ring. The F ring had some life in it, but it was not considered in the habitable zone. This was what made the fact that life existed in the Kimdori system so unbelievably improbable, since their homeworld was in the M ring, in sector S2PM. No life had been found any deeper than the M ring. The Kimdori homeworld was the closest life-sustaining planet to the core in the known galaxy.

The stars in a sector were organized by importance. Only stars with solar systems containing at least one planet-sized body were eligible for a high priority designation, and there were conditions on that. The planet or planets had to be terrestrial, or it had to have gas giants with terrestrial moons. And “terrestrial” had a specific definition under Karinne mapping; a terrestrial planet or moon had to be a planet or planet-sized roughly spherical body composed of rocky or metallic matter, in orbital tracks where the science said there was a good chance that the planet’s conditions

were not patently lethal to Faey life. This mainly meant both planets and gas giants with moon systems in the “habitable zone” of a star’s orbit, not too close to the star and not too far away, depending on the size of the star and the energy it radiated. This classification dealt mainly with the mean temperature on the planet or moon in question. It couldn’t be too hot for biodomes to be built or so cold that most gases liquefied. Under this classification, Venus, Earth, Mars, and the moon system of the gas giant Jupiter classified as terrestrial, for they were within the “Goldilocks zone” where life could be sustained with reasonable life support systems. But systems with planets too close to their stars or planets like Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, so far from the star that they were so cold that most gases liquefied, did not qualify for the higher priority because the life support that would be required to colonize the planet was not *reasonable*. Karinne technology would allow colonization of Venus or the moons of the outer planets, but the domes would have to be almost ridiculously rugged and reinforced to last any amount of time there, so they failed to classify as terrestrial under the Karinne system. Priority systems were systems where the possibility existed for life or the conditions where life might be sustained with reasonable support systems.

Stars with non-priority systems were simply labeled with a numerical code based on its position within the sector, but a star with a system got the letter-number designation to distinguish them quickly on a starchart. So, star RK-0455-4837-2894 was classified on the Karinne astrographic maps as RK-09 because it had a terrestrial solar system, and that designation made it stand out among the stars around it. Luckily for Jason and the modern Karinnes, the Karinnes of old had used hyperspace telescopes to detect most of the terrestrial solar systems in the entire galaxy. They didn’t know what was *in* those systems, but they knew most of the stars in the galaxy that had at least one terrestrial-quality planet or gas giant with terrestrial-quality moons orbiting it. On the average, only about 2% of solar systems in the galaxy classified as terrestrial, which made planets and moons in the terrestrial priority range very rare. Most stars had solar systems, but the vast majority of them were very hostile to life. There were tons of frozen moons so cold that liquid methane lapped on shores of ice, tons of rocky planets orbiting outside its star’s habitable zone either too far away or too close, resulting in planetoids like Pluto and planets like Mercury, neither of which classified as terrestrial due to the temperature

and/or radiation extremes. If systems like that were included, then every sector would have *millions* of “priority” systems.

On the average of all sectors in the habitable rings of the galaxy, there were usually about 1100 terrestrial priority systems in a sector in the galaxy’s habitable zone, systems with the potential to support life. Of those, maybe 50% of them had planets or moons actually capable of being colonized with life support systems like domes or radiation shields; just because a system had terrestrial planets or moons, it didn’t mean that the planets or moons could actually support life with *reasonable* life support systems. Venus was in the terrestrial zone of Terra’s solar system, but the planet was as hostile to life as a planet could possibly get without being composed of radioactive materials. It only meant that the *potential* was there. And of those, maybe 10% of them were capable of supporting life... and maybe 10% of those were life-rich terrestrial planets like Terra or Karis or better, like the Gaia planet of RG-118. As one moved deeper into the galaxy, both the number of solar systems and the number of terrestrial solar systems decreased as the number of stars increased, as did the ambient background radiation emanating from the core.

Some sectors had much fewer systems than the average, like the PR sector with only 406 planetary systems and the home sector with only 381 systems, but the most desolate sector in the quadrant was the Kypan sector. An entire *sector* of the galaxy, holding some 19,893 stars, only had 96 terrestrial planetary systems within it, which was a true anathema given that the Kypan sector was a *rim* sector, which would normally mean that it would be teeming with terrestrial systems. The Kypan Void was the biggest, most desolate, and most surprising “desert” in the S quadrant’s habitable zone.

The density of terrestrial systems was not consistent through the galaxy. The S quadrant had, on the average, fewer terrestrial systems than other quadrants, with the S and R quadrants having fewer terrestrial priority systems per sector than the Q and P quadrants. The S quadrant had on average 650 terrestrial systems per sector and the R quadrant had 725 terrestrial systems per sector. The P quadrant had 1,650 terrestrial systems per sector on average, and the Q quadrant had 1,350 terrestrial systems per sector. There was a region in the P quadrant close to its border with the Q quadrant where the habitable sectors had an average of 2000 terrestrial

priority systems per sector; this region was on the far side of the P quadrant from the PR sector, which was relatively close to the border with the R quadrant. Exile was much closer to that area than PR-371, since Exile was QMA-396 on the starcharts, on the far side of the Q sector from Karis. Jason had put one outpost in roughly the same point in each of the other three quadrants, Exile at QMA-396, PR-371—which was mainly just lucky coincidence since the Consortium more or less chose that outpost for him—and RG-118, which gave them decent coverage of the rest of the galaxy. The most densely populated sector for terrestrial priority systems was the P5P sector, which had a staggering 11,495 terrestrial priority systems in it and was marked on the starcharts as possibly the location of the most life in the galaxy because of that fact.

That was what made the P quadrant so curious. The side of the quadrant holding PR-371 had far fewer terrestrial systems per sector on the average than the other side of the sector, and the two sides averaged out. The other three quadrants had their systems more evenly distributed through the quadrant.

As a general rule, the most terrestrial class solar systems were in the rim sectors and the A ring sectors, the “pie crust” sectors on the edges of the galaxy and their corresponding interior A sectors, while the sectors beyond the A ring tended to have fewer priority solar systems the deeper one went into the galaxy. This wasn’t an absolute, however, since the Kypan sector, the Rath sector and the PR sector all had much fewer systems than the average for the quadrant.

That was the terrestrial priority system. There was a secondary system called the mineral priority system that identified solar systems based on mineralogical scans, where rare elements might be found. That system had even fewer star systems in it than the terrestrial system, and the two quite often overlapped. Many terrestrial systems also held exploitable mineral resources, and these “double classified” systems were the ones that the Karinnes of old and the new were most interested in finding. The KES completely ignored the mineral priority system for right now, because finding arable planets to grow food was much more important...and they often found the mineral resources they needed within those systems. Searching for systems based solely on the minerals the system might hold wasn’t necessary.

The home sector holding the Imperium was the center of the S quadrant, the S2TA sector on the Karinne starcharts, but nobody called it that. Every sector in the sector cluster had a name, and they were referred to by that name. Terra sat right at the edge of the S2TA – S2T border, with the Kypan Void dominating the S2T and S2S sectors and extending well into the S2TA and S2SA sectors. The mostly uninhabited Kypan sector, for which the Kypan Void was named, was the S2T sector on Karinne starcharts, extending right out to the very edge of the galaxy, the Grimja sector was the S2UA sector, and the Verutan sector was the S2SA sector. The Kirri and Rathii were in the Rath sector, which was the S2S sector. The Imperium was almost smack dab in the middle of the home sector, drawn up that way by the Faey and whose original starcharts the Karinnes adopted, and it was surrounded on three sides by other empires and on the fourth by the Kypan Void...at least in a two-dimensional sense. To be more correct, the Imperium was surrounded on *five* sides by other empires and the Kypan Void on the sixth

And that was why Dahnai and the other Confederate rulers were so hot for access to the PR sector...there was nowhere left for anyone in the sector cluster to really expand, since there were other empires beyond the home sector cluster that ringed them in. They had to go all the way to the S2WC or the S2QD sectors to get where there was unclaimed territory worth claiming and doing so would require them to cross the sovereign territory of dozens of remote empires.

Such were the dangers of living in such a populated section of the galaxy. The home sectors were the most densely populated stretch of sectors in the quadrant in that every known terrestrial class system in the sector cluster was inhabited, as well as quite a few non-terrestrial systems where extravagant life support systems had to be in place to allow life to survive in the system, like the Skaa's Raxxad system. There was also the fact that nobody had anywhere to expand, since even the most desolate systems holding either very hostile planets or no planets at all were looked upon as potential expansion targets by empires desperate to find room to expand, the desperation that drove the Faey into exploring the Kypan Void and finding Terra in the first place. They literally had nowhere else to go, and food shortages drove Dahnai to mount very expensive and time-consuming exploration missions deep into the Kypan Void, far beyond

where their scouts had gone before. That was why the empires were always on edge. The only way to increase an empire's influence was to take territory from another empire.

They waited as the hyperspace probes continued high-resolution scans of the star systems in the RK sector, returning more and more refined data as more and more probes flooded into the sector to investigate energy signatures. The probes had to move around a great deal in hyperspace to get close enough to get more detailed scans of the energy signatures and had to physically be inside the system to get any decent images. The scanners on the probes weren't nearly as good as the ones on a scout ship, which was why the KES used manned ships to do the exploring. Hyperspace probes were only used to find systems that looked worth sending a scout ship to investigate.

"We're getting some differentiation on the energy signatures. I think they indicate a difference in technology levels," the same controller called out. "That hints that there's more than one empire or civilization in the sector."

"That's a good bet," Jason agreed, coming over and leaning over her station, looking at her hologram. "How many different types have you found?"

"Six so far, your Grace," she answered, glancing up at him. "We're getting a different style of tachyon burst modulation from this area, this area, and this area, and we're reading old-style neutrino pulse modulation in this area," she reported, pointing at her hologram of the RK sector. "This area and this area are emanating a very strange rhythmic pulse riding on a hyperspace jump signature...almost like they're using hyperspace engines to generate modulated pulses into hyperspace. I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah, see?" Jason said, looking back at Meya and Myra. Myra promptly flipped him off in the Faey fashion, which made him laugh. "No gravband?"

"None detected sir, not even the older ripple modulation techniques."

"They may not have developed spatial warping tech," Meya noted. "That's required for gravband."



“That puts them about on the same level as the Imxi if that’s true,” Jason speculated, then he asked Cybi to join them via gestalt. Her hologram wavered into being, as did a holo of Myri and Juma in the command center back at the White House.

“What is it, Jayce?”

“I want you to move a task force to RJ-44,” he answered. “The KES just found an extensive number of spacefaring star systems in the RK sector. Maybe hundreds of inhabited systems. I want some muscle there in the system and another task force on standby in Kosigi for immediate deployment, just in case things get hostile.”

“We’ll send you some scans we’re getting of one of the warships parked at RK-02,” Meya said. “We have a CMS hyperspace probe in the system conducting scans.”

“We do like to know what we might be up against,” Juma said with a smile and a nod.

“What do you have on that ship?” Jason asked the controller.

“Umm, hold on, your Grace,” she said, switching the holograms. “It’s using a form of harmonic ion pulse technology for power.”

“Striated?”

“Yes, your Grace,” she nodded.

“About the minimum power necessary for most decent jump engines,” Juma mused.

“Engines are ion-based, and I’m getting readings of phased harmonic ion beam weaponry.”

“Not nearly as powerful as Colonial iso-neutron weapons, but not too shabby,” Myri added. “If they managed to phase it, that actually makes them pack a punch. Those weapons are shield-piercing, just like an MPAC, but they wouldn’t have much luck piercing Imperium Neutronium armor. They have *no* chance against our compressed carapace armor.”

“It has an Edratium alloy outer hull, and we’re detecting shield generation units inside. Harmonic phased ion shields. *Hard* and *phased* ion shields,” the controller declared. “I can’t get a reading on their energy

output, your Grace. They'd have to turn them on. But we can figure out that much based on the energy they're emitting in standby mode."

"Edratium? I'd use shocked titanium over Edratium," Myri said.

"So their armor technology is weak, but they have some damn good shields," Juma said. "They must really have solid ion-based tech to harmonize ion shields enough to make them hard."

"They're multiphasic, that's what's way more fucking impressive," Jason said. "That'd stop an MPAC, maybe even a pulse weapon, depending on the power output of the shields. But it'd definitely stop an MPAC."

*"But not a particle beam,"* Cybi supplied. *"Nor a Torsion weapon."*

"It would come down to how good their energy dispersal system is as to how long they'd stay up against an MPAC or pulse weapon," Myri grunted, scratching her chin absently.

"I'm reading some missiles as well, your Grace. I can't detect what kind of warheads they use, but they too have ion engines in the missiles," she noted.

"Does the ship have artificial gravity?" Jason asked. "It's not built like a ship that doesn't have an artificial gravity field."

"I...yes, your Grace, it does. But it's not spatial tech. I'm not detecting any spatial warping anywhere in the ship, yet there's definitely a directional gravity field plane set at the ship's keel, creating a uniform down direction for the entire ship. I'm not entirely sure how they're generating an artificial gravity field without some kind of spatial unit," she said with a small frown.

"Well *that's* new," Juma said with some surprise, turning and looking to the side, probably at a hologram over the main console.

"So, whoever they are, they've learned a few tricks we haven't," Jason noted. "Thank you, Captain," he added, patting her on the shoulder, then he stood back up and looked to the twins. "Suggestions?"

"We should gather some more scans, and once we have a rough idea of how much territory is inhabited over there, we make contact," Myra answered.

“I agree. We make contact after we get a more detailed look at things,” Meya nodded.

“Myri, you concur?”

“I do,” she nodded. “If they have warships on the edge of territory abutting a void, then they have reason to be afraid of something. Let’s get a good look at what’s over there before we make any moves.”

“Alright. Meya, send every single probe we have and saturate the RK sector, let’s get as detailed a look at what’s over there as we can. Myri, I think I’d rather you move more than just a single task force to RJ-44. Enough that if someone scans the system, they’ll think twice about attacking it. I’m not completely depending on the interdictor. These are unknown civilizations with different tech. One of them *might* be able to find a way around an interdictor. Until we know for sure they can’t jump an interdictor, we assume that they can.”

“Not a problem, Jayce. I’ll send 120 ships to RJ-44, three full battle squadrons and two carrier task forces,” she replied. “Juma, should we send a command ship?”

“They’re currently both just docked, we can always give one of them some field time. Let’s send the *Iyaneri*, its crew could use more field experience. The *Aegis* crew doesn’t need it.”

“Your Grace. Your Grace,” the controller said. “I think you should look at this.”

He returned to her console. She pointed at an image being relayed from the probe there in the system, pointing at a large ring-like device in orbit around the planet. “I’m getting some very strange readings from this device, your Grace,” she told him. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before!”

Jason looked at the energy output of the device, and immediately saw that it was *hyperspace*-based. It was generating a hyperspace field inside the ring, and they watched as a ship entered the ring and then jumped out. Jason studied the output chart, and then gasped. He slammed his hands down on the console and gave a sudden laugh. “Holy *shit*!” he blurted.

“What is it, babe?” Meya asked.

“It’s a *catapult*!” he said animatedly. “It’s a hyperspace *catapult*!”

“What is that, your Grace?”

*“It’s a device that accelerates a ship in hyperspace to reduce the relativity delay the ship suffers,”* Cybi answered for him.

“We obviously don’t need them, but Myleena’s been playing around with the technology to supply to other empires...or she *was*,” Jason continued. “With them cracking the relativity delay researching Consortium engines, she more or less stopped bothering.” He looked to Myri. “We *definitely* make contact once we get more information,” he said firmly. “Captain, I want you to scan the hell out of that device,” he ordered the young woman sitting in front of him. “See if you can get a detailed scan of its internal workings, something our research team can reverse-engineer, and send that data straight to research. Cybi, mirror it to 3D.”

“I can, sir, it doesn’t have a sensor-absorbing hull,” she said confidently as Cybi nodded in acknowledgement

“This way Myleena doesn’t have to waste time inventing it,” he said to a curious Meya and Myra. “Even with the Confederate empires developing real-time engines, a catapult system will help with their older freighter fleets. That way they won’t have to upgrade *everything*. So we definitely want to contact this civilization. We might be able to get them to trade us this catapult technology, maybe for spatial technology. That would be pretty fair for both sides.”

“So, we’re stealing their catapult tech,” Meya said with a slight smile.

“No, we’re *studying* it,” he replied primly. “If they won’t trade it to us, *then* we’ll steal it.”

The twins laughed. “And here we thought you were honorable, Jayce,” Myra grinned.

“Me? *Honorable*? Girl, you gotta spend more time at home,” he chided, which made half the ops center burst into laughter.

Jason stayed in the ops center as the large task force Myri dispatched made for the RJ-44 Stargate, the *Iyaneri* and two carriers dominating the formation as it cruised out from Kosigi. More and more probes arrived in the RK sector and started to scan, searching for the communications they were using, tachyon burst and neutrino pulse modulation, both of which

were faster than light and were viable means of system to system communication.

*“Can you get a high-resolution image of the surface, Captain?”* Cybi asked the controller. *“Let’s see if we can see what they look like.”*

“Easily, Lady Cybi,” she replied, and the image on the hologram shifted to the planet, centered over a city about halfway between the equator and the pole that would give them a good angle to see more than the tops of the beings’ heads—if they had heads—then began to zoom. It shifted to avoid a cloud as buildings became discernable on the hologram, then the units on top of the roofs of the buildings, then a street between them with vehicles moving back and forth, then all the way to where they saw individual beings.

The controller gasped, and Jason’s eyes widened quite a bit.

They were a humanoid race that looked identical to Terrans, Shio, and Faey, with tan-brown skin and several different hair colors. Their faces were leaner than a Terran, more like a Faey but with a Terran’s rounded ears, but they looked very tall and slender. They wore clothing, at least from the waist down. All of them were bare from the waist up, including the females, which bared very normal-looking breasts. “Can you get some measurements?” he asked.

“The planet is .89 gravity, .93 pressure,” the controller replied. “Aspect ratio analysis coming in. This being is 5.812 shakra tall,” she reported, pointing at a female. That was a touch over two meters, or close to seven feet. “Going by body shape and assuming they have similar mass density as we do, this being weighs approximately 72 *konn* in their gravity.” That was about 170 pounds, or around 77 kilograms. That was fairly light for a being that tall...but then again, the planet had .89 gravity. In standard gravity, she’d weigh around 80 *konn*. That was still pretty light, but this female was very slender, almost skinny, with a very light bone structure and no fat anywhere on her. And it seemed to be normal for their race, Jason noted as he looked at others walking on the street. They all wore no shirts, but many carried bags, cargo slings, or very Terran-looking backpacks. Tattoos seemed common among them, with flowing, almost tribal designs done mainly in black and dark blue, which made it visible against their light brown skin—a tiny bit lighter than Temika—tattooed on the lower arms, on

the stomach mainly above the navel, over the pectorals on the males, and on females, between and above the breasts, leaving the breasts unadorned. They also had tattoos on their backs, which covered the upper back and shoulders over the shoulder blades, and another tattoo on the lower back just above the waist of their pants or skirts, all of which had a sash over it of various colors. Just as on the front, there was no connection between the upper and lower tattoos. Many of them wore necklaces or metal rings on the upper arm, but there were no bracelets, no rings, no earrings.

“Gora’s Law strikes again,” Meya mused as they looked at a mirror of the feed on their hologram.

“They’re definitely Faey-like,” Myra agreed. “More like us than Terrans and Shio, but those tattoos...what are they thinking?”

“Not every humanoid race believes in the beauty of the unaltered body the way the Faey do,” Jason told her lightly.

“Well, at least they’re not tattooing their faces,” Meya grunted. “Or their tits. That would be a crime.”

“I never knew you took such an interest in other women’s tits, Meya.”

“I do when I compare them to how big mine are,” she replied with a grin. “And I’m *way* more stacked than them.”

“Well, their culture may find big tits to be a turn-off,” he countered playfully.

“Then no way are they even remotely similar to us,” Meya declared, which made Jason laugh.

More telemetry came in from other probes, and it started to reveal the scope of just what they were dealing with. There were 878 planetary solar systems in the RK quadrant, out of some 14,000 or so stars in the sector, and they were getting either tachyon burst or neutrino pulse energy signatures from 603 of them. The entire RK sector was inhabited, but they’d only detected energy from RK-02, which was the closest RK system to RJ-44. RJ-44 was all the way across the RJ sector from RK-02. There were also comm signals coming from border systems in the RL, RKA, and the extreme corner of the RLA sectors. It was an entire sector cluster of potential inhabitation, just like the home sector, with six distinct technology

levels in the comm signals they were receiving. That hinted that there were at least six separate governmental entities in the sector cluster. And there might be more, deeper in the RL, RKA, and RLA sectors, since their probes could only scan a tiny sliver of a sector. They were just too damn big. As it was, they had their entire inventory of 1,180 probes in the RK sector, and most of them could just *barely* make out the comm signals coming from the most distant systems. If not for the fact that tachyon burst and neutrino pulse comm systems were faster than light and had very, very long range, they wouldn't even detect *that*.

Jason watched with the twins as the task force moved through the Stargate one ship at a time, the *Iyaneri* and carriers going first, then in order of largest ships first as more and more data came back from the probes. They had probes at 28 inhabited systems now, the ones closest to RK-02, and it looked like they were all using the same technology, which hinted strongly that it was a singular government. Every system had three things in common: a large number of ships moving around it, the presence of warships, and a hyperspace catapult.

"It's going to take another half an hour to get anything back from one of these other tech level systems, Jayce," Meya said. "Why don't you go to your office so you get out of our hair?"

"Don't order me around, woman," he retorted, which made Meya grin. "But I could get some paperwork done while we're waiting for more info."

"Good. Dera, get him out of here," Myra declared, looking at the smiling guard.

Jason went to his office and set up dedicated holograms for both the KES and KMS headquarter, then did a little reading through reports as he kept an eye on a hologram showing the readings coming back from the probes. They started painting a picture of a sector nearly as crowded as the home sector with six different technology levels, and the first probe to reach one of those other technology level systems confirmed that it was a different species. The species there was a canoid bipedal species similar to the Kimdori, the Beryans, or the Rakarri, again showing that Gora's Law was more than just a theory. They too were highly militarized, they noticed, with large numbers of warships at the system. The closest of their systems to RJ-44 was RK-103, and from the comm signals coming from the sector,

these wolf-like creatures occupied the central region of the sector closer to the RJ sector.

Eventually, his absence was noticed. A hologram of Dahnai appeared, her sitting in a padded chair and nursing Miyai at her breast. “Where are you, babe?” she demanded.

“At work,” he replied. “We’ve got something going on. I may not be back for a couple of hours, I’m waiting for some reports to get here.”

“About?”

“House business,” he replied simply.

“Okay, okay. Well, hurry back,” she ordered, then her hologram winked out.

Miaari padded into his office without warning—she was one of the few allowed in without his approval—and sat in the chair across from his desk. She waited until he disabled the two-way communication holograms he had going with Meya and Myri. “I heard that you’ve encountered intelligent life in the RK sector,” she said.

“Yeah, I have probes out trying to get an idea of what we’re dealing with.”

Miaari touched her memory band, and a detailed map of the sector appeared in a hologram between them, with six different colored areas within, very small areas. The largest of them was only made up of six systems, where the smallest were just single systems. “This is the RK sector,” she said. “It is inhabited by eight separate and distinct spacefaring species which make up six separate governmental entities. I think you encountered the Keelo, which is a humanoid species whose homeworld is closest to RK-02, but that is only a guess.”

Jason looked at her with a little disgust. “You knew about them?”

“Of course we did,” she replied simply. “We don’t tell you *everything*, Jason. We allow the Karinnes to explore on their own, even in areas we have already been, because it is important for you to learn and grow on your own with as little interference from us as possible. It is not our place to interfere.”



He gave her a slightly dirty look, then sighed and leaned back in his chair. *Fucking* Kimdori...but he guessed he shouldn't have been too surprised. "What do you know of them?" Jason asked.

"We haven't sent any scout missions into the RK sector for 400 years, so our information is very outdated," she said. "The races in that sector lacked the technological advancement that require us to keep an eye on them, so after the initial exploration, they scheduled a follow-up exploration for a time when our explorers estimated someone in the sector might have discovered plasma or spatial technologies. When they reach that level of advancement, *then* it requires us to keep an eye on them. This information is 400 years old, so do not take it as up to date," she warned. "When we first explored the sector 400 years ago, there were six separate governments here, Jason. The Keelo Republic," she said, making one of the areas brighten. "The Hrathrari Dominion. The Druvom Empire. The Strath-Zegra Alliance. The Gudara-Yood Partnership. And the Birkon Empire. None of them had reached the technological threshold that would attract attention from our explorers, to the point where the next scheduled exploration of the sector is set to occur in 200 years. They had crude engine technology that allowed them to reach other star systems, but the journeys would take years. The Keelo have hyperspace catapults now?"

"Yes."

"That's surprising, their technology level 400 years ago didn't even hint that they'd advance that far so quickly, and yet they have developed a technology so advanced that it has practical use to this quadrant," she mused, tapping her muzzle. "They had only just developed propulsion technology to reach other star systems at that time."

"I was going to make contact with them. Do what the Kimdori know of them make that a good idea or a bad idea?"

"I cannot give a recommendation one way or the other, Jason. They have clearly advanced far faster than we expected. When we were last in the RK sector, the eight races weren't aware of each other outside of the two alliances I mentioned. Both are separate species that evolved on different planets in the same system, and both had joined into alliances rather than fight one another. It seems that they have grown rapidly in the

400 years since we surveyed the sector. Far more rapidly than we would have imagined.”

“Well, your map is missing about 90% of what we’re finding from the probes. Almost every planetary solar system in the RK sector is inhabited.”

“Surprising,” she said. “Might I get access to the probe data?”

“That’s a silly question,” he told her. “Anything you can tell me about these races?”

She shook her head. “Even if I could, after 400 years, there’s little that would still be the same. I can show you what they look like, that is the only information I would feel confident passing on to you. Firstly, I can say that the Birkon are radically different life forms from most others,” she amended. “They breathe methane and live on a planet that is so cold that it would kill most anything else. They have a glycerol compound for blood that prevents freezing and can withstand temperatures where some gases liquefy. Surprisingly, though, they can tolerate higher temperatures as well as the Jobodi,” she said. “They are a very curious race, and one of the hardest we have ever encountered.”

“The others are less exotic?”

She nodded. “The Keelo, the Strath, and the Yood are humanoids much similar to your species, but the Strath are the size of a Makati and the Yood are very burly and bulky, as they hail from a heavy gravity planet only slightly less strong than Prakarika. The Hrathrari are canine in appearance like Kimdori, but they look more wolf-like. The Zegra are equinoids, horse-like creatures with hooves for feet and three-fingered hands,” she said, projecting a very old image of what almost looked like a bipedal zebra with hooves for feet like a Moridon, an equine head and face set on a vertical base, but with black and brown fur rather than black and white. But it did have stripes. “Birkons are not very attractive,” she said, showing an image of a humanoid creature that looked long and lanky, like the Keelo, but had chalky bluish skin and black eyes like a Jun...and had a squid-like beak on their faces in place of nose and mouth. They also had tentacle-like appendages in place of arms, complete with sucker-like attachments to the two “fingers” that split off from the end of the appendage. They were *not* very pretty. “The Gudara are horned goat-like creatures the size of a Makati,

who resemble the satyrs from your Terran mythology,” she said, displaying a slender bipedal creature. They had hooves like a Zegra and shaggy fetlocks around them, with a muzzled face that looked like a cross between a goat and a human and curved horns on their heads. “The Druvom are another silicoid-based species similar to the Stevak, but they don’t look similar.” She showed him an image of a wide-featured humanoid with stone for skin, complete with crystalline growths protruding from the backs of the shoulders, the backs of the forearms, and from the shins. The creature’s face was very wide and had no nose, however. “They are also among the largest intelligent beings in the galaxy. This creature is nearly ten shakra tall.” Jason whistled, that was 12 or so feet tall, or around three and a quarter meters. That wasn’t as big as a Benga, but this Druvom would come up to a Benga’s chin.

“That’s even bigger than a Bari-Bari.”

She nodded. “That’s all we have on them, Jason. As I said, we haven’t been back in the RK sector for 400 years. This is the only information I could pull from our archives that we felt was still viable, but I thought it might help.”

“It helps a little, but not all that much,” he said honestly. “About all it does is confirm that the six technology levels we’re detecting are probably those six, and all six still exist as governmental entities.” He gave her a look. “And it makes me a tad miffed.”

She smiled. “We are a race of secrets, Jason,” she said with dancing eyes.

“Yeah, get out of my office, you traitor,” he told her, which made her laugh.

Miaari strutted out, and Jason turned the holograms back on and related what Miaari told him to the others. “So, at least we know that much,” he said after going over what Miaari told him. “We’re most likely dealing with eight species organized into six different civilizations.”

“And they can’t have overly friendly relations, given the number of warships we’ve found so far,” Meya noted.

Jason glanced at the door. “Meya, I want you to fully map out the inhabited systems in the RK sector and watch them a little while but keep

our probes back a little from their inhabited planets. Don't get them too close, one of those other civilizations might have some way to detect them. Let's not start out a potential new contact by them thinking we're spying on them," he said. "But, let's get more information before we decide what to do. Let's set up a conference for 14:00 tomorrow to go over what the probes find, then discuss making contact with one or possibly all of them. Myri, put our comm officers on their burst transmissions, see what they can figure out. And send your data to Miaari, have her put her analysts on it too, see what they can get out of it."

"Sure thing, Jayce," she nodded.

"Myri, keep that task force at RJ-44. They might have noticed we're there by now," he continued.

"Sure thing, Jayce."

"Alright, 14:00 tomorrow at the KES ops center, everyone be there in person," Jason said. "I'll bring Miaari, so we can all take turns beating her up for withholding that information until we came across them on our own," he added, which made them all laugh. "Meya, your team's responsible for the presentation. Everyone be ready to discuss making contact with one or all of the governments over there, along with all the pros and cons that might come with it."

"We'll be there," Myri said.

Jason ended the holograms and leaned back in his chair. This was definitely a first for him, coming across an alien civilization with whom they had *no* contact, at least in a non-war situation. They'd known nothing about the Consortium or the Imxi either, but those were different situations. This would be their first contact with a completely unknown race in a peaceful situation, and there were a lot of questions about it. They would be moving into a populated part of the galaxy previously unknown to the Karinnes, where *they* would be the newcomers, where six governments existed and had their own relations. The Karinnes would be the strangers there, unfamiliar with the politics of the area, and there was no telling how they'd be received. How would those races take finding out about the Karinnes? What about the Academy, would they be interested in that? And

how would they receive finding out about the Confederation and its goal to push back the Andromedans? There was really no telling.

But there was something *exciting* about this situation. They'd come across their first spacefaring race that was more or less completely unknown, so unknown that not even the Kimdori really knew much about them. An unknown race with unknown customs, with relations with other races that were equally unknown. For the Karinnes, who pursued knowledge over all other things, this was a golden opportunity. It was an opportunity to learn new things about new people, to see how races in a completely different part of the galaxy had grown and evolved, and how they related to one another. The Keelo looked a lot like Terrans and Faey, but there was no telling how they might *act*, and that was what made it so intriguing to Jason.

He'd find out more tomorrow. He wanted to get back to Dahnai's palace to spend time with his wife, his *amu*, and his new daughter. That was more important to him right now.

*Chiira, 36 Shiaa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 7 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 36 Shiaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Operations Center, KES Headquarters, Karsa, Karis*

The room was pretty crowded.

Some 35 Faey, Terrans, Makati, Shio, two Kimdori, and a lone Beryan stood around the large room, members of the KES, the KMS, Miaari's intelligence service, and diplomats from Yeri's State department listened as one of Meya's research specialists went over everything they'd learned in the day or so they'd been gathering information from the RK sector. Jason, Tim, Miaari, Kemaari, Yeri, Myri, Sioa, Juma, and Navii stood with Meya and Myra in a group, the big brass in the room, and it was mainly to them that the briefing was given.

“From what we’ve managed to piece together, your Grace, the RK sector is just one of four populated sectors in the quadrant,” the KES analyst said, a handsome Faey man with bone white hair. “We detected inhabitation in the RKA, RL, and RLA sectors as well, which were systems belonging to the six empires in the RK quadrant. The borders of these empires are fairly well defined within the RK sector, but outside of it, there’s almost a piecemeal placement of systems, as if they had raced each other to colonize them first, or perhaps they’ve changed hands as the result of treaties or wars. We know absolutely nothing about what’s beyond the edges of the outlying sectors, but from the looks of it, there are no spacefaring races there to challenge this colonization. We have probes searching deeper into the sectors to find out.

“We have determined that there are currently two wars being waged within the sector. The humanoids Ambassador Miaari called Keelo are at war with the canoids she called Hrathrari, and on the other side of the sector, there is a war being waged between two other empires, the Birkons and the Druvom. Oddly enough, the majority of these wars are being waged in the outlying territories,” he said, bringing the holo close along the border of the RK and RL sectors. “The Keelo and the Hrathrari share a border, but the Birkons and Druvom do not. It seems that the Keelo and Hrathrari aren’t willing to wage war in their core systems but are more than willing to fight one another in the outer territory.”

“Or perhaps the defenses within the core systems make military action prohibitive, so they wage war where there is a chance of success without heavy casualties,” Navii speculated.

“We theorized that ourselves, Admiral,” he nodded. “The other four nations in the sector seem to be at peace with each other and with the warring parties. From a technology standpoint, these six nations are behind the Confederate norm in most respects, but they’re using some technology we’ve never seen before. All six of these nations are using hyperspace catapults, for example, which they’re using to significantly offset the hyperspace delay of their engines. We’ve also detected a few other technologies never invented in the home sector because of the discovery of plasma and spatial technology. Since none of them have made that advance, they’ve pushed the boundaries of ion technology farther than we’ve seen any other nation take it.

“This scenario introduces some tricky problems. If we make contact with any one of them, we risk destabilizing the sector’s political balance even further, but making contact with all of them jeopardizes our neutrality. The warring nations will invariably try to pull us into their wars, especially when they find out that we have vastly superior technology. It also makes trading knowledge with them problematic. The core tenet of the house is to never give others technology which they’ll use in a military fashion against others in a non-defensive manner. If we trade any of our tech for their hyperspace catapult tech, we run that risk. However, with the coming of the Syndicate and the Consortium, it is almost our duty to warn them of what’s coming and allow them to make informed decisions about it,” he added, glancing at Jason.

“It’s the official recommendation of the KES Social Research department that we make *brief* contact with all six empires. We tell them who we are, tell them we won’t get mired in their political problems, and warn them of the coming of the Syndicate and the Consortium. We then tell them they can find us at RJ-44 if they want to talk more about it and leave them be. There’s too much murky political upheaval in the sector to get too involved with them.”

“Thank you for the recommendation, Major,” Jason said. “Alright, who else has an opinion?”

“I’d have to mostly agree with the Major,” Miaari said, tapping her muzzle. “The Karinnes do not get involved in the affairs of others, but we do owe it to them to warn them that the Andromedans are coming. What would happen if they asked to enter the Academy, Jason?” she asked him.

“Official Karinne policy is that politics ends at the edge of the Academy’s campus,” he answered. “the Academy is open to all comers who have a sincere desire to learn. We couldn’t really tell them no as long as they’re sincere about wanting to go there to learn, and from the sound of it, they’d learn a hell of a lot. They teach plasma and spatial technology science there. But they’d have to *know* about the Academy to ask to enter it. As long as we don’t tell them about it, we can dance around that sticky problem. I’d rather not have them go there and learn enough to change the political dynamics of the sector. If one of the more aggressive empires learns Confederate tech, it could make things completely go to hell.”

“From a military standpoint, they’re absolutely no threat to the house,” Myri said. “We’ve gone over the data the KES sent us, and my military analysts assure me that their weapons are no danger to a KMS vessel. So, telling them where RJ-44 is won’t be a potential security threat. They can’t jump the interdictor, and their entire fleet is no match for the task force we have at RJ-44 right now. I think the KMS could take on the entire combined fleets of all six empires and have an even chance of victory.”

“Stop thinking with your tits, Myri,” Jason said, which caused some chuckles in the room. “What’s the KMS recommendation?”

“Since they’re no threat to the house, we don’t have any objection to revealing RJ-44. So if you want to contact them, we’re fine with it. I’d really like to get my hands on that hyperspace catapult tech, but not if it comes with the risk of violating Karinne oaths.”

Jason had every single person in the room give his or her opinion, to which he listened with full attention, going person by person through the KMS officers, the KES scientists, Miaari’s department, then Yeri’s State department diplomats. They then spent nearly three hours discussing the possible advantages and consequences of contact with one empire, contact with all empires, and everything in between, and the possible scenarios where the Karinne contact teams might be attacked...which was a distinct possibility given the upheaval in the sector. Unknown ships jumping into the sector might be seen as hostile and be attacked before they could open diplomatic channels.

The last opinion he asked was from Cybi, who hovered just beside him. She put her hands behind her holographic back and took on a thoughtful expression, then ghosted forward a bit. *“This is a complex situation,”* she said. *“There’s a very great risk that we might get pulled into their wars, but we do need to warn them about what’s coming. But no matter what we decide, what we must do is keep their existence a secret from the rest of the Confederation,”* she said strongly. *“The others would see them as prime targets for military takeover, since their technology is not sufficient to repel any empire from the home sector cluster. And with the empires starting to develop the technology to jump in real time, it puts these R quadrant civilizations in very real danger. They are now within reach of the*



*aggressive empires in the Confederation and would stand no chance if they are invaded."*

"And that's why I told all of you to keep this quiet," Jason nodded. "No matter what we decide, the existence of those empires doesn't leave this ops center. Understood?"

They all nodded in assent.

*"As to my recommendation, Jason, I concur with Major Stren. I think we should contact all six governments simultaneously, tell them who we are and stress that we are neutral in all things, then warn them that they are little fish in a sea of much bigger predators. We warn them both about the coming of the Andromedans and the fact that the aggressive home quadrant empires are developing technology that will allow them to reach the R quadrant. We reveal the existence of the Confederation and its goal to protect our galaxy from the Andromedans, we then tell them about RJ-44 in case they wish to further discuss the matter, and then allow them to go about their business."*

"Scare them into joining the Confederation, eh Cybi?" Myri asked lightly.

*"Their only protection from empires like the Faey, the Skaa, and the Verutans is to be allied to them,"* she replied simply. *"But, given that there are wars being fought over there, it is a good chance that they will be more worried about the enemy they can see than the one they can't. They still deserve to know what's happening beyond the R quadrant, things that very much could affect them, be it the Syndicate or a fleet of Imperium battle cruisers refitted with real-time jump engines entering the RK sector with conquest on their minds."*

"That is a distinct possibility," Meya grunted, leaning back on a console. "We could tell the Confederation about them without revealing where they are, I suppose. And perhaps warn them that messing with the RK empires might make us put a hand in."

"Leave that part of it to me, Meya. There are several ways I could scare the others out of the idea of messing with the RK empires," he said dryly, which made Miaari chuckle. "Alright, everyone, you've given me a lot to think about. Let me head back to my office and go over some of my notes

and think about a while. I'll send out a missive with my decision when I make it."

Jason returned to his office and spent several hours thinking about it, isolating himself from everyone else as he pondered the problem. He reread every report and watched his gestalt recording of the meeting earlier three times, listening carefully to everyone's opinion, then researched some history to see how historical first meetings between two nations with a technological imbalance had gone...which was pretty sparse, since most of the time it resulted in the stronger empire conquering the weak one. He spent nearly two hours studying how the Imxi were doing now that they were part of many other empires, their own empire chopped up and doled out to Confederate powers, and after a break for dinner, he and Cybi went through several possibilities, Jason utilizing Cybi's incredible computer processing power to have her run probability scenarios on actions they might take. He was there so long that he decided to just go to sleep in his private bedroom, at least after telling Jyslin and Dahnai he'd be staying overnight, getting a good healthy nap before getting back on the problem.

By dawn the next day, he'd made his decision. He grabbed a shower and got an early breakfast down in the cafeteria, then called a conference of the four departments who needed to know about his decision, the KMS, the KES, Miaari's intelligence office, and Yeri's State department. The eight women in charge of those four departments were on flat holograms arrayed in front of his desk once he got all of them in conference. "Alright, after thinking about it a whole lot, I've made a decision," he declared. "I've decided that we're going to make contact with all six empires, but we're going to do it in a specific way," he told them as Cybi manifested her hologram and sat demurely on the edge of his desk, which was more or less her preferred spot. "We're going to contact all six empires at the same time. We're sending out six main battleships carrying a telepathic specialist. I decided on a battleship because I only want one ship going, and if only one ship is going, I want a ship that's in very little danger if it's attacked. A battleship can hold off the military ships our scanners show in their home systems and jump back out without risking the safety of the crew. This battleship will jump directly into the capitol systems of each empire, hold about an hour's sublight from the most populated planet and broadcast a signal using that nation's comm technology to get their attention. They'll

wait for them to come to the battleship, make contact, and deliver our message. If the battleship is attacked, *do not return fire*,” he stressed. “Defensive systems *only*, shields and shockwave generators. Just sit there until they either stop firing or they start doing damage. If they start doing damage, then jump out. Myri, I want the RJ-44 task force to divide into squadrons and jump to points where they can arrive to assist the battleship in five seconds if it becomes necessary,” he ordered. “These squadrons will *not* return fire, they’ll just help the battleship retreat, at least up until the point where they must return fire to get the battleship out of the theater. Remember, girls, we’re not there to start a war, we’re there to deliver the message.

“Our message is fairly straightforward. To paraphrase it, we’re telling them who we are, that the Andromedans are coming, and that their remote location won’t be a defense against either the Andromedans or the Confederate empires developing real-time jump engines for much longer. We’re also going to tell them that the Karinnes want to host a summit of all six empires at RJ-44 in twenty days from today to discuss what’s coming, to give them more information, and maybe see if we can get more information about what’s going on over there and offer our services as completely neutral arbitrators for possible peace talks. If we can help stop those two wars being fought, we may as well take a shot at it,” he said dryly.

“Yeri, I want you to contact Red Horn and have them build a passingly decent negotiation center at New Kiria on Janja as fast as they possibly can,” he told her, referring to the largest of the 16 habitable moons and the one they were setting up as the “capitol” of the moon system. “It doesn’t have to be extravagant, but it does need to be functional and at least look like it’s not built out of cardboard and rubber bands. Tell them they have complete discretion as to what they build as long as it can hold a couple hundred people for a diplomatic conference, and it’s built so the protection of the emissaries is taken into account. You’ll be hosting and moderating that conference, so start preparing for it.”

“I’ve already got some outlines prepared,” she said with a smile.

“Pick six diplomatic officers with the telepathic training for first contact situations and get them to Kosigi, I’ll have their talking points ready for them in a little bit. Myri, pick six battleships for the mission. *Veteran*

battleships,” he stressed. “I don’t want a new battleship with an untested crew going out there.”

“The *Dreamer*, *Trelle’s Gift*, *Jenda*, *Victory*, *Shiani*, and the *Ijani* are all available.”

“Perfect. Get them off standby and warn their captains that more detailed orders are going to be coming down the pipe. If you need to pull more ships for those protective rescue squadrons, do it. Defense is your job, and I’m not going to micro-manage you. Meya, Myra, pull all the hyperspace probes out of the RK sector cluster and send them back to what they were doing,” he ordered. “And restrict those sectors from further exploration missions until we get more information. You can still run missions in the other R quadrant sectors, just don’t go that way.”

“Not a problem, Jayce. We’ve gotten some interesting long-range scans of REA-1743, that’s our next mission.”

“So, any surprises you might want to warn us about in advance if we go that way, Miaari?” he asked pointedly, which made the others laugh.

“I’ll never tell,” she replied playfully.

“Typical,” he drawled, which made her smile wolfishly. “Get some of our intelligence people on Janja, Miaari, so we’re in position to find out what they *won’t* tell us.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Oh yeah, Yeri, if possible, send jacked diplomatic officers, so they can upload the local languages into the battleships’ mainframes,” he said. “Once they’re uploaded, send them to Cybi and to the mainframe at the Academy for archiving and study. That should make it easier on you when it comes time for the conference.”

*“I’ll keep in contact with all six battleships to download the data. I’ll send it on to the Academy,”* Cybi supplied.

“Works for me,” Jason told her.

“My entire office is jacked, Jason,” she told him with a nod. “Because of exactly that.”

“Alright, ladies, that’s it. Get it done,” he said. “I’ll send out the official orders and what I want the diplomats to talk about right now. Just send me priority reports, since I’m going back to the summer palace and spending some time with my family.”

“And when are you releasing some pictures of Raisha for the public?” Myri asked. “Some of us haven’t even seen her yet!”

“Blame Dahnai for that,” Jason said. “But I’ll take care of it. Actually, I won’t have to. Cybi, you have some images of Raisha and Miyai that would look good in a press release?”

*“Several,” she replied. “I’ll pick a few nice ones and release them on the Ducal Announcement section of CivNet.”*

“Problem solved. But I will be bringing Raisha back to the strip when I can pry her away from Dahnai,” he chuckled. “I do want to show her off a bit.”

“Why not Miyai?”

“Miyai will take a little preparation,” he said carefully. “If I bring her, nobody can bring guests. Only people Dahnai’s guards pass through their security screening will be allowed to come see her.” Which would mean that any Generation would not be allowed to come see her. Miyai’s status was going to remain an *absolute* secret, even from House Karinne. And since a Generation could sense another Generation, it meant that any time Miyai was on the strip, *only* Jason and Saelle from the Generations could be there. And among the Kimdori, only Miaari and Kemaari would be allowed anywhere near her as well. “But I can get around that with Raisha, since she’s half mine. But when it comes to Miyai, I don’t have any say in what Dahnai does.”

“Fighting over the twins already, are we?” Yeri asked with a chuckle.

“More like making sure my little girl has an actual childhood,” he answered. “I guess I should go back, even though Dahnai has a bunch of Grand Duchesses over there right now,” he grunted. “She’s having the private presentation ceremony today, introducing the twins to the *Siann*. Tomorrow she’s taking them back to Draconis so they can have their cleansing ceremony in the Faey religion, and I have to go. Whee,” he grunted, which made several of them laugh.

“Isn’t the Brood Queen there now?”

He nodded. “As well as Magran and Kreel, they’ve come to see the girls and talk a little politics with Dahnai in an informal setting. Magran got here yesterday, and Kreel had some kind of problem and had to push his visit back a day. He was scheduled to arrive about half an hour ago.”

“Then it sounds like you have more than one reason to go back to the summer palace,” Yeri noted.

“I get along with them,” he smiled. “Actually, to be fair, all three of them are friends. If it was that bitch Anavan, I’d find every reason in the world to stay here in my office.”

“Then you’d better get back to the palace, Jayce. We’ll send you reports, and if it’s important, Cybi can come get you in person.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said. “I should have the paperwork out to you in about ten minutes.”

“Alright. We’ll get everything rolling,” Myri said.

Jason created a list of diplomatic guidelines for the contact specialists to follow, issued the formal orders to the KMS and State, then he headed for his skimmer. Dera and Ryn were with him, had been since yesterday, and Dera piloted the skimmer as Jason sat in the back and caught up with Dahnai and Jyslin over the biogenic network, warning them he was done with his work and returning to the palace. Dahnai, Magran, and Sk’Vrae met him at the landing pad, Magran wearing a Hawaiian shirt and cargo pants of all things, looking almost a bit silly, looking more than happy to divest himself of his Grand Master robes for a couple of days. Dahnai had had a couple of days to recover from the childbirth, and that was enough for her to be able to walk...but a doctor was nearby with a hoverchair, just in case she got too tired or walking became painful. “It’s about time, Jason,” Magran said as he stepped down onto the pad. “What’s going on that kept you tied up for two days?”

“House business, Magran, and fairly important business at that,” he replied. “They’re going to be sending me messages if something comes up, so all of you will have to excuse me in advance if I suddenly have to leave again.”

“I hope it’s not something serious,” Sk’Vrae said. Since Magran couldn’t send, she was speaking.

“Serious and not serious,” he replied. “It’s nothing that’s potentially harmful to the house, but serious enough to require my personal attention.”

“That’s nice and vague,” Dahnai accused.

“Yup, I thought so myself,” he grinned. “Where’s Kreel?”

“He got delayed again, but he should be in Karis space by now,” Dahnai answered.

“Are the Highborns still here?”

“The entire *Siann* is here,” she told him. “They’re having a party by the pool right now. It’s not often the *Siann* gathers outside of the palace, so it’s a bit casual,” she chuckled.

“I think I hear them calling me back to the office,” he said, turning around. Magran laughed when Dahnai grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him towards her palatial summer home.

“Oh no, buster, I’ve got you here now, and you’re *staying*,” she declared as she dragged him towards the side door.

It wasn’t *too* bad. Jason, Magran, Sk’Vrae, and Dahnai joined the party of the 85 Grand Duchesses and Trillane emissary gathered around the large pool, sitting on pool furniture, swimming, playing a croquet-like lawn game on the lush grass by the pool deck, or standing in small groups talking. Jason made sure to get Kreel over with them when he arrived, sitting at Dahnai’s table near the grill as her cooks prepared barbecue for the party. Faey had developed a great love of Terran outdoor grilling, though Jason could admit that the Shio were the true masters of cooking on grills and other open flame sources. “That’s a whole lot of naked Faey,” Kreel noted lightly as he flopped in a chair beside Jason.

“Faey don’t wear swimsuits around a pool, even if they have no intention of swimming,” Jason told him easily. “And this is Dahnai’s first real chance to make the *Siann* jealous over her summer palace.”

“What took you so long?” Dahnai demanded.

“Oh the usual,” he replied, taking a mug of Makati ale from a servant with a bright, buck-toothed smile. His oversized front teeth showed signs of being recently filed down. “I had to do a little actual work when two Councilors demanded my presence at a negotiation.”

“Which took place at the Dripping Whiskers,” Jason predicted.

“It did move negotiations along,” he replied shamelessly, then took a long drink. “Ahhh, now that’s better. It was too late for me to head out once we were finished, so I just begged off until now. It’s early morning back at Grimjaka, I left before dawn. Now, where are your babies, Dahnai? I came all this way to pretend to be impressed by them!”

Dahnai laughed. “Saelle has them right now, doing her job as the foster.”

“So, she’s more into showing off her palace than her kids, eh?” He asked with a sly look at Jason. “I had no idea she was *that* kind of Empress. You know,” he said, making a dainty gesture with an imperious, highly snobby expression.

Jason laughed, but Dahnai narrowed her eyes. “Watch it, buster, you’re on sovereign Merrane territory,” she warned. “I’m the one in charge around here.”

“If there’s no danger involved, there’s no fun, Dahnai,” he replied shamelessly, which made Jason laugh harder. Kreel’s irreverence was, in Jason’s opinion, one of his most endearing attributes. He certainly never let council meetings stay boring very long.

Dahnai did have Saelle bring the twins out for Kreel to see, as well as many of the Grand Duchesses, who gathered around the hovercarriage. He almost caused a riot when he reached down and picked up Raisha without permission, but his hold on her was professional and gentle, smiling down at her with that strangely cute toothy smile of his. “That’s the cradling of a male with children of his own,” Magran noted lightly.

“Not a one, but I have nieces and nephews,” he replied with a smile. “Grimja politics doesn’t leave a guy with much chance at a social life. And who’s an adorable little hairless blue baby? Who’s an adorable little hairless blue baby?” he said in a funny voice, rubbing his nose against Raisha’s. “Which one’s yours, Jayce?”



“The one you’re holding,” he replied. “That’s Raisha.”

Raisha started to fuss a bit, and he handed her back to Saelle. “Not your fault, High Councilor,” Saelle chuckled. “Both of them are a little sensitive to sending, so all that chatter is making them a bit cranky,” she said, glancing her eyes to the pool.

“They’re both expressed?”

“No, just sensitive, but it’s a good sign that they’ll both have strong talent,” Dahnai said proudly.

After the twins were taken back to their nursery, Jason enjoyed more or less just hanging out with a few of his favorite Confederate rulers. He was good friends with all three of the visiting rulers, so sitting with them around a patio table just enjoying the warm sunshine and talking about far less important matters was pretty nice. It didn’t stay just them for long, however. Dahnai spent some time with the Highborns, inviting them to sit at her table in twos and threes and talk a while, then Jason brought Yila over, who was rather boldly showing off the small *jaingi* tattoos she had had just to each side of her pubic hair, which was downright rebellious when it came to Grand Duchesses. She made sure to work the table, talking trade and business with the visiting rulers.

Jason did keep up with the mission, thanks to priority reports sent directly to his gestalt, including some video. The task force organized itself at the blue gas giant planet at RJ-44, then it jumped out in groups, with the six battleships heading for the six homeworlds Miaari had noted on the starchart and the rest of them jumping to a position where they could get there in a hurry if the battleship was in trouble. Jason did pay more attention to the mission than the party when the battleships jumped in, and in five of the six individual missions, it went smoothly. In those five cases, the battleship jumped about an hour’s sublight cruise from the most populated planet in the system and broadcast a signal emulating the technology of the system, just broadcasting pulses to get attention, and in each case, they didn’t have to wait long. Those five encounters worked out much the same. A group of alien ships came out to the battleship—which was bigger than most of the other ships by a noticeable margin—and the battleship very slowly moved forward. Once the ships were about 15 to 20 kathra apart, the range of a strong telepath, it held position and the diplomat aboard went to

work. Each of those encounters took about an hour and a half to two hours to complete, as the diplomatic officer first established a common method of communication, then arranged a face to face meeting with a diplomatic or military officer aboard the ships. The officer boarded the KMS battleship, and once they were in the landing bay, the diplomatic officer conducted the negotiations, delivering the message, inviting their diplomats to RJ-44 for a conference, and gaining tactile contact with the emissary to absorb their language—even for a telepath like Ryn, touch was required for something that intricate—and teach the visiting envoy the Faey language in return. The alien officer then went back to their own ships and the KMS battleship jumped out of the system.

The exception was the Birkons. When the KMS battleship jumped in and announced itself, the Birkons sent a fleet of 20 ships to intercept it. And when they got within range, they opened fire without warning. The battleship that went there was the *Dreamer*, and Marayi did what Jason wanted, she just sat there and let the Birkons fire their ion weapons and missiles at the battleship. For long moments, the battleship simply sat there and absorbed their fire, the phased ion weapons failing to penetrate the battleship's Teryon shields and their missiles being destroyed by the shockwave generator. Marayi waited nearly five minutes as the 20 ships kept firing, the shields able to dissipate the energy as fast as the Birkons could fire it, but when they advanced to engage the *Dreamer* at close range, to bring more weapons with shorter range into play, Marayi made a pretty smart move. Instead of retreating, she instead sent the *Dreamer* at the Birkons as they closed, and that got the diplomatic officer close enough to make telepathic contact. The firing stopped quickly once the diplomat told them that they weren't some brand new Druvom ship. Once the Birkons realized that they weren't Druvoms, they apologized quite profusely and sent a diplomatic envoy to the *Dreamer* to negotiate. The envoy had to wear a breather and an environmental suit since they breathed methane and preferred temperatures so cold it would kill most carbon-based life, but Birkons could tolerate what Faey and Terrans would consider to be room temperature, so the diplomat was able to make hand to tentacle contact to teach the Birkon language and be inserted with Faey in exchange.

Of note to Jason was that four of those six races had telepaths of their own. Only the Birkons and the Druvom had not had telepaths on the ships.

In all six cases, the message was delivered, the local language learned and uploaded to Cybi, and the invitation to a conference at RJ-44 was extended. The mission was considered a success, with only the Birkons reacting with violence...and they apologized immediately after contact was made. They mistook the *Dreamer* for some brand new Druvom warship.

The party lasted nearly six hours, until Dahnai finally got tired of holding informal court in her luxurious new palace, and she sent the Grand Duchesses back to Draconis. Yila managed to hang around, however, sitting with Jason and Jyslin out by the pool while Dahnai was nursing the infants. Kellin and Symone were with Dahnai, Tim was off “entertaining” himself with one of the palace servants, Magran and Sk’Vrae both were up in guest rooms resting, and Kreel was goofing around with Maer and Sirri tossing a batchi ball around with sticks from the equipment room, and showing some surprising skill with a batchi stick. Yila caught Jason up on her simsense project, how the movies she was producing were just starting production now that the actors were all jacked and finished assimilation training. But she couldn’t help but notice something else. *I saw that the Paladins are 2-3, which is better than most analysts predicted given their schedule*, she sent lightly.

*They’re coming along nicely*, Jyslin answered. *We’re very optimistic that we’ll have a winning season this year. I doubt we’ll make the playoffs, though. That’ll be next year*, she sent impishly, grinning at Yila.

*Just be glad my Tigers are in division IV*, she sent coolly, competitive challenge shimmering through her thought. The IBL was organized into eight divisions each holding eight teams. A team played every other team in its division once a year, and the rest of the games were organized by random draw every year within a schedule where divisions faced four random teams from two other divisions in a rotating schedule, and five games that were purely random draw, where a team might play a team from its own division more than once due to the random draw...which had gone against the Paladins this year. They’d randomly drawn some of the toughest teams in the IBL in the first half of their schedule, with a much easier second half. The random nature of the IBL schedule led to some curious trends, such as the fact that some teams hadn’t played one another in nearly 90 years because they didn’t get randomly paired during the schedule creation process, and other trends where two teams seemed to *always* get

paired any time their divisions came up in the rotation. The last four games of the season were always division games, but the rest of the schedule was more or less randomly created. That gave the end of the season a whole lot of importance, since division games determined who went to the playoffs.

The Paladins were in Division VIII, and this year they were scheduled to play four teams each from Division II and Division III. Their five random draws were the Draconis Immortals who were division champion of Division I, the IBL championship game runner-up Joliki Berserkers in Division IV, the Terra Warriors, which were in Division I and had been the only easy team in the draw, the 3<sup>rd</sup> place Makan Destroyers from Division VII, and their final draw had been none other than the current IBL champions, the Karvectos Blades from Division VI.

*Oh, we'll be playing them next year in the playoffs, and we'll beat 'em. Assuming they can get out of the division bracket,* Jyslin sent grandly. *The Paladins are 13-4 lifetime against the Tigers. History's on our side, you know.*

*So much swagger from an expansion team,* Yila retorted.

*We were an expansion team 43 years ago,* Jyslin shot back.

*Still the last team to enter the IBL, so you're an expansion doormat until you prove you're not,* Yila countered, smiling in a slightly ominous manner.

*You wanna make a little wager on that, Yila?* Jyslin sent immediately. *Say, on just whose team is going to reach the IBL championship game first?*

*You've never been there.*

*And your team hasn't been there since you took over your house,* Jyslin dug right back. *The Tigers can't get past the quarterfinals. We don't have that jinx on our team.*

Yila gave her a dirty look. *And just what kind of bet are you considering?*

*If we get to the championship first, you hand over 7% of your ownership of the Paladins, and you give up an equal 7% of all the profit-sharing agreements. If the Tigers do, we give you 14% more of all the profits. I'd offer you share ownership, but IBL rules won't let us go under 51%. Frinia's 10% won't let me do it.*

*You're serious, Yila realized.*

*Well, Yila? You got the guts?* Jyslin sent challengingly.

Yila looked torn a moment. She thought quickly on her feet most of the time, but she wasn't a *gambler*. She was the type that thoroughly analyzed a situation before making a move, though her decisions almost always came quickly. But pure gambling, betting on a sports event, that wasn't Yila's style, and especially not with such high stakes. *On one condition*, she sent. *The bet's only good for five years. If neither of us makes it to the championship game in five years, the bet's off.*

*Done*, Jyslin sent instantly. *We have a wager, Yila*, she added with an eager smile.

*And what brought this on?* Jason asked privately.

*Motivation to make it to the championship game*, she replied with a sly look.

*Like you need any more.*

*She thinks we'll never get there. Ha!* Jyslin sent privately to him, her thought smug. *I wouldn't have made the bet if I didn't think we could do it.*

*If you lose, that comes out of your allowance*, Jason threatened, which made her grin at him. He opened his sending and looked back to Yila. *I noticed that you finally showed your two little secrets to the Siann*, Jason noted dryly.

Yila laughed, touching a finger to the bone white pictoform on her inner hip. *They all knew I had them, so I decided why bother hiding them?* she grinned at him. *At least now I can go bottomless, which I much prefer. Maybe I'll start a trend...or maybe Saelle will. She has a huge jaingi on her back.*

*I've seen it before, and it looks lovely on her.*

*Exactly. Saelle's mey has started quite a few conversations in court.*

*Court, pfft*, Jason snorted aloud, which made Jyslin grin. *That's the one thing I'm glad I managed to free myself of. I hate court.*

*But we miss you, Jason, Yila grinned. You were the only man in our little clique, so now the only hunky guys we can look at are the husbands and invited noble men and the servants...but it's not the same. Several of the Grand Duchesses would never admit it, but the idea of a handsome man that happens to have a lot of real power really turns them on. There's still quite a pack of Grand Duchess in the Siann that would wrap their legs around you in a heartbeat, Jayce, she sent with a wicked tilt to her thought.*

*I did not need to hear that, Jason sent blandly.*

*Oh come on now, don't be modest, Yila teased a little. You know you'd enjoy a few interludes in the dressing rooms with a few of the Grand Duchesses.*

*There are some really sexy Grand Duchesses, I'm not gonna lie about that, but I have everything I need at home, he answered easily. And that reminds me, I need to call Zora and warn her we'll need to reschedule our date.*

*So she's been popping your cork since Jyslin's nearly in the window?*

*Who says I can't keep him happy? Jyslin grinned. But this does...limit our options a little, she added with an audible laugh, patting her bare, very pregnant belly.*

*What, down to blowjobs and doggy style? Yila asked crudely.*

*More or less, Jyslin grinned. Jason has to fish the strip if he wants a little more variety. And the squad girls keep him defused enough. You know how men get when they're not getting enough, she sent teasingly, giving Jason a sly look out of the corner of her eye.*

*Let's not start listing gender faults, cause there are enough female faults to fill an entire archive datastore, he sent in a chippy manner. And as a man, remember that I can drop both of you anytime I please. There are plenty of other girls out there.*

*And when did we become an item, Jayce? Yila asked lightly. I know you think I have a sexy ass, but I didn't think you wanted to do more than look at it.*

*Don't flatter yourself, Yila, Jason sent as offensively as possible, but it just made her laugh.*

Cybi manifested her hologram directly in front of Jason's lounge. "Jason, Jyslin, you should prepare to leave," she said in a happy voice.

"What's up, Cybi?"

*"If my scans are correct, Symone will be entering labor in a few hours. Her biosigns are indicating that her water is about to break. I calculate a 92.3% chance she'll be entering labor within four hours."*

Jason laughed and sat up. "Now that's good news!" he declared. "You told Symone yet?"

*"Not yet,"* she replied. *"I didn't want to get her hopes up until I got more detailed scans. I got them when she entered the nursery, there are much more sensitive sensors there. I'm about to warn Songa."*

"Yeah, go ahead. We'll take Symone to the annex and see one way or the other, but odds are we'll be staying there for a while to greet our new stepdaughter," Jason said, then looked to Jyslin. "And now you're gonna be last."

She laughed. "That's *your* fault, not mine!" she retorted. "If you were more of a man, you'd have gotten me pregnant *first*!"

"I *did*," he retorted. "Or does Rann suddenly not count anymore?"

She laughed helplessly. "Yeah, yeah, we're not talking about the *last* pregnancy. We're clearly talking about what you've done for me lately."

"Someone wants me to take her IBL team away," Jason threatened.

"You wouldn't *dare*!"

"Try me," he said calmly.

"I'd say you're losing this argument, Jys," Yila injected from her lounge.

"Don't take a man's side against another woman, Yila!" Jyslin said in mock outrage. "That's against the Woman Code!"

"And that's why men are clearly superior. We don't need to collude with other men to win," Jason said grandly as he got up.

"Keep talking, buster," Jyslin warned.

“I’m the Grand Duke. I can talk all I want,” he said with a great deal of arrogance in his voice, but he danced forward with a laugh when Jyslin tried to smack him on his bare butt. “And since all you can do is waddle after me, I can be as sassy as I want until the twins are born. You can’t catch me,” he added as he headed for the door into Dahnai’s luxurious mansion... a little faster than he’d usually walk, given Jyslin’s stare followed him towards the door.



# Chapter 9

*Koira, 1 Hiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 8 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 1 Hiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis*

Raisha proved the exception rather than the rule.

Duchess Lyra Melissa McGee Ayalle Karinne yawned before promptly falling back asleep, which she did with quite the audience watching her. Jason, Jyslin, Tim, Dahnai, and Kellin crowded around her crib with Symone sleeping just beside it, recovering from what for her had been a very long and very unpleasant labor. Lyra had Tim's bronzed skin, had Symone's lovely face, and what seemed a constant for Faey-Terran kids, had a Faey's pointed ears. But Tim and Symone had to make sure their child was different from all the others, and that was with Lyra's hair. Her hair was the most curious shade of light aqua, and her eyes were a shimmering, brilliant golden-amber color, which made her *very* striking. Her eyes reminded Jason of Palla, so they weren't unique, but he had never seen that shade of light aqua on *any* Faey before. Sure, he'd seen aqua, but never that specific shade of it. Lyra's striking eyes were closed at the moment, and she was settling into a nice sleep after what for her was a pretty eventful day.

*Why do you pronounce her name Laira when you had it spelled Lyra on the birth document?* Dahnai asked. *That's not how it should be spelled, unless her name was Lyva.*

*Because it's an English name, not a Faey name, so I'm pronouncing it the proper English way,* Tim replied. *I went with the closest Faey spelling of the name.*

*You realize that every single Faey that can read English that reads her name is going to pronounce it Lira.*

*And when she corrects them, they'll never forget her name,* Tim replied with a grin. *I'm not the only one that gave my kid a different name. After all, look at Myleena. It should be pronounced My-lehh-na, but she pronounces it like it's spelled Myliina.*

*That's an old grammatical quirk in Faey, it goes back into antiquity,* Dahnai retorted. *Any Faey that has basic education knows that old exception to the rule, that the e sound turns into an i sound if the vowel is doubled. It's just an alternate spelling of the ii sound, usually used when it follows an L or R sound. Every language has those little quirks in it. Don't get me started on how many fuckin' contradictions there are in how you spell words in English.*

*Well, I'm setting a new trend then. Maybe it'll catch on,* Tim countered.

*Dahnai rolled her eyes, which made Jyslin giggle. I hope that you're spelling the twins' names so they won't endure a lifetime of being mispronounced?*

*Of course. Bethany may be a Terran name, but I convinced Jayce to use the Faey spelling when it's written in Faey. English is almost silly. A vowel can have four or five different pronunciations, and each one has a different meaning.*

*That's because you never bothered to learn how to tell when to use short vowels or long vowels,* Jason retorted. *People who speak English have no problem telling them apart, so the problem is you, not English.*

*A limited species shows its limitations with its limited language,* Dahnai teased.

*English makes you think. Faey caters to brain-dead holo addicts who wanted the simplest, laziest language that could possibly be created.*

*Hey now, you're getting into dangerous territory, baby,* Dahnai threatened with a slight smile.

*The truth hurts, I know,* Jason drawled mentally, which earned him another swat. *When are we heading back to Dracora for the cleansing ceremony?*

*I'm supposed to be there right now, but I wasn't gonna miss this, she replied with a smile, looking down at Lyra. That's my god-daughter down there, after all. I told them to reschedule for 16:00, that gives me a good three hours to get home, get dressed, and relax a bit before the ceremony. I'm the Empress, I can get away with it.*

*Templars aren't afraid of you, Dahnai, Jason warned with a slight smile.*

*Don't remind me. But we do have to get there. It's about an hour back to Dracora once I get on the transport. Seriously, could you have put the Stargate a little closer?*

*It's where it is for a reason, Jason replied. Besides, why are you bitching? It's the closest Stargate to Karsa.*

*Yeah, speaking of Stargates, we're gonna talk about those other Stargates you have in orbit, Dahnai sent soberly. Like where they go and what's on the other side.*

*I'm so glad you think so, Jason retorted. We're independent now. What's on the other side of those gates is none of your damn business.*

*Dahnai and Jason shared a short, direct stare, until Kellin nudged her. Let's not start a fight over Lyra's crib, he sent sternly. And we do need to go, love. You can congratulate Symone when we get back. She looks totally wiped out.*

*Fourteen hours of labor can do that to a girl, Jyslin noted, compassion rippling through her thought.*

*I'm going to wait for her to wake up as long as I can, Jason said. If she doesn't, I'll be there in time for the ceremony to start. If not, I'll be there a little early.*

*Don't be late, Dahnai warned.*

*I won't be.*

Tim and Jyslin stayed with Symone, and Jason escorted Dahnai and Kellin out into the waiting room. All the kids, Saelle, and Evin were waiting there with the guards, having already visited Symone and seen Lyra. *Alright, guys, let's get ready to go, Dahnai sent across the waiting*

room. *Captain, we'll be heading straight to the palace for the ceremony,* she told the captain of her guard detachment.

*We have your skimmer ready for departure, your Majesty,* the guard answered. *Come along Princess Sirri, Prince Maer. Let's go.*

*I don't think we're coming straight back,* Dahnai told Jason. *The ceremony doesn't take that long, but we're all pretty tired, so we'll probably get some rest before coming back. I'll be back for dinner.*

*I am coming back, and odds are we'll be back home on the strip. Songa will release Symone sometime today, and she probably won't want to travel to the summer palace.*

*Of course she won't. I'll send my chefs—*

*Chefs? Ayama would murder them the instant they set foot in her kitchen,* Jason interrupted, which made Dahnai laugh.

*Probably. But that's a lot of people to cook for.*

*If she wants help, she'll ask for it. I learned long ago that you don't go messing in Ayama's business. She has very nasty ways of making her displeasure known.*

*She runs that house with an iron fist, doesn't she?* Dahnai grinned.

*It's her house, we just live in it,* Jason sent dryly, which made her laugh.

Dahnai left with her little entourage of kids, fosters, and guards, and Jason returned to the recovery room and sat nearby as Symone slept, just being nearby, while his kids and Danelle stayed in the waiting room so they could do homework and play some games without risking waking Symone up. She'd had a long and rough labor but a smooth delivery, and Songa had already said that she'd be discharged to return home as soon as she woke up. While Tim and Jyslin talked about the first couple of weeks of being a parent and what Tim should expect, Jason decided to at least get a little paperwork done...and realized that he'd been taking these "paperwork time outs" more and more lately. Probably because he hadn't spent much time in his office since Dahnai came to have her two month-long maternity in her summer palace. That was tradition for the Empress, to spend two months on vacation after giving birth so she could rest, recover, spend some time with her newborns before handing them off to the fosters, and do a lot of the

ceremonial crap that came with brand new High Princesses. There'd be even more ceremonial crap if it was the Crown Princess. She'd be here until the end of Toraa, and that meant that she'd be taking up a lot of Jason's time. He wasn't going to spend all that time at her palace, but she certainly *thought* that he was. He'd been staying over there since she arrived, but he'd be returning home in a couple of days and just commuting back and forth about once a day to go spend time with her.

She *was* his *amu dorai*, and he did honestly want to spend time with her while she was here. He didn't get to spend time with her a fraction as much as he wanted to. But he also had a house to run, and the stark reality of paperwork trumped his desire to hang out with Dahnai.

And there were actual things going on now, not just watching and listening and waiting. The RK empires were reacting much the way Cybi predicted, with worry, fear, and also a little curiosity, now that they had probes out there picking up their burst communication and Cybi could understand their language. She wasn't eavesdropping on their encrypted military and government transmissions, but their entertainment transmissions were abuzz with the arrival of the "aliens" from a distance so vast that most of the lay citizens almost didn't believe it. Images of the battleships had reached their news outlets as well, depending on the liberties of the empire. The Hrathrari were an oppressive dictatorship, Cybi had managed to learn, so the information filtered down to the common citizen was very sparse and heavily censored, and mostly propaganda anyway. Jason hadn't heard anything back from Yeri yet as to if any of them were planning on attending the summit, but they'd better decide soon. RJ-44 was on the far side of the RJ sector from the RK sector, and that was a whole lot of travel time for empires that had a relativity delay in hyperspace. It was 8 days of hyperspace travel from the center of the RK sector to RJ-44 using those ingenious jump catapults, which meant that they'd have to decide soon if they were attending and jump their ships to RJ-44. The Birkons, the most distant of the empires, were looking at a 14.3 day jump with a catapult boost and were looking at a nearly 50-day return trip...which they wouldn't be taking. A KMS cruiser could tow a Birkon battle cruiser, and Jason would offer to get them all back home via tow in real time.

More detailed analysis of the RK sector painted a very interesting picture. First off, those six nations were *big*. The smallest of them, the Druvom Empire, numbered 170 star systems *just in the RK sector*. They had some 120 more systems in the outlying RKA, RLA, and RL sectors, which made them nearly three times as big as the Imperium...and that was the *smallest* of the six. There were quite a few more viable terrestrial systems in the RK sector than in the home sector, and with only six empires there to claim them, it allowed the six empires to reach sizes that dwarfed the empires of the Confederation in territory and size...but not in technology. Even the tiny Confederate empires like the Shio could give an RK empire a run for its money with its superior technology. They were huge empires with lots of military assets, which had belied the fact that only 10 warships were at RK-02 when they arrived. The Keelo didn't keep much presence there since it was as far from Hrathrari territory as a Keelo system could get, so they felt relatively safe leaving only light defense there.

That made sense once more intelligence came in. None of the empires there had any kind of stealth technology, and all six had sufficiently advanced scanner systems that let them see invading battle fleets coming. The catapults let them get defenses to an imperiled star system before the invaders arrived, at least in the core systems. Within the core systems, they also had substantial defenses around their planets and stations, with orbital batteries, military warships, ground batteries, and orbital stations representing significant defensive firepower to deter invasion. Most of the warring empires' militaries were in the outlying sectors, however, defending what they had and trying to capture other systems from their enemies. Because they could see it coming in the core sector, they didn't need to stack their defenses within the core sector, they instead used those assets to attack the lesser defended colonized systems in the outlying sectors.

The situation reminded Jason of the New World Colonial era of Terra, back when the colonizing powers—France, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, and Portugal—fought wars in the colonized territory and on the seas without ever firing a shot at each other in their home territory. They were almost wars by proxy, fought on foreign land for control of that foreign land. These RK empires were doing the same thing. The Keelo-Hrathrari and Druvom-Birkon conflicts were being fought out in

the hinterlands, far away from the “civilized” core sector, where armies and navies clashed over control of colonized star systems and never tried to invade the enemy’s established core sector territory.

More detailed information about the six empires was also being gathered. The Keelo was a representative Republic like the Skaa Republic, the Jun, and the Grimja. The Hrathrari was a military dictatorship, and a fairly oppressive one at that, reminding Jason of North Korea. The closest Confederate comparison was the Jobodi, but Field Marshal Grran was by *no means* an oppressive dictator. He was actually very popular and highly respected in the Jobodi Empire. The two alliance-based governments were both council systems like the Alliance, the Colonists, and the Kirri, where council members were selected to represent the interests of the empire. The Birkons were an autocratic empire like the Imperium, the Collective, the Verutans, and the Skaa Empire, but the Birkon Emperor seemed to be very popular among his people, and he wasn’t oppressive. The Druvoms were a religious autocracy where the high priest of their religion held power, something like the Haumda but not quite. Gau was considered the High Archon of their religion, but the Haumda were simply a very religious people whose faith intertwined into every aspect of their daily life and government. The church of the Druvom *ruled* the Druvom, cutting out the middlemen and the figureheads and doing so directly.

That was what was going on over in the RK sector. Krirara had sent him a message stating she’d swayed another council member over to her side, and only had to convince one more to get the council to vote on joining the Confederation. That, Jason very much wanted to see. There was still no word from the Farguut or the Morbods as to if they were interested in joining the Confederation, which Jason also wanted to see. They were very large empires, each one with about 60 systems, and if they joined, then it would be every major empire in the Grimja sector in the Confederation. There were six other smaller empires on the far side of the sector, but they were about the size of the Colonies, each with about a dozen systems. The Farguut and the Morbods were *major* empires, as things were measured in the Grimja sector.

That wasn’t the only thing he was keeping an eye on. The Rakarri had taken another step towards unification in that the council of kings on the largest continent was now trying to organize a council of kings from *every*

continent, forming their own style of United Nations. If they pulled that off, that body *could* negotiate with the Imperium and the Karinnes under Jason's requirements for extended contact. It was slow going for them, since they had to sail ships across the sea and spread the word with messengers, but they seemed quite serious about it.

On the other side of the sector cluster, down in the B ring, the Confederation was starting to get some attention as well. The B ring empires were much more distant than those in the Aridai sector, but not as distant as the Rathii and Kirri from the Rath sector, so they didn't have quite as much interest in what was going on. They were empires as large as the Imperium and larger, as old as the Imperium or older, and much more established and less concerned about the happenings up in the A ring. There were some 63 different empires in the three interior sectors of the cluster, most of them about the size of the Alliance, and occupying every single terrestrial system in the sectors, as well as quite a few very hostile systems where they used gigantic orbital stations similar to the one at Raxxad. Several of the larger empires in those sectors were professing some interest in joining the Confederation, which Jason suspected was because of three things; the Confederation seemed to be working, those empires abutted the middle sectors and were thus within reasonable range of Confederate warships, and the Confederate empires were gaining power *fast* by helping one another. Much as Cybi had said of the RK empires, Jason had the feeling that the larger B ring empires were considering joining the Confederation if only to have them as allies instead of potential enemies. And there were some *big* empires over there. The Sha'i-ree was an empire of 201 systems, more than twice the size of the Imperium, but they were very peaceful. Over in the next sector, the Kouï was similarly very large, some 183 systems, but not many other empires liked them all that much because they were so...weird.

They were humanoids, although not all that attractive to Faey, Terrans, and Shio, but they'd taken the concept of cybernetic enhancement to the extreme. There was virtually no Kouï that had his or her natural eyes, arms, and legs anymore. They replaced what they could from their bodies with cybernetic implants, reminding Jason of the Borg from the old *Star Trek* TV show, but the Kouï weren't aggressive like the Borg were, and their cybernetic implants weren't garishly *mechanical*, they were instead



patterned after natural limbs while looking obviously cybernetic. One couldn't meet an adult Kouï with natural eyes, ears, or limbs, and they also had cybernetic implants in their bodies that did things like filter toxins and poisons, increase lung efficiency, bone implants that made their bones almost impossible to break, and other such things. They simply saw replacing the natural with the cybernetic to be a quality of life issue, to extend life and create a more pleasant life experience, one devoid of failing organs and weakening bodies as they aged. Over time, that outlook caused them to admire the beauty of the machine, but only when the machine was patterned after the living part it replaced. Most Kouï worked to afford better cybernetics, which they felt made them *better*. It was the Faey vanity taken in an entirely different direction, and just as powerful. Kouï who didn't have shiny cybernetics were seen as poor and lower class, so the average Kouï wanted obvious cybernetics that didn't look *ridiculous*, making their prosthetics to enhance what they saw as beautiful, which was elegant and sleek. They were like the Faey in that regard. Cyberlimbs were made of chrome-like metal, cybereyes were obvious, and they often had implants in their flesh that were purely ornamental, getting a stylish dermal implant the way a Terran might get a tattoo, or a Faey might pierce her ears—which was the only widely acceptable form of body alteration in mainstream Faey culture. Faey like Yila and Saelle were definitely outside the norm, though the opinion of *jaingi* was starting to change in the Imperium.

As a result, the Kouï were just a tiny step behind the Imperium when it came to cybernetic technology and had been as eager as the Moridon to get their hands on cyberjack technology. The Kouï had also been researching direct brain-machine interface but lacked the medical expertise to wire a machine up to the brain directly without causing irreparable brain damage. They did it like the Faey did it, connecting machines to nerve endings outside the brain, they were just much better at it than most other empires.

More and more, things just kept seeming to get bigger and bigger. The galaxy was starting to open up, to the Karinnes and to the Confederation, and in more than one way. More empires were starting to consider the Confederation. The Karinnes were encountering distant empires in far-flung parts of the galaxy. There were now 83 unique empires comprised of 133 intelligent species with students in the Academy, four new empires sending students just over the last two months, as more and more distant empires

sent their scientists and students there to learn, returning the Academy to what it was in the age of the old Karinnes. Those participants represented the inhabitants of 11 different sectors—12 if the first of the Imxi students were counted, being sent by their new overlords to learn Confederate-level technology.

12 sectors...out of some 25,601 in the galaxy.

It reminded Jason of just how *big* the galaxy really was, and how small the Karinnes were in relation to it.

But that was out there. There was plenty enough going on just on Karis to keep his inbox from getting too empty. Reports from his cabinet, direct reports from important people, status reports from Dellin and cryptic “all is well” reports from 3D, Jason worked through the top of the stack, at least until he got word from the Hive leaders on Kirga that they’d be happy to come over and look at his administrative office and see if they couldn’t streamline things to help take so much of the burden off of him but also allow him to keep up with what was going on. Jason did delegate authority and trusted those to whom he gave authority, but he also liked to know what was going on, what was *really* going on, so he was never surprised. Getting to the truth of things was probably the most important aspect of Brall’s job, for Brall was the man that went out there and *looked*, asked questions on the ground and on site, then reported back his honest observations to Jason. In that respect, Brall was even more important than Chirk in keeping Jason well informed.

*Nobody* on Karis traveled more or knew more about what was going on than Brall.

Work was put on the back burner, however, when Symone gave a little sigh and stirred. He was up and at her bedside in a heartbeat, smiling down at her as she opened her eyes, Tim and Jyslin holding her hands. “It’s about time,” Jason said gently. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah,” she replied, then she gave a yawn. “Still dead tired, though. The meds Songa has me on are pretty good, I don’t feel any pain at all.”

“You probably won’t need them after tomorrow,” Jyslin told her. “I was sore for a few days after delivering Rann, but it wasn’t all that bad.”

“You certainly complained enough,” Jason teased.

“That was to annoy you,” she replied, giving him a dirty look.

“Okay guys, lemme up. I woke up to go to the bathroom, and you’re keeping me from the toilet,” she said with a playful smile.

Tim laughed and helped her sit up. “Alright. Feel like walking or you want a hoverchair?”

“I can walk to the bathroom, baby,” she said, a touch tartly, gingerly swinging her legs out from the bed.

After tending her business, she paused to admire Lyra a moment, smiling down at her with pure love glowing in her beautiful eyes. She looked almost reluctant, reaching down as if to touch her newborn daughter, but pulled her hand back. *I’ll let her sleep. Trelle knows, I’ll be begging her to sleep in a few days.*

*Enjoy it while you can,* Jyslin grinned.

*When can we go home?*

*Songa said whenever you woke up and felt ready,* Tim replied.

*Okay. Lemme talk to Songa and see if now isn’t too soon.*

*Sounds like a plan,* he nodded, helping Symone back into bed.

*Dahnai left to go to that ceremony?*

*Yeah, she has to do a lot more preparing than me, so she had to leave early. She said she’d be back in time for dinner tonight, on the strip. I told her you weren’t going to want to go to her palace.*

*Yup. I want Lyra to spend the first couple of days home at home, not in a skimmer flying back and forth between home and Dahnai’s place.*

*But now that you’re awake and I’m sure you’re gonna be okay, I have to go too,* Jason told her, patting her leg.

*I know, baby,* Symone nodded. *I should be home by the time you get back.*

*It won’t be that long. I’m not hanging around over there. As soon as the ceremony’s over, I’ll be on the way back. Dahnai’s going to stay over at her palace for a bit to rest and catch up on some paperwork.*

*Okay, baby. See you back home.*

*See you soon, hon,* he said, supplanting Tim and kissing her.

Jason took a corvette up to the newly commissioned battleship *Yorktown*, which was going to take him to Draconis, and set up in the visitor's lounge just off the main landing bay. Ryn and Shen helped him into his formal robes as the new battleship headed for the Draconis Stargate, along with the ship's captain, Samantha Kerry. She was one of the veteran warhorse Terrans who had been military before coming to the house, and like Justin, Samantha—or Sammy to her friends—was a telepath. She was a surprisingly fit and highly capable 55 year old woman who had been a cargo pilot in the American Navy before the subjugation, came to the house with the other Terran telepaths, then worked her way up from the tactical position on a destroyer all the way to the chair of a battleship. She'd transferred over from a heavy cruiser and opted to bring the name of her old ship along with her. Her father had served on the American carrier *Yorktown* in World War II, and she'd wanted to honor the name by bringing it to the KMS. *So, how's the chair, Sammy?* Jason asked as Shen helped him into his inner robe.

*It's just a bigger ship, that's all, Jayce,* she replied easily. *I like it well enough, but I also miss my cruiser a little bit.*

*Buyer's remorse already?*

*Of course not,* she chuckled aloud. *But when you command a ship long enough, you get...attached to it a little bit. Look at Sevi. What did you have to do to get her off the original Arabax?*

Jason laughed. *Something I won't repeat in polite company,* he replied with a dry nuance to his thought.

*We've been hearing rumors that they're designing a new class of battleship,* she noted as the ship turned a little and accelerated.

*They aren't rumors,* he replied. *The boys over at naval engineering are designing the Mark II Battleship as we speak. It's about 35% larger than this ship and carries additional weaponry. We're designing them for one specific reason.*

*Death Star killers?*

Jason nodded grimly. *That's what they're being built to do, take out those fucking death star ships the Syndicate uses. They're too small for a GRAF cannon, but the guys over at 3D have developed two new weapons that both pack a tremendous punch. Actually, they developed one of them last year, but we've never had a ship that it was practical to put on it, at least until now. That's what we're putting on the Mark II. They're designing it to mount this particular weapon.*

*What kind of weapons?*

*The first is a variation of a pulse cannon that fires a much more powerful Teryon bundle that's far more stable. The pulse only has a .03% destabilization ratio in transit and the ratio goes up to only 4.8% when it strikes a solid object. That gives the cannon the longest range of any pulse weapon we have. If the pulse doesn't hit anything, it'll travel nearly 4700 kathra before it finally destabilizes and the Teryon energy escapes back into hyperspace. But, since it's not a rail cannon, it means that the pulse bundle actually travels and that'll make aiming at things at extreme range a real trick. A ratio like that means that once it makes contact with a solid object, the pulse travels just over two kathras before detonating. That's two kathras deep into a ship, Sammy. That'll let it go halfway through the Aegis when hit in the bow before it explodes, and it explodes with nearly three times the power of a standard heavy pulse blast. It was designed so the pulse's stability can be changed by the gunner to give it more or less penetrating power, so the cannons can be brought to bear against smaller ships, but the weapon's primary function is to take out capitol size ships or bigger. That should let it do substantial damage to the core systems we figure are kept deep inside one of the Syndicate's death star ships. We originally designed it to mount on our own capitol ships to take out other capitol ships, but we found that it was actually better to mount a GRAF cannon on our own capitol ships for that, so this weapon's been sitting on the shelf for over a year. Well, we pulled it off the shelf when the command staff ordered the new battleship designed. The downside it is that this pulse cannon variant takes an absolute fuckton of additional power to use, and the cannon itself is an absolute beast. It's half the size of a GRAF cannon. It's so big we can only mount two onto a Mark II.*

*Fuck, that is big, Sammy agreed. I hope it fires faster than the GRAF.*

*It does, he nodded. It can fire once every two seconds, and they can't fire both cannons at the same time else it drains too much of the ship's power, so the system is being designed to fire the two cannons in a rotating cycle. Four or five Mark II battleships in a formation should help our forces take out those death star ships much more easily. We can't have a capitol ship everywhere to face off against them. We're only going to have five or six capitol ships by the time the Syndicate gets here, depending on how fast Dellin can get them built.*

*What's the other weapon?*

*It's a very special kind of rail cannon that fires a rail shell comprised of a stable Teryon core encased in layered iron and titanium, he answered. It does the same thing as the super-heavy pulse cannon, but it does it in a different way. What it does is basically fire a pulse blast at the speed of a rail cannon. The Teryon core of the shell explodes instantly on being fired and escapes back into hyperspace in a matter of microseconds, but it still travels a few thousand kathra before it dissipates because it's being fired at relativistic speed. And because the Teryon blast is already exploding on firing, it creates a cone of Teryon energy behind the wake point of the rail trajectory that expands as the blast moves forward. So, it's only six shakra wide at the barrel of the rail cannon, but at its terminus, the Teryon blast is nearly 120 shakra wide.*

*Holy shit, seriously?*

*Jason nodded. It has a range of 1,670 kathra, so it's not a true long-range weapon like a standard rail cannon is, but anything in the blast cone when it fires is disintegrated. In close quarters, it'll be brutal, but its optimum range is about 1,500 kathra, when the cone effect of the blast is really wide and it can do some major damage. The cone effect can go completely through a death-star sized ship if the cannon is fired from very close range, but it doesn't explode. But still, a hole completely through a ship will no doubt cause extensive damage, especially if that hole is sixty or seventy shakra wide, he sent dryly. We tested this with a fighter-mounted rail cannon variant, our original prototype before we upscaled, and the fighter destroyed a Consortium cruiser with one shot. The weapon shows a lot of promise, but it's got a few bugs we're still working out. We're gonna go ahead and install eight of these special rail cannons on the Mark II*

*battleship then just upgrade and refit once we have a fully operational and bug-free system.*

*What kind of bugs?*

*Well, for one, the cannon can't be aimed. The recoil makes it like a GRAF cannon, the cannon is hard mounted directly into the superstructure of the ship to absorb the recoil, and it has to be aimed by moving the ship instead of the cannon. That limits its utility a little in short-range high maneuverability scenarios, but that's not what the weapon was designed for, so we consider it a fair trade. For another, it tends to blow up the rail cannon that fires the slug, he told her with an audible grunt. The Teryon blast's energy wake feeds back into the magnetic catapult system that fires the shell and overloads it, and so far, we haven't been able to work around it. We've been trying to find some way to create a Teryon shell that delays its explosion until after it clears the barrel, but so far, no luck. The acceleration of the slug ruptures the containment bubble no matter how we try to set it. The rail cannon itself is a different kind of cannon. It's about ten times bigger than a standard cannon due to the shell it has to fire, and it sucks up a truly obscene amount of power. It'll drain as much power as the next-gen pulse cannons will. All that power is just to fire the slug at the same speed as a normal slug. The Teryon core resists being catapulted because of its containment system, the magnetic flux field interferes with the magnetic coils that fire the shell. Because of that, the rail cannon's gonna have to use the same power system as the next-gen pulse cannon, and they won't be able to be fired at the same time. The captain will have to decide which weapon to use based on the situation.*

*And you had this on a fighter? How did it power it?*

*The smaller shell didn't take as much power by proportion, but it still nearly blew out the Wolf's power system when it was used, he answered. The original design almost blew up the fighter. We tried using the original design and just put it on a line vessel, but after we did more testing, we found out that it was only by a miracle that the original prototypes didn't blow up those fighters. It was because they fired them in the nebula. The gravity field and EM fields in the nebula dampened the blowback effect on the cannons after they fired the shells. When used anywhere else but a nebula or in a planet's gravity well, the cannons just blow up when we try to*

*fire them, and we didn't figure that out because we tested it in a gravity well instead of in deep space. So, we had to completely redesign the entire thing to make it viable. What we got after the redesign doesn't have the same range as the prototype, but it's far more stable, he told her. It's not a threat to the ship, only to the cannon itself. That was a fair trade-off to get a viable system that can still do insane damage at short range.*

*Sounds like the original version might be a useful ground battery system, Sammy noted.*

*Not quite. When fired from the ground into space, the wake of the shot blows a whole lot of atmosphere out into space, he noted dryly. What Myli's looking into is using it as a low-orbital weapons platform just outside the atmosphere. When fired from outside the atmosphere but deep in the planet's gravity well, it's stable enough to actually fire. It still blows up the cannon and the orbital platform it's on, but we don't see that as necessarily crippling. Fighter-mount rail cannons aren't very hard to make, and they're fairly cheap. Our idea is to adapt the original design as a disposable one-shot weapon system that has a range of around 3,000 kathra. That should scare the fuck out of anything closing on a Karinne planet, Jason sent darkly, which made Sammy laugh. The guys over at 3D were banging their head against that wall for about five months, first trying to figure out why the prototype wouldn't work in our deep space tests. But it has major promise if we can work out the bugs. It's a one shot one kill weapon that has decent range. If we could only get it to work without having to replace the rail cannon after every shot, he sent wryly.*

*Make disposable barrels, swap them out after every shot, Sammy replied evenly. If the slug is burning out the magnetic catapult system, just make barrels that you can replace after it fires. Install some hard breakers between the barrel and the gun so it disconnects after charging, move the charging system into the barrel rather than the cannon mount unit, and bingo. Fire, replace barrel, load, fire. Or even better, just preload the slug in the barrel so it's a single unit. Fire, swap barrel, fire, and so on and so on.*

*That's actually not a bad idea, Sammy. I'll pass that along to Myleena and she'll take a look at it. It just might do as a temporary fix, until we solve the problem.*



Sammy scratched her chin in thought. *I see where you're going with it. The new pulse cannon will be for combat at any range and in evasive maneuver situations, but this new rail cannon will be especially devastating in short-range scenarios. It'll be the artillery the fleet fires as the enemy closes to range, softening them up.*

*That's the way we're designing it,* he nodded. *After feeling that bite a few times, the Syndicate might not come with 3,000 kathra of any of our Mark II battleships.*

*What other kind of weaponry will this Mark II carry?*

*The usual, just more of them,* Jason answered as Ryn tied the chest ties of his inner robe and Shen shook out his outer robe, getting it ready. *It'll carry six particle beam projectors, multiple standard pulse and rail batteries, plasma torpedo launchers, and it'll have enough internal bay space to carry a squadron of 40 Wolf fighters and a company of 40 Gladiators. Most of the extra space in the Mark II is going to be eaten up by the new heavy pulse cannons and the power plants to fuel them. The ship is just small enough for a shockwave generator. That was the maximum size they could go. And it has some pretty rugged shields, since they can pull directly off the cannon plants to back up the shield generators if they need to, the same way the capitol ships can draw directly off the GRAF power plants. That'll give it some pretty hefty defenses.*

*Sounds like I accepted a battleship too quickly,* Sammy grinned.

Jason laughed as he shrugged into his outer robe, and Shen started tying it together in front. *We might not see the new Mark II for a year, dink. It hasn't even been fully designed yet, and Dellin estimates it'll take about four months to build the first one.*

*Really? They created that frigate pretty fast.*

*It was already designed, they just shelved the project,* he told her. *All they had to do was tweak the original plans a bit to accept some new upgrades and then build it.*

*Ohhh, okay. How does it look?*

*The frigate? No problems so far, and it's almost done with its shakedown. If the post-shakedown inspection pans out, I'll add them to the*

*fleet. They're pretty nasty little ships, but I wouldn't suggest serving on one unless you're a Beryan or a Makati.*

*Cramped?*

*Oh yeah,* he nodded as Shen wrapped the sash around his waist three times, then tied it off. She tugged on it a bit to get it just so, so the tails of the sash hung properly, then she adjusted the lapels of his outer robe so they laid flat. *You about done trussing me up, girls?*

*We can tie things tighter, your Grace,* Shen sent lightly.

*No thanks, these robes keep reminding me that I need to lose some weight,* he grunted, pulling a little on the sleeve. Unlike most male formal robes, Jason had sleeves of equal length, and his sleeves nearly covered his hands. That was mainly so he couldn't *accidentally* make skin to skin contact with any of the Grand Duchesses of the *Siann*. He had little straps in his sleeves that he could grab hold of to pull his hands fully into his sleeves, which he often did by tucking his hands into the opposite sleeves in front of him. Since the robes had no pockets, it gave him something to do with his hands.

*You're all done, your Grace,* Shen declared, patting his shoulders and smoothing out the material.

*That's much faster than I can ever do it,* Jason sent wryly as he turned and looked at himself in a holographic mirror, admiring his reflection. The robes didn't look half bad, even if the blue of his robes always seemed to clash with the red sash...but the red sash was an ancient tradition of the *Siann*, so he was more or less stuck with it. The red marked him as a married man, and he'd never dishonor Jyslin by wearing the blue sash, which would go with his blue robes, but also would mark him as unmarried. A purple sash denoted a widow, and the white sash was the exclusive sash of the Imperial family, white being the *royal color*. It was why the Imperial Guard wore white armor, and only Imperial servants could wear white inside the palace. Dahnai and her family could wear any color robes they pleased, but the white sash told everyone that whoever was wearing it was in the Imperial family. The only other color sash that could be worn was the yellow sash, and *only* Maer could wear that sash, but only *after* he was married. It was the mark of a Prince of the current Empress who was

married to a woman in another House, marking him as *formerly* of the Imperial family.

Actually, technically speaking, *Shya* could also wear the yellow sash, since she left House Merrane to marry Rann. But she'd never do that, since a yellow sash was a *boy's* sash. Jason had ordered red sashes for both Rann and Shya for their formal robes, and that was correct under *Siann* livery, since Shya had the option of wearing either red or yellow because she was a girl. The Clerk of Protocol had told Jason so when he asked about it.

*We have experience, your Grace,* Ryn smiled. *But we dressed you entirely too fast. Whatever will we do until we get there?*

*I'm sure you'll find something,* he answered.

*Speaking of that, I'd better get to the bridge for the gate crossing. We can't be more than ten minutes out,* Sammy realized.

Jason caught up on paperwork as they crossed over to Draconis space and cruised to the planet, then he did his best not to yawn in public as they had the rather boring two hour cleansing ceremony, which was like baptism in the Faey religion and was being broadcast live to the Imperium over *Courtwatch*. It dealt purely with the worship of Trelle, and next year, the twins would have other ceremonies dealing with Demir and Aris, meant to invoke the blessing and protection of all three of the Faey gods onto the newborns. But it was an official function, so the cathedral was filled with nobles from every house of the *Siann*, and the members of the Highborn Council were up on the dais with Dahnai, Jason, Kellin, and the kids. The only reason Jason was up there was because he was Raisha's father. The only reason he was there at *all* was because he was Raisha's father. The cleansing ceremony was also the first public and official presentation of the infants to the general public. Dahnai had released pictures of them already, but this was the first time anyone outside the Imperial staff and the *Siann* had seen the newborns live. For that reason, the ceremony was a bit longer than it needed to be.

Jason made sure to avoid all silliness by getting right back on the corvette that brought him down as soon as the ceremony was over, not even going with Dahnai back to her apartment in the palace, and headed back up to the battleship. He was more than happy to have the girls take the robes

right back off of him as they headed for the Karis Stargate and was back in a tee and jeans before they transited the gate and returned to Karis space. He got back home and went straight to Tim and Symone's house, where Symone was asleep, Jyslin was relaxing in the recliner, and Tim was doing the same thing Jason did when he had spare time, going through reports from work on a secure handpanel. *How was the ceremony?* Tim asked.

*Boring,* he answered. *How is Symone?*

*Sleeping,* Tim relayed. *And Jys sent the kids back to school, so we have a little time to rest and relax in peace. Oh, by the way, I've finally scheduled my jack implantation.*

*Really? When?*

*Tomorrow,* he answered.

*Well, that's certainly well timed,* Jyslin sent lightly. *Wouldn't have anything to do with getting out of changing diapers, would it?*

*Actually, it's so I can be here to change diapers,* he replied easily. *Miaari already agreed to give me assignments I can do at home during my assimilation training, and I figured it wouldn't be much extra work. So I'll do four hours of jack assimilation in the morning while Symone takes care of Lyra, and that puts both of us home the rest of the day.*

*That's actually a pretty good plan. I'm surprised you thought of it,* Tim, Jyslin teased.

*Yeah, fuck you too, Jys,* he shot back, which made her laugh. *I'm looking forward to it. I almost feel like the last guy on the block without the new toy.*

*Temika and Mike don't have jacks yet. I think Temika might never get one.*

*Temika and Mike both got their jacks, Jayce,* Jyslin told him. *They got them the day after the twins were born.*

*What? Why wasn't I told?*

*Because you've been too busy to keep up with strip gossip,* she answered. *And it's not that big of a deal. Tim actually is the last one on the strip without a jack, at least if we don't count you.*

*I don't need a jack, Jason retorted.*

*Now that I have a window where I can do the training without missing too much work, I'm ready to fix that, Tim told them.*

*Actually, not everyone has a jack. None of the Imperial guards have one. I wonder if Aya considers a jack to be a violation of the guard oaths, he mused.*

*No, I don't consider them to be against the oaths, Aya chided from the barracks behind their two houses. I'm just waiting for some additional research to be done by Songa before I allow it.*

*Over what?*

*If the jacks compromise our defenses. An Imperial Guard's mental defenses must be absolutely unassailable, Jason. I won't permit any of my women to get jacks until I have multiple conclusive reports and extensive research that says the jacks won't give an attacker some undiscovered back door into our minds. Once I'm absolutely sure that a jack is safe for an Imperial Guard, I'll institute an implantation schedule so the guards can rotate through implantation and training without reducing our staffing.*

*Institute? No option?*

*No option, she replied. The benefits of a jack will make it mandatory equipment for any guard that serves under my command. I'll be the first woman in the rotation, so yes, I'll be practicing what I preach.*

*Bully.*

*We've established that fact multiple times in the past, Jason, she sent with a sardonic flourish in her thought, which made all three of them laugh. Besides, every single guard in my detachment has been all but begging me to allow it, so I won't be pushing them into the annex at gunpoint. They've seen what you can do as a Generation much more than most others, so they certainly see the usefulness of a jack.*

*Good. Well, if Symone's sleeping, I'm going to go over to my home office and knock out some paperwork, Jason told them. Tell me when she wakes up, if she doesn't tell me herself.*

*Sure thing, baby, Jyslin told him.*

Ayama, that beautiful woman, intercepted him in the kitchen and pushed him into a chair, where she had a fairly large platter of chicken and sausage jambalaya out on the kitchen table, one of the New Orleans dishes he'd come to love when he was living there. Just seeing it made him realize he was absolutely famished and attacked the food like a starving man. Amber jumped up onto the table and filched some of his jambalaya, which earned her a stern word from Ayama and a small plate of her own jambalaya; Amber *never* ate pet food, she ate what the people ate, sitting on the table to be part of the family meal...and often had people food specially prepared just for her, several pages of Ayama's hand-written cookbook were filled with recipes *just* for Amber, things she liked that no one else in the house did. Such were the demands of prissy little vulpars.

She kept him company, sleeping in his lap since he wasn't wearing armor, and he spent nearly as much time petting the tiny vulpar as he did working on his paperwork. The most welcome one was that the Hive leaders had arrived and were examining the way he had his office set up, and that meant they'd have some recommendations for him very soon. The rest of the reports were the stupor-inducing kind, mainly from the Confederation offices, things they sent him all the time that he felt he really had no reason reading.

He was almost relieved when the White House sent him word that Krirara wanted to talk to him. She appeared on a flat hologram in front of his desk, sitting at her own desk in the council building. "Jason," she said with a slight, warm smile.

"Hey Krirara. What's up?"

"I have a voting majority," she declared with a triumphant smile. "I wore Krazrou down. I bring the matter up for vote tomorrow morning my time."

"Outstanding!" he said brightly, sitting up and startling Amber awake. She gave a little hiss of displeasure and jumped up onto the desk, glaring at him. "Sorry," he told the vulpar, patting her gently on the head. "By the way, Krirara, Amber. Amber, Krirara."

"A vulpar!" Krirara said brightly. "Among the most treasured of pets among my people! Hello, little one," she crooned, which made Amber tilt

her head in curiosity. “How many other kits did your vulpar have?”

“We only have Amber, Krirara.”

“She’s still a kit, Jason. How did you get one so young? The mother would never give up a kit that young.”

“I didn’t steal her, thank you very much. Amber is here with the mother’s blessing. And if you try to lure Amber away, Rann will kill you,” Jason warned, which made her laugh.

“I *have* a vulpar living in my house, thank you very much,” Krirara said haughtily, teasing him a bit with his own words, and understanding in those words that *nobody* owned a vulpar. “We have a fairly young male vulpar named Kruri living with us. We’ve had him for five years.”

“Back to the subject at hand, Krirara,” Jason chuckled, petting Amber. “You’re sure you’ll get it passed?”

She nodded. “But part and parcel of the deal is that the Karinnes install a Stargate from Terra to Kirri’arr, a gate that we control and which we can defend with our navy.”

“That’s the standard deal I offer to anyone who wants a Stargate, Krirara,” he assured her. “I’ll have a pair available in two days, so they’ll be ready when you pass the vote. You’re going to need an entry station for your Stargate, where you can inspect all goods and travelers moving in and out of your territory. You have any large orbital stations you can divert?”

“Actually yes, we have one at Krakkarda’arr we can repurpose, but we’ll need to hire your house to tow it to Terra.”

“I can do that for you, no problem,” he assured her. “How about I send a cruiser to Kirri’arr to pick up your naval staff officers and engineering specialists so they can tour Kosigi and get some information from Admiral Dellin?”

“That was the next thing I was going to ask,” she smiled. “We will very much take advantage of your generous offer to use Kosigi for shipbuilding operations.”

“Alright, it’ll be there in about two hours,” he said, splitting his attention to send the order to Myri and warning Dellin that the Kirri officers

were coming to tour the base. “We’ll have to wait until you’re voted into the Confederation to move that station. What about interdiction?”

“When the time comes, yes. But right now, interdictors would actually cause more problems than they would solve,” she replied. “When the Andromedans arrive, we’ll have you interdict our systems to protect them. By then we should have a system in place to be able to function with interdiction in effect.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” he nodded. “By the way, Symone had Lyra this morning.”

“Congratulations! Do you have pictures?”

“Of course I do,” he chuckled, then sent her a couple dozen images of her.

“Aww, she’s adorable,” Krirara said in a loving voice as she looked down a little to look at the pictures. “A little too bald for my tastes, but all babies are adorable.”

“At least I won’t mistake her for my pet,” Jason teased.

She gave him a tart look, which made him laugh. “I’ll take that as an indication that you’re too busy to talk to me,” she said biting, which just made him laugh harder.

“Actually, yeah, I’m sorta in the middle of something,” he said. “Mainly trying to reduce the size of my inbox to merely insurmountable, since I’ll be so busy with other things the next few days.”

“I can imagine. I understand the Faey *amu* convention. That makes Symone like your second mate.”

He nodded. “So I’m waiting for her to wake up so I can go over and be with her. And certain Kirri females have a habit of keeping me from doing my work,” he accused.

“That’s your fault for having such a short attention span,” she retorted with a playful smile. “The honest truth is, I’m the one too busy to talk today. With the vote tomorrow and your ship coming, I have much to do. I’ll talk to you later, alright?”



“I might be too busy to answer,” he warned. “Symone just had Lyra and Dahnai’s spending her maternity in her vacation palace here on Karis, so my attention is pretty much taken.”

“Then both of us have much to do,” she chuckled. “I’ll send your office updates as needed, that way you can spend some quality time with your females.”

“Thank you,” he said with an honest smile.

As soon as Krirara’s hologram winked out, it was replaced with Zaa’s. “I just finished talking to Moderator Krarou, and she has a voting majority. They’re going to vote on applying for entry into the Confederation tomorrow morning her time.”

“Good,” Zaa nodded. “The Kirri are exactly the kind of members we want. Are they moving operations into Kosigi?”

“I already have a cruiser on the way to pick up their officers and engineers to talk it over with Dellin,” he answered.

“Excellent. How is Symone?”

“Resting comfortably, thank you for asking,” he replied. “And Lyra’s absolutely beautiful.”

“I know, I’ve got quite a few pictures of her from Handmaiden Miaari,” she smiled. “I would come to Karis in the near future, Jason,” she said. “I find the need to take a short rest, and Karis is a good place to come when I would like to relax. And I would see all the new cubs in less formal circumstances.”

“You’re welcome here anytime, Denmother,” he said with an honest smile. “Just talk to Yeri about a hotel—”

“I have vacation quarters in Jaxtra, cousin,” she told him. “There has always been a house there for the Denmother or Denfather, and with Jaxtra repopulated by the Kimdori, there is one again.”

“Then you’re good to go,” he nodded. “Just let me know when you’re getting here.”

“Not for some few days, I have too many things to finish before I can take a rest,” she replied. “I’ll probably remain for six or seven days.”

“I’m not gonna kick you off the planet, Denmother. I might confine you to Jaxtra once you get too obnoxious, but I won’t kick you out,” he said, which made her chuckle.

“I’ll let you know when I intend to come,” she told him. “But for now, I’ll warn the other members of the Confederation of the Kirri’s intent. No doubt that will be the topic of discussion at tomorrow’s meeting that you won’t attend.”

“I learned how to play hooky from you, Denmother,” he said grandly. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Until later, cousin.”

Jason picked up Amber and leaned back in his chair, cradling her in the crook of his arm. He was already looking forward to seeing Zaa again. She was one of his closer friends as well as being his mentor in political affairs. “I get the feeling that Zaa’s going to hang around until the twins are born, girl. I just hope you don’t get too jealous. Newborns take a lot of attention,” he told her, stroking her fur. “It’s not that we don’t love you, little girl, it’s that we’ll have two babies in the house. They’re going to be noisy sometimes, and they’ll take a lot of attention from both me and Jyslin to take care of them. You’ll just have to endure it for a while,” he chuckled, scratching her behind the ears, which made her purr. “When they get old enough, I think you’ll really enjoy having them around, at least after you train them up a bit. Two new kids to play with. Three actually, since I bet Lyra’s going to be spending nearly as much time over here as we do over at Tim and Symone’s,” he corrected. “What do you think of that?”

She gave a noncommittal little yip.

“That’s a good attitude,” he said. “Just don’t let them drive you crazy, little girl. If they start annoying you, well, you’ve got the rest of the house *and* outside, where they’re only going to be in whichever room we put them in. Besides, Rann will still be spending most of his time with you anyway. I’m the one that’ll have his attention split because of the twins. Six-year-old boys don’t have much interest in babies after the first couple of days, since they don’t do much but eat, sleep, and cry,” he chuckled. “And even if we are busy, don’t ever forget that you’re a part of this family and we love you very much. Don’t *let* us ignore you, Amber. You’ll have to give us some

time to take care of the twins, but don't just sit back and let us not pay attention to you when we *aren't* taking care of them. Okay?"

She gave another, more enthusiastic yip, and pushed her head up against his fingers.

"That's my girl," he told her, looking down at her with a gentle smile. She looked up at him in return, then reared up, putting her little paws on his collarbones and leaning up enough to lick his chin with her curiously hot tongue, her two tails swishing back and forth in a nearly hypnotic pattern. "You are *so* a daddy's girl," he laughed, stroking the fur on her back.

*Kaira, 19 Hiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Friday, 26 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 19 Hiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Kosigi Command Center, Kosigi Lunar Station*

Leaning a little on the central projection console, Jason and Krirara Krarou watched as a large space dock was towed into position in the new Kirri sector within Kosigi, a half-built Kirri cruiser literally bolted into the frame so it could be towed along with the dock. The dock was one of the ones from Kirri space, towed in by the battleship *Victory*, and the last of the 31 large-scale docks the Kirri had in orbit around Kranvaka'arr. With the last dock in place, the Kirri shipworkers could get down to business, and that business was first finishing the 14 cruisers that were in the docks towed into Kosigi. Krirara had managed to arrange a trip to Karis to look over Kosigi in person and talk about some trade deals, but the fact of the matter was, she just wanted to come see Karis in person, to get the chance to do what the other rulers did during the summit, and Jason was more than happy to arrange it. Krirara had toured Kosigi and had seen some of the historical sites on the planet, but she'd also worked Kumi and Temika to secure trade deals while she was here. She'd already secured three new deals from Kumi and Temika, trading food and some unique Kirri crafts like their *kriji* woven goods for the industrial resources her empire lacked.

Krirara was here for another reason, as well. In three hours, she had an appointment in the Karsa Medical Annex to get a cyberjack, and as of right now, 6 of her 16 council members had completed the procedure with the other 10 waiting their turn. It took Songa a bit to figure out where was best to place the jack, but once she had a good spot, she was ready to go. The ears of a Kirri, the musculature that controlled those ears, and their bone architecture made it a bit tricky to properly place the jack so it could plug into an interface that would wrap loosely around the ear, about the only place it could go on a Kirri's head and still do its job. She found a good spot behind and below the left ear, which required Kirri-specific interfaces to have an extension reaching down to the jack socket so they could be properly placed wrapped loosely around the left ear. Kirri interfaces thus far were the only ones they'd designed that would have a *cord* running from the jack to the interface rather than just have the jack plug on the interface itself. The cord was encased in a protective metal housing to keep it from fouling on things or getting caught up and pulled out, which gave Kirri interfaces a little "arm" of sorts that reached down from the main body. They'd also designed an external interface patterned after Kimdori memory bands that were worn around the wrist, and a tiny remote transceiver would plug into the jack that was on a dedicated short-range hyperthreaded frequency to its interface. The remote nature of these bands made them .1 microseconds slower, but on the other hand, they wouldn't be on top of the head potentially making the fur under them uncomfortable.

The Kirri were a welcome addition to the Confederation. Krirara had already found her groove on the council, and the Kirri were quickly becoming nearly universally liked by the various Confederate rulers. Krirara was calm, measured, even-tempered, logical, and approachable, which mirrored basic Kirri personality, and Jason was proved right that she was very much a moderating influence on the more egotistical members of the council. Krirara was already the one settling disagreements in the council and always negotiating, bartering, be it trade deals with other council members or arbitrating negotiations between other members. In a very short time, Krirara had become the *referee* on council, the impartial, intelligent individual that could boil things down to stock and hammer out compromises between separate parties. It was how the Kirri Council operated, and Krirara had brought those skills up to the next level. In many ways, Krirara had usurped that position from *Jason*, and he was more than

happy to have the council members crying to someone else rather than him. While Krirara wasn't as adamantly neutral as Jason was, she was always *fair*, and that went a very long way with the other council members.

Within the Confederation, everyone that dealt with the Kirri liked the Kirri, and not because they were gregarious like the Grimja or charismatic like the Shio. They were just...*nice*. Calm, rational, logical, yes, but always nice. Within hours of the Stargate being set up to Kirri'arr, Kirri had started arriving at Terra looking for work; unemployment was something of a problem for the Kirri, due to the lack of heavy industry and the fact that a farm only needed so many farmers before the farmers were more of a hindrance than a help. The Kirri's economy was much like Europe's in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more of a service and support economy than an industrial economy, and those conditions led to high levels of unemployment. Those Kirri were finding all kinds of work on Terra, working in factories producing Confederate weapons, generic ship parts like universal mounts, and other shared Confederate technology, and the Kirri had set up a mass transit system that let them commute from Kirri territory to Terra and back every day. It was two hours one way for the average Kirri worker, but they were more than eager to sit on a transport four hours a day if only to have a *job*. Since no Kirri would leave their inhabited planets on a permanent basis, the Kirri had set up a very efficient mass transit system so that any Kirri on any planet or moon or station only had a maximum three hour commute to get to Terra. Some planets only had a half hour commute, at least if one didn't count them waiting for the transport to get back from its constant run back and forth between its two points. There were transports moving back and forth between Terra and the Kirri starport from which it originated at all times so that there was a transport leaving exactly every 37 minutes, creating a constant stream of transports flying in and out of the Kirri Stargate at Terra.

They were pulling that off thanks to the fact that the Kirri had opted to allow Jason and Dahnai to install a Stargate at every Kirri system with Kirri'arr serving as the hub of the Kirri system. Jason had demanded interdiction at every Kirri system when they asked for Stargates, and the Kirri Council debated that for about three days before they agreed. Jason wasn't having that many Stargates that far out from the home sector without interdictors in place preventing some pirate—be it private or governmental

—from trying to jump in an attack force in relatively undefended Kirri space and capture one. There wasn't very much smuggling and illegal activity in the Kirri empire anyway, so they didn't lose all that much with interdictors being up. They'd installed the last of the Stargates just yesterday, and it had taken both Jason and Dahnai's combined industrial Stargate-producing might to build enough Stargates to create the Kirri Stargate network.

But that was the model that Jason was hoping to see in every Confederate empire. It was now in six empires not counting the Imperium and the Collective, the Grimja, the Alliance, the Colonies, the Shio, the Jobodi, and now the Kirri, and Jason was seriously hoping that the other empires decided to trust Jason enough to allow Stargates into their territory. They'd never be able to build enough to put a Stargate at *every* system before the Syndicate arrived, having to use the Grimja model where Stargates from Grimjar led to important hub systems in the Grimja Union, and ships jumped hyperspace from those points to the surrounding systems. It was Karinne ships that did the jumping from those systems, since only Karinne and Kimdori ships were capable of jumping inbound with an interdictor up, so Jason very much wanted to see more Stargates in more Confederation systems. Every Stargate put into service cut the workload on his very large, very expensive, and very overworked merchant marine fleet, which now included tugs.

The tugs were the latest product coming out of KPC, the Karinne corporation that produced most of the house's skimmers, dropships, transports, freighters, and other commercial vessels. They'd seen a need for them after the freighters started towing so many ships not long after the Confederation formed, and they'd been producing them for about three months after ironing out the plans for them. They were literally patterned after Terran marine tugboats, frigate-sized ships with big engines whose only purpose was to tow much larger ships through hyperspace. A tug could tow a ship 50 times its mass through hyperspace thanks to its engines, letting a single tug tow a ship the size of a KMS destroyer through hyperspace, and destroyers were bigger than about half of the freighters the various empires in the Confederation used. And if a single tug couldn't do the job, they just brought in a second tug and had them sync their jump engines, and they just kept adding tugs until they had enough to jump the

ship. Yesterday, 10 Karinne tugs—which happened to be half of the tugs they had in the fleet—had jumped an Alliance battleship from Trieste to Faroll so it could get to the Stargate, ten frigate-sized ships towing a *battleship*...that was pretty impressive. It was almost like a Gladiator's flight pod, a ship that came along, secured the larger ship in towing beams, then jumped the towed ship to the destination. They were still having Karinne freighters tow other ships along with them as they did their runs, but the tugs were proving invaluable because they didn't have any cargo of their own. They could move ships from location to location quickly and efficiently, jumping in, dropping off one ship or group of smaller ships, picking up another ship or group of ships, then turning around and jumping right back out. Jrz'kii, who commanded the KMM as the Secretary of Transportation and Logistics, ordered 500 of them from KPC once their usefulness became apparent, with the initial order of 20 tugs and the testing of them in the fleet. They were also very good at picking up free-floating cargo containers, which could be made *huge* since they had no extensive systems in them. All they had were bare-bones environmental systems that protected their contents from exposure to the vacuum and bitter cold of space, so they could build a box the size a football field, stuff it to the gills with cargo, then have a freighter tug pick it up and jump it to its destination.

And that was where the jack upgrade became such a *fucking* godsend. His merchant marine crews weren't suffering any adverse reactions to extended hyperspace exposure, so they were able to jump much more frequently and for much longer. There wasn't a single report anywhere of a case of jump shock in the KMS, the KES, or the KMM, the Karinne Merchant Marine, the freighter fleet, since the jacks had been upgraded, and he had girls who were doing 90 second jumps every hour for ten hours a day.

Rilari Indarre, the young enlisted sailor that had given Jason her program and subsequently led to Myleena developing the jack upgrade, was now Rilari Indarre *Karinne*. She was a Zarina in the house now, the lowest rank in the house structure. She was also in OTS (all nobles in the KMS were officers), had a major commendation on her military record, had been awarded a C500,000 cash bonus. And what she was most enthusiastic about, she was slated to join the engineering department on board the *Aegis* as an officer when she graduated and became an Ensign, where she would

receive Academy-level training and instruction by some of the best engineers in the KMS, the highly distinguished Aegis engineering department whom the Makati among them had named the *Shield's Hammers*. Giving her a title, a commission, a commendation, and a hefty monetary bonus was the least Jason could do, since that young lady had all but eliminated one of the longest and most persistent hazards that came with jumping hyperspace, jump shock. That accomplishment *earned* her that Zarina title and commission. Jason rewarded those who excelled within the House of Karinne, and he was *never* stingy about it.

*How long will it take for your people to set up the material deliveries?* Krirara asked. Much like Jyslin, Krirara only spoke to him when she had to, to include non-telepaths in the conversation. But for Krirara, it was actually much easier. Due to the shape of her maw and the fact that her lower jaw was fixed, unable to move in any direction but open and close, it wasn't easy for her to speak Faey. If not for a very long and nearly prehensile tongue, she would have been physically incapable of making many of the sounds necessary to speak Faey, the same problem the Jobodi had...but it carried the additional risk for a Kirri of biting her tongue with those very sharp teeth trying to create Faey language sounds. And on the other side, the large number of growls and bark-like sounds in the Kirri language made it hard to speak, because it was a language with a very small number of distinct phonetic sounds—due to the fact that Kirri had muzzles and lacked prehensile lips—which they expanded by including aspects of pitch into the language syntax. A word could have multiple meanings based solely on the pitch used to speak it, even things like if the pitch was ascending or descending while the word was spoken. Even the length of time the word was spoken could change its meaning. The common Kirri word *krawr* had 16 different meanings based on the pitch used, if that pitch was steady or changing, and how long the word was sounded. This made Kirri a surprisingly complex and nearly musical language, since in some ways, it had to be *sung* to be spoken correctly due to the pitch requirements for its spoken syntax, and it took real attention to comprehend. Jason remembered speaking Kirri, and the sore throat he had afterwards trying to modulate the growling-sound pitches correctly to say the right words. Sending was a nice compromise so neither of them had to suffer a sore throat or risk a bitten tongue trying to speak.



*They already have, Jason answered, zooming the hologram out. This here is the warehouse area for your workers. You tell us what you need, we'll either help you get it here from your own territory or we'll supply you the materials at cost.*

*At cost, eh?*

*This isn't about making money, he told her seriously. This is about protecting our galaxy from the Andromedans. I'd give out the materials for free if I could, but they do have to be made, so that means you have to pay the salaries of the workers that made them. Dellin always supplies a very detailed list of exactly how much things cost and why they cost what they do to the other governments' construction managers.*

*I see they set up the habitat modules.*

*You do know that they aren't necessary, Jason chided lightly.*

*Tell that to my people, Jason, not to me, she replied. They won't come work here unless we have enclosed habitats. It's the modules or you allowing them to commute back and forth from Kirri space every day.*

*They can't do that.*

*And so we have habitat modules, Krirara sent with a slight smile, swishing her tail a bit. I'm just glad they're already here and working, she sent, looking out where her workers were already detaching the half-built ships from their docks so they could resume construction. Your security measures are almost silly.*

*We have a lot to protect here, and right now, there are more outsiders than there are Karinnes in this moon, he answered without a hint of guilt. Every worker we allow to live inside Kosigi has to get past that screening, so we know they're not a threat. So, you ready for the implantation?*

*Of course I am, she replied. We studied your Songa's data closely and referred to our own medical specialists, which is why we're all getting jacks. They are just too useful not to have. I'm very much looking forward to it, though I'm not looking that forward to upgrading our entire computer network to make it interface compatible.*

*It won't be that hard, just some extra programming, Jason chuckled. Just think of never having to use a keyboard again.*

*Exactly, she smiled. And with our new trade deal where you supply us Kirri-specific interfaces, I'll get the most out of mine.*

*Exclusive access to paw-woven kriji mats? You know we'd go for that; those things are wildly popular through half the Confederation members. I can hear Yila screaming in frustration already.*

*You and her have quite the unusual relationship, she noted with a sly tilt to her thought.*

*I like her, but I'm not stupid enough to trust her, he replied dryly. I don't entirely trust Kumi, for that matter. Temika is as much my spy in her office as she is Kumi's main lieutenant.*

*Krirara laughed. You must have a very lively life, filled with intrigue and shenanigans.*

*You have no idea, he agreed vehemently. Never rule a Faey-majority noble house, Krirara. They're almost tear-out-your-hair aggravating sometimes. Faey have their bright spots, but they're all a bunch of freakin' hyper-competitive, morally ambiguous opportunists.*

*We are right here, your Grace, Dellin sent tartly, which made Krirara give him a fang-filled smile. Perhaps you should send privately?*

*Oh no, I wanted you pack of treacherous jerks to hear every word, he replied cheekily, looking back at Dellin with dancing eyes.*

*Perhaps you should continue your tour, Moderator, before you see something the Grand Duke might want to keep secret, Dellin warned urbanely. It's always embarrassing for it to be seen by outsiders when he's publicly spanked.*

*You're not man enough to spank me, Dellin.*

*Perhaps, but I'm good friends with most of your guards. And they are.*

*Dera and Ryn gave Jason a slightly predatory look from the side, which made him laugh. Yeah, I think moving on is a good idea, before someone ends up scrubbing pots in the galley, Jason added, glancing back at Dellin.*

*With Dera and Ryn along, Jason and Krirara boarded a flying platform and they went out to take a closer look at the Kirri operation. The dock manager had already gotten them going, with several thousand Kirri*

workers unpacking the half-built ships and conferring with Karinne base workers. Krirara was quite willing to take Jason inside a Kirri warship, boarding one of the three Kirri battle cruisers hanging along the edge which had come with the docks, towed in by Karinne ships. They were here for a scheduled refit, which *would* have taken place at the docks that were just moved to Karis...so they came along with the docks. The military Kirri in the ships didn't wear uniforms either, though they did wear bracelets that denoted rank. The only time a Kirri covered himself was to put on armor, which the Kirri did use on their naval vessels. But since the ship wasn't in a potential combat situation, the crew wasn't in armor.

After a very lengthy and surprisingly detailed tour of the battle cruiser, they boarded a skimper and headed for the surface. Dera and Aya piloted with Jason and Krirara in the passenger compartment, discussing the last council meeting. *I'm all for another summit, but this isn't all that great of a time for me*, Jason fretted. *At least they agreed to have it on Terra this time.*

*It's the best place. It is more or less the capitol of the Confederation*, Krirara noted. *All the offices are there. The headquarters of the CCM is there. With us and the Rathii joining, I suppose they decided it was a good time to have a summit, to discuss those things so sensitive that not even galactic crypto is secure enough. I look forward to meeting the other rulers face to face. That is how we Kirri prefer to do things.*

*More than just you two. The Prakarikai and the Haumda have also joined since the first summit.* He laughed. *That'll put me and Anavan in the same room. That should be interesting. After the ultimatum I dropped on her when I caught her people spying, I hear she goes to bed every night after burning me in effigy.*

*I'm also glad they finally pushed through that resolution to make the non-confidential parts of council meetings public*, Krirara added. *That will give the other rulers a chance to see what goes on behind closed doors, at least partially. After all, much of what we discuss affects them as well, either militarily or financially. If anything, those first images of the Syndicate fleet the Kimdori promised to have for us within the next ten standard days might sway some opinions.* The Kimdori had promised a first image of the invasion fleet, taken with an extreme-power hyperspace telescope able to see *into* hyperspace much the same way a standard

telescope did into the night sky. The telescope was on board one of the scout ships currently heading for Andromeda, controlled remotely from Kimdori Prime, and the scout ships were almost close enough to get a first look at the invading fleet, albeit a very fuzzy one. Jason had seen long distance imaging from those kinds of telescopes before, and it wouldn't have the best resolution due to the distances involved and the nature of hyperspace. Extracting images visible to the naked eye out of hyperspace wasn't easy. It took a hell of a lot of software processing to assemble a good image.

That was because visibility in hyperspace was much like the desert at noon on a hot day. Things up close were easy to see, but the further one looked, the more "heat shimmer" in the air distorted the image, and there were mirages in hyperspace as well, ghostly images of three dimensional objects that could flicker in and out of visibility depending on conditions in both hyperspace and normal space; after all, three-dimensional space *was* a part of hyperspace, which was simply the upper dimensions of space.

The really odd thing was, there was *light* in hyperspace. It was truly a unique force, reaching into hyperspace without having hyperspace affect it the way it affected everything else that existed in upper dimensions. Much like Terynium, the hyperspace substance used to make Teryon comm antennas and the antennas in interdictors, it was something that existed in all dimensions simultaneously. But light in hyperspace behaved much differently than it did in normal space, even though it was the *same light*. Light had a completely different set of rules and laws in hyperspace than it did in normal space, even when it was the same photon or light wave. It acted entirely differently depending on where it was in relation to dimensional space, much akin to that famous old Terran experiment where a photon would be in two places at once simultaneously, yet it was just a single photon. Einstein's brain would have melted if he'd ever learned about that little contradiction in nature.

*Now they'll all know just how not-seriously some of us take council meetings,* Jason laughed. *Kreel might become a stand-up comedian after they see him.*

*There's little reason to be overly serious right now. But I think even Kreel will get very serious when the Syndicate is nearly here.*

*True, he agreed as the skimmer vibrated a little...that was not normal. It was a very faint vibration, but Jason had flown planes and skimmers too long to not be acutely aware of those tiny little things when he was flying, even if he wasn't the one at the controls. What's going on, Ryn?*

*I'm not sure, she replied. I'm getting some faint vibration in the fuselage. There's no warning indicators. Maybe it's engine vibration. We might have a loose mount, but we shouldn't. This skimmer was inspected just two days ago.*

Jason made Krirara give him an odd look when he got out of his seat, knelt down, and put his hand down on the deck, feeling the vibration. *It's external, Jason told them. It's not the engines.*

*How can you tell that?* Krirara asked curiously.

*I've been flying things since I could walk, Krirara, Jason replied seriously. And I'm an engineer by trade. I know an external vibration when I feel one. Are we in the atmosphere?*

*Not even close,* Dera answered.

*A dust cloud?*

*No dust particles on the scope, Jayce, Ryn answered. No hull ionization that would come along with hitting dust either.*

*An ion burst in the solar wind?*

*Nothing strong enough to cause a vibration.*

*Are we close enough to another ship to intersect its artificial gravity field?*

*The closest ship to us is 33 kathra away, and that's a Stick coming back from Kosigi using the same vector. It must be heading for Karsa. And Sticks don't have artificial gravity.*

*Get the command center on the comm, see if the sensor officers know what it is, I'll ask Cybi. [Cybi, what was that?]*

*[I'm not sure. It's some kind of gravimetric spatial disturbance that just passed through the system,] she answered. [A wave front. It might be the gravi-kinetic front of a supernova, but I'm not registering any supernovas*

*from the sensor net. It might also be a space-quake.]* Space-quakes were just like earthquakes, but they happened in the fabric of space. When natural forces caused spatial distortion, that distortion could explosively release to return to normal if the pressure being exerted on that space was suddenly removed. That caused ripples of gravimetric disturbance—which was different from *gravometric* force, which was exclusive to artificially created spatial effects used in engines and gravband—that radiated out from the point of origin like ripples created by a rock thrown into a still pond. It was the behavior of gravimetric forces that led to the science of *gravology*, a branch of astrophysics that dealt with the study of gravity and its effects on space and the natural world, and thus produced gravband technology and gravometric engines. The term *gravometric* was named after the *science* rather than the *energy*. They were different things, and thus the Faey had given them two similar but distinct names to distinguish them in research papers and journals. Any engineer with basic education knew the difference between *gravimetric* and *gravometric*, mainly that one was artificial and the other was natural.

Space wasn't as smooth and even as most believed. There were countless gravimetric phenomena out there that made space more like a crumpled piece of paper than a smooth sheet. And like any rugged terrain, sometimes things moved, and those movements caused reactions. People on planets or deep in a gravity well never felt those ripples because the gravity well smothered them, but if they were strong enough, then they got noticed. And if that one was strong enough to shake the skimmer this deep into Karis' gravity well...that was *fucking strong*.

*[Origin?]*

*[I'm calculating now,]* she replied.

*Cybi's on it, she says it's a gravimetric wake that originated from outside the system. Dera, link us up with the Academy and see if any of the other sensor feeds from the other Confederate empires logged it. That'll give us a direction and maybe a distance.*

*Triangulate it out? Good idea,* Dera nodded.

*[I have it. It originated in the Jirunji sector,]* Cybi told him. *[A Factor 7 space-quake.]*

*[Damn, that's seriously strong. Where in the sector?]*

*[About 31 light years from Chezaa.]*

*[Any damage?]*

*[Possibly, but it's Chezaa, Jason. Do you care?]*

He had to laugh aloud. *[Maybe for the slaves they hold, but not for the Chezaan. Can you get a cause?]*

*[Data coming in from Jun and Prakarikai long range sensor feeds suggest it was the collision of two free neutron stars,]* Cybi answered.

*[Holy shit, I've never heard of that ever happening,]* Jason exclaimed. Free neutron stars were just that, neutron stars that “roamed” galactic space, not locked into any orbit. They were the hyper-compressed cores of supergiants whose supernovas actually knocked them from their galactic orbits, when the supernova explosion was so asymmetrical that it knocked the remnant neutron star out of its orbit in the galaxy. That was a very rare occurrence, and that was only by the grace of God that it was so. A free neutron star was a mobile killer of entire star systems, destroying any star system into which it wandered with its incredible gravity well, vacuuming up planets and small stars like the Hoover from Hell. Only a supergiant star had the sheer mass and corresponding gravity well to escape immediate destruction by these free-roaming killers...though the neutron star could still kill a supergiant depending on how the two interacted. When a neutron star encountered a supergiant, the supergiant either absorbed the neutron star into its mass rather than have the neutron star absorb it, which could possibly trigger a supernova if the neutron star had too much velocity when it collided with the supergiant, or it captured the neutron star into orbit. When that happened, the neutron star slowly siphoned off mass from the parent star if its orbit was close enough, slowly killing the supergiant like a stellar parasite. Either way, supergiants were the only stars that could stop a neutron star from moving through the galaxy.

Neutron stars mainly came from the interior sectors deep in the galaxy, about three quarters of the way to the galactic core, where there were tons and tons of supergiants and they could gain enough velocity to break free of the galactic orbit if they suffered an asymmetrical supernova. Once free of galactic orbit, they slowly worked their way through the galaxy, and then

eventually left the galaxy and hurtled out into intergalactic space. Cybi kept very careful track of the four free neutron stars that were even now moving through the home sector, nearly done with their 27-million-year journey from the core to the edge of the galaxy. For two free neutron stars to meet up and collide...that was *majorly* rare. Like once every hundred million years rare.

*[Did it create a black hole? Or even worse, a spatial rift?]*

*[No,] Cybi answered. [I've got my own arrays pointed that way now, Jason. I detect neither.]*

*[That's good news,] he communed in relief, then switched to sending. Cybi just got some data. She says it's a space-quake caused by two colliding free neutron stars, out in the Jirunji sector, he told the others.*

*Two colliding free neutron stars? Has that ever happened in recorded history?* Krirara sent, thoroughly surprised.

*Not in Karinne history,* Jason answered. *I bet ten credits the Haumda have an omen about it,* he added spontaneously.

*Any word on damage to systems close to the collision? If it was that strong all the way out here, it must have had Torsion-level effects locally. It might have completely destroyed an entire star system if it was close enough*

*It happened 31 light years from Chezaa, too far out to tear planets apart, but I'll bet that broke some windows and maybe knocked down some weaker buildings. They probably have light to moderate damage, but it's Chezaa. They can fix it their own damn selves. Either way, it's something for the scientists to orgasm over, not us. I bet there's all kinds of unique readings coming in over the sensors pointing in that direction. Two colliding neutron stars? There must be an absolute soup of subatomic particles and naturally occurring tachyons blowing out from them.*

Krirara gave him an odd look, then burst into laughter. *I wasn't sure if I was reading your thought correctly,* she sent with a smile. *For a second, I thought you were making some kind of unnatural proposition involving scientists with loose morals.*

Jason burst out laughing himself. *It's a rather crude expression among the Faey and Terrans, and you're my friend. I'm allowed to be crude with*



you, he told her. *I didn't realize I was framing in Faey.*

*You're not framing at all, that's what made it hard to figure out, she grinned. I must say, sending with you certainly opens up a new level of your personality, Jason. I had no idea you were so...salty.*

*He's being polite, Moderator, Dera noted from the cockpit. Just wait 'til he's really comfortable with you, you'll think he's a dirty old man. And if you're gonna use Faey-centric thoughts, Jason, frame them. Don't leave things like that open to interpretation. A slight shift in the texture of your thought, and you might be heading for the annex to treat bite wounds rather than to drop the Moderator off so she can get her jack.*

*Duly noted, Jason replied casually. And I grew up as a regular person surrounded by other regular people, Moderator. Other Terrans might have been raised with impeccable manners, but I'm not one of them. I play nice for the cameras and because I deal with people who have way too much of an opinion of themselves, but I'm a middle-class blue-collar worker at heart. It's who I am, and it's who I'll always be.*

*I see, she smiled. And I'd never bite you, Jason, she assured him grandly. I might want to do it, but I've been in politics too long to succumb to those baser instincts.*

Jason laughed brightly as he got back into his seat. *Well, I will be guided by you, Moderator,* he sent with a playful grin.

They dropped Krirara off at the annex so she could join the other council members and wait for her turn to get her jack, and Jason left them to that and returned to the White House. He had a cabinet meeting in about an hour, but Yeri had a standing request to see him as soon as he had time. He let her know he was back by sending through the complex as he came in, and Yeri was waiting with Chirk and Brall in his office when he got there. *"Revered Hive-leader, the Hive Leaders have finished their examination and have issued a report,"* Chirk told him as he came in. *"I queued it onto your office panel."*

"Outstanding, I've been waiting for them to finish," he said as came up to Yeri. "Alright, Yeri, step into my office."

"Famous last words there, Yeri," Brall warned with a craggy smile, which made her laugh.

Ryn and Dera locked the door behind them and stayed out in the reception office to chat with Chirk and Brall, and Jason flopped down into his chair behind his desk. “Alright, hit me,” he said.

Yeri chuckled as she sat down, looking up. A hologram wavered into reality over the desk, showing the freshly built Diplomatic Hall on Janja, built in classic Faey architecture. “Red Horn finished it yesterday, and it has everything you wanted. Seats five hundred in the main gallery, six different smaller conference rooms holding anywhere from ten to 100, kitchen, formal dining hall, recreational center, and all the latest security features to protect the diplomats, as well as heavy external defenses to protect the building from external attack. It also has guest rooms for 100 visitors on the upper floors, in case someone needs a place to sleep. I’ve assigned a staff of 20 diplomats, 60 support personnel, and 120 guards to the facility. They’re all there already, getting things ready for the RK sector summit.”

“And where’s that?”

“All six empires have ships en route to the system,” she answered. “Sensors show they’ll all drop into normal space right where we told them to starting tomorrow afternoon local time, and the diplomats will board a KMS vessel and jump in from there. The Keelo only sent ten ships, but the Hrathrari sent over a hundred,” she frowned a little. “They’re staggered so the four warring parties won’t arrive at the same time or at the same place, but those ships are going to wait for their emissaries, and the arrival points we gave them are within long-range scanning distance of each other. I’m a little worried a battle might break out.”

“Have Myri park a squadron at each arrival point and warn all of them that anyone that leaves the area in any direction other than back to their own territory gets blown out of the sky by *us*, problem solved,” Jason said. “RJ-44 is our territory, if anyone’s gonna shoot at anyone, we’re gonna be the ones shooting.”

“That’s not very diplomatic, Jason,” she chuckled.

“Diplomacy is *your* job, Yeri,” he retorted. “Speaking of diplomacy, you ready to host the summit?”

She nodded. “I have everything organized, and I’ll be leaving for RJ-44 early tomorrow. I just need the Academy feed with what information we’re

willing to give them, and I'm fully ready."

"I had Ayuma set that up earlier today. When you access the Academy mainframe, it'll be there."

"What do you want me to focus on in tech swapping proposals?"

"The catapults," he replied immediately. "That's really the only thing any of them have that we can use. Feel free to make individual trade deals with any of them within the guidelines I set. Foodstocks have the highest priority. We're selling every spare *kaba* pod we have to the Grimja and the Skaa and they're still using food replicators. So we need more food imports. We need to close that food gap, that has highest priority."

"Got it," she nodded, touching her interface with a long finger, no doubt making a note of it in her interface's memory. "Okay, let me walk you through the outline of my presentation."

For over two hours, forcing Jason to delay the cabinet meeting, Jason listened as Yeri went over what she planned to cover in detail, going over what they were going to tell the RK empires and how far they were willing to go to open relations. Jason made sure to get the most detail when it came to how she was going to explain the Syndicate, the Consortium, and the threat the more aggressive home sector cluster empires posed to the RK empires, due to the vast technology gap. Dahnai already had 90 INS ships and 470 scout ships refitted to jump in real time, and that number grew every day. It was just a matter of time before a long-range scout came across the RK sector, as soon as one of them had the bright idea to hopscotch over the closer sectors that others might be exploring to find "virgin" territory to survey. That may be months, that may be years, that may be decades, but it *was* going to happen, and the RK empires had the right to know about it.

When she was done, they discussed a few tweaks to her presentations, then they both got up and went straight to the cabinet room, where the other secretaries were waiting for them. Yeri sat down as Jason filed in behind her, finishing the last of a donut, then he sat in his own chair. Everyone was there except for Kumi, with Temika sitting in her usual chair, and as usual, Miaari wasn't attending. She rarely did unless it directly impacted her

office. “Sorry guys, me and Yeri were going over tomorrow’s RK summit,” he said. “That’s just *slightly* important.”

“We’ll forgive you this time, Jayce,” Temika said with a smile.

“Where’s Kumi?”

“Annex, doctor’s appointment,” Temika replied, shrugging a bit. “I didn’t run fast enough when she was looking for someone to fill in for her.”

Jason chuckled. “I wish I could run fast enough to get out of these,” he said candidly. “Alright, let’s start with old business then work around to new business.”

After nearly three hours catching up on a lot of house business he’d been neglecting since Dahnai arrived, he returned to his office to read that report by the Kirgan Kizzik. Much as he expected, they found the way he’d set up his administration to be highly inefficient, and listed nearly 26 pages of suggested changes to streamline things, which included creating 23 new offices within existing departments and two entirely new departments in the White House to take over many of the things Jason and his executive staff were doing themselves. It would create the Department of House Member Services, which would take over all house member services and programs and would also serve as the point of interaction between the house and the Medical Service, and the Department of Science and Research, which would handle all aspects of scientific pursuit within the house except for the educational services, the Academy, and 3D. Education would go to House Member Services, but the Academy and 3D would remain independent Divisions that answered directly to Jason. The KES would also remain an independent Division, but it *would* have to send copies of all its research and findings to the new science department to keep them informed of what the KES discovered in their explorations. All the other various science offices and divisions would fold into the new department, as would the multiple research and development offices and divisions that weren’t part of the KMS, those fell under Myri’s jurisdiction. The House Member Services department would handle education, but the Science department would handle research and scientific endeavors, which overlapped somewhat with education. Extensive research and scientific pursuit took place within the Academy and other schools of higher learning, so the two new departments would be sharing a little responsibility when it came to that area. But the

Kizzik had taken that into account and had created a very efficient system where the boundaries were clearly drawn, and the two departments couldn't "go to war" over the shared divisions. Each department had clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the system would have them keep each other well informed and have them work together. The Kizzik were well aware of Faey territoriality when it came to political power, so they put safeguards into the system to prevent pissing contests before they could even begin.

The end result would create a very controlled hierarchy under him where he had full awareness of what was going on—his highest priority when he explained it to the Hive leaders—but gave his underlings the ability to make decisions on their own and the authority to carry them out, giving them the latitude they needed to get things done without Jason having to approve everything. *That* was where most of his headaches were coming from, the Kizzik reported, his need to micro-manage aspects of House business that he really didn't need to be sticking his nose into. So many things had to come through Jason's office that he could entrust to his cabinet Secretaries, it was bogging down the entire administration.

After sitting for nearly an hour and pondering the report, he found that he could agree with every single recommendation they made. All of their advice was sensible, practical, and efficient, which were the cornerstones of anything a Kizzik did. They had some pretty good ideas about how to reorganize things to make it easier for *everyone*, not just him.

He got the six Hive Leaders of Kirga on holograms after reading the report. "Alright, Revered Hive-leaders, I've read your report," he told them. "Do all of you agree to these recommendations?"

*"We do unanimously," Kr'Strkk answered. "We took into account that it will not be Kizzik within these offices. Despite that inefficiency, we project that efficiency in the executive will increase by 32% if our recommendations are accepted, and it will reduce your personal workload by over half."*

"That would have sold me right there had I not already made my decision," he said dryly. "I found all of your recommendations to make sense, revered Hive-leaders, but I need time to consider how I'm going to implement them. It's going to take some preparation to transition over."

*“We have considered the problem, and offer a previously prepared transition schedule,” Shikk said. “We did not include it with the report of findings because it was uncertain if you would agree to our conclusions.”*

“How about I have a few of you come over here and oversee the implementation of your proposed changes?” he asked. “You thought up these changes, you’re the best ones to put them into place. You can come over and get everyone ready for the changes, then set up a transition schedule while I look for qualified candidates to head the two new departments.”

*“It would be our honor, Revered Hive-leader,”* Chg’grr nodded statefully.

“Alright then. Decide among yourselves who will come and who will stay to oversee the Kirgan hives and coordinate with Chirk. She’ll be your point of contact for the transition and will keep me informed.”

*“As is proper,”* Kr’Strkk stated. *“Allow the workers to work, revered Hive-leader. They know their jobs and will do them well once they receive instruction. You have issued your orders. Entrust that we will carry them out to your specifications.”*

“That’s *exactly* what I’m going to do, revered Hive-leaders,” he answered honestly. “You know exactly what I want and how to set this up, since *you* organized it. I’m positive that I’ll get exactly what you promised when you’re done.”

*“We will arrive tomorrow to begin the preparations.”*

“That’s fine with me. My availability is going to be spotty for the next couple of takirs, so check with Chirk if you need to speak with me. She always knows where I am and if I’m available.”

*“It will be so, revered Hive-leader,”* Ek’Lrr replied.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

Jason leaned back in his chair and pondered a bit after the Kirgan Kizzik were dismissed. Myleena would naturally be the best choice to head the new science department, but if he tried to stick her in that chair, she might brain him. She already had so much on her plate, she didn’t need all the administrative paperwork bullshit that would come with that position...

unless, of course, she took the job and just had her office handle the paperwork.

Actually, it wasn't that she was the best choice, she was the *only* choice. It would just formalize how things already worked, and she was the only one that knew half of what was going on in that area anyway...which was probably why the Kirgan Kizzik wanted to formally go in there and organize the various research labs and offices into a more efficient effort. Myleena wouldn't like them nosing in her business that much, but she'd get over it.

That was definitely the way to go. Myleena could just hire a couple of secretaries to handle the paperwork if she didn't like the extra duties that came with the job.

The other department...that wasn't so easy. He'd need someone already in the system that knew it very well, someone that could coordinate and get along with the Medical Service, and someone that Cybi liked, since they'd be dealing with Cybi quite a bit as well. He'd need someone like Ayuma, a career bureaucrat that knew how to administer a large and complex system that dealt with multiple aspects of house member services and welfare, from recreational parks to member general welfare to house member health care. The office would be managing the *people* side of things the same way Lirren managed the *land* side of things. The only thing Interior would continue to oversee dealing with house members would be the Land Use Authority, which managed the housing system that assigned housing to new members and managed property ownership. All other aspects of member social services would transfer to the new department, along with the large number of social services that Jason's executive office still oversaw.

Jason leaned back in his chair and decided to break the bad news to Myleena. [*Myli,*] he called into the biogenic network.

[*Yeah babe? I'm kinda busy at the moment,*] she answered. [*I'm elbows deep in the transition module the Consortium uses on its striation decay limiters. I'm studying them to see if they have any use in our own power system.*]

[*Stop teasing me with the fun things you get to do,*] he complained. [*I just wanted to give you some advance warning, that's all.*]

*[About?]*

*[Your upcoming promotion. The Kizzik finished the examination of the executive, and they've issued their report. One of their recommendations is to raise the Science and Technology Division to full department status, and I agree with it. So congratulations, Secretary Myleena.]*

*[Babe. When I get home, I'm gonna hit you so hard,]* she warned, which made him laugh.

*[Just hire an office staff and have them handle most of the paperwork that comes with the job. The only real demand on your time will be having to come to cabinet meetings once or twice a takir. I'll snip out the part of their report that deals with the Science Division and send it to your gestalt so you can read over their recommendations. They're actually pretty good ones.]*

*[Well, I can at least do that much,]* she replied without much enthusiasm. *[But you can summarize what you want to change.]*

*[Very little. Raising the Division up to a department will give you some more resources, and it stops pushing so much of your work through my office. Most of what the Kizzik were doing was trying to reduce my workload, hon, which seriously has gotten out of control. Instead of me having to authorize so much shit you guys do, it gives you the authority to do it yourself. You'll still keep me in the loop and I still have to authorize the big stuff, but really what it does is give you a lot more freedom to do things your way instead of constantly asking me for permission.]*

*[Okay, now it doesn't sound so bad,]* Myleena communed brightly, which made him chuckle. *[Not that I don't do things my way already, but at least now I don't have to worry about you telling me I'm wrong,]* she added impishly.

*[I've always let you run the Division your way, cause I know you know what you're doing,]* he assured her. *[You've never let me down, cousin, and I don't think you ever will. But now you'll have a bigger budget and the freedom to change some of the processes on your own. You'll have complete control over the department.]*

*[Trelle's garland, I never say no to a bigger budget,]* she communed with laughter rippling through her thought. *[So do I get the Academy too?]*



*[No, the Academy is a special case, it's going to remain as an independent Division that answers directly to my office,] he answered. [And even if it did get folded into another department, it wouldn't be yours. Education is the responsibility of the new Department of House Member Services, because first and foremost, the Academy is a school.]*

*[Nuts,] she complained. [But I still get access to the Academy, right?]*

*[Of course you do, dink,] he chided. [I told you, very little is going to change other than the route the paperwork takes once it leaves your office.]*

*[3D's staying independent too, right?]*

*[Yeah, no way is 3D answering to anyone but you and me,] he affirmed. [I think the cabinet would choke if they knew how big a budget 3D has,] he added with an audible laugh. [But you can't innovate without spending lots of credits. Speaking of 3D, anything to pass along?]*

*[Nothing worth you coming to visit,] she replied. [Still working on the same projects, and nothing new to report.]*

Cybi interjected herself into their private communion. *[I'm sorry to intrude, Jason, Myleena, but I thought you might want to know that Jyslin is about to begin the childbirth process,] she told them. [My scanners are picking up the initial stages. I calculate her water will break some time within the next three hours.]*

Jason gave an audible cry of happiness, jumping up out of his chair. *[Alright, finally!]* he threw into the biogenic network, but doing it publicly...and since Jason had complete access to all aspects of the network, it caused everyone connected to the network to hear him. He laughed again when he got a few thousand mystified responses. *[Sorry all, got excited. But Jyslin's going to start labor in a few hours, guys. The twins will be born sometime tonight or early tomorrow!]*

*[And when were you going to tell me that, baby?]* Jyslin asked archly as the entire biogenic network blew up with excited chatter, which made him laugh again.

*[Cybi just told me, I thought she told you first,] he answered. [She said that you just started the, well, whatever it is Faey women do before they give birth. She said your water will break sometime in the next three hours.]*

*So we're almost there, love! You wanna go to the annex right now, or wait a bit?]*

*[I'm not feeling anything here, but we'll head for the annex when you get home. You call Dahnai and tell her, I'll spread the word to anyone who didn't hear that,]* she told him archly.

*[You always say that the mother's the last to know. I was just proving your point,]* he told her flippantly. *Let me out, girls,* he called as he buttoned up his office. *[I'll be home in fifteen minutes tops.]*

*[Alright, we'll be ready.]*

Jason almost skipped out when the door opened. "Chirk, send it over to Yeri's office that they don't give the official release until the twins are born," he told her. "But they can tell the Confederate Council that Jyslin's going to be delivering late tonight or early tomorrow our time. Oh, since the Kirri Council is here on Karis, you can have Yeri go ahead and tell them now, since they're gonna hear about it anyway," he added. "Zaa and Denfather Grun are over in Jaxtra, get word to them, I'm sure they'll want to come to the annex. As far as business goes, unless it deals with the imminent explosion of the sun, I don't want to hear about it until at least four hours after the twins are born," he declared, to which Chirk nodded.

It was very relaxed and orderly, mainly because there was no sense of urgency. Jyslin had plenty of time before her water even broke, and her labor wouldn't start until after that. When Jason arrived back home, all the kids were assembled, a TSV-50 was hovering overhead waiting to land in the water to carry all of them to the annex, along with four escorting Wolf fighters, and the girls on the strip were starting to assemble. Ayama and Surin were packing food in carrying trays, the supper they'd been cooking for Jason and Dahnai's families, and they weren't about to let it go to waste. Tim and Symone were coming out of their house with Lyra in a hovercarriage, and both gave Jason a big hug when he got to the deck. *Looks like everything's under control,* he sent in relief.

*Ayama had a checklist,* Tim noted as Ayama scurried past them carrying several large containers towards the dock. *Much more organized than when she had Rann,* he added with a chuckle.

Ayama's checklist got everyone on the fairly large passenger transport, the guards taking over herding the kids. Jyslin still was showing no indication that she was close and walked into the annex on her own when the transport landed on the big pad by the building. There was quite a crowd of house members outside, cheering as Jyslin appeared, and she waved to them as she entered. As soon as she was on the other side of the door, however, Songa was there to take charge. She put Jyslin in a hoverchair and had her carted up to the room that would serve as her waiting room, delivery room, and recovery room all in one. This room was much bigger than Dahnai's, mainly because it had a lot more people in it. All the older kids were in the room—she was *Mommy Jyslin* after all—as well as all the strip girls, Luke, Mike, and Jenn and Erinn had managed to sneak aboard the transport. The two male Generations were good friends with just about all the girls on the strip. Not all of them would get to stay in the room for the delivery, however. Only Jyslin's immediate family and Dahnai's immediate family would get to stay. More and more people arrived to visit with Jyslin as they waited for Dahnai, Denmother and Denfather arriving with Miaari's parents, Miaari, and Kemaari, joining the group inside the waiting room. To Jason's surprise, the entire Kirri Council also arrived to celebrate the birth. The Kirri took pregnancy and childbirth very seriously, so it wasn't really much of a surprise that they would drop everything and come see Jyslin even as they recovered from their jack implantation procedures.

Krirara was very proud of the metal jack rim on the left side of her head, just under and behind her left ear, her fur trimmed around it so stray hairs wouldn't get caught in the plug when she'd get to plug in an interface. Jason had to regard it a little bit when she wished Jyslin a speedy delivery, musing that she would be lucky that the interface's bonding ability wouldn't rub the fur off her head, if she opted for the interface rather than the wrist unit. It could bond to the skin through the fur without compressing it.

*What?*

*Just pondering if you'll go with an interface or a wrist unit.*

*Both, she replied easily. The wrist unit I'll use at home since I don't have to have it on me, and I'll use the interface unit when I'm out and about.*

*That's fairly clever, Jason noted. But you might have to hook up your unit to a signal amplifier to give it house-wide coverage, if you're just gonna leave it sitting on a table or something.*

*I have one of those already as well, she affirmed with a slight smile.*

*That is a fairly good idea, Jason mused as he thought about her idea. I might talk to Myli about producing a software update that allows any standard vidlink to serve as an interface. We'd just need to produce the transceivers, and that way people wouldn't have to wear an interface all the time if they didn't want to. Though, it's much less of an issue for people without fur, he sent with a sly look at Krirara. Hell, I've worn this thing for so long it almost feels like a part of me, he added, touching his gestalt.*

Dahnai arrived while the Kirri Council was still visiting, marching in with her kids, Kellin, Saelle, and Evin in tow. "Where are you at, Jys?" she asked as soon as she was in the room.

"Water hasn't broke yet," she replied with a smile, taking Dahnai's hand. "Just waiting for this show to get moving, that's all."

"Ayama brought dinner for you guys," Tim said.

"We saw her out in the waiting area with a portable food warmer," she chuckled.

It was nearly a party in the room, at least until Jyslin's water broke. Songa hustled all of them out of the room to give her an initial assessment, which Jason used as an excuse to get something to eat. Jason, Dahnai, and Krirara sat at a table out in the main area sharing Ayama's cooking and talking a little politics while they waited for Songa to let them back into the room, and she limited the room to immediate family once she let them back in. Two doctors attended Jyslin as she quickly started labor, Rann and Shya all but competing with the adults for space by her bed as they supported her through the contractions. Rann had Amber cradled in his arms; not even their tiny vulpar was going to miss this.

Jyslin had had a very short labor when she had Rann, barely an hour, but she wasn't so lucky the second time. Five hours she suffered through the contractions, nearly breaking Jason's hand twice when she unexpectedly clamped down on it when it was in an awkward position. Songa and her assistant remained by her bed, and when they checked her dilation and

timed the contractions, Songa declared that Jyslin would start giving birth on the next contraction. *This is it, love*, Jason sent reassuringly, stroking her sweaty auburn hair from her face. *You ready?*

*I'm ready for this to be over*, she replied with her teeth clenched, closing her eyes. *Let's do this*. "And no more sending from here," she said aloud, looking mainly at Rann. "Remember, the babies will probably be sensitive to sending. Let's not disturb them once they're born."

Once it started, however, it moved along at a very fast pace. Barely four minutes after she began her birthing contraction, Songa was lifting a very cranky newborn from the bottom of the birthing bed. The baby had Jason's skin, pointed ears, and had Jyslin's dark red hair—at least Jason assumed so since it was wet. The assistant checked Jyslin's stomach with a sensor as Songa took the infant over to the nearby table and touched a scanner to her foot. "Perfectly healthy," she declared, looking back at them. "Which one is she?"

"That's Siyae," Jyslin panted.

"Symone, you can come clean her up while we deliver Bethany," Songa ordered. Symone grinned and rushed right over, and she started cleaning Siyae up as Songa returned to her position to accept the second baby.

Ten minutes later, a carbon copy of Siyae was in Songa's gloved hands, which wasn't a surprise since they were identical twins. Songa took her over to the exam station as the assistant helped deliver out the afterbirth, and Songa turned to look back at them. "Also perfectly healthy," she announced. "Just give us a few moments, Jys. Rest a little bit, dear, it's almost over. You did very well."

"I do have a little experience," she chuckled wearily as Tim kissed her forehead. Symone brought over a now dry and resting Siyae, and Jason was right that her hair was almost exactly the same shade as Jyslin's, that lovely auburn, she had Jason's skin color, and so much of Jyslin's face was in Siyae that there was absolutely no doubt who her mother was. Jason could sense his bloodline in her as well, the mark of a Generation. Jason took her from Songa and marveled at his tiny daughter for just a brief moment, then carefully handed her down to Jyslin. She held Siyae as she delivered out the afterbirth, and the assistant cleaned her up as Songa brought over Bethany.

Again, Jason held his newborn baby girl, who was still crying, but she stopped crying almost unnaturally fast once she was in Jason's arms. Brilliant blue eyes looked up into his, the color of the Caribbean Sea, and she yawned a little bit. Jason set her very carefully on Jyslin's breast, and she looked like the happiest woman in the world with her two healthy newborn daughters cuddled up to her. She looked down at them with love and wonder, then smiled up at them all as Tim put a finger to his interface.

"Show them off to the whole house, baby," Tim declared with a grin as he activated the camera in his interface.

"These are Duchesses Siyae and Bethany Karinne," she proclaimed, nudging them in turn as she gave their names. "Our twin daughters."

Amber gave a little yip, and there was a muted roar of cheering from beyond the door as Jyslin's proclamation and real-time video of her with her babies was broadcast over CivNet. Jason leaned down and kissed Jyslin tenderly on the lips, then put a gentle hand on Bethany. Though they were identical, Jason could already tell them apart because of the unique aspects of their minds. Rann held Amber close to Siyae, and the little vulpar sniffed curiously at the swaddled newborn. She then licked Siyae's face, which made the baby wriggle a bit...but she certainly didn't seem to mind it. "I'm glad you like them, Amber," Jyslin smiled. "I'm positive they're going to love you."

Songa opened the room to all visitors, and Jyslin all but held court as friends filed in and out to see the babies. The strip girls gushed over them, albeit quietly since the babies had fallen asleep after their very trying little experience, the kids asked all kinds of questions, and Krirara and the Kirri Council almost looked like they wanted to steal the newborns, they were so ecstatic over their birth. Tim took a bunch of video and still pictures with his interface, spreading them all over CivNet, at least until Songa had had enough and kicked almost everyone out. "I'll take the newborns for their first extensive exam, dear," Songa declared as an aide brought in a hovercrib. "Then it'll be your turn. After the exam, it's up to you what you want to do. If you want to rest a little before going back home, that's fine, but you'll be clear to go back home if you don't."

"I'd rather rest in my own bed, Doctor," she declared. "I'm not as weak as Symone," she added, grinning at her *amu dozei*.

“Keep talking, bitch,” Symone threatened with a grin.

“In that case, you’ll be on a skimmer heading home in about an hour, dear,” Songa predicted. “Get some rest while we run the newborns over to the scanning theater for an in depth sensor scan and exam. You’ll be after them, then we’ll get you all ready to go back to the strip.”

“Sounds like a plan, Songa,” Jyslin nodded. “And now that the birth is over, I could *really* use a painkiller,” she said hopefully.

Songa chuckled. “I’ll turn on the pain inhibitor in the bed, it should take some of the bite off,” she replied. Pain inhibitor fields didn’t penetrate very deeply into a body, so for something like the pain after childbirth, they could only reduce the pain Jyslin was feeling. Drugs were usually the prescribed course of action for pain felt deep inside the body. But for something like a skin laceration or a burn, they were awesome. “I’ll have a prescription filled for you once you’re out of it.”

“Kinda makes you wonder why you don’t turn that on during childbirth,” Tim pondered, looking at Dahnai.

“Because it’s not *natural*,” Dahnai answered firmly. “A woman would never do anything against the natural course unless the health of her or the baby was on the line, you dink.”

“Well, guess that makes you more of a man than me. I’d demand painkillers if I was in that position.”

“Which proves why men are the weaker sex,” Dahnai declared with a smile.

Jyslin managed a brief dozing nap once the pain inhibitor field was on, resting somewhat comfortably after the ordeal of delivering the twins. Jason stayed with her as Dahnai and the others drifted in and out of the room to talk to friends and family outside, but also giving Jason and Jyslin a few moments of privacy, even if Jyslin was sleeping through it.

It was Jason’s turn to show off the newborns once they came back from the exam with a clean bill of health. They stayed in the hovercrib, a directional holoscreen over the top that allowed them to look in but made it dark enough inside for the infants to sleep without being bothered by changing light. Everyone did whisper, however, since the system did

nothing to muffle sound. A tentative low power sending proved that both newborns were sensitive to sending, so that took sending off the table until that sensitivity faded, at least if they didn't want to wake up the babies. Everyone gathered around the hovercrib and admired Jason's two new daughters, who were sleeping peacefully and looked totally beautiful, very nearly angelic in their little red swaddling blankets, which were actually sophisticated pieces of technology that kept the babies at a perfect temperature.

"They're so tiny," Kyri breathed as she stood up on her tiptoes, looking over the edge of the floating crib with amazed eyes. "Even smaller than Lyra was when she was born."

"They had to share space inside Mommy Jyslin's tummy, where Lyra didn't," Jason said artfully. They were a smaller than Lyra had been, but to be fair to Lyra, she'd been a *big* newborn.

Amber squirmed a bit in Rann's arms, then she dropped down into the crib, curled up at the feet of the twins, and promptly fell asleep. That made Jason laugh softly. Amber was ever the opportunist, and she saw the perfect place to both sleep on a soft bed *and* get all kinds of attention at the same time. Jason stopped Rann from trying to fish her out. "She's sleepy, pips, just let her sleep," he told his son. "She's usually not awake this time of night. It's nearly 2400, after all. I'm surprised you're not falling asleep yourself, it's way past your bedtime."

"I'm too excited to sleep, Daddy," Rann replied. "But I am a little tired."

Jason looked around and saw that Amber wasn't the only one taking advantage of a soft cushion to get a quick nap. Zachary and Sora were sleeping on one of the couches, and on another couch, Latoiya was sleeping with her head in Temika's lap while Jari slept on the other side of her, leaning against Temika's side. "I think we'd better pack everyone up and get them home, girls," he declared, looking at Jari. "The kids are starting to fall over."

"We're just waiting for Jys, babes," Myleena said, her hand on Danelle's shoulder as she looked into the crib.



Once Jyslin was cleared by Songa to leave, they took the infants out into the waiting room and let the large group there take turns admiring them in their crib, but not *too* long since Jyslin was tired. Everyone got their chance to look at the babies, however, which created a pretty curious sight as Zaa and Krirara stood side by side by the crib, which gave Jason a chance to compare both how similar and how different the two species were in their appearance. They had the same basic body shape, both had muzzles and animal ears and tails, but the radical difference in their legs and fur color made them quite strikingly different.

Despite the late hour, there was an even larger crowd outside the annex, which caused Aya to call in a skimmer to pick them up from the roof and take them home. Jason helped Aya lock the crib into an anchor as Jyslin was helped into the seat beside it by Tim and Symone, then he took a seat by his wife. *[Better tell that crowd we've left, Songa,]* he communed to her interface rather than send, to avoid disturbing the newborns. *[They might stay out there all night if you don't.]*

*[Now I see why you left by the rooftop. Coward,]* she accused in reply.

*[You're the one that always reminds me that the annex is sovereign territory. Well, woman, go be sovereign.]*

It was just past midnight when they finally got home. Ayama had made them a light meal, which Jyslin was more than happy to wolf down after they installed the newborns in the crib in their nursery. Jason activated the sensors and other child-monitoring features in the room now that the twins were using. If one of them cried or was in distress during the night, the sensors would warn them and they'd respond. Tim and Symone only stayed a few moments before heading back to their house to put Lyra in her own bed. Rann and Shya barely lasted ten minutes once they were home, crashing hard after all the excitement, to the point where Ayama had to put them to bed. That left Jason and Jyslin alone in the nursery, looking down at their infant daughters. Jyslin had a look only a mother could have, a look of pure love and contentment as she looked down at Bethany and Siyae. Jason held her against him with his arm, as much supporting as anything else, since she was *very* tired. *They're so beautiful*, she sent in a way the twins couldn't hear, since Jason and Jyslin were touching. A sending at that level couldn't even be heard by a listener.

*They look just like you, love, of course they're beautiful.*

She gave him a loving glance, then kissed him. *We're almost a third of the way there, she told him*

*To what?*

*To how many kids with you I want, she replied with a smile. I'm aiming for ten, but seven is a more realistic goal.*

Jason laughed. *Are you sure you can handle seven kids, love?*

*Of course I can, I'm the Duchess of Karis, she replied with insincere haughtiness. Besides, that's what friends are for. Free babysitters.*

*They have their own kids. And if I'm not mistaken, we might have a few more, he noted. I think Sheleese might be pregnant.*

*Did she tell you?*

*No, just call it a hunch, he replied. All the strip girls are trying to get pregnant again, so even if I'm wrong, it's certainly not because Sheleese isn't trying.*

Jyslin flashed him a weary but impish grin. *Sheleese wants your baby next, she warned.*

*She still won't let that go, will she?*

*Nope, Jyslin affirmed. I'm sure you'll enjoy her determination, she added flirtily.*

*I'll enjoy your determination more, he told her, which made her giggle.*

*Well, now that I have blackmail material, you can help me to bed, love. I'm sore and exhausted, and I think I need to get as much rest as I can. Two babies means getting woke up twice as often, she fretted.*

*We'll see how it goes. Bryn said that Riza and Miza always woke up at the same time to nurse, so it wasn't all that bad.*

Jyslin yawned. *Alright, love, take me to the bedroom. I have got to get some sleep.*

*I guess I'll let you, he sent playfully as he physically picked her up, which made her gasp. She wrapped her arms around him, they both looked*

down one more time at their daughters, and certain that they were sleeping and comfortable, Jason turned and carried his wife to her well-deserved rest.

# Chapter 10

*Daira, 33 Hiraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Friday, 10 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Daira, 33 Hiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Kosigi Lunar Station*

Yeri deserved a massive raise.

Jason and Myleena watched from a mobile platform as the heavy cruiser *Hailaeri* and the cruisers *Aravallo* and *Imai* towed a Strath-built hyperspace catapult close to the top-secret enclosed 3D dock. Several 3D members were there waiting for it, as well as a team from Myleena's Research Division. The Strath-Zegra Alliance had been the first and most eager to jump all over Yeri's offer to trade technology, and they'd traded one of their catapults and the technical specs for it in exchange for airskin shield technology, something that could run on their ion power systems. They had to use hard shields and utilize an airlock system of depressurizing and pressurizing to get ships in and out of docking and landing bays, and airskin technology would vastly speed up their logistics schedules by removing that delay in their system. The *Hailaeri* had delivered five different airskin systems of various sizes, from personal airskin units used in showers to industrial airskin units used in the ship entry doors of space stations and ships. They'd also included schematics written in their common language for their engineers to study and manufacturing manifests that told them exactly what parts they had to produce to build airskin units of their own, so they could get their own versions of the units in production quickly.

Jason considered it to be a more than fair trade. The Karinnes didn't give over any potential military technology, gave the Strath-Zegra Alliance something useful, and got something useful in exchange. The catapults

weren't all *that* useful because they could jump in real time and the interdictors would knock a catapulted ship out of hyperspace, but it was a new technology unknown to the home sector cluster, and if anyone could find a use for it, the Karinne Division of Research and Development were just the people for the job. They would take that catapult apart and study it, study the technical specs, learn how to build their own using both Karinne technology and standard Confederation technology, then prepare to release them as public archive data into the Academy once the threat of the Andromedans was eliminated once and for all and they could take the interdictors down. In that scenario, the catapults had real use by allowing empires to not be forced to upgrade their entire fleets to real-time in a hurry, using catapults to get their older ships around much faster.

But Myleena *really* wanted to get her hands in that catapult, because she had a feeling that the Karinnes themselves might be able to use catapult technology once Karinne tech was applied to it. She was fairly sure she could design a catapult that allowed a ship with Confederation-level engines to jump in real time using a catapult, which would make 95% of the Confederation's civilian and transport fleet viable without the need to upgrade to real-time engines once interdictors were no longer needed. Myleena was planning for the future they all wanted, when the Consortium and the Syndicate no longer threatened them, and they only needed interdictors at Karis and Terra.

The RK summit had been a moderate success. They'd established contact with all six empires, but outside of the Strath-Zegra, they hadn't gotten very far with most of them. The others were fairly wary of the Karinnes because of their vastly superior technology, seeing them as being nice to study them for future conquest, but the Strath-Zegra and the Gudara-Yood Partnership were much more open and interested in formal relations...which oddly enough were the only two empires in the RK sector currently not at war with anyone. The other four were all wary of the Karinnes, or at least they became wary when Yeri made it clear that the Karinnes don't trade military technology due to their strict oaths. All six empires asked to have a physical diplomatic office on Janja, so they had a "direct line" to the Karinnes, and also so they could have their diplomats there to passively study Karinne technology. Yeri didn't even have to ask Jason about that one. She told them no and instead ordered six tachyon

burst arrays from R&D that would let the Karinnes send messages back and forth with all six empires...just not in real time. At that distance, the average delay to the center of the RK sector with burst transmission tech would be 37 seconds. Since no empire in the sector had spatial tech, they couldn't employ resonant tightbeam to establish real-time communications from up to two sectors away.

The KMS had taken the diplomats back home, which would let them get there *long* before their supporting fleets, but that was their problem. The Karinnes told them one ship, they brought more, so the other ships now had to jump back with relativity delay while the diplomat's ship was taken straight back home. The KMS ships hadn't dawdled, either. They'd jumped in with the diplomat's ship in tow, released it, then turned around and jumped right back out.

*[This is gonna be so awesome,]* Myleena communed in excitement as the ships released their towing beams. Both of them were wearing armor, so they engaged their grav drives and drifted towards the monstrous device. It was vaguely like a Stargate, a large metal ring which contained all the relevant equipment within the ring itself. The device was big enough to allow a cruiser to fit through it, but there were much larger ones. The Strath-Zegra had simply given them one of their smaller commercial catapults for study and released technical specs for the larger ones, which were primarily military.

*[Just remember that you're already pregnant, so trying to have sex with it won't get you very far,]* Jason replied, which made her laugh.

*[I'm not Sevi, thank you very much,]* she retorted.

*[Speaking of pregnancy, when do you enter the window?]*

*[In about a month,]* she answered. *[I'll be happy to get her out of me.]*

*[She been bugging you again?]*

*[Oh yeah,]* she nodded as they reached the giant ring. *[She always wants to know more, more, more. I keep telling her I can't tell her more than what she already knows until after she's born, but she's a typical little brat. She wants what she wants.]*

*[She has a pretty unique outlook of the world, cousin.] Jason chuckled. [After all, you're teaching her things about the outside when she's not even born yet. Songa warned you not to go too far, else you'll screw up her development.]*

*[Tell her that,] she told him as Jenny, Bo, Tom, Luke, Leamon, Genvin, and Eraen reached them, armed with tools.*

*[And go against Songa? She told me that only you should be talking to Siyara, to keep from confusing her. I'm not that brave.]*

*[Siyara already understands the concept of others,] she answered. [And she eavesdrops on open sending all the time and asks me about what she hears.]*

*[Kyri never did that,] Jason mused. [After Yana taught her how to close her mind, she was more or less happy to enjoy the silence.]*

*[Well, Siyara's pretty nosy, just like her mom,] Myleena grinned. [The hardest part is when people share images or sensations through sending, since Siyara really can't do much but hear and feel in here,] she told him, patting the round ribbed plating on her special "maternity" armor. [That's what makes her so curious. She knows there's a whole big world out here filled with things to explore and learn, and she almost feels like she's in prison 'til she's born.]*

*[Yeah, that certainly sounds like a daughter of yours,] he agreed. "You guys ready to crack this thing open?" he said aloud as the 3D and Research teams reached them.*

*"We're ready, Jayce," Bo grinned.*

*"Then I'll leave you to it, I have to get home. I just wanted to see them bring it in," he declared. "Jys is probably thinking I'm getting out of diaper changing duty."*

Things had gone well so far. The twins seemed fairly mellow, didn't cry as much as Rann did at that age, but since there were two of them, it took a lot of Jyslin's time. Ayama and Surin helped a great deal with about everything but nursing, which was actually in their job description. They were both expert caregivers and babysitters. Jason had been pitching in as much as he could, taking over when Jyslin had to go do Paladin stuff, the

two of them trading off caring for their daughters as they both continued to pursue their very busy lives. The business of the house was as unignorable as the duties of an IBL owner. Added to that was the demands of Dahnai that they come over to her palace...but that actually wasn't all that bad. They'd been putting their three babies on a skimmer and flying over, and just spending time together even as they spent time with their new children. Jason had been bringing all the kids over as well, and they'd been having lots of fun playing with Sirri and Maer, who had been thoroughly enjoying what for them was an extended vacation.

Dahnai had been fully recovered from her pregnancy for quite a while, as was Jyslin, and was near the end of a strenuous exercise regimen to get her figure back. She was spending hours in the gym every day under her doctor's observation to make sure she didn't go overboard, working off all the weight she gained during the pregnancy and also re-toning her usually washboard stomach after months of it being distended by pregnancy. She was only half a *konn* from her target weight, back to being muscularly sleek and sexy, but she hadn't gotten the muscle tone back in her stomach that she wanted, so she was still hard at it. Jyslin wasn't quite going that far, but since recovering from her delivery, she'd been working out with Dahnai to lose what little weight she gained carrying her own twins. Most of what Dahnai's maternity leave was about for her was getting back into shape, and getting to spend lots of time with her children that lived with fosters.

Saelle was enjoying her job as foster. Raisha and Miyai were almost like the kids she'd never had to her, which seemed so *wrong* to him that someone so good with kids had never had any of her own. But she'd admitted to Jason, caring for the twins had made her *keenly* aware of the fact that she had no babies of her own. She wasn't particularly trying to get pregnant, but she'd told Jason that she'd be happy if it happened. She rather liked Evin and felt he'd be a good father at least for the eight or nine years she'd be with him. She fully intended to return to Karis once she completed her foster duties to Dahnai, no matter what Dahnai thought about it, and now she was hoping she'd come back with one or two children of her own. The protections in the palace for Raisha and Miyai would also serve to protect *her* kids and raising her own children in the palace would be a unique experience for them.



She was contemplating stealing Evin, to be honest about it. she *really* liked him and was considering asking him to emigrate to Karis with her when their marriage concluded.

Jason caught a very special ride back down to the surface, on board the KMS *Javelin*. He stood beside Luye's chair as they navigated out of Kosigi and hanging on the wall was the ship's charter of commission and flag. The ship was too small to have a ready room for the captain, but the captain's quarters were just off the bridge, a rather cramped one room quarters that were still larger than anyone else's quarters on the ship. Unwilling to place those two ceremonial objects in a private space, Luye had instead opted to display them on the bridge proper, and Jason rather liked her decision. It had been officially commissioned just yesterday, once the extensive inspections had been finished. The ship had, quite simply, blown the doors off everyone. It performed even better than projected, and now that it had finished its shakedown, it showed that it was rock solid. It had no hidden problems, no issues to be found after they all but took the ship apart to inspect it, and now it was the first of the new frigate class ships officially commissioned for service. Dellin had run with it after the engineering division passed the frigate, and the keels for the next 80 frigates were laid just yesterday, beginning the shipbuilding process. It would take about 16 days to build a frigate once all its parts were being mass produced, and half of that time would be involved in installing the particle beam projector.

But the ships were everything that they hoped they would be. They were fast, agile, and powerful. The particle beam made it a viable threat to virtually any ship, possibly even those death star ships, and the CMS allowed them to get into an attacking position with little threat to themselves. If its speed and agility failed it, the ship had just enough armor and shields to allow it to take a few hits from anything not a Torsion weapon, holding out until it could recloak, and then it was all but invisible to most sensors. It was a small ship that was relatively easy to build compared to the bigger line vessels yet still packed a serious punch when the guns started blazing. Juma wanted at least five frigates coming off the docks every day once the production schedules were normalized, to quickly build their numbers, and Navii had already changed KMS tactics and strategy to include frigates in the task force, which would give the task force more options when it came to battling an enemy. And Jason couldn't

argue with them. The frigates fulfilled a dual role of both stealth and power, and along with the destroyers, they would form the backbone of the KMS.

It wasn't the cruisers or the battleships that was the core foundation of the KMS, it was their smallest line ships. Navii had once stated that it put more firepower into a theater to build 20 destroyers over a single battleship, and she was entirely correct. The big ships would have their purpose in the task force and an important role to play in naval combat, but the mainstay of the fleet would be the destroyer, and now also the frigate, that anonymous small line vessel that took it to the enemy with their powerful weapons and could take on all comers.

"So how does it feel to be official, Luye?" Jason asked as they cleared the smaller doors. Kosigi's rotation put the small doors more in line with Karis than the capitol doors, so they'd gone that way.

"Like it's about time," she replied. "This ship has been nothing but a dream since I took command. I'm overjoyed that we're not a prototype anymore. This is the first of the frigates, and it's *mine*."

"Until I take it away from you," he said with a playful smile.

"You really don't want to make it home, do you, your Grace?" she said seriously, which made the navigator splutter to contain a laugh.

"You keep me from getting home on time, you answer to *Jyslin*," he threatened.

"More speed, navigator!" Luye barked, which made Jason laugh.

What made the frigate unique was that it was capable of a water landing by the strip, which no other line vessel could do. A destroyer was almost small enough, but it drew too much draft when in the water to line up a hatch with the dock. The pilot did a great job of landing the frigate and getting the forward port hatch close enough for Jason and his two guards to step down, then the frigate pulled up and backed off, water cascading off of it after the pilot ionized the hull to repel water molecules. "That is one pretty ship," Jason noted as it ascended back towards Kosigi.

*It does look very graceful, Shen agreed. But it's even more fearsome for what it can do than how it looks. I saw the sims for it.*

*And since when have you been snooping in the KMS mainframe, Shen?*

*Since the fact that Juma and Navii allow us to study all the data in the KMS tactical mainframe, she answered. Captain Aya is a student of military history and is one of Navii's military advisors. We all do have formal tactical combat training, Jason. It's a job requirement.*

*I knew Aya and Navii were friends, but I didn't know that she gave Navii advice.*

*Navii is smart enough to know that she doesn't know everything, Jason. She seeks advice from those she trusts, just as you do.*

*Yeah, I'm not arguing that point, Jason noted as they walked up the wooden walkway from the dock to the wooden path that ran from one end of the strip to the other just off the beach, which was the main thoroughfare used by the residents of the strip. Jys, I'm home. Where are you?*

*She's taking a nap, your Grace, Ayama answered openly. The babies are asleep as well.*

*Well, I guess I'll knock out some paperwork 'til she wakes up, then. Could you bring me some lunch up to my home office, please?*

*Of course.*

The Kizzik were only halfway done with their plan to reorganize his office, but it had already done a *huge* amount to reduce his workload. He wasn't looking at an inbox with 1000 or more items in it every morning anymore. He was still doing a lot of work, but at least now he wasn't dreading waking up every morning because of all the work he'd have to do. And every day, his workload became less and less as their new system took hold. At the rate things were going, he'd only be working maybe ten hours a day and either clearing out his box or coming pretty damn close to it.

But the new system did keep him informed, and that was mainly through a twice a day briefing from Chirk. She gathered up all the important information and organized it, then presented it to him when he came in first thing in the morning and again right after lunch. Her hologram was active and waiting for him as he sat at his home office desk, and as soon as he was settled, Chirk gave him the afternoon briefing. He didn't let lunch interrupt her, taking a plate of spaghetti and eating as he listened to Chirk go down her list.

One thing did catch his attention. *“The CBIM installation is complete,”* she relayed. *“It was finished about an hour ago. All the support equipment is installed, and it only awaits the CBIM core and its primary systems. Frodak Rull further reports that the oye seed has sprouted. He sends a picture.”* An image of the site, with a lovely garden full of flowers from about 20 different planets, appeared to the left of Chirk’s hologram. It was built in a circular style with the flowers arrayed so their various colors created a nearly mesmerizing spiral pattern when seen from above. At the center, in a circle of bare earth some 20 shakra across and ringed by a very fancy ornate metal fence was a tiny little green sprout with three tiny golden leaves. The oye tree had indeed sprouted.

“Very nice,” Jason said. “I was starting to wonder when it was going to sprout. Frodak’s going to seal the building, right?”

Chirk nodded. *“Brall is on site overseeing the sealing of the building.”*

“Good, that’s where he needs to be. Get in touch with Myri and arrange to have a detachment of guards on site at all times.”

*“That has already been arranged. A garrison of 40 guards and five Gladiators will be on site at all times until the building is reactivated.”*

“That’ll be in about six months,” Jason noted. “That reminds me. Get a status update on the second CBIM core construction preparations. They should have the second growth tank built by now.”

*“I will compile the data and have it ready in tomorrow morning’s report.”*

“Good.”

Chirk went over the rest of her itinerary, and then let Jason get to work. He worked through about 40 items in his inbox waiting for Jyslin to wake up, at least until the kids got back from school. Rann, Shya, and Danelle were downstairs, getting lunch from Ayama and Surin in the kitchen, and the sudden increase in sendings told him the other kids were back as well *What are you doing home so early, little man?* Jason sent when he realized it was barely past lunchtime.

*Half day at school today, Daddy,* he answered. *Why are you home?*

Jason had to laugh. *I had to go to Kosigi earlier today, and didn't feel like going back to the office,* he answered. *I should be out of the office in a little bit. Just do me a favor and let Mommy sleep, she's taking a nap.*

*We have to go to Miss Ayuma's after lunch anyway, Daddy. TK practice.* That wasn't that hard, since Ayuma only lived about four houses past the gate into the strip.

*And how have your exercises been going, Shya?*

*I'm doing okay,* she answered. *Ayuma thinks I might have some ability, but she said it's sometimes hard to tell with kids my age. She works with me every day while Ranny does his practice exercises.*

*That's good to hear. We're going to the island this afternoon, so don't make any long-range plans.*

*Okay,* all three sent in unison.

After lunch, the kids headed for their lessons with Ayuma, leaving the house quiet again. But since everyone knew he was home, he wasn't alone for long. Temika came into his office, wearing a blouse and blazer with smart slacks. *Hey Jayce,* she greeted as she closed the door. *I have those projections Chirk said you wanted. I figured I'd just bring 'em straight to you.*

*Thanks Mika. You can just dump them on the house computer, I'll get to them eventually.*

*Where's Jys?*

*Sleeping.*

*I'm surprised she's letting a chance like this go by,* she sent with a slightly naughty tilt to her thought.

Jason looked at her. *Is this Temika I hear making innuendo?* he teased.

She flipped him off, which made him chuckle. *Just so you know, Kumi's taking the next two months off. She's starting to get worried that she hasn't had the baby yet, since she's so late in the window. She's almost overdue. She thinks maybe it's work stress, so she's starting her maternity now instead of when she delivers.*

*I can't blame her for that, Jason noted. You ready to run the office?*

*Sure am, she nodded. We've got Rahne almost trained up to where we want her, so she'll be taking over a lot of responsibility in the office.*

*That's good to hear. Rahne certainly loves working there.*

*She's a natural, Temika told him. Of course, so are the Beryans and Shio that Kumi hired, she added with a grin. We're still making so much money that we don't really know what to do with it all.*

*That'll change when you start seeing the maintenance budget for the Naval fleet we have to build, he replied. So don't do anything with that money. We're gonna need it.*

*I know, Kumi keeps me in the loop. Anyway, I'm gonna go change and hit the beach. See you later, Jayce.*

*Later Mika.*

Jason did consider Kumi's actions enough to talk to Songa about it. *[I've given her a thorough exam, dear, and nothing's wrong. She's fine, the baby's fine. She's just a late window girl, that's all,]* Songa assured him. *[Some women just deliver late. She has five more days in her window. If she goes to the end of it, then we'll discuss some options.]*

*[Okay, long as she's alright, I guess I'll leave it up to you.]*

*[And what would you do otherwise, you silly man?]* Songa replied playfully.

*[Assert my authority and order the baby to leave the premises,]* he replied, which made her laugh.

*[I don't think it works that way, dear.]*

*[I just haven't tried it yet,]* he replied with aplomb.

Jyslin woke up just after the kids were taken over to Ayuma's house for their TK lessons, padding into his office wearing nothing but a lazy smile. She leaned over and kissed him, then sat on the edge of the desk facing him, nearly in the same pose that Cybi often used, leaning on her hand. *The twins still asleep?* Jason asked.

She nodded without replying, then yawned. *They need to wake up soon. I have some stuff to go over with Frinia over at the office before we go over to Dahnai's, and they need to nurse before I go.*

*I think I can bottle feed them, silly.*

*I know you can, but you're not a mother, baby. You don't know how right it feels to nurse my children.*

*So, it's all about you,* he teased, poking her in the belly, which made her flinch and laugh. *Trying to keep me from my daughters, that's what this is all about.*

*They're my daughters until they need their diapers changed, then they become your daughters,* she replied with a grin. *We've got a really big match coming up. We can get back to .500 if we beat the Centurions. At this point in the season, both me and Frinia consider it a major milestone.*

*At least it's a home game,* Jason mused. *Just remember that we're going over to Dahnai's for dinner.*

*What, are you trying to throw me out here?* she asked lightly, grinning down at him.

*Yes,* he answered honestly. *I'm trying to at least see the bottom of my inbox today, and that's never gonna happen with you sitting with your tits in my face. So go do something less distracting,* he ordered with a shooing motion of his hand.

*Don't order me around, buster, I'm the woman around here,* she threatened with a smile. *You may rule the house, but don't ever forget who rules you.*

*Make a choice, love. Either leave or suffer the consequences.*

*And what consequences might those be?* she asked, leaning over a little more to put her breasts much more in his face.

*The kind that require you to take a shower afterwards,* he answered.

*Pfft, that's a reward, not a consequence,* she declared, sliding off his desk and reaching for the tail of his shirt.

Jyslin wasn't the only one taking a shower about an hour later, but it was very fun and delightful way to get sidetracked from trying to clear out the major items from his inbox. And with the twins asleep and the kids at lessons, they had all kinds of time without worrying about being interrupted. Myleena marched into the shower just as they finished up, drying off near the soaking tub. *Hey guys*, she greeted. *Jayce, you gotta come to 3D. We got news.*

*News or news?*

News, she grinned.

*Why do you always pull this shit when I'm busy doing something else, Myli?* Jyslin asked sourly.

*Because we kicked you out of 3D when you decided batchi was more important,* Myleena replied with a grin.

*Bitch.*

*You know it.*

Myleena didn't discuss why he was going to 3D as they flew there in Jason's personal skimmer, Dera and Ryn riding in the back seats, but they did go over some of the other projects that Myleena as working on. It kept them busy until Jason landed on the pad beside the nondescript warehouse beside the main Shimmer Dome complex that held the shady and mysterious operation known only as 3D. Everyone was in except Jyslin, everyone working on their current projects, be them military or...military. 3D's main focus was the development of military-applied technology to protect the house, though they did work on some non-military projects. Jason called everyone to the main table in the center of the open floor of the warehouse. "Okay, I'm here, so what's so important that Myli would come get me in person?"

"Two things," Myleena said, touching her gestalt and causing a hologram to appear over the table. "First off, Leamon finally made some progress on the Teryon rail shell problem."

"Yeah," the tall black man said, standing up. "I've been working on the power problem for a while, which is all I ever seem to do," he added, looking over at Myleena.



“Hey, you’re the best at dealing with annoying power problems, Leamon,” she grinned in reply.

“Me and Tiya managed to come up with a new power coupler that keeps the cannon from feeding back into a ship’s power supply when it fires a Teryon shell,” Leamon said, using his interface to display an image of a power coupler. Tiya was one of Myleena’s Black Ops researchers that she lured to Karis. Jason often found it funny that some of the smartest researchers in the Imperium came here to work with very average Terrans. Leamon had been an electronics technician before the subjugation, he wasn’t a genius, and now he was a member of one of the most elite research and development branches in the known galaxy. Luke had been a mechanic before the subjugation. Bo had worked for Verizon as a lineman, installing fiber optic cable on telephone poles. Jenny had been a *waitress*. But they had all proved back in the Legion days that they were smart enough to do things the Legion way, and that had translated over when 3D was formed. All of them had the most important training of them all, “do or die” training from their days in the Legion fighting against Trillane. “It almost acts like a diode, Jayce. It only allows EM power flow in one direction without interfering with plasma flow, and it’s specifically designed to stop the feedback the Teryon shell causes when it’s fired.”

“That’ll definitely help,” Jason said with a nod. “Have you tested it yet?”

“We’ve tested it on our deep space cannon, but we need your approval to test it on a ship.”

“I’ll talk to Juma and arrange it. Now what’s the other thing you have?”

Jenny and Eraen stood up. “We made a breakthrough on the diffuser project,” Jenny declared. “We finally hit 75%.”

“That’s great, guys!” Jason said brightly. “What about the other problems?”

“We decided to work on the power first, and once we had a 75% unit, then work on the other problems. But we’re there, Jayce. We did full testing on our 75% diffuser, and it’s solid. Now we just have to solve the power problem and figure out how to make it directional, and we’re there.”

“Outstanding! That’s a full five months before you thought it’d take!”

“Thank Eraen for that,” she smiled, looking at her partner on the project. “He figured out that we could use a spatial harmonic to boost the diffuser’s power.”

“Good work guys, seriously,” Jason said, slapping his hands on the table. He was about to say something else, but a small toy Gladiator landed on the table and started marching around. It was exactly like Rann’s toy, a perfect scale replica of a Gladiator, even with its own set of flight pods. “You been making toys again, Myli?”

“That’s not a toy,” Bo said as the little robotic unit started towards him when he held out his hand. “Remember that faulty chip we pulled out of Cybi’s I/O tree and you let me take to work with? It’s installed in this,” he said, patting the Gladiator on the head. “Meet Rook, 3D mascot and general all-around helpful little guy. I’ve had it installed in this scale model for about a month now, and it roams around the shop learning things. It also likes to help out, so it’s become the shop gopher. We ask it to bring something, it brings it to us.”

“Really?”

“I’ve been sending you reports on the work I’ve done with the chip, Jayce. I guess you haven’t been reading them,” Bo grinned. “The chip is up to a first-grade educational level and learns more every day. I had it installed in a flying camera pod, but it wasn’t challenging for the chip for very long. So, we upgraded it to this Gladiator replica, where it’s had to learn how to manipulate the limbs and use the toy’s extra systems. I’m still not entirely sure if it’s self-aware, but it does *learn*.”

“All biogenic chips learn,” Jason said easily. “Has it been communicating?”

“It can use the toy’s speaker to speak, and it can commune, but it’s not that much different from any commune with a chip in that class, Jayce,” Myleena answered. “It doesn’t have much sophistication, so you have to keep things very simple. I have some hardwired limiters in the toy’s circuitry to keep it from getting out of control. It also can’t leave this warehouse. It’s not ready to go outside yet.”

“Does it at least respond in ways that aren’t baseline for a chip in that class?”

“If you mean does it ask oddball questions, yeah,” she grinned. “It *does* seem very curious, but that’s also an ingrained programmed tendency of a biogenic chip. Bo’s done pretty well with it. He treated it like a newborn infant at first, taught it Faey, taught it to read, and now it’s gotten educated enough to control that Gladiator. It also accesses CivNet. I keep an eye on the usage logs, and it seems to focus on educational programs and sites. It’s been teaching itself algebra lately,” she said, patting the little Gladiator on the head when it walked by. “It certainly wants to learn, so we let it learn. Say hello to Jason, Rook,” she said.

“*Hello, Jason,*” the toy replied, turning to look at him. “*Are you well today?*”

“I’m just fine, thank you for asking,” Jason replied, looking down at the little blue toy. “Have you been enjoying your time in the Gladiator?”

“*I fell down a lot before I learned how to work the legs,*” it answered.

“Who gave you the name Rook?”

“*I am an RK-47 class master processor. Bo decided that Rook sounded better.*”

“It sounds less sterile,” Jason chuckled. “Sounds like some of Rook’s encoded programming is intact,” he noted to Myleena.

She nodded. “It still has its onboard memory and programming, but the mutation allows it to ignore it. What’s interesting to me is Rook doesn’t download data, it *learns* it the same way we do. The chip’s lattice pathways are growing and evolving, almost like the synapses in the brain.”

“*Downloading and assimilating data goes against Bo’s instruction. I am to learn, and to download data is not learning.*”

Jason was impressed by its reasoning ability, to reach a conclusion like that. That certainly put a mark in the *sentient* column for the chip. “Well, then, Rook, you just keep learning,” Jason told it. “And I’ll pay more attention to your status reports, Bo,” he chuckled in addition. “Alright, guys, what ideas do you have to start working on the power and directional problems?”

Jason spent nearly three hours as the entire group discussed possible approaches to fixing the diffuser’s major issues, completely losing track of

time and enjoying every second of it. Jenny and Eraen put out their ideas for solving the problems, then the whole shop debated them, even argued about them a little bit. The problems were tricky ones, and as usual for the tricky problems, everyone discussed it. He was there so long that Dahnai started pestering him over the biogenic network, ignoring his replies that he was very busy and he'd be there when he got there. He had to all but block her as they finished up their discussion, and once they were done, Jason, Dera, and Ryn got in his skimmer and headed for Dahnai's palace.

He smacked Dahnai on the shoulder when she met him at the pad, which made her laugh. *What was that for?*

*When I'm busy, it means I'm busy*, he told her in a bit of a surly mental state. *I don't tell you that just because I don't want to talk to you. When I don't want to talk to you, I'll tell you so straight up.*

*Is that so?* she asked with a smile. *And what were you doing?*

*Things I can't tell you about*, he answered honestly.

Everyone else was already on the island, which wasn't quite as easy now that life was getting back to normal. Symone was back on duty and had returned to her job training Gladiator pilots, Tim was spending his days at home working from his own home office so he could take care of Lyra, and both Jyslin and Jason had jobs that didn't really let them take much maternity leave. Dahnai had taken advantage of her ability to bring guests to her palace over the last month or so, since it seemed that every day, this Grand Duchess or that INS Admiral was relaxing by the pool or walking through the garden, but today it was nothing but family. And they *were* one large family now. Dahnai was now related to him by virtue of Rann's marriage to Shya, *and* she was his *amu dorai*, which held at least a little weight in about every aspect but legal. There was no legal status for an *amu*, but it was widely considered that *amu* did have a relationship of a sort. It just wasn't official. Rann and Shya were swimming in the pool with Jyslin and Evin, Maer and Sirri were playing a holo-game with Symone, Saelle was lounging on a pool chair, laying on her belly with the large *jaingi* mey prominent on her back, and Kellin and Tim were conspicuously missing. Saelle and Evin were considered family since they were the fosters for the twins, but Dahnai was much closer to Saelle than she was to Sirri's fosters. Saelle wasn't just the foster of Miyai and Raisha, she was also one

of Dahnai's closer friends and a trusted advisor. That gave her a very envied position in the palace as always having Dahnai's ear.

*Hey guys,* Jason greeted as he reached the pool deck. Two of Dahnai's servants were walking around with trays of drinks, and six of Dahnai's white-armored guards stood silent vigil around the edge of the pool deck. *How's the water?*

*Just fine, Daddy,* Rann replied as he and Shya swam towards the deep end. *What took you so long?*

*I had some serious business to take care of,* he answered as he accepted a drink from a smiling servant. *Where's Tim and Kellin?*

*Oh, they're out having a little fun,* Symone sent in a coquettish fashion, which told Jason *exactly* what those two were doing. And no doubt Symone told Tim to go do it.

*And where are all the babies?*

*Believe it or not, all five are sleeping,* Saelle answered without opening her eyes. *Miyai and Raisha just nursed a bit ago, they always sleep after nursing. I'm keeping an eye on them.*

*Got a monitor up in the nursery?*

*More like three, and there are two maids and four guards stationed in the nursery at all times,* Dahnai answered for Saelle.

*I'm surprised you don't have guests over,* he noted to Dahnai as he sat at a table near the pool.

*I will,* she answered. *I invited Carissa to the palace for dinner and to talk about a few things. She's been very helpful since the cloning incident.* Carissa had been more or less blackmailed by the IBI to be the front to buy that cloning equipment, and ever since then, she'd been Dahnai's best friend in the whole world ever. Dahnai didn't blame her for what happened, but she also wasn't letting Carissa get away quite so easily either. She'd leveraged Carissa into some deals that were more advantageous to Merrane than Luralle.

*Sounds like I'll be leaving early,* he noted with a dry undertone to his thought.

*I thought you liked Carissa.*

*I do, but I'm not getting involved in Imperium politics. I just got free of that cesspool. I'm not wading back into it.*

She gave him a dirty look as both Saelle and Jyslin laughed.

Jason decompressed by playing with his son and all-but-daughter in the pool with Jyslin and Evin, and were joined by Dahnai and Saelle not long afterward, the kids making sure that they didn't do any boring or silly things like talk about politics. After swimming a while, they went out and took a long walk around the island as Maer talked about his upcoming new semester at school, and his need to choose a focus for his studies now that he was no longer getting private tutoring. *I just can't decide between math and biology*, he fretted a little as they walked through the carefully tended woods on the northeast side of the island. All the trees there were Draconis species, and Dahnai had also imported several animals to live in those woods that the palace staff fed. And she was pretty broad in her tastes of animals. She'd seen Terran peacocks in pictures, and now there were quite a few of them wandering the palace grounds. The animals in the woods were all "cutesy" herbivores that could live on a planet that had no real ecosystem, a planet with no insects except those specifically imported for specific tasks such as honeybees, only a very few species of plants, and even fewer species of animals. The animals living in these woods didn't need that ecosystem to survive, for they lived entirely off what the trees provided them and the water from the artificial stream that the Makati engineers had built through the area. Every single one of those trees had been transplanted from Draconis, yet the woods looked as if they'd been here for decades. That said a lot of the skill of the Makati landscapers that Red Horn kept on staff. Those animals had a nice cushy life, Jason supposed, living on the island on a planet with no natural predators, where if the trees weren't feeding them enough, the wrangler Dahnai kept on staff would feed them. They truly had no worries or cares, and in a way, Jason could envy them a little bit.

*Just go with what interests you most, Maer*, Saelle told him.

*That's just it, I like both advanced mathematics and biology.*

*Then study both, Kellin told him. There's nothing saying you have to study only one.*

*Well, the school said it was best if I did. They said I had to have a major, that I need to pick one and focus my studies there, then I can come back and study the other. They said it would be too much work if I tried to study both. I just can't decide which to study first.*

*And you can't decide? Dahnai asked, to which he shook his head. Alright then, I'll decide for you, that way you don't have to worry about it, she told him. How does that sound?*

*Well, okay, I guess, he answered.*

*Good. So, I decide that you'll study art history.*

*But I don't like art history!*

*You let me decide, so you're stuck with it now, she grinned at him.*

*Maer gave her a look, which made Jason chuckle. That's not fair, Mom.*

*Life isn't fair, son, she replied easily. Now, you still want me to decide for you?*

*No. I'll study biology first, he replied, in a bit of a huff.*

*Dahnai just glanced at Jason and winked. Well, that crisis is averted, she sent grandly, patting her son on the shoulder.*

*Your Majesty, Raisha is awake, one of the guards sent. I believe she's hungry.*

*Well, back to reality, Dahnai sent with a chuckle.*

It was back to reality in more than one way for them, because Carissa Luralle arrived not long after they got back to the house. She was a very tall woman with dusky blue skin and a slender, nearly thin athletic frame—she was an outdoors type, very active—white-gold hair that she wore very long and straight, and with stormy blue eyes. She was a very handsome young lady, but often wore a stern expression that downplayed her natural beauty. Carissa was the youngest of all the Highborn Grand Duchesses. For that matter, she was the youngest Grand Duchess period now that Jason was no longer part of the *Siann*. She was only 31 years old but had sat on the throne

of her house for 11 years, before she was even considered an adult. Her mother had died in a skimmer accident and had died in one of the worst ways in Jason's opinion. She'd been killed when the power plant in her skimmer exploded en route back to Draconis, and it had ruptured the hull of the skimmer and decompressed the passenger compartment. Without the power plant, the emergency pressure shields couldn't activate, and Drevara, her husband, Carissa's 11 year old brother, and the skimmer's flight crew all died from decompression...and death by vacuum exposure was one *painful* way to die. There were still rumors that Drevara Luralle's death had not been an accident, though every investigation showed that it was just that. It was just a random accident, like how his mother had died. Even in the ultra-high technology Imperium, accidents could and did happen, and people died as a result. Carissa was unmarried, pretty, and was smart enough not to get involved in politics as much as possible. She was one of the few Grand Duchesses that Jason enjoyed talking to in the *Siann*, since she rarely had an ulterior motive.

"Your Majesty, Jason," she said in greeting as a servant brought her to the sitting room where Dahnai was nursing Raisha. "Hello again, Duchess Symone, Duchess Jyslin," she added with a smile.

"You're early, Carissa," Dahnai noted as she carefully cradled her daughter to her breast.

"I finished my work a little earlier than I expected. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, it just means you're going to have to wait a little while for dinner. That and me and Jason have a council meeting in about half an hour, but that shouldn't last too long. I'm sure you can just hang out 'til we're done."

"It's been a while, Carrie," Symone said lightly as she held Lyra, who was awake but not hungry from the looks of it. "So, what happened with that hot guy from house Vinalle?"

Carissa laughed. "That was nothing but a cloakroom encounter, Symone," she said. That term referred to the random and sometimes anonymous sex that happened in the back rooms of the palace between nobles attending court. It earned that nickname from back when it literally



took place in the cloak room, the large room where they stored visitors' cloaks and coats and hats, but now it happened in the many bedrooms peppered through the common areas of the palace, which were there literally just so nobles would have someplace to go to have sex. At about any time during court, maybe twenty of those rooms were in use by nobles attending court and enjoying a bit of a diversion.

Faey nobility in general and Grand Duchesses in particular were a *very* wanton and bandy lot, much worse than most Faey commoner women, and since they were Faey, they were not only proud about their sexual exploits, they sometimes took things a bit further than even the rather worldly Jason considered proper. There wasn't a single Grand Duchess in the *Siann* that hadn't had sex with one of the many male nobles that were brought to court or palace servants, Dahnai herself had been well known for bedding noble men that attended court—no man was allowed by law to say no to Dahnai—and there were quite a few lurid tales of the sex parties and orgies that took place in some Grand Duchesses' manor houses in Dracora or back on their home planets. Dahnai's mother had been almost famous, or infamous depending on one's point of view, for her extravagant and wildly over the top sex parties and had probably had sex with every male noble in the Imperium above the rank of Zarinen. She had considered it her Imperial privilege to lay every man in the *Siann* with enough rank to matter.

Dahnai was considered quite strait-laced and conservative by most Faey noble women because she didn't host or attend orgies or other sex parties. Then again, they didn't know Dahnai very well, or they'd understand why she didn't. Dahnai had a *very* strong libido, like most Faey women her age, she just far preferred to have her sex in private. She considered it the one thing she could do without the guards watching her.

Most people had *no idea* what really went on in the palace on court days, they only saw what the roaming *Courtwatch* cameras picked up. They also had no idea how the nobles of the *Siann* used sex as a political tool as much as a personal pursuit, much like the ancient Romans did.

"So, still haven't found a guy worth marrying?" Symone asked with a grin.

"I've been looking, but so far nothing," she said as she sat after Dahnai motioned at a chair. "I'm not all that interested in marrying for a political

alliance, so that lets me take my time.”

“Woah, what is this? A Grand Duchess not using marriage as a political tool? I’m shocked,” Jason said dryly.

“I’m in the same position as the Empress, Jason, just from the other end,” she told him. “There’s not much gain in it for another house to marry into mine, and those that *do* aren’t the houses I want to be associated with. Hell, my house is smaller than most of the lower houses,” she shrugged. “And since I don’t *need* anything like that, it means I can marry who I want, not who’s best for the house.”

“See? Now this is the way marriage should work,” Jason said, pointing at Carissa as he stared at Dahnai.

“Oh, hush, you,” she retorted. “Rann and Shya happen to be very happy together. And why do you think I married Kellin, you dink?”

“I thought you married him for his dick, Dahnai,” Symone teased.

“I could get that without marrying him,” she snorted in reply, which made Jyslin chuckle. “You forget, Symone, I’m the *Empress*. No man is allowed to say no to me. It’s the *law*.”

“Yet another reason why I’m so glad I’m not subject to your law anymore,” Jason injected.

“I already own that big dick of yours, sweetheart,” she said with an acidic smile. “I don’t *need* my crown to get you between my legs.”

“So sure of herself,” Jason noted to Jyslin.

“This is all the proof I need, baby,” she told him lightly, pointing at Raisha. “By the way, you’re staying over tonight, and guess which garden you’re going to be planting.”

“Well, if I *must*. I guess it’d be best to get that unpleasant business out of the way as quickly as possible,” he sighed in a melodramatic fashion. Symone burst out laughing then Dahnai picked up an empty glass with her free hand and threw it at him.

At least Carissa’s presence wasn’t a drag on the evening. Jason *did* like her, so she fit in very well as they first relaxed around the pool, which was Dahnai’s favorite spot at her summer palace, then had a very large and

enjoyable dinner inside. Dahnai did talk a little politics and business with her after they came back from the Confederate Council meeting, but all in all, Jason could say that he enjoyed the evening even with Carissa being there. He wouldn't have if it was a much less grounded Grand Duchess, like perhaps Emae.

Holding through with her threat, Jason spent the night with Dahnai in her bedroom, with Kellin spending the night over with Jyslin. She'd been very romantic since having the twins, almost as if she was making up for that last month of pregnancy when she hadn't been as interested. It was past midnight when Jason woke up because of his gestalt, which was sending out a communal "beep" that a Generation would hear but no one else would, an alarm of sorts that went off when he had a very important message waiting for him. Instead of putting it on, he instead accessed it from where it sat, beside Dahnai's jack interface, and saw that it was the military command center that had been trying to get in touch with him. *[Who was calling me, and what did you want?]* he called back.

Shey's voice sounded in his head as she answered. *[Jason, we have something of a situation,]* she told him.

*[Summarize, Shey.]*

*[Ten minutes ago, we received an ultimatum from the Hrathrari Dominion, your Grace. If we don't give them the technology behind real-time jump engines and Stargate technology, they'll declare war. To back up their threat, they've jumped a fleet of approximately one thousand ships towards RJ-44,]* she noted in a dry, unimpressed tone.

*[Why the fuck would they do that?]*

*[The usual reasons, I imagine. Someone thinks her tits are too big to fit in her shirt,]* Shey replied lightly.

*[Mother fuckers,]* Jason growled. *[And just what do they think they're going to do when they reach the interdictor? Spend a year cruising in under sublight?]* he asked acidly.

*[We'll find out in about ten minutes. Miaari was already told, and she has several hyperspace probes heading for Hrathrari territory to get detailed scans of the fleets. But we thought you might want to know too. Since you're in charge and all,]* she added as an afterthought.

*[I'm so glad you remember who pays your salary, woman,]* Jason retorted. *[Let me get dressed and I'll be over in a little bit.]*

*[No reason for that, Jason,]* Shey told him. *[Why don't you just merge and use one of the holographic emitters? General Myri's doing it right now herself. And I doubt you want to disturb her Majesty.]*

Jason was silent maybe a moment too long. *[And how do you know I'm with Dahnai?]*

*[Because I'm not an idiot,]* she replied smoothly.

*[Someone wants to spend a couple of days scrubbing garbage cans.]*

*[Oh come now, you're not going to punish me for the truth, are you?]* she replied with exaggerated innocence.

*[When it comes to you, Shey, yes,]* he retorted, which made her laugh.

Jason put on his gestalt and settled back into the bed, admitting that it wouldn't be very easy to get out of it without waking up Dahnai. She was half-sprawled on top of him, sleeping peacefully. He effortlessly merged up into the biogenic network, moved into the military mainframe, then had it project out a hologram of himself. He did it the way Cybi did, projecting out a pseudo-nude image of himself as he really looked, just without detail...and without genitalia. He then merged to a nearby floating camera pod in a way that let him see from the hologram's point of view. Myri was indeed present in holographic form, which was her with her hair pulled back and nude, sitting at the desk in her house. Sioa and Juma were there in person, and Navii wasn't present, at least yet. Miaari walked into the command center seconds later, nodding to Jason as she advanced past the comm station, where Shey was one of four officers sitting. "I have six probes nearly in position now, Jason," she said. "We should get back their scans in just a moment."

*"I just do not understand what would make the Hrathrari do something this dumb,"* Jason growled. *"They know that RJ-44 is interdicted."*

"And they saw virtually no defense there when their diplomats attended the summit," Miaari added. "No doubt they believe that the house either doesn't have the military power to counter their fleet or won't risk losing military assets to a Hrathrari incursion when we're engaged in war with the

Syndicate and Consortium. This ploy is pure blackmail, to scare us into giving them what they want, especially when they believe that we are unwilling to get involved in a war against *them*.”

“We don’t need this right now,” Juma said darkly. “The Hrathrari won’t be anything more than an inconvenience, but they’re diverting our attention away from what *is* important.”

“A thousand ships is more than an inconvenience, Juma,” Miaari said calmly.

“We’re getting the first readings back from the pods,” Shey called. “I’ll send it to the main console.”

“Thank you, Shey,” Juma nodded. A series of holograms showing the results of the scans appeared over the center console, and they all leaned in a little to look at them.

“Here,” Sioa said, pointing. “That’s how they’re gonna do it.”

“FTL drives!” Juma gasped. “They have actual *FTL* drives on those ships! They must be *ancient*!”

“*FTL? You mean they have warp drives?*” Jason asked.

“Actually, they have trans-light drives,” Miaari noted as she looked at the results. “They utilize light hyper-modulation to shroud the ship in a field of hyper-light, separating it from three-dimensional physics. That allows the ship to exceed the speed of light. It’s the most efficient and fastest of the assorted FTL drive technologies.”

“*How long will it take them to get to Janja from the interdiction border?*” Myri asked.

“It will take them roughly 40 minutes. Their utilization of the technology is exceptional,” she said as she studied the data. “They’re the fastest trans-light drives I’ve ever seen. They must have used them extensively before developing jump engines. At that speed, I would guess that they still use them on some of their freighters and civilian craft for short distances. By Denmother’s tail, if they didn’t have catapult technology, these drives would be nearly as fast as their current jump technology,” she noted, raising a furry brow. “I am impressed.”

“Several things about these RK empires are impressive,” Sioa agreed. “They’ve taken tech we consider obsolete and developed it in ways we never thought to pursue. Like Jayce’s rail cannons, nobody ever thought to develop that tech when energy weapons don’t require ammunition, yet rail cannons are just as powerful as pulse weaponry in certain situations.”

*“Why would they have FTL drives and jump engines on the same ship?”* Jason asked. *“That’s some major power drain there.”*

“They can also be used for sublight propulsion, Jason, unlike jump engines, and when they are used thusly, they take a fraction of the power needed to run them faster than light. And trans-light drive aren’t as large as jump engines. These look to be about the same size as a Karinne gravometric engine,” she noted, studying the image on the hologram depicting one of the Hrathrari ships. “Since they haven’t yet developed spatial technology, I think that these ships are some of their older ships built with trans-light drives, which were never replaced by the newer ion differential engines our scans found on the Hrathrari ships that came to RJ-44. Given how expensive it would be to refit that many ships, they probably found it more economical to simply leave the trans-light drives on these older ships rather than upgrade to the ion differential engines we saw on the Hrathrari ships that came to RJ-44.”

“The fleet will reach the interdiction effect in nine days,” Sioa declared as she looked at a graphical representation of the fleet’s location on a starchart of the area. “So that gives us time to come up with a plan.”

*“The plan is we kick their asses,”* Jason said pugnaciously, which made Juma grin. *“We will not be threatened or blackmailed. I was hoping we wouldn’t have any problems with the RK empires, but I was wrong. So we make a very visible and very messy example out of the Hrathrari. That means we’re throwing everything at this attack fleet, ladies. Everything. Juma, mobilize the fleet and call up all active duty Wolf squadrons from the Army and Marines for deployment. Sioa, mobilize our mobile infantry to deploy to Janja as defense, add enough Marines to every Navy ship so it has enough Marines and Tarks to both repel boarders and board enemy vessels, get the Red Warriors and the KBB on the board to attach to the Navy for the operation so they can practice space-based operations in a real combat environment, and activate our guard militia to move into a*

*planetary defense posture since we'll be pulling our forces out of the system. I'll call in 3D and send a team to Janja with the entire inventory at their command, so be ready to add that to your battle plan. Myri, I want every stellar collector we have available sent to RJ-44. Ladies, prepare a battle plan to ambush that fleet as soon as it drops out of hyperspace. The battle plan is this, ladies. Nothing escapes. Their entire fleet is either destroyed or it surrenders. When the prisoners get back to Hrathrari space, I want them to tell horror stories about the battle that makes the grandchildren of their grandchildren wet the bed."*

All three of them laughed. "You do know how to make a girl happy, Jayce," Juma grinned. "And you just saved Kyva skinning you for cutting her out of a battle *again*."

*"Everyone's getting involved in this, Juma. I want to capture one of those FTL drives so we can take it apart and study it, and since only the best will do, we're going to go after their command ship. So Sioa, I want you to prep a boarding team to invade and capture their flagship."*

"I'll get with Miaari so we can identify it and scan it so we know how to best go about it," Sioa nodded.

"I will inform Denmother of this development," Miaari added. "She might dispatch Kimdori ships to aid you, but that will be her decision."

"We'd certainly welcome them, Miaari," Juma told her. "A few stream weapon attacks will get us more than one Hrathrari ship to inspect."

A flat hologram of Yeri shimmered into view, just without her being merged. She was standing by her desk in her bedroom, and she was nude. Faey tended to sleep nude, it was a cultural practice. "I just received word about the Hrathrari threatening war," she said, looking over at Jason. "What do you want me to do, your Grace?"

*"You tell the Hrathrari that if they wanted a war, they just got one,"* he answered with a flat expression. *"And we'll happily discuss the terms of the peace treaty after we grind their fleet into dogmeat."*

"Oh dear," she sighed. "No negotiating?"

*"No negotiating,"* he affirmed. *"They're bullies, Yeri, and a bully won't stop until you punch him in the nose. If we ignore them, they'll do it again."*

*If we try to negotiate or appease, they'll definitely do it again. Hell, even if we park our fleet just inside the interdiction effect and allow them to just jump out, they'll do it again because we didn't do anything about it. I've read the intel on the Hrathrari, and I'm positive this is the best way to deal with them. I'll allow you to entertain peace treaties after we wipe out the fleet they just jumped towards RJ-44. I have little doubt they'll be very amenable to peace afterwards."*

"Object lesson," Miaari said mildly, which made Yeri chuckle.

"Ah, alright. I'll formulate the response and send it off as soon as I can."

"*Make it extra snarky,*" Jason told her. "*We have no time to deal with their bullshit with the Syndicate coming, so I want them to know how annoyed we are.*"

Yeri laughed. "I'll make it *diplomatically* snarky, your Grace. How's that?"

"*However you wanna do it, Yeri, you're the diplomat,*" he told her. "*In the meantime, warn the other RK empires about the Hrathari's ultimatum and our response, so they won't be surprised at what happens next.*"

"I'll take care of it. Let me get dressed and I'll get to the office as soon as I can."

Yeri's hologram winked out as Myri leaned on her elbow. "*I find it a little dumb that they'd actually risk war with what they know is a technologically superior opponent,*" she mused.

"We may be technologically superior, Myri, but we are an *unknown* to them," Miaari answered. "The ultimatum might be a test of our defenses, a vehicle to make us reveal our military capabilities," she mused as she continued to look at the data coming from the probes. "They know next to nothing about us, after all, and an aggressive, expansionistic empire like the Hrathrari would be inclined to react aggressively to another civilization that only calls itself a *house* and has admitted in the summit we conducted that we only have one star system. They must believe that we either lack the military might to repel a Hrathrari attack fleet despite our superior technology, or we are unwilling to risk military assets with yet another war. Since they are not certain, they come up with the ultimatum rather than just



jumping an attack fleet to RJ-44. If they arrive and see little or no opposition within the system, they know that the house is weak and able to be conquered, and they will threaten war if we don't give them what they want...or they may simply attack what they see as a weakly defended system anyway. If they see a sizable force in defense of the system, then they know that we are not to be trifled with. At that point, they simply retreat and withdraw their ultimatum, believing that we are unwilling to pursue a war with a third party."

*"Well, we're not giving them the chance," Jason grunted. "I'm not playing this fucking game with the Hrathrari. If we do nothing, they'll simply try this shit again. They want to test us, fine, they're about to get both barrels of it right in their face."*

"My, someone's aggressive today," Juma chuckled.

*"This isn't about being aggressive, Juma. This is about punching the bully in the nose," he answered bluntly. "And it sends a message to every other empire in the RK sector that we are not to be fucked with. I don't want to have to mobilize the fleet in defense of Janja more than once."*

*"Jayce makes a good point," Myri agreed. "After we spank the Hrathrari, nobody else over there is gonna try a stunt like this. An overwhelming show of force will quash any further ideas that we might be easy to conquer. And wiping out this Hrathrari battle fleet will send that message loud and clear."*

*"Exactly," Jason nodded at Myri. "And this will give us a chance to test jacked pilots and ship crews in a real situation, not a scenario. Justin is back on flight status, so I'm curious to see how he and the other jacked fighter pilots perform. A thousand Hrathrari ships aren't too much of a threat for our fleet, so this will be good exercise if nothing else."*

"So you want us throw the entire *chaba* pod at them?" Juma asked.

*"That's exactly what I want. I want it to be over ten minutes after their fleet drops into normal space. I want them to have no idea what the fuck just happened."*

Juma laughed. "We can do that," she assured him with an impish smile.

*“We have 421 ships on the board, added to the ground-based assets, fighters, orbital platforms and drones we can pull, I think we can more or less eradicate this Hrathrari fleet with minimal risk to our own people,”* Myri said, looking over at the status board. *“We’ll need to study the fleet to figure out exactly how we want to do this, girls. If Jayce wants us to capture their flagship, we’d better make sure nobody blows it up by accident.”*

*“Alright then, I’ll leave you ladies to it. This is your job,”* Jason declared. *“I’ll be in the office early tomorrow morning so you can go over the initial plans.”*

*“Yeah, we’ll get your corner ready for you, Jayce,”* Juma grinned.

*“I’m calling Red Horn in the morning and I’m ordering them to remove all corners from the command center,”* he declared, which made them all laugh. *“I’ll see all of you in the morning.”*

*“We’ll be here. We’ll even let Navii in on it,”* Juma smiled.

Jason disengaged himself from the biogenic network, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself almost nose to nose with Dahnai. She was laying on top of him, her chin propped on a hand and her elbow and arm almost against his head. *So, who are the Hrathrari, and why are you about to go to war with them?*

He gave her a hostile look. Even though he was communing, Dahnai was making skin to skin contact with him, which gave her a powerful connection to him that let her see into his thoughts. That let her bypass the fact that he was communing, something she couldn’t hear.

*That’s none of your business,* he replied evenly.

*Yes it is my business, babes. I may have let the Karinnes go, but you’re still important to me and to the Imperium. If you’re about to get involved in some secret war, I want to know why. It’s not like you or the Karinnes to start wars, and from the sound of it, you’re certainly starting this one. You’re not giving these Hrathrari the chance to back down.*

*The Hrathrari are an empire within jump distance of one of my remote farming planets,* he told her. *They’ve decided that they can extort us and threaten us with war to make us give them technology they have no business having. I’m going to disabuse them of that idea. The way you stop that kind*

*of foolishness is to immediately punch the guy in the nose to teach them that you're not worth fucking with.*

*So that's where one of those Stargates go, she mused, giving him a quirky smile. And why do you keep them a secret from the Confederation?*

*To protect them from the Confederation, he answered honestly. If you or the Verutans or the Skaa knew about them and knew where they were, you'd try to conquer them.*

*Give me a little more credit than that, baby, she protested, then she frowned at his flat, unimpressed look. Why not invite them to join the Confederation?*

*They're not interested. They act almost exactly like you do, all they're interested in is expanding their power.*

*I do not.*

*He slowly raised a single eyebrow, which made her a little uncomfortable. I don't do that now, she amended. There are much more important things going on, like protecting the entire galaxy from the Andromedans.*

*If only you weren't saying that just to cover your ass.*

*I don't have to cover my ass. I'm kinda hoping you'll grab hold of it, she sent seductively, touching her nose to his.*

*Nice attempt at changing the subject.*

*I don't have to attempt, I know how to make you forget about everything but me, silly man, she teased lightly even as she leaned down and gave him a kiss that would have unlocked his knees if he'd been standing.*

*Koira, 5 Oraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 18 November 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 5 Oraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*The White House*

This was *much* better.

Jason leaned back in his chair after Chirk's initial morning briefing of his day's schedule and saw that he only had 23 items in his inbox today, which made him so happy that he almost felt like dancing across his office. The revamp of the executive organizational structure was finished two days ago, and already, it was showing the kinds of results that Jason wanted to see, mainly in the 23 items in his inbox instead of 200. His new cabinets were set up, the cabinet secretaries were staffing them to their own specifications.

And the cabinet was starting to show that the Karinnes were a multiracial house. After an exhaustive search of qualified candidates, Jason had selected Jerrim Dawnglow to the cabinet post of House Member Services. Jerrim was a very handsome Shio who had worked in the Shio Federal Government before coming to the house, who had the perfect balance of organizational skills, compassion for others, and the ability to navigate governmental structure to be a good head of the department that oversaw the welfare of the citizens of the house. He had already moved into his new offices in the complex and was busy working with his core staff to bring in the people that would run the department...and he had a *big* department. It was Jerrim's responsibility to manage the education, health, welfare, and in a way, the morale of the house subjects, from health and housing to happiness and opportunities to grow. His department would oversee education, planet-wide organized sports, citizen health by working with the Medical Service and the Agriculture Department, comfort by working with the Land Use Authority within the Department of the Interior, and morale. His office also encompassed a former Interior office which managed the house employment system, where people looking for jobs were matched up with jobs available, and since his department also included education, it allowed him to streamline the job search and job training offices into a single office. In that single office, a house member could come in, see what jobs were available, apply for a job, and arrange vocational training if it was required for the job. Jerrim would also take over the house recruiting office to bring new members into the house.

And there were *always* jobs for those new members. The House Karinne was still in desperate need of new house members just to fill the jobs their expansion had created, and had an unemployment of 0%, or .83% if those who didn't work by choice were taken into account, such as stay-at-home parents. They were still heavily recruiting in virtually every Confederate empire, even empires beyond the Confederation, trying to fill those jobs and increase house population...just the *right* people.

And they were certainly getting applications since they'd expanded their recruiting through the Academy and out beyond the sector cluster. The last figures Miaari sent him said that there were 1,303,233 applicants in the last cycle, but maybe only 10% of those applicants would pass the screening. Those applicants were from 27 different empires and represented 59 races or species, *not* counting Confederate members. The house itself currently had 38 different races or species in it, though the vast majority of the house population was Faey, Terran, and now a sizable number of Shio. Every species in the Confederation had members in the house except the Kirri and Jun due to their respective world views, in varying numbers based on how long they'd been in the Confederation, and there were house members from outside empires as well, recently joined after they opened recruiting up to virtually every species attending the Academy.

And that was just the way Jason was hoping it would be. The House of Karinne was an inclusive institution that accepted anyone willing to roll up their sleeves and work for a brighter future dominated by peace and prosperity. He believed in the ideal that diversity brought strength, and had instituted it into the house he ruled...just with certain conditions and safeguards to make sure the diversity he brought to the house didn't bring conflict along with it.

He could live with an inbox like *this* every morning. It meant that he'd have time to actually catch up on some other things, maybe even relax a little bit after lunch, maybe take an unscheduled trip out to look around. For the first time in over a year, he didn't feel *overwhelmed* when he sat down at his desk and activated his panel.

But he did have some things to do today. There was a final briefing before the KMS whipped the Hrathrari Dominion's ass tomorrow local time. There was the first cabinet meeting with Myleena and Jerrim being

part of it. After lunch, he was scheduled to attend a demonstration of some prototype device that the Military Research and Development Division had been working on. MRDD was the slightly less top-secret sister agency to 3D, where military applications of current conventional technology were developed and implemented, on equipment from as small as a spider to as large as a line vessel. Things that were unconventional or were brand new technology came out of 3D, but more traditional things that used 3D innovations came out of MRDD, like the design for the frigate. MRDD included Naval Engineering under its umbrella. But the first major event on today's agenda was a Confederate Council meeting that he couldn't blow off, because he was going to make a major announcement. He was going to formally release the jack upgrade software to allow anyone with any model jack to jump hyperspace without jump shock. They'd had to do a lot more work than they expected on that due to the different brain architectures of various jacked species, but Songa, Siyhaa, and Myleena had finally come up with a "blanket" program that worked with any brain architecture.

In fact, that was the first item in the inbox, which Chirk had prioritized with her usual efficiency. Ayuma had everything ready to release it into the public archives of the Academy, and she only needed his authorization. That authorization was sent as soon as he opened up the request, and twenty seconds later, the megastings of program code and instructional files were copied into the Academy mainframe.

Jason worked through the other items in his inbox as he waited for the council meeting, which would take place at 11:16 local time. He usually got into the office around 9:00—one of the perks of a 29 hour day was always getting as much sleep as he wanted and still getting to work on time—so that gave him two hours to knock as much off his inbox as possible.

He very nearly finished his morning's inbox when council time came around, though Chirk did add six new items to it over the two hours he worked. He laughed when the first hologram popped up, and naturally it was Kreel doing something goofy. He had a toddler Grimja girl on his shoulders, wincing as the youngster pulled on his ears. "I thought you didn't have any kids," Jason noted lightly.

"This is my niece La-La," he grinned in reply, speaking in Grimja. "My sister Vreela is visiting from Kojik today. Say hi to Jayce, La-La."

“Hi!” she said, giving him an almost diabetes-inducing cute smile and waving at him.

“Vreela’s youngest,” he said, wincing again. “Those are my ears, girl, not handles!”

“But they’re so convenient,” Jason noted with a sly smile, switching to Grimja himself, since he rather doubted that the toddler spoke Faey.

“I’ll show you convenient the next time I’m on Karis, Jayce,” he said as La-La patted him between his ears. “Speaking of that, wanna invite me over? We haven’t sat down and had a few tankards for a while.”

“You’re not getting me that drunk again, Kreel.”

“But it’s fun,” he grinned.

“I’m not going to be able to invite you over for a while, but when things settle down, sure,” Jason told him. “But we’re going to see each other on Terra next takir anyway.”

Kreel laughed. “What kind of fun is the official summit going to be?” he asked. “Oh, by the way, La-La wants to see you play music. She doesn’t believe that one person can make an instrument do what you do in that recording.”

Jason laughed and stood up, then walked over to the piano he had on the side of the office. “And what do you want to hear? I didn’t send you just one song.”

“Surprise her,” Kreel grinned.

“So, you don’t think a piano can make those sounds, La-La?” he asked.

“Nuh-uh, I said one person couldn’t do it by himself,” she replied.

“Then I think I’ll play something that shows you that ten fingers can make ten sounds,” he said, holding up his hands.

“We only have eight fingers,” she noted.

“And that’s why you wouldn’t do very well playing a Terran *piano*,” he smiled. “It was meant for someone with at least ten fingers. But I bet a Jobodi could do things I could never dream of on this thing,” he added with a laugh. “If I had fourteen fingers, I could do way more.”

“You seen those tricks Grran does? It blows my mind,” Kreel laughed, referring to a Jobodi’s almost supernatural manual dexterity when it came to fingers.

“Like I said, Terran professional *piano* players better hope that Jobodi never take up the craft,” he noted as he put his fingers down on the keys.

La-La was suitably impressed as Jason played something that sounded easy but was deceptively hard to play, Charlie Brown’s theme song from the *Peanuts* TV shows, something that almost everyone seemed to like that had any ear for Terran music. He followed it up with something *much* harder but something much more fun to play, *Pinetop’s Boogie Woogie*, written at the tail end of the Ragtime era and just as early jazz started to bloom. It was meant only for very, very good piano players. Jason could admit that he was good enough to play ragtime, but he’d never be as good as some of the greats of the era, like Scott Joplin. That man was a *master*. When he finished, he looked behind him and saw *all* the rulers’ holograms, and they were all just sitting quietly listening. “Sometimes I forget just how good you are on that thing, babes,” Dahnai grinned.

“Everyone needs a good secondary skill, in case this rulership thing doesn’t pan out, Dahnai,” he said lightly as he turned back around and started pecking at the keys, playing a cheerful, jazzy little ditty, maybe showing off his improvisational skills a little bit. “I once made extra money when I was in school playing *piano* in a tavern. I could always go back to it, I suppose.”

“I think the pubs around Grimjaka would fight over who booked you, Jayce,” Kreel grinned, setting La-La down. “How many years did it take to learn to play?”

“Quite a few, but it never seemed like work. Nothing is when you have fun when you’re doing it,” he replied with a smile as he turned back around. “Anyway, we have real business to talk about, so I’ll stop holding us up,” Jason said as he swung around on the bench to face them.

“I believe we can all wait another moment or two so we can hear you finish whatever that was you were playing,” Krirara said mildly.

“Indeed,” Shakizarr nodded.



Jason laughed. "I wasn't really playing anything at all, just messing around," he said as he stood up, then moved back to his desk, the holograms moving to stay arrayed so he could see them all. Cybi manifested her own hologram and sat demurely on the edge of his desk, which had become her habit. When Jason attended a council meeting, so did she. She had also sat in for him several times when he either was too busy or didn't feel like attending a council himself. "I was wondering where you were, Cybi," he said.

*"I was pondering a quantum vibration calculation Myleena posed to me. It took much of my attention."*

"If *you* found it that challenging, I don't think I even want to hear about it," Jason said, which made Dahnai chuckle.

Prime Minister Vizzie of the Skaa Republic had the gavel, so she got them started up. They went through old business first, a few updates on prior reports, then she opened the council to new business. Jason moved before Anavan could start diatribing, jumping in almost as soon as the large Skaa female finished speaking. "I have a major announcement that affects everyone at this table," Jason spoke up. "We've made a major breakthrough with cyberjack technology that allows a jacked individual to jump hyperspace with no adverse effects," he declared.

That got all of their attention. "What do you mean, no adverse effects, Jason?" Vizzie asked.

"Just that, Vizzie. We've found a way to remove the sensory ghosting and sensory overload that causes jump shock, but it only works with people with a jack. The jack shunts off the body's natural sensory input in favor of artificial input fed from a camera and a microphone, and those *don't* suffer sensory ghosting. We've been testing this upgrade with KMS personnel for the last month, and we haven't had a single case of any jump-related illness or condition since we perfected the technology. No jump shock, no jump psychosis, not even so much as someone throwing up. Nothing."

"How does this system work?" Anavan asked, actually sounding cordial.

"I'll leave the technical explanation up to your scientific and medical advisors," he replied. "It's not a complete cure for everything jump-related,

however. We've found that this system messes with a person's balance, so everyone has to stay in jump restraints. But that's the only drawback to what we've devised. Once upgraded, your jacked military members will be able to stay in hyperspace for *hours* at a time with no adverse effects. At least until they need to use the bathroom," he added with a chuckle.

"I would *very much* like to see this data, Jason," Assaba said with eager eyes.

"We've released it to the public archive of the Academy mainframe," he stated. "The upgrade is only software, tweaking how the jacks operate while in hyperspace. Everything you need is there, including the program code for the upgrade and an explanation of how the upgrade works. It won't require anything but a software update to the jack processor's programming."

"Well, that's certainly some serious motivation for our Navy personnel to get jacks," Shevatt chuckled.

"*Indeed it is,*" Grran's vocoder translated for his dancing fingers. "*The upcoming conflict with the Syndicate will be offensive, requiring our forces to travel great distances. The removal of hyperspace exposure sickness will vastly increase our fleet's mobility.*"

"Yes, that's why we researched it," Jason nodded.

"It has value far beyond military objectives," Alros of the Rathii said. "My merchant marine crews would *kill* for the ability to jump hyperspace without any ill effects, and it would vastly speed up our logistic schedules."

"Yes, imagine a merchant marine that doesn't have to have mandatory rest periods after jumping," Quord agreed. "It would allow our freighters to move more cargo in the same amount of time."

"That's where we started with our own upgrades, Quord, with the Karinne Merchant Marine," Jason chuckled with a nod. "They jump *far* more often than our military ships do."

"I think you need to give Myleena a raise, Jayce," Dahnai grinned.

"This didn't come from Myleena. Hell, it didn't come from anyone in my scientific department," he said, which made Cybi smile. "This came from an enlisted engineer's apprentice who is sensitive to hyperspace exposure and decided to try to do something about it. She wrote the original

program that we developed into this upgrade. So *she's* the one you should be thanking," Jason chuckled.

"It sounds like she deserves a promotion," Sk'Vrae noted.

"Oh, she got a promotion, alright," he laughed. "I made her a noble. A contribution like *that*? She earned it."

"*Jason was quite lavish with his rewards for her efforts,*" Cybi assured them.

"Well, she'll get a few medals from *us* when we adapt this," Grayhawk declared. "I'll be getting our scientific bureau on this as soon as we're done here."

"I've already got men downloading the data," Kreel said with that buck-toothed grin. "I'm not alone in this room, ya know."

"Well, I hope all of you enjoy it," Jason chuckled lightly.

"What does that mean?" Krirara asked.

"*It only works for someone with a jack, Moderator,*" Cybi answered. "*So this fix does nothing for Jason.*"

"Ah," she sounded. "Could you not merge to a device to cancel out your natural senses?"

"We've tried it, but the sensory overload bleeds through a merge, no matter how deep it is," he answered. "So that leaves us Generations stuck in the lurch, as it were. But that's alright, since we don't really leave Karis anyway. Anyway, the software we developed will work with any race or species, ladies and gentlemen. There's no race-specific program you need to locate and download. Like everything we do, we've made it as generic as possible so everyone can use it without having to adapt or alter anything."

"A very foresighted thing to do," Shakizarr said approvingly.

"I believe we can suspend council for a short time while we have our respective scientific offices retrieve this data and give them time to brief us on its contents," Vizzie said. "Shall we resume in four standard hours?"

"Works for me," Kreel said easily. "I'd like a little more time to spoil my niece."

“Any objections?” Vizzie asked, then she waited a moment in silence. “Then we are adjourned for four standard hours,” Vizzie said, banging the gavel on the desk in front of her.

And that was that. It was the next piece of the puzzle to get the other Confederate empires up to the level where they could prosecute a war that might span an entire quadrant. Now there was only the jump engine issue to deal with, and also the potential consequences of unleashing highly aggressive, expansionistic empires on the galaxy at large.

But it really had to be done. Jason knew he was unchaining a bear to deal with a tiger, but at least he had a collar on the bear to keep it in check. He’d have to further reinforce his grip on the aggression of the Confederate empires to prevent them from becoming the next plague on the galaxy... somehow.

With the abrupt adjournment of the council, Jason got his cabinet meeting out of the way in the free time he had, had an early lunch, then got back on the paperwork while waiting for council to resume. He actually managed to completely clear his inbox, even of the new items Chirk had put there over the morning and sat at his desk staring rather incredulously at the fact that he had *no paperwork*. He’d worked upwards of 20 hours a day for the last takir or so clearing the backlog as the Kizzik reorganized his office, aggravating both Jyslin and Dahnai a bit since he was clearing paperwork when he was supposed to be relaxing, and he was staring at the astounding number 0 on his panel’s inbox queue.

He literally got up and cavorted across the office.

And naturally, there were two new items in the queue after he sat back down, which made him grumble a bit and open the first one.

He had time to read some less important reports before council resumed, Cybi rejoining him minutes before. *[So, exactly what does MRDD want to show me?]* he asked curiously as they waited for the other rulers to come on.

*[I’ll leave that a mystery, so you have something to look forward to after the meeting,]* she replied with a slight smile. *[But I think you’ll like it.]*

*[Okay, be that way, but remember that poking a bear with a stick might make you end up with an angry bear.]*

*[That's alright, I have quite a few images of Jyslin, Symone, and Dahnai naked to distract you.]*

Jason laughed.

When they got going again, all of the assorted rulers looked *very* impressed. “We just tested your jack upgrade, Jayce, and it *works*,” Grayhawk declared eagerly. “My freighter crew suffered no ill effects!”

“I’ve also had a test done, with similar results, though I had to scrape together a crew with jacks to do it,” Ba’mra’ei added. “This changes the entire landscape of our naval operations. The ability to jump long distances without having to do it in stages or give our crews rest dramatically changes the basic way we will deploy our fleets. I’m bringing a resolution up before the Alliance Council to mandate jack implantation for all Alliance military personnel that are required to jump.”

“I’m going to study this information a bit more before I make any decrees, but if it works as well as my advisors believes that it will, I’ll be doing the same,” Shakizarr agreed.

*“I have already had a meeting with the Jobodi War Staff, and they are highly optimistic about this recent development,” Grran typed, his vocoder translating. “As the High Staff said, this will radically change basic CCM operations. We will be able to jump fleets directly to a battlezone without having to stop them to rest, which might give our opponent the chance to see them coming and move defenses in place to oppose them. This is exactly what the Consortium did to us when they invaded the Alliance, the Shio Federation, and the Skaa Empire, and now we will be able to do it to them. The strategic and tactical value of this Karinne breakthrough cannot be underestimated, august members of the council. I advise in the strongest terms possible that you follow High Staff Ba’mra’ei’s lead and consider mandating jack implantation for all of your respective Naval personnel. I will be doing the very thing with the Jobodi Navy as soon as this council is complete.”*

“Ba’mra’ei and Grran are spot-on with their observations,” Quord said strongly. “As a student of military history, I concur with their conclusions, and agree with the High Staff’s idea to mandate jacks as basic military

equipment for Naval personnel. They have summed up precisely what this development means to the Confederation.”

“How far of a jump did *your* people do as a test, Jayce?” Dahnai asked.

“The longest was 28 minutes,” he answered. “We conducted that test a couple takirs ago.”

“That’s halfway across the galaxy!” Anavan blurted.

“Yes, and the crew suffered no effects from hyperspace exposure. It took us some time to come up with the generic upgrade that would work with any jack architecture due to differences in the species, but as soon as my medical experts approved it as safe, we got it out to you.”

“I’m glad you did,” Quord said with his usual intensity.

“And I’m glad I already have my jack,” Dahnai laughed, touching the interface around her left ear. “No more hyperspace ghosts for me! I’ll go to the Annex right after this meeting and get the upgrade, Jayce.”

“I’ll warn Songa you’re coming,” he replied.

“You are still on Karis, Dahnai?” Shevatt asked.

She nodded. “For the next takir or so. I’ll be returning to Draconis soon.”

Discussion of the jack upgrades dominated the rest of the council, even to the point where they called in Lorna to make an official recommendation...which was to jack every member in the Confederate Combined Military, since any of them might be called upon to jump. That was more or less what Jason had been expecting, because Grran was right about it being a game-changer. It would radically change the way the CCM deployed Naval assets and give them much more flexibility.

Jason actually left the council early since that was all they wanted to talk about, because he had another appointment. He went out to Camp Beranne on the Virgan continent, landing his skimmer on a tarmac where other ships, Gladiators, and several hangars were located. He stepped out with Shen and Suri, where a small contingent of scientists and engineers from MRDD were waiting for him, along with Myri and Sioa. “Alright, I got here on time,” he said easily. “So, what did you want to present?”

A shivering in the ground told him something big was moving, and he turned in time to see a freaking *juggernaut* stomp out of one of the hangars. He recognized it almost immediately, it was based on the design of the *original* Gladiator exomech they'd found in Kosigi when Jason first came to Karis. That mecha had been a large, angular, hulking brute, a war machine that *looked* like a war machine. Its operational systems were the basis for the current smaller, sleeker, and lighter Gladiator exomechs the house used. But this wasn't the original prototype, that was sitting in a museum in Karsa. This unit was about the same size as the prototype, but it had a different, updated design. It was less hulking and bulky, but it was still a wide-shouldered brute that made no one who looked upon it doubt for one second just what purpose it served, and that was to lay waste to anything and everything in its path and leave nothing but crushed, broken ruin in its wake. Everything about it just *oozed* strength, power, and intimidation, from its fearsome head construct to its wide shoulders to its powerful arms and legs, all covered in black Neutronium carapace armor with additional armor plating that made it look even more nasty, with flared gunport nacelles in the forearms and shoulder armor pieces that looked to be additional armor to protect external pod mount points. It also had a long crest-like armor plate on its chest that went from its waist to its neck with the Karinne crest emblazoned upon it, armor plates on its limbs and sides further protecting the carapace hull.

This thing was no sleek, elegant, agile-looking Gladiator. This was a hulking, stomping, smashing destroyer, something that would scare the piss out of anything that saw it coming onto the battlefield on the *wrong* side.

"This is the prototype of a new class of exomech, your Grace, which we have dubbed the Paladin, in honor of our batchi team and the martial tradition the name Paladin represents," one of the Makati research engineers said proudly as the prototype's pilot brought it over to them. It was nearly three shakra taller than a Gladiator, over a meter taller, wide-shouldered and sturdy, with powerful legs. It was very much different from the elegant, sleek Gladiator exomechs. "We designed this based on the original Gladiator design for one specific purpose, your Grace, to combat the Benga. These units are larger than them and should be stronger and faster. If our front-line units have to fight Benga hand to hand, then this mecha will have

an advantage. That's specifically what we had in mind when we designed it, to counter Benga line infantry."

"It's certainly intimidating," Jason said, looking up at it. "Have you field tested it yet?"

"Yes, your Grace, we'll give you all our test results for you to study," he answered. "It doesn't have the same foot speed or agility as a Gladiator, but it's stronger and can use much heavier weaponry. It's designed to be more of a tank than a fleet-footed ground unit, a large, heavily armed brute that can smash its way through the opposition. It should complement our Gladiators perfectly on the battlefield, serving as the muscle to work with the speed and precision of a Gladiator. Our tests included integrating the Paladin with a squad of Gladiators, and the results were highly promising."

"What kind of armament does it carry?"

"It carries two arm-mounted conventional infantry pulse cannons, two internally fed rail gatling autocannons, supports four RVR drones and six spinners, and also carries four packs of Wasp defensive missiles," he answered. "It supports three external mount points for pods, has internal glide drives and can support external flight pods, it has monomolecular blades for hand to hand combat, carapace armor with additional armor plating over the cockpit, and carries a class two Teryon shield for additional defense. But what makes this unit stand out from a Gladiator, your Grace, is that it can carry an external shoulder-mounted heavy pulse cannon that doesn't rely on an external power plant to power it. It can fire the weapon from its own internal plants."

"Outstanding!" Jason said with a surprised smile.

"This unit has one other feature, your Grace, that we've incorporated into the design," another Makati said. "Pilot, open the cockpit."

The large crest on the chest split in half and opened, along with the internal doors, exposing the cockpit.

Which was *empty*.

"This unit is being controlled remotely by a jacked rigger, your Grace," the female Makati explained. "The other thing we considered when redesigning this mecha was that it might come up against talented Benga



infantry. Since not all of our infantry is Faey, this leaves an untalented rigger potentially vulnerable. This unit can be driven by biogenic link from a remote merge pod designed to provide maximum merge immersion from pilot to mecha.”

“Faey telepathy is the main reason the Imperium never really pursued the concept of remotely operated mecha,” the first Makati explained. “They want their telepaths on the battlefield and as close to the enemy as possible. And it’s still the fundamental reason that *only* talents are riggers in the KMS,” he added. “The risk of a rigger being dominated and turning that firepower on her own army is too great a risk. So the KMS only allows telepaths to drive rigs in combat operations.”

“Well, that’s not the entire reason,” Jason said, looking into the empty cockpit. “Most attempts at AI-driven robotic fighting units and remote-controlled mecha have failed against living opponents. They may have good aim, but no matter how sophisticated it is, every AI combat program has a weakness, the inability to deal with the unexpected. And that more or less defines a battle. The unpredictability of a living opponent and the chaos of a battle confuses their logic and makes them easier to take out, which is why most KMS AI is directed by someone living, like how our drones operate. We tell the drones what to do, they do it to the best of their programming with the operator supervising. And remotely operated units lack the response speed to deal with a live opponent. Besides, remote-operated units can get their signals jammed and don’t have the same ability to see and hear as someone right there, and that can make a big difference, especially in a rig, since it’s a front-line combat unit.”

“Jacks completely reforge that hammer, your Grace,” the female Makati said. “Because jacks supply complete sensory immersion via the merge, it gives a remote pilot the same sense as if she were here right there in the mecha. And biogenics give the pilot the ability to operate the mecha from orbit, because there’s virtually no delay. The lag delay of command to execution is measured in picoseconds with a biogenic-driven remote interface. And of course, there’s no way the enemy can jam a biogenic link. It’s the ultimate secure form of communication.”

“Now, we’re not saying that Paladin units will never be directly piloted,” the first Makati warned. “Our sims show that the pilot does best

when she's *in* the exomech. But it does give us the ability to put exomechs on the field with pilots that a Benga telepath can't dominate. It will let us put non-talented riggers in a Paladin and allow them to perform, with the rigger outside the range of the enemy telepath, making him immune to domination attempts."

"It also gives the added bonus of protecting the pilot in case the mecha is destroyed," the female Makati continued. "The shock of the biogenic unit going offline does put them in a coma for a couple of days, but they aren't killed."

"You've tested this remote operation?"

They both nodded. "Extensively, else we wouldn't be presenting it to you now, your Grace," the male said. "Biogenics makes the link unhackable and uninterruptible, unlike virtually every other form of remote control. And biogenics further completely removes the response delay and provide the rigger the same sensory immersion as if they were in the cockpit, thanks to the cyberjacks."

"We're currently working on an upgrade to the Gladiators to give them the same remote operational capability," the female added. "It's our aim to double the number of mecha we can field by removing the requirement that they have talent, and we do that by placing the pilots out of range of enemy telepaths."

Jason looked up at the thing for a moment, then looked at Sioa. "This is your batchi pitch, Sioa. What's your recommendation?"

"Even without the remote operation feature, the mecha is solid, Jason," she answered. "It brings additional firepower onto the field as well as the ability to just bash in people's faces. Its ability to carry and fire a heavy pulse cannon alone gives it immediate tactical value to any battlefield. It's larger than the average Benga, at least if Miaari's intelligence is right, and that will give them an advantage if they have to fight Benga hand to hand. It will give the mecha companies some extra muscle and also introduce some additional issues for enemies to overcome. They'll have to deal with Gladiators *and* Paladins, which have different strengths. It's not as fast or as agile as a Gladiator, but it makes up for that with sheer brute force and much more raw firepower. I'm not entirely sold on the idea of remote

operation either, but I see no harm in putting a few of them in my battalions and seeing how they do. I'd prefer to have a pilot in the rig, but I *can* see some potential in a remote link feature, like sending the rig out to do something exceptionally dangerous. That way, the only risk is losing the rig, not losing my rigger."

"Myri?"

"I agree with Sioa," she replied. "I think this unit will be a benefit to the Army because of the firepower it can bring to the battlefield. What we don't have is a mecha like this, something big and mean and nasty that can just smash face. This mecha will smash face, Jayce. It's what it was designed to do."

"Then I'm sold," he replied, which made the technical team which had designed, built, and tested it give sighs of relief and big grins. "But I don't like the name Paladin, it refers to a virtuous knight of towering morals and purity. This doesn't *look* like a virtuous knight, this thing looks like an ogre, or a troll. So let's call them something that more aptly describes just what this beast looks like to me."

"What?"

"*Juggernaut*," he said, using the English—well, *Hindi* word. That word was originally a Hindi word imported into the English language. "In my native language, a juggernaut is a powerful, nearly unstoppable thing or force. A juggernaut is not nice, it's not dainty, it's not graceful, it just plows right through you like you were never there. I think the name Juggernaut describes this monster much better than the name Paladin."

"That's not a very pretty word," Sioa chuckled.

"Then it suits a beast like this perfectly," Jason replied, looking up at it again. "Nothing about this monster should be *pretty*, not even its name. I'll talk to Trenirk myself and have him set up a limited production run of, oh, say, a hundred of these, and we'll try them out in the Army and Marines, Sioa, see how they do. If they pan out, we'll add them to the inventory. And keep working on that remote operation upgrade to the current Gladiators, guys, that might be useful," he said, looking back at the engineering team. "Get a training program up and running to rate some riggers on this monster so they'll be ready when the first of them come off the line. As long as the

design team has everything ready for production, Trenirk can have the first of these off the line in about twenty days.”

“We do, your Grace. We’re ready for the production phase to begin immediately,” the female Makati answered. “We have all the specs and engineering templates for part production ready, and it will take only a small amount of retooling to produce the parts specific to this mecha. We designed this mecha so it shares nearly 80% of its parts with Gladiators, to reduce maintenance costs, increase production rates, and maximize battlefield repair capability.”

“That was a damn smart thing to do,” Jason commended.

“Not many Faey riggers will want to pilot that over a Gladiator,” Sioa chuckled. “It’s not pretty enough.”

“Yeah, but I’ll bet our Urumi and Skaa riggers will kill to pilot something like *this*,” he said, motioning at it. “This beast just clicks with basic Urumi and Skaa war mentality. Besides, they’ll change their minds if it pans out, especially the ones that like to blow things up.”

That made many of them laugh.

“I’ll get Trenirk on it, so get the production specs to his office as soon as you can so he can get the factories on the job,” he said as he turned around. “And good work, ladies and gentlemen.”

Jason gave Myri and Sioa a ride back to Karsa in his skimmer, sitting in the passenger area with them as Shen piloted them. *You think we’ll need the Juggernauts for the Benga?* Jason asked her.

*I don’t think the Gladiators will be ineffective, but this gives us more options, Jayce, and options are good in ground combat, she answered. Besides, this new mecha does fill a role. We don’t have a high-firepower brute of an exomech in our inventory, and this new mecha will fit well into that role. It’s going to complement our Gladiators nicely, bringing a good balance of speed, agility, and sheer firepower onto the battlefield when both mecha are operating in concert. And like everything we’ve been developing, we’re positive this mecha will be just as effective against the Consortium as it will be against the Syndicate. This way we’re not wasting resources building something to use against one we have to put in reserve when*

*facing the other. Consortium mantis mecha are no match for a Gladiator as it is. They'll be just as ineffective against a Juggernaut.*

*I do like that name, Myri chuckled aloud. "Juggernaut." It even sounds imposing.*

*That's the general idea, Jason nodded. Keep me updated once you get units into service, Sioa. I'd like to see how they perform.*

*I will, she nodded.*

*So, want to get a head start on the briefing about the Hrathrari, or you wanna wait for Juma and Navii?*

*We'll wait, but it won't be all the long of a briefing, Jayce. We have a fairly simple strategy for dealing with the Hrathrari. Set an interdicator in front of them to bring them out of hyperspace before they're ready, blitz them when they drop out of hyperspace, isolate and board their flagship, keep shooting 'til they surrender. Hrathrari ion weapons can't bring down our shields unless several ships concentrate their fire, and they'll only have about a two to one ship numbers advantage not counting fighters and corvettes, so they won't have much opportunity to concentrate enough fire to threaten us. Not with us shooting back, they're not.*

*Sounds like you have it all covered.*

*Of course we do, Sioa smiled.*

Back at the White House, Jason went straight to Trenirk Bruun's office, which was a bustling beehive of activity. Trenirk was the Makati in charge of all factory production and raw material replication and fabrication. He managed factory and replicator output to ensure that all of their various industries had what they needed when they needed it, as well as replicating raw materials for sale or trade to others. It was a very demanding job with a wide scope, since Trenirk was managing thousands of facilities, and that number increased daily as more factories or replication centers were put in service. But he was a Makati to the roots of his hair, and he kept the industrial output of the House Karinne on a tight and efficient schedule.

He wasn't alone in his office. Bunvar Koan was also there, no doubt discussing the factories her department was building for his, as were two

other Makati and a female Beryan. “Ah, Jason, what brings you by?” Trenirk asked.

“We have something new for you to produce, Trenirk,” he said, using his gestalt to bring a holographic image of a Juggernaut up on his office emitters. “Meet the Juggernaut, the newest design out of MRDD. We need you to do a limited production run for more extensive testing. I want 100 of these built as fast as you can arrange the factory space.”

“I remember the machining orders for the parts for the prototype,” he said, looking at the hologram. “Are they still the same?”

“MRDD’s sending you a list along with the templates for part production,” he answered. “I rather doubt they’re all exactly the same. You know how engineers custom refit produced parts on prototypes to get everything just so.”

“True enough,” Trenirk nodded. “I’ll get on the comm with MRDD and get the templates over here, and I can get the units in production by tomorrow. I just got two new factories on Virga on the board today, and they’ll be perfect for this. They haven’t tooled for production yet, so one can tool to produce the parts for this Juggernaut, and the other can build them. Since you only want 100, a single production factory can do the job.”

“Sounds like a plan, so I’ll leave you to it,” he said easily.

He wandered down to the command center for the KMS and sat in as the four commanders showed him a holographic depiction of what they had planned. “We’re setting up right here,” Myri began, pointing at a spot about half a light year outside the interdiction effect. “We figure there’s a chance they might have aimed to come out of hyperspace a good distance from the interdiction effect to check over any possible defenses and get orders from their com-con, and you said we’re not giving them the chance to turn around and jump out. So we’re gonna hit them here. Five interdictors are already in place in a hexahedral pattern and building their fields, and this fleet will fly between two fields and into the middle between the five of them. If we did the math right, the fields will close off the entry neck just after they enter, trapping them in interdicted space. They’ll drop out of hyperspace right here,” she pointed. “We’ll have the entire fleet parked at that spot with all the extra fighters and exomechs, as well as 3D toys, pulled

orbital platforms, and solar collectors, and everything will be hot and ready to fire. When they drop into normal space, we hit them hard, before they have a chance to respond.”

“I project they’ll lose 20% of their fleet before they can so much as raise their shields,” Navii injected.

“We don’t let up, either. We blitz them,” Juma continued for Myri. “Every ship has orders to fire on any ship that has power, *except* this ship,” she stressed as she pointed at a single dot on the hologram. “We’ve identified this Hrathrari battleship as their flagship. There are six other battleships of the same class in the formation, but our intel tells us that this one is carrying the task force commander. Simply put, we wipe out the Hrathrari fleet except for this ship, which we surround, grapple with towing beams, then board and capture. Unless they surrender, of course. I’ve given orders that if the enemy fleet surrenders, we’ll accept it.”

“Sounds nice and efficient. What kind of offense can they muster?”

“Not much against our defensive systems,” Juma answered. “They do have fighters and missiles, that might be the most danger they pose, and mainly to our own fighters. Our line vessels’ shields and armor are too strong for their armament to bring down easily. The main danger to our own comes to the fighter and exomech corps. They’ll be the most vulnerable. But that’s relative. We ran the sims, and a Wolf’s shields can take a hit from one of the Hrathrari’s heavy ion cannons. It can only take one, but it *can* take it. Their carapace armor can also withstand their ion weapons, but without the shields, you know they’ll mess with the power systems in the fighters. That’s the main danger ion weapons pose. The only wildcard is Hrathrari missile technology. We still don’t have a clear idea of how good it is, so we’re approaching that threat as if it can do real damage. Until we know for sure, we act like it can.”

“So, Hrathrari fighters shouldn’t pose a threat to ours?”

“That’s going to depend on their missiles, but their fighter-mounted ion cannons can’t bring down a Wolf’s shields,” Navii answered. “Not unless three or four Hrathrari fighters are all shooting at the same Wolf, anyway. As Juma told you, we have no real idea of what kind of missile technology they have, so we don’t know if fighter-carried missiles are a threat to our

fighters and exomechs. The fighter squadrons have orders not to act like they're invulnerable, however. That creates bad habits that might get them killed."

"What about rigs, Sioa? We're going to have some Gladiators up there mixed in with the fighters."

"Gladiator shields aren't as strong as a Wolf, but they're still strong enough to take several hits from a Hrathrari fighter's ion cannon," she answered. "That's why only the KBB and the Red Warriors will be doing free-space operations, their training will make them really damn hard to hit. All other exomechs in the battle plan will be on the hull of a ship, firing from their bunker positions. That way they have cover and concealment and can retreat into a hardened position if necessary."

"I've had Sioa embed the KBB in with the Ghost Squadron," Juma said, smiling a bit. "That puts our best riggers with our best fighter squadron."

"That'll be a nightmare for the Hrathrari," Jason laughed. "Justin on one side and Kyva on the other? I'd just surrender."

"As usual, the Ghost Squadron is pulling the most difficult assignment in the operation for fighters," Juma told him. "Their job is to attack the enemy flagship and destroy its gun batteries so it can't fire on ships close enough to grapple it. Kyva and the KBB will be a definite help for them. They'll have to fly through a lot of flak to reach the enemy flagship, then take out as many of its weapons as they can while dodging enemy fighters and missiles. They'll have the KBB and four of our best Navy attack corvettes attached to them for the mission, as well as the *Javelin*. The *Javelin* is going to strike first, and we're thinking that it will draw enough fire from the flagship's support vessels to let the Ghost Squadron and the KBB get to it with minimal threat."

"That's why they're the best, Juma," Jason said with a smile. "They can do the job."

"The operation should last no longer than 40 minutes," Navii said. "The only unpredictable element of the battle plan is capturing the enemy flagship. We have little knowledge of the Hrathrari's defensive capabilities inside their ships, or how many of their crew have talent. If they don't have talent, it'll be easy. If they have enough talented defenders to protect their



Marines from our boarding party, it may take our girls a while to take the ship.”

“It sounds like you have everything covered,” Jason said. “What time will this go down?”

“A little after 04:20 local time,” Juma answered. “So you can wake up and read the combat report, Jayce. It’ll be over long before you wake up.”

“I’ll be awake. There’s no fuckin’ way I could sleep while my people are out there risking their lives,” he said strongly.

“Don’t worry too much, Jayce. We’re dealing with a technologically inferior empire here, we know they’re coming, and we can hit them before they know what’s going on. There’s never a guarantee in war, but I’m confident that we’ll be able to defeat the Hrathrari with minimal damage to ourselves.”

“Just don’t get cocky, Myri,” he told her, which made Juma chuckle. “Alright, I’ve gotten everything done, even all my paperwork, so I’m going over to Dahnai’s palace for the evening. Let me know if anything changes.”

“We will. Enjoy your evening, Jayce,” Juma nodded.

# Chapter 11

*Raira, 6 Oraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 19 December 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raira, 6 Oraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

He may be home, but his mind was nearly a quadrant away.

Jason was in his home office, leaning back in his chair with his fingertips steepled together, but the reality was his consciousness was all the way over in the R quadrant, merged with Cybi through the tactical gestalt in the basement and joined to the mainframe of the *Aegis*, which had the flag for the KMS operation about four light years distant from RJ-44. Jason was connected to the ship via BG1 comm, which allowed a Generation to merge to the *Aegis* mainframe from Karis. But he wasn't making a nuisance of himself. He did have a hologram of himself, again going Cybi-style and creating a pseudo-representation of himself that hovered next to Palla on the bridge, but he was completely silent and was just observing. He'd already told Palla that he wasn't going to involve himself in any way, and for that matter, she had his official permission to completely ignore him if he *did* decide he knew better than women who trained their whole lives to make those decisions.

The *Aegis* was commanding over three quarters of the KMS' active fleet, some 420 ships with another 160 not on the board due to other deployments, scheduled maintenance, or in the case of the destroyer *Inji*, off the board due to repairs. The *Inji* had developed power problems after reaching RJ-44, and it was sent back to Kosigi before the fleet jumped to the ambush point...much to the vociferous objections of the ship's captain and crew. They felt they could get the ship repaired before deployment, but

Palla had decided that since the destroyer wasn't absolutely required, to send it back to Kosigi for repair. One destroyer wasn't going to make a difference in this fight...not that it was going to be much of a fight. The Hrathrari had numbers, but they didn't have weapons that could penetrate KMS defensive systems, and *every* weapon the KMS used would damage Hrathrari ships.

In reality, the KMS had nearly 700 ships in its inventory, but the 220 not in active service were finished ships sitting in mothball waiting for commission and assignment, the majority of them destroyers. They were ships that had no crews, since Juma didn't have crews trained to man them. Kosigi was cranking out ships so fast that Juma couldn't put crews together to man them, now that Dellin had so many docks.

A hologram to the side showed the deployment of the fleet and its assets. The front line was occupied by 3D toys operated by Leamon and Tom, mainly mines. Behind that first wave were the fighters, gunboats, and Naval attack corvettes, nearly 20,000 small craft arrayed by squadron and by role. And right in the center and on the front rank were the Ghost Squadron, the KBB, and the Red Warriors, 70 Wolf fighters and Gladiator exomechs. Behind that line were the line vessels, rows and rows of destroyers and cruisers with the larger ships interspersed among them, but with the largest ships sitting on the rear echelon, the two command ships and the four carriers deployed for this operation, well back and out of harm's way.

There were two new black Gladiators out there, two new members of the KBB. Ebri and Kanri had been promoted from the Red Warriors to the KBB because Kyva wanted two more riggers to bring her elite squad up to 10 and had chosen those two based on the many wargames she'd fought against them. She felt that Ebri and Kanri were the best of the Red Warriors and worked well with the rest of the KBB, so she filched them. They'd been replaced in the Red Warriors by the best of the regular rigger companies, and much to the surprise of many in the Red Warriors, neither of them were Faey and both were male. The first was a Shio named Janrey Moonsinger, an infantry officer in the Shio Federated Army before coming to the house and changing PTS to drive a rig, and the other was an Urumi, Krovar Vi'Kax. The two males had distinguished themselves to Sioa over their careers in the rigger corps, and it was Sioa that put them in the Red

Warriors. Those two had just entered a very different world than they were used to in their former Gladiator companies, but they weren't with the rest of their new outfit. The Red Warriors not assigned to the Ghost Squadron were attached to other fighter squadrons assigned to defend KMS line vessels from Hrathrari missiles and fighters, but the two new Red Warriors didn't have the same extensive zero-G and free space training as the rest of the company, so they were currently attached to the 141<sup>st</sup> Exomech Company on the hull of the *Iyaneri* to serve as defense for the capitol ship.

The original plan was for the entire 40 members of the Red Warriors to attach to the Ghost Squadron, but Justin had asked for only 20, that 50 extra Gladiators were *too* many for what they had to do.

And because no plan the staff made ignored the possibility of failure, the rest of the forces were deployed around the moon of Janja, mainly the solar collectors, orbital platforms, and Planetary Guard and militia units, to defend the moon just in case the Hrathrari somehow managed to get past the fleet.

"Enemy fleet ETA, seven minutes," one of the sensor officers called, whose duty was to sound off every minute.

"Is the fleet fully deployed?" Palla asked as she leaned forward in her chair, her legs crossed demurely.

"The last fighter squadron just reached its deployment area," came the response.

"Very well, begin phase two. Tactical, begin ignition sequence for the GRAF cannon and open the doors."

"Aye, sir. Beginning GRAF cannon ignition sequence," her tactical officer answered. "Opening the outer doors."

"GRAF cannon ignition sequence initiated. T minus six minutes until primary couplers are engaged," another officer declared in a loud voice.

"Recoil absorption system online."

"Engine compensators online."

"Power distribution system online."

"All weapons on GRAF standby," Palla called.

“All automated weapons are online and ready, Captain,” Tom called from his and Leamon’s post on the bridge, just beside the engineering liaison station. “The instant the Hrathrari drop into normal space, they’ll attack automatically.”

“Then that will be the signal to the rest of the fleet,” she nodded. “Send that down to all ship, comm two, begin the attack as soon as the automated weaponry activates. Comm five, send our firing arcs down to the fighters so they don’t get into the GRAF blast area. Is the *Iyaneri* on schedule?”

“Yes sir, its GRAF cannon is in ignition sequence right now.”

“Then we’re prepared. We only need the Hrathrari to arrive,” she declared.

Jason stayed close to Palla’s chair and remained silent as he watched the bridge crew operate. They were coordinating with the entire fleet, getting everyone where they needed to be and sending down the orders to tell them what to do, which was why a command ship’s bridge looked more like a huge office than the bridge of a ship. Dozens of controllers sat at stations throughout the bridge as ship operations operated from stations in the central area, with tactical, engineering, comm, and navigation clustered around Palla’s command chair. A hologram of Haema appeared in front of Palla, the captain of the other command ship in her own chair as KMS personnel bustled about behind her. “We’re all ready on this side, Palla,” she said.

“We’ll initiate the attack on the activation of the automated weaponry,” she nodded. “Tom tells me it will activate automatically when the Hrathrari drop into normal space.”

“We’ll be ready.”

“Hrathrari fleet ETA, five minutes. Five minutes,” the countdown officer barked loudly.

There was little to do for those five minutes but wait. On ships and in cockpits up and down the line, KMS sailors, pilots, and riggers waited for the Hrathrari fleet, which most of them couldn’t see. But Jason and the bridge crew on every ship could, since a hologram of its position was displayed on every bridge up and down the line. Jason watched as the enemy fleet entered the neck formed by the interdictors, which closed

behind that fleet in a bit of brilliantly precise mathematics, causing the neck to close at its end and come up behind the enemy fleet as it advanced, but would overtake the fleet at exactly the point where they were waiting for them.

“Thirty seconds,” the countdown officer called.

“GRAF cannon is online, captain,” the tactical officer called.

“Charge to 20% and prepare to fire,” she ordered. “Target our predetermined firing arc. After the initial shot, set cycle sequence to 5% and engage GRAF cycle protocols. Target at your discretion, Commander,” she told her tactical officer. “Set the threshold at 1,000 kathra.”

“Aye sir, charging to 20%.” The tactical officer’s voice then called over ship wide intercom. “Prepare for GRAF recoil! GRAF cannon about to fire at 20%! Prepare for GRAF recoil!”

Palla locked her leg restraints from the arms of her chair, and Jason had his hologram lean down and put a phantom hand over the forearm vambrace of her armor. “*Good luck,*” he said quietly to her.

She smiled up at him. “We don’t need luck for this one, your Grace. Now stop distracting me.”

He had to laugh, but he did dissolve his hologram and retreated into a construct he’d placed in the *Aegis* mainframe, built to look like his work office. He was sitting behind the desk with dozens of floating flat holograms arrayed before him, showing camera views, graphs, tactical maps, everything being fed to the *Aegis* computer from the assorted telemetries and data coming in from every ship in the fleet.

It gave him the perfect vantage point. He moved a real-time view of the space before the fleet in front of him just in time to see 1,000 Hrathrari warships drop out of hyperspace, when the interdiction effect caught up to them from behind and overtook them. They were a mix of ships, from frigate-sized ships up to ships a bit larger than a KMS battleship, and there was no doubt in Jason’s mind that the crews of those ships were more than a little surprised. They’d come out of hyperspace 1.2 seconds before they were supposed to, which most of them wouldn’t notice, but they were staring down a fleet half their size that they hadn’t been told would be there waiting for them.

And the KMS didn't give them time to figure things out. Almost instantly, several thousand pyramid-shaped objects lanced forward, accelerating geometrically, and Jason almost winced out of reflex when the image was saturated with light. Thousands of explosions spread out across the enemy formations as the small mines did their jobs, striking the ships and exploding. Dozens of Hrathrari ships had their lights flicker out and many of them were driven backwards by the explosive force of the mine attack, knocked out of the fight before they really even had any idea what the fuck just happened. Jason could only imagine the chaos on those ships at that moment, as crew who hadn't been expecting combat found themselves on ships taking heavy damage. Of the 1,000 ships in the enemy fleet, 146 were knocked out by the mine blitz, either destroyed or damaged to the point where they had no power. That was nearly 15% of their fleet.

Then came the inevitable display of overwhelming firepower. In unison, both flagships fired their GRAF cannons, and they were pre-aimed to strike two of the support battleships around the command ship, to help clear the way for the fighters and destroyers to reach their target. The Hrathrari ships were struck bow-on by the incandescent twin bars of blazing light, then they shattered as the kinetic energy transferred into the ship's structures and tore the rest of the ships that the beams didn't envelop apart from the power of the blow. Both ships struck were blasted backwards by the impact, and as the bars winked out, nothing but twisting wreckage and debris careened back towards Hrathrari space.

And that was the signal. In one simultaneous wave, the small attack craft surged forward. Wolf fighters, gunboats, and corvettes streaked in behind the mines, and the crews on those Hrathrari ships saw them coming after the fires of the explosions cleared. A second wave of explosions erupted up and down the Hrathrari line as the attack craft got in range and opened fire, pulse blasts and missiles pounding into the ships even as they started to react, shields coming up and several of them starting to fire back. White streaks of phased ion energy lashed out from ships behind the initial line, those who hadn't taken most of the brunt of the mine attack, but they hit nothing but empty space as the nimble attack craft evaded their fire. Hrathrari fighters started to pour out of their larger ships as Jason checked the raw data and saw that Navii had been almost exactly correct. 20.3% of

the enemy fleet had been destroyed or disabled before they even started raising their shields.

But the Hrathrari weren't cowards. Missiles screamed out of their formations as more and more fighters got into space, and the remaining ships moved with speed and coordination to tighten up around the damaged or destroyed ships so the ships could support one another. Hrathrari fighters engaged Wolf fighters, gunboats, and corvettes between the enemy ships as batteries on the ships shot at the fighters, but it was like flies attacking a bull. Jason saw a Wolf take a direct hit from a Hrathrari cruiser's heavy ion cannon, and while it brought down the fighter's shields, it did *nothing* to the fighter itself. The fighter turned on the ship that had shot it and opened up with its pulse weapons, which struck the ship's shields and sent ripples of visible energy rippling in a sphere around it. The fighter kept firing, and Jason saw that lone fighter bring down the cruiser's shields, overloading them from the sheer energy that the pulse blasts forced the shields to dissipate. Just as Juma predicted, Hrathrari phased shields stopped pulse weapons, but couldn't stand up to them for very long for the same reason Teryon shields couldn't hold up long against an MPAC. That fighter had enough power in its pulse weapons to overload the cruiser's shields, and that one image demonstrated with stark clarity the technological difference between the two opposing navies. Twin cascades of fiery explosions raked across the belly of the Hrathrari cruiser as the Wolf fighter slipped under it, its pulse weapons blazing, and it did so much damage that the cruiser's lights flickered out and it began to list to port.

Jason flash-scanned a missile seconds before it reached a Wolf, and almost frowned at the result. The warhead was an unstable ion core, a weapon not meant to blow big holes in ships or blow them up, but to disable their power systems by creating an ion surge effect....and plasma systems were as vulnerable to ion surge attacks as were the ion systems the warhead was designed to attack. The Wolf must have scanned it in time as well, for one of its drones shot the missile down even as it evaded, then the Wolf wove back and blew up the Hrathrari fighter with a single burst from its pulse weapons.

Those missiles posed a threat, and he was relieved to see that that information had already been filtered down to the fleet.



Voice reports came in from fighter crews. The Hrathrari had both telepathic and non-telepathic pilots in its fighters, and the wizzos were engaging in telepathic combat with the enemy...and no doubt the Hrathrari were a bit shocked to find that *every single enemy mind* they could sense was talented, and so well trained that they couldn't dominate them. The wizzos were reporting that sufficient numbers of Hrathrari talents in the ships made dominating ship crews to do damage problematic. They clearly had experience battling against enemies that employed talent on the battlefield.

The Hrathrari knew how to fight against telepaths and knew how to employ them themselves. That was useful information.

Then the destroyers were there. Those shields did *nothing* against the particle beam projectors the destroyers unleashed, and the Hrathrari lines just *wilted* as the destroyers lanced right into the enemy formation. The destroyers went right through the Hrathrari fleet, slicing ships apart left and right as the Hrathrari seemed momentarily stunned, since their ships didn't react. Jason saw the Ghost Squadron and the exomechs race into the holes created by the firing of the GRAF cannons, saw fighters scramble out of the way just before two more GRAF blasts rampaged across the empty space between the two command ships and their targets, two more Hrathrari battleships. They were firing the cannons only at about 5% power, he saw, now in cycle mode, but 5% was more than enough to kill an enemy ship with one hit.

The Hrathrari fleet began to turn. Scans showed that they were powering up their FTL drives.

They were going to try to retreat.

That was a wise move. In barely a minute, they'd lost nearly 35% of their fleet and they were losing a ship every four seconds. Their weapons were completely ineffective against KMS shields and armor, and KMS weapons were tearing through them like they were made of balsa wood. *Fighters* were destroying their line vessels, and every single enemy they faced had talent, stripping their telepaths of the ability to utilize telepathy as a weapon. They were outgunned and outclassed, and the Hrathrari commander had the wisdom to know when to retreat.

But the KMS wasn't going to give all of them the chance to flee. The entire fleet screamed forward at flank speed even as the Hrathrari ships began to turn, because they only had 38 seconds before the FTL drives achieved enough power to transit the ships into FTL mode, which would let them escape despite the interdictors. The Ghost Squadron and its supporting exomechs danced through enemy fire with destroyers and cruisers right behind it, but it was behind the Hrathrari flagship that had Jason's attention. The KMS *Javelin* decloaked behind the enemy command ship and almost immediately fired its particle beam, and it fired it as a pinpoint strike, not raking the beam across the enemy ship. Done that way, the particle beam acted almost like a bullet from a conventional Terran gun, penetrating into the enemy ship. The frigate had detailed scans of the enemy ship, so it knew exactly where and how to hit the command ship to do what it wanted to do, and its cloak allowed it to get into firing position and take careful aim before taking the shot.

The white stream of the particle beam punched into the aft top quarter of the Hrathrari battleship, and almost immediately, all its lights flickered out.

The *Javelin* had severed their primary power feeds without damaging any important systems, a weakness in the battleship's design that KMS military engineers had discovered after analyzing scans of it. They'd be able to get auxiliary power back on, but it would take them critical moments to do it, and that was all the time that the KMS would need.

The *Javelin* turned away from the command ship as a blitz of ion blasts and missiles lashed out in its direction, the sleek, agile frigate evading the missiles while taking several hits from the ion weapons, its shields flickering in and out of visibility. And exactly 12 seconds after decloaking, the frigate shimmered and vanished from view, becoming only a featureless black silhouette against the stars behind it, nearly invisible to the naked eye and completely invisible to 98% of known scanners and sensors. And just as Navii had predicted, that reduced the incoming fire on the Ghost Squadron, the KBB, the Red Warriors, and their four attack corvettes, allowing them to get within range of the enemy battleship. They spread out as if choreographed and attacked the battleship with very precise strikes, constrained single shots of pulse weapons striking missile launching nodes

and gunports, very quickly disabling the ship's ability to fire on enemies once it got its main power back online.

Jason watched as the organized lines dissolved into a complete brawl. KMS vessels managed to get right into the midst of the Hrathrari ships, and they unloaded on them, trying to prevent them from escaping as the Hrathrari ships fired only sporadically at the KMS, much more intent on escaping than they were fighting. The KMS ships were doing anything they could to prevent those ships from escaping, the movement of every ship coordinated carefully from the bridge of the *Aegis* to ensure that no Hrathrari ship was unharassed. The Hrathrari ships started to accelerate, trying to outrun the KMS ships while they waited for their FTL drives to power up, but they found out to their dismay that Karinne gravometric engines were just as fast as their trans-light drives were when used in sublight mode. More and more Hrathrari ships were knocked out, their power down, raging fires burning from gaping holes in their hulls.

Palla began broadcasting the order to surrender over Hrathrari tachyon frequencies, even as the destroyers *Veriven*, *Dauntless*, and *Jeza's Hammer* reached the enemy battleship. They snared it in towing beams and reversed engines, slowly started dragging it out of its broken formation, pulling it towards the four cruisers coming up behind them. Ten different jumpers launched from the four cruisers and attached themselves to the hull of the Hrathrari battleship as Kyva and four members of the KBB blew a hole in the main landing bay's closed blast doors and entered—not on the battle plan, that was Kyva just being Kyva—with four more red Gladiators entering just behind them.

A whole lot happened in those 38 seconds, but the Hrathrari ships finally managed to power up their trans-light drives, which they had to power down to sublight mode to use their jump engines. Jason watched as 106 Hrathrari ships managed to escape, vanishing in a bright flash of white light as they achieved light hyper-modulation and accelerated far beyond the speed of light in the blink of an eye, escaping back towards the RK sector. They escaped in staggered order, each ship achieving full power on its drive and activating it, but most of their compatriots hadn't been so lucky. Most of them had been damaged by KMS attacks, with some 528 Hrathrari ships totally destroyed and a further 366 disabled but still more or less intact, fires raging around gaping wounds in their grayish hulls.

But the battle wasn't over. Jason picked up feeds from Marines and Tarks inside the enemy battleship as they boarded it and engaged the Hrathrari crew in combat, trying to take the ship. The Hrathrari were wolf-like and fairly tall and stout, and they moved very quickly, but they weren't wearing full-body armor. Their dedicated security forces were wearing armor plated uniforms, but they found that they had the same problems that their ships and fighters did. Their ion rifles couldn't penetrate Crusader armor, and their military telepaths couldn't use their talent against a boarding party whose *every member* was a well-trained telepath. The fact that they had mindstrikers among them told Jason that they were versed in fighting other telepaths, but they weren't ready for the Faey, who had been fighting against other telepaths for thousands of years...mainly each other. The Faey mindstrikers on the boarding teams shut down the Hrathrari telepaths in short order, and once they were knocked out of the fight, the non-talented members of the enemy crew had no protection against the boarding party. The fights at the four breach points in the battleship ended quickly when the Faey mindstrikers took out the resistance with talent, putting them all to sleep and leaving them laying on the deck as they advanced, pausing only to take their rifles but otherwise just leaving them where they lay.

It only took the boarding party 12 minutes to secure complete control of the Hrathrari command ship and capture the task force commander, a frightened-looking gray-furred Hrathrari wearing a gaudy uniform with tons of medals.

And with the capture of the flagship, almost wholly intact, the battle was over. The remaining Hrathrari in the disabled vessels surrendered on order of their task force commander, or surrendered because they had no life support, and the KMS began rounding up the survivors off their damaged ships, more or less rescuing them.

That was the easy part. Jason brought up an initial list of damages and casualties, and that made him smile.

Moderate damage to 12 destroyers, light damage to 24 destroyers, 14 cruisers, and one tactical battleship. 141 damaged Wolf fighters, most of them with their power systems blown out from repeated ion weapon strikes or hits from ion core missiles, 14 damaged Gladiators with the same

problem, power loss due to ion disruption of plasma flow. 66 injuries ranging from light to moderate, most of which with electrocution and energy burns from exposure to high-saturation ion energy, enough to cause electrical conduction in their armor that went through the gel backing.

Number of fatalities: 0.

And that was the number Jason wanted to see the most, though it was not a number he was going to see again for a long, *long* time.

Karinne technology prevented a single KMS soldier or sailor from losing her life in the fight, mainly because Hrathrari ion weapons couldn't penetrate Neutronium armor. It caused quite a few energy burns on his girls from ion surges hitting their armor, but no fatalities. It had gone down almost exactly as Navii had predicted.

*"Begin recovery operations," Palla called from the bridge. "All fighters and exomechs return to your ships. Launch the rescue craft to pick up our damaged fighters. Begin evacuating Hrathrari off the damaged ships. Bring in the tugs and support craft, start towing the damaged Hrathrari ships back to RJ-44 for inspection, and begin detailed sensor sweeps of the damaged Hrathrari ships. Upload all logs to central command and stand down from battle stations."*

Jason disengaged himself from the *Aegis* mainframe with a great deal of relief, opening his eyes in the darkness of his office, the only light in the room emanating from Cybi's hologram. She was sitting on the edge of his desk facing him, and she also looked relieved. *[That was almost exactly as Navii predicted,]* she communed.

*[Except the part where they broke and ran earlier than she expected,]* he answered. *[But I'm glad they did, it just saved lives on their side. I hated to do that to them, but this is one of those cases where it had to be done. Those Hrathrari just saved tens of thousands of other Hrathrari from dying later on. The Hrathrari dictator now knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that going to war with us is insanity.]*

*[But you presume that he has the mind of a rational being, Jason,]* Cybi warned. *[Sometimes, especially in a brutal authoritarian like this, rationality rarely figures into their decisions.]*

*[Well, he'll lose his empire if he pushes it, that should motivate him to stop thinking with his dick.]*

*[You would interfere in the government of another?]*

*[If he declares war on us again, I'll send the Javelin to his front door and let him meet its particle beam,]* he replied pugnaciously. *[As far as I'm concerned, the war will be with him, not his empire, so I see nothing wrong with killing the idiot that's getting everyone else killed because he's an idiot.]*

*[Surgical,]* she noted with a slight smile, her thought betraying her amusement. *[I'll begin analysis of the data from the logs and see if there's anything else about their ships and tactics that might be of use to Myri.]*

*[Thanks hon. Myleena,]* he called across the strip.

*[What? I was asleep you know.]*

*[You told me to wake you up when it was over. Well, it's over. The Hrathrari command ship should be in Kosigi in about three hours, if they stick to the plan Navii set for the fleet after the battle.]*

*[Awesome. I'll head to Kosigi and get everything ready so we can start the initial inspection.]*

*[Good, because I'm going back to bed.]*

*[Isn't Jyslin and Symone over on the island?]*

*[Yeah.]*

*[Poor baby, sleeping all by his widdle self,]* Myleena teased. *[Whatever will you do with no pussy to keep your cock warm?]*

*[Push off, bitch,]* he retorted, which made her laugh through communion.

Cybi gave him a light look before she dissolved her hologram, but not before she turned the lights on in his office. Jason was indeed alone in the house, and he was *completely* alone. Ayama and Surin were taking a three-day vacation and his family was over at Dahnai's, and the guards didn't come into the house at night except during their inspection rounds, which left the house strangely empty. There was almost always someone in the

house, be it someone in the family or Ayama or Surin or the guards, and the house took on a nearly eerie feel to know that he was the only one in it. Not eerie in a frightening way, just eerie in a way that made him feel unsettled.

It gave him time for quiet introspection, at himself and his recent decisions. Dahnai was right about one thing, that him not giving the Hrathrari the chance to back off was *not* how he would have done it just a year ago. The war with the Consortium, the coming of the Syndicate, they had changed him, maybe hardened him a little bit. True, he'd been very worried about the women and men he had ordered into battle, and nothing had made him happier than to see that *zero* when it came to KMS fatalities, but a year ago, he'd have tried a diplomatic solution to the problem first. A year ago, he *would* have allowed the Hrathrari emperor to try his extortion a second time before doing something about it. The last year had taught him a whole lot about the reality that sometimes force *was* the first and best choice to solve a problem, so long as it was exerted with careful restraint.

A year ago, the other side of that fatality column would have concerned him a whole lot more than it had today, the number of *Hrathrari* that had died in the beatdown. And that had been a significant number, some 8,000 by initial estimation given the number of ships completely destroyed and the average crew complement per ship. He did feel some responsibility for their deaths, but not *too* much. They had started it, and he was being honest when he said that the sacrifice of the Hrathrari sailors today would save far more Hrathrari in the future. Jason didn't have to like it, but it was a fact.

Koiri Karinne. Stark were the lessons that she had taught him, reaching out from 1,300 years in the past to remind him the price that would come with the idea that their technology and their abilities made them *better* than everyone else. He could celebrate the victory, but he had to keep in mind that that victory had come at a price, a price of *Hrathrari* dead, and that it could come with the price of his own soul if he got too *used* to the idea of celebrating the victories of his armed forces. As he told Maer months ago, one of his jobs was to protect the house from itself. Well, he'd better remember that protecting the house from itself included protecting himself from hubris.

He had to remember that with pride came arrogance, and with arrogance could come monstrosity.

*[Yeri,] he called from his bed.*

*[Yes, Jason?]*

*[It's time for you to go to work,] he told her. [Inform the Hrathrari that all their damaged ships will be returned to a place near the closest Hrathrari system to RJ-44 where they can come pick them up in three standard days, except for the command ship we captured. We claim that ship as spoils of war. Tell them that uninjured Hrathrari will be returned along with their ships, but all injured Hrathrari will be returned to full health before we send them back. I'm going to tell Songa that no Hrathrari returns to their Dominion any less that completely whole. And finally, tell the Hrathrari Emperor that a peace treaty will be on his desk in one standard day. Make it very simple, Yeri. No conditions or reparations offered or accepted. Just simple peace.]*

*[He'd be a fool not to sign it,] Yeri noted clinically. [What do we do if he doesn't?]*

*[We'll get to that point when it comes around,] he replied. [Since I doubt he knows what happened yet, include some footage of how one-sided the battle was with your missive, and tell him we're more than willing to wait for him to get confirmation from what's left of his fleet as to what happened before he signs the peace treaty.]*

*[Alright.]*

*[I'm going back to bed, so just send the reports to my inbox.]*

*[Okay then, Jayce. Do you still plan on going to Janja in the morning?]*

*[Yup, much to Aya's intense displeasure,] he replied dryly. [I intend to talk to the Hrathrari commander myself before Miaari gets her claws on him. I figure he'll talk to his Emperor personally after we send him back, so I want him to take back the message I'm sending where I'm sure it'll reach the Emperor's ears.]*

*[Wise,] Yeri chuckled. [I'll be on Janja myself. Lunch?]*

*[It's a date,] he affirmed. [Sleep well.]*

Jason disengaged from the biogenic network and blew out his breath. That was that, and now he could go to sleep relieved more than anything



else, relieved that his decisions hadn't gotten anyone he cared about killed today.

Any day he could say that was a good day, anymore.

Commandant Admiral Gravrith was a very tall, fit Hrathrari. He had dusky gray fur with a white ruff, and he looked both fierce and mature at the same time. He wore a very gaudy dark red uniform, nearly the color of Terran blood, with a virtual carpet of silver and gold medals on both sides of the polished chrome-like buttons that went up the middle of his jacket. He was also shell-shocked.

That was a good explanation of it. His eyes looked haunted, nearly vacant, and he did whatever he was told by whoever told him. He was meek and compliant, sitting in one of the small conference rooms in the diplomatic building they'd built on Janja for the conference. There were four Marine guards in there with him, but in reality, they could have left him alone in the room with the door unlocked and told him to just stay in his chair, and he'd have sat there until he died of dehydration.

The lightest touches on his mind showed that it was no act, but that touch required actual effort. These Hrathrari had naturally closed minds, even though the Admiral himself was not a telepath. The entire race seemed to have a natural passive defense against telepathy that made their minds naturally closed. So Jason had to actively engage the Admiral's mind to assess his mental state, very nearly attack him to hear his surface thoughts, but once he got that access, he saw that the Admiral's doe-eyed demeanor was no act. He was nearly dazed, stunned, overwhelmed by what had happened to his ship and to his fleet. In his many years of fighting for the Dominion, he had *never* had anything like that happen before, seen the ships in his fleet fall like dominoes, see his grand and mighty fleet *eradicated* so swiftly, so abruptly. He had never seen a lone fighter destroy a Hrathrari battle cruiser. He had never fathomed that there could be others out there with ships so powerful, so fearsome, that it made the might of the Hrathrari Dominion look like a termite mound beset upon by a swarm of starving anteaters. The perceived invulnerability of his homeland had been destroyed in the blink of an eye, and his mind just hadn't been able to handle it.

Reality had crashed down on Commandant Admiral Gravrith, and his mind hadn't caught up to it yet.

Aya herself walked in behind Jason as he entered the room. Jason was wearing armor but not his helmet, a nod to Aya's security precautions, armor with a tactical gestalt in it and with the house crest emblazoned upon the chest with the house colors trimming the armor. The armor marked him as important to anyone who looked at him without understanding Karinne heraldry, but the admiral just stared blankly at him. Jason sat on the other side of the table at which the tall, burly Hrathrari was seated, turning the chair around and sitting with his hands resting on the back. "Good afternoon, Admiral," Jason said in the Hrathrari language. "I am the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne."

That made the admiral blink, staring at him woodenly. Then a glimmer of comprehension flickered in his amber eyes. "Your Grace," he said in a fearful voice.

"I'm here to explain to you what's about to happen, and to give you a message to relay to your Emperor when you are returned home," he began, leaning on the back of the chair a bit. "And since it's coming directly from me, you will know that it's the truth.

"Firstly, be assured that all of your Naval crewmen who survived the battle are being well tended," he began. "You will be allowed to tour the mobile medical facility we've set up to treat the wounded, and the rest are being billeted in modular barracks units we've brought in. We're holding them here for 31 Hrathrari *edoi* while we organize the logistics and warn your people of our intentions," he said, using their time measurements, "then they'll be returned to the Dominion, along with all of the ships we've captured except for one. That one ship we claim as spoils of war," he declared strongly. "We will be keeping the seriously wounded here on this moon until they are fully healed, however. It has long been the custom of my people that *all* injuries are healed after a battle, and not a single Hrathrari will leave this moon unless he is well and whole. Those who have lost limbs will have those limbs replaced using our medical technology, and those will probably be the ones who stay here the longest. It will take approximately 23 Hrathrari days for them to undergo limb replacement.

“Secondly, we’re not holding you here or in isolation. You will meet with Handmaiden Miaari, an intelligence expert who will debrief you, and then you will be released to the prisoners’ barracks to be with your men. They’ll need your leadership, and your presence will give them reassurance.”

“So it’s to be interrogation, then?” he asked with a little steel in his voice.

Jason laughed. “To be brutally honest, there’s little you know we care about, Admiral. Your technology is vastly inferior, and we honestly don’t care about your fleet size or dispensation. You are no threat to us, and you never were,” he said calmly. “Handmaiden Miaari’s questions will be more about Hrathrari leisure activities than fleet sizes. She is also of a canoid species, and she’s curious to see how similar your species is to hers in certain areas. So don’t worry about betraying any Hrathrari secrets to us, Admiral. We don’t care about them.

“Thirdly, you will carry a message back to your Emperor from me, and it’s a very simple one, Admiral. The next time the Hrathrari attacks the House of Karinne, we will not attack Hrathrari planets or fleets, we will attack the Hrathrari *Emperor*. We have ships that your sensors can’t detect, and I can park one directly over the Imperial Palace on Hrathar within ten minutes. He’ll never see it coming, and he’ll never know what hit him. You tell him that the next time he attacks the House of Karinne, we won’t fight his ships, we will come after *him*. Can you remember that?”

The admiral looked at him with haunted eyes. “I...I wish to have asylum!” he blurted, his hands shaking.

“What?”

“Do you know what the Emperor will do to me when I return?” he asked in a nearly hysterical voice. “It was my command, and the punishment for such an utter failure will be levied against *me*! He won’t care that we never had a chance! I don’t want to go back! I don’t want to die!” he nearly screamed, his eyes wild.

Jason looked at Aya, who returned his gaze with a calm, measured expression. “I didn’t expect you to want to stay.”

“I want to *live*, and that means that I can’t go back!” he answered.

“Well...I’ll have to discuss the matter with Secretary Yeri,” he said hesitantly. “If you don’t want to go back, that’s fine. It’s not our place to *force* you to go back. But to be honest, I’m not sure where you can go,” he said honestly.

*Terra*, Aya noted.

“Actually, yeah, *Terra*,” he agreed with a nod. “But that would be a one-way trip, Admiral. If you don’t return to the Dominion, you can never go back later, even if you change your mind.”

“I can never go back as it is!” he said, his eyes darting about. “The Emperor executes commanders who fail!”

“Alright then, I’ll talk to Yeri about granting you asylum,” Jason said as he stood up. “We can send you to *Terra*, which is a neutral planet in our home sector that acts as a trade hub and neutral meeting place for multiple empires. In the meantime, *Miaari* wishes to talk to you.”

*Well, that’s not entirely shocking*, Aya told him as they walked out, where the admiral looked *much* more relaxed, almost relieved.

*It is to me, that someone that high-ranking would ask for asylum*, he answered. *It does pose an interesting question, though. How many others would stay if we offered?*

*You’re going to?*

*May as well, just not directly*, he replied. *I get the feeling that anyone who stays will get his family in big trouble back in the Dominion. And the Hrathrari know who survived, so those that go back will tell their superiors who decided to stay behind. That might cause some retribution. That’s the way assholes like the Hrathrari Emperor work.*

*Maybe we should send the Javelin to Hrathar*, Aya proposed dryly.

*Much as I’d like to, we’re not in the business of being the galactic police*, Aya, he answered. *Eliminating a ruler we don’t like just because we don’t like him goes against the tenets of the house. Besides, it sets a bad precedent. I would be so tempted to do that to Anavan, I’d never be able to look her in the face again.*

Aya smiled rakishly. *I know, Jason, I was just being facetious.*

*Sometimes it's hard to tell with you, woman,* he replied lightly as they approached Miaari. "The Admiral asked for asylum, Mee," he told her.

"I'm not surprised. My discussions with the enlisted paint a very ugly picture of the Dominion," she replied, clicking her teeth together. "Many of them fear reprisal upon their return for their failure. We can send him to Terra."

Jason nodded. "That's what Aya suggested, and it's a good one. I'm sure he can find a job."

"What about the others?"

"I think we can *quietly* offer them asylum," he replied. "Somehow I get the feeling that the families of those that refuse to go back may take the brunt of it once the Dominion knows who defected. And since we have all the enlisted in the same barracks compound, they know who lived and who didn't."

"Stop thinking like a Terran, Jason, and think like a Karinne," she chuckled. "We can solve that problem. Your telepaths can edit their memories so they believe that whoever stays was killed in the battle."

"I...I guess we could," he grunted. "I don't like using telepathy like that, but I think this *would* be an acceptable use of telepathy against the will of the victim, if only to save the families of those that stay. That might be tricky, though. The Hrathrari have closed minds. I've never seen a race with natural resistance to telepathy that wasn't insectoid, Faey, or Kimdori."

"It is a curious coincidence," she said, tapping her muzzle. "And more curious that other canoids like the Beryans and the Rakarri don't share that trait."

"The Hrathrari might be your long-lost cousins, Mee," Jason said.

Miaari gave him a dirty look. They both fully knew just how ludicrous such a statement was. "I will bring in skilled telepaths in case they are needed."

"Send me the reports, I'm going back home," he said.

*I don't see why you came in the first place, Aya* accused. *Other than to annoy me.*

*That's always a bonus, but I wanted to talk to the Admiral face to face, he replied. Is everything ready for next week?*

*Yes, she replied with a nod. I have the security for the summit all organized with the Terrans. You won't be staying in New York, though. You'll be staying in Ayuma's house on the grounds, she offered it to you for the summit. I already have an advance team of guards and Marines there.*

*That works for me, I'd rather be there than in New York anyway, it makes it hard for the others to annoy me, he told her. And what about the presents?*

*They're all there already, she answered. They'd be on Terra for Christmas, so Jason had had Aya ship all their gifts ahead. Does the Empress still intend to end her visit there?*

*Yeah, she's going from Terra straight back to Draconis, he affirmed. She's not too happy about it, though. She really likes the summer palace.*

*She should, it's beautiful, Aya noted. And it's much less stressful here than Dracora.*

*Shya makes that point about twice a day, he chuckled. She hated being an Imperial Princess once she discovered what life was like outside the palace. I think she sees moving here as emancipation rather than the humiliation that some in the Siann believe it to be.*

*Not every Merrane has the temperament to be Empress, and Shya is one of them, Aya sent honestly. But I think Sirri will be a great Empress.*

*Yeah, me too, he agreed. She's smart, she's calm, and what's most important to me, she's kind. The Imperium could use a little kindness on the throne. God knows, as much as I love Dahnai, kindness and compassion are not her strong suits.*

*Dahnai is very kind, Aya protested.*

*Her kindness begins and ends with those she likes, Aya, and you can't deny it, he retorted. If Dahnai likes you, she can be incredibly generous and caring. If she doesn't, she'd order your execution without batting an eye.*

*I can't argue with that, Aya admitted.*

*Sirri has much more basic compassion than Dahnai, and I think that will make her an effective Empress in the coming era, he predicted. When the political landscape because of the Confederation changes everything about how the Imperium works.*

*You mean how you are trying to change the Imperium, Aya accused with a slight smile.*

*I've said it before and I'll say it again, my friend, the Imperium is a terrible political system that doesn't work, he replied bluntly. It's fomented nearly four thousand years of infighting among the houses, and it teaches the commoner that the only way to get anything out of life is to have loyalty only to one's self. I worked for five years within the Siann to try to change things, and I got about as far as a bowling ball would trying to roll uphill. Well, I'm in a position to do something about it now, but this time from the outside. And the easiest way to start changing the Imperium is to fix it so the other houses stop trying to take the throne from Dahnai and her family, he sent calmly. Taking that temptation away is the first step to changing the Siann.*

*I doubt that'll work, but I do commend you for trying, Aya told him honestly.*

*It won't start to show for a couple of generations, he added. The current Grand Duchesses were raised to believe that they should be Empress. I figure that when their granddaughters take the house thrones, then we'll start seeing some change in attitude.*

*That's a good point.*

*The other half of it is to show the Grand Duchesses what Yila's already figured out, he sent as they walked out of the building. That peace is more profitable than war.*

*Yila makes profit off everything, Aya chuckled mentally.*

*True, but she's making more money off peace than she was off war, Jason replied as they approached his skimmer. The blue gas giant hung behind the sleek blue craft, dominating the sky, and another of the 16 moons of the system was also visible... Jason had to pause and admire it as they walked, noting how it almost looked like a scenic backdrop to some sci-fi movie. Those old movies loved to put multiple moons and such in the*

sky to drive home the alien nature of the scene, and here he was standing on a terrestrial moon orbiting a gas giant the color of Neptune from his home solar system. *When the other houses figure that out, I hope to see a major shift in how the houses approach things. If peace is more profitable than war, they'll pursue peace. Their greed will ensure it.*

Aya gave him a proud look as they climbed up into the skimmer. *And I remember the day you showed up in the throne room looking so nervous you'd jump if someone looked at you, with your crazy scheme to kick Trillane off Terra that turned out to be not quite so crazy as everyone thought it was, she mused with a light tilt to her thought. How far you've come, Jason.*

*This was a sink or swim job, Aya, and too many people were depending on me to fail.*

She patted him on the shoulder just before they sat down in the cockpit, Jason flying and Aya in the copilot's chair. *[Jason,] Cybi called.*

*[Yeah, Cybi?]*

*[I think you might want to come back home. It seems that both Myleena and Kumi are about to enter labor.]*

*[Both?]* he asked, then he laughed. *Cybi, he told Aya when she glanced at him.*

*[I know, but my scans show that both of them are in the first stages,] she replied. [They should have their water break within 20 minutes of each other. I've informed both of them. Kumi is on her way to the annex, but Myleena is finishing up what she's doing before she leaves 3D.]*

*[That woman is such a freakin' workaholic,] Jason complained. [Alright, I'll get things sorted out when I get back home and be at the annex when I can.] He looked over at Aya. Both Kumi and Myleena are about to start labor, like within 20 minutes of each other, he told her.*

Aya laughed, that eerie wheezing voiceless sound. *Kumi can never do anything the normal way, she observed.*

*That's part of her charm, he agreed. Cybi knows what gender the baby is, but she won't tell anyone.*



*And that's Cybi being Cybi*, Aya noted with a sly look in his direction as the engines started up.

Jason couldn't go directly to the annex, because he had things to do. He settled into his office after taking off his armor and got the important stuff out of the way. He first called Yeri and explained everything going on, breaking their lunch date, but she didn't mind all that much when she found out why. He left it up to Yeri to find out who wanted asylum and organize the telepaths to protect the families of those that stayed behind, as well as authorized her to send Jason's personal message to the Hrathrari Emperor via tachyon burst...and do it *unencoded*, so everyone in the RK sector would pick it up and know exactly where the Karinnes stood and what would happen if the Dominion tried this idiocy again. He got the initial inspection report from 3D and KMS Engineering, who were inspecting their prize, the Hrathrari battleship. It was mostly intact, just with blown-out gun batteries, but the interior showed some signs of the door to door fighting that had taken place inside, holes from rail slugs and pulse weapons, burn marks from ion blasts, and a few areas where very normal-looking red blood stained the decks or the bulkhead. Kyva and the riggers had invaded the landing bay not to take it over, but to prevent any of their small ships from leaving or being destroyed to deny them to the Karinnes, and that had netted them several personnel transport ships and four fightercraft that hadn't launched, probably down for maintenance.

He got the initial report from Miaari, which was delivered by Kemaari on a dedicated handpanel; even though she could have sent it securely using a biogenic link, the Kimdori protocols for secrecy were still well set in Miaari's operation, and foremost among them was no sensitive report or information was broadcast over any medium. It was delivered by hand on dedicated handpanels. Commandant Admiral Gravrith was sincere in his desire to stay, Miaari's touch on him confirmed it, though he was unwilling to divulge the secrets of his empire or his military. He had loyalty not to the Emperor, but to his navy and to the Hrathrari that served in it, and Jason could respect that. Gravrith *cared* about the men and women under his command and feared that telling the Karinnes anything might get more of them killed in the future, so he would remain silent. Of course, Miaari got all those secrets anyway by that touch on him, but what mattered to Jason

was that Gravrith believed that he upheld his sacred duty to his fellow sailors.

It was only sheer self-preservation that had driven him to ask for asylum, for he was firmly convinced that the Emperor would have him executed if he returned, the punishment for his utter failure at RJ-44.

After he got everything all wrapped up, he flew to the annex with Shen and Suri accompanying him and tracked down his best friend and good friend. Songa had put them in rooms next to each other, which let Jason and the others who had already got there to simply go down one door to see both of them in turn. Myleena was actually reading a handpanel when he came in, the initial inspection reports, and she gave Jason a glare when he took it out of her hand and set it aside. “You are *in labor*, you nit,” he accused. “Work can wait!”

“I’m not in labor *yet*,” she challenged. “I’ve done this before, you goof, I have time before I’ll be too busy to care about anything else. I’ve even warned Siyara about what’s coming. She’s a little nervous, but she’s also really excited. She’s been wanting to see the outside world for almost as long as she could comprehend that it’s there.”

“Did you warn her that it’s not going to be all that fun of an experience?”

“She’s ready for it,” Myleena nodded.

Jason went next-door and found Kumi sitting up, talking animatedly with Songa. “Babes!” she said happily, holding her hand out. “Where’s Jys?”

“Rounding up the kids from school so they could be here,” he replied. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. I was starting to get really worried!”

“I was too,” Songa said. “I was just a day from arranging her to come in to induce labor. She’s past the window.”

“Well, I guess my baby just wanted to make everyone wait,” she grinned, then she winced a tiny bit. “And I think I’m about to go into labor,” she declared.

“You are,” Songa said, looking at her bio-board behind Kumi’s head. “But the biorhythms suggest it won’t be a very long one, dear. Count yourself lucky. I think you’ll give birth before Myleena.”

And that was exactly what happened. About two hours later, with a very smooth labor, Kumi delivered a beautiful little baby girl with dark chestnut hair and green eyes...which made Jason silently relieved. Given how depraved Kumi was, he wasn’t sure he *wanted* her to have a son, for reasons even he didn’t really want to think about. That just seemed too explosive a combination. Not that her having a daughter was going to be much better, given just how that girl was going to be raised. Kumi saw nothing wrong at all with her hedonistic, oversexed lifestyle, and he had no doubt that she’d raise her daughter to believe the same thing she did.

Kumi decided to name her daughter Jysara, and Jason left her in good health and surrounded by friends and well-wishers, because he had another pregnant friend, and this one required his presence.

Jason had gone through this before with Yila, so he was there when Myleena started real labor. Jason finally made telepathic contact with his daughter to introduce himself and reassure her while Myleena went through labor pains and contractions, just as he had with Kyri. A calm mind needed to be there to keep that telepathic baby from getting worked up, because childbirth wasn’t a very fun experience for the baby either. And since Jason was the father, it was his job.

The first contact with Siyara was almost exactly the same as it had been with Kyri. At first, she was a little startled, since only Myleena had directly talked to her up until that point. *Who?* came her response when he called her name mentally. Though Myleena had taught Siyara abstract concepts like language already, she was an infant, so her mind tended to couch her thought in primal instinct and impulse.

*I’m your father, Siyara. Didn’t your mother explain what a father is?*

*Yes. Why?*

He understood the real question behind her thought. *Because your mother is going to be distracted as she gives birth to you. I’m going to be here for you, to explain anything that makes you frightened. What’s about to happen will be new and scary, my daughter, but it’s going to be alright.*

*Discomfort, came her thought.*

*That's because you're about to be born. It won't be much longer, so be patient.*

*Nothing else to do.*

Jason had to laugh. *You already have a firm grip on the reality of the outside world*, he sent dryly. He went over what she could expect but ran into a bit of a hang-up at the concept of *cold*.

*Not understanding.*

*It's not something you can easily describe until it happens to you*, he answered. *Trust me, daughter, the first time you feel cold, you'll know what it is. But you won't be that way long. Just be ready for it, daughter. At first, you'll find much discomfort in being in the outside world, but that passes quickly.*

*Different. Different good.*

*Not all the time, but that's a good way to look at things, Siyara. Never be afraid of different.* "Where we at, Songa?"

"Myleena will start delivering on the next contraction," she replied, looking at the bioboard.

"It's about damn time," Myleena growled, wincing a bit as she recovered from the last contraction.

*Just a short time before it starts*, he told Siyara. *Remember, just be calm. You will be well cared for, daughter. Just be calm and trust us.*

*Trust.*

It only took about ten more minutes. The childbirth began in earnest with the next contraction, and like most Faey and Terran women giving birth, it was slow going until the baby's head crowned, then moved swiftly afterwards. Siyara took a reflexive birth and did as Jason instructed, allowed herself to cry, which helped an infant kickstart her respiratory system to do actual real work. But just like Kyri, the crying only lasted a moment, until her lungs were cleared of amniotic fluid and drawing oxygen normally. *Cold...cold not good*, she decided as Songa cleaned her up after the initial medical scan.

Jason and Myleena both chuckled. *I warned you.*

*You did. Bright. Sounds much louder. Disorienting.*

*It takes practice to make sense of it, Siyara,* Jason assured her. *It's just a matter of learning.*

Songa presented the infant to Myleena, who gave her a beautiful, loving smile. Now that she was clean, Jason could see that she had his skin, Myleena's pointed ears, light blond hair, and deep, emerald green eyes, eyes that looked at her parents with lucid curiosity. *Hello, my beautiful baby girl, it's so good to finally see you,* Myleena told her.

*Unexpected. Pretty.*

Myleena laughed. *I think you're pretty too,* she said.

*Father. Different.*

*Yes, your father and me are different,* she replied with a smile as Danelle came into the room eagerly. *And this is your sister, Siyara. This is Danelle.*

*Baby sister,* Danelle sent with a happy smile.

*Sister like mother. I like father.*

*If you mean your skin, yes. Me and Danelle are blue, you and your father are...whatever color that is,* she sent slyly, glancing wearily at Jason.

*Not understanding different. Why different?*

Myleena chuckled. *That's going to take time to explain. But it's nothing to worry about.*

*Okay. Tired.*

*So am I,* Myleena told her. *We both just had a very busy day, baby girl. I'm going to let Songa put you in a place where you can sleep, but you'll be close, you'll be warm, and you'll be safe. So don't be frightened.*

*Not frightened. Just tired. Want sleep.*

*Then we'll let you get some sleep,* she sent. Songa took her and put her in the hovercrib by the bed, and Siyara was asleep nearly the minute she was made comfortable.

*Are you okay, Mommy?*

*I'm fine, pippy, she answered, patting Danelle's cheek. Thank you for waiting outside and understanding. We had to keep the number of people in here as few as possible. If Siyara would have acted out of fear, she could have been dangerous. She's powerful, and that kind of power backed up by her emotions could have been dangerous. I'm just glad she seems more curious than afraid, she sent in relief.*

*That was your doing, not hers, Songa told her approvingly. You handled teaching her from the womb exceptionally well, Myleena. She was ready for this, thanks to you.*

*I'm just glad everyone's alright, Jason sent. Kumi and her daughter are fine, you and Siyara are fine. Now, you ready for the visitors?*

*Yup, let's roll them through here so I can get all the schmoozing out of the way and get some rest.*

Jason had to laugh at her mental tone, and so did Danelle for that matter, giggling as she looked up at her mother.

*Raista, 12 Oraa, 4401, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 25 December 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raista, 12 Oraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Academy, Terra*

It was too bad that the rest of the Confederation didn't really get Christmas, but he had to admit, they did rather like the idea of exchanging gifts.

Kim had started that. When they gathered for the summit two days ago and Kim explained all the decorations the rulers were seeing all over New York City, he forwarded the idea of exchanging gifts to celebrate the Terran holiday. Kim very wisely put a hard cost cap on the gifts, knowing the extravagance of some at the table who would give ridiculous gifts to show their wealth and power, putting a hard cap of C1,000 on the gifts, then drawing names randomly out of a hat. Jason lucked out in a way and had to

buy a gift for Field Marshal Grran, which wasn't all that hard. Grran was a fairly easy-going fellow. Shakizarr had the bad luck of drawing Anavan, and Dahnai had drawn Krirara. This was the second day of their four-day summit, which started two days after everyone arrived so they could have some time to inspect the Confederation offices and operations on Terra before they started their deliberations.

And they'd been inspecting. Every member of the Confederate Council except Jason had been running around Terra for the last two days, personally touring the many different bureaus and offices that the Confederation ran in support of its member nations. They toured the Academy, they toured the different government offices that managed the communications and trade between the member nations, they toured the three Moridon banks that operated on Terra almost solely for the member empires, and they toured the gigantic orbital station that was now operating that served as the hub of all trade coming from the respective entry stations. Cargo came through an entry station to an immense and impressive orbital cargo terminal and then was routed on to its destination. The station was three times the size of the Martian moon of Phobos, a large station with a massive central body and six radial terminal wings, managed by Kizzik and Makati logistical experts to keep the large and complicated Confederate cargo and transport system running smoothly. That cargo terminal had been built by the Academy and replaced four different orbital stations they'd been using for cargo hauling and routing. The station was in extreme high orbit to mitigate its effect on the ocean tides and had been in operation for about two months.

Terra itself was starting to look *so* much different. Jason had arranged a trip to Broadway to see a show with his family and Dahnai's family, and the streets of New York City were like a scene out of *Star Wars*. Dozens of different races and species walked the streets of New York now, both Confederate members and non-members, since Terra was operated as an open planet where members of any empire or nation could come to the planet. Since it was the pseudo-capitol of the Confederation, that had attracted other empires to open offices on planet, had attracted inter-empire megacorps to open business offices on the planet, and the war effort had caused an explosion of work on Terra to work in factories and support the people working in those factories. Farming was still Terra's main output,

but virtually every old closed factory on the entire planet had been remodeled, refitted, and opened to produce goods. The Rust belt states that had suffered so drastically when the auto industry slumped were enjoying a renaissance of work, as factories that had been closed for years or even decades were opened back up to produce Confederate gear or goods built by the many megacorps that had moved to Terra to take advantage of the planet's open status. Virtually anybody on Terra that wanted a job had a job, since Kim's contracts with other empires and megacorps stated that they had to hire local Terrans to man those factories before they started recruiting from offworld. Because of that, unemployment world-wide on Terra floated around 0.35%, and they were bringing in foreign workers by the transport load daily to fill the millions of jobs openings on the planet as more and more old closed factories were revamped and reopened. Terra was now *the place* to go if you wanted a job and wanted a fresh start, because jobs were plentiful, and those jobs paid well. If you could tolerate Terran temperature and gravity and breathed either oxygen or nitrogen—or didn't mind wearing a breather if you didn't—then you could make a good life for yourself on Terra.

Kim kept on showing why he was such a smart man and a wily politician. The system he'd set up ensured that the jobs on Terra wouldn't dry up when the war was over, because of all the civilian megacorps that had come to Terra to set up factories, taking advantage of the unique legal and political status of Terra. Those jobs would keep on going after the need to build Confederate war technology was past.

It was Christmas morning for his family, but it was also Christmas for the KMS. After intentionally slowing down construction to give Juma time to train a crew, the third of the KMS command ships was coming off the dock today. The provisionally named KMS *Indomitable* had actually been finished for about a week, but Dellin hadn't wanted to park a command ship like some mothballed destroyer, so he ordered "extensive post-construction quality control inspections" to be conducted until the crew was rated and ready. Jason had already organized his day so he could be there for the commissioning ceremony, where Flag Admiral Salira Karinne would leave the KMS command staff to assume command of the capitol ship. Jason knew she was going to rename the ship, but Salira always kept everything close to her rather generously curved chest. It was also Christmas for Sioa,



since the first of the new Juggernaut exomechs were coming off the line in the new factory today, and she already had riggers ready to pilot them thanks to rating simulators. Now that the factory was tooled and producing, 5 Juggernauts would be coming off that line every day, and two more factories were already slated for Juggernaut production when they came online within the next month, which would up their production to 15 units a day. And since they had three years to prepare, that would allow them to build up their numbers in the inventory, because every sim and simulation and real exercise was showing just how nasty those exomechs were. They were the perfect complement to the sleek and agile Gladiator.

*I don't get it. It's not New Year's yet,* Shya sent suspiciously as the family gathered in the living room of Ayuma's old house on the Academy. Jason had all his kids with him for this trip, their mothers graciously allowing him to bring them to Terra while they stayed on Karis. Now that Ayuma was more or less restricted to Karis for the near future, she allowed important visitors and friends to use her house when they came to the Academy...and it was quite a house. Mansion was a better term for it, a three story, 20 room residence almost smack dab in the center of the Academy grounds, just a block from the main administration building. Ayuma had chosen that location very carefully so she was always figuratively and literally in the middle of everything. The big house did ensure that all five of his older kids would get their own rooms for the trip.

*This is a Terran holiday where we exchange gifts, pips,* Jason chuckled as he bounced Bethany a bit in his arms. *It has very deep roots in Terran religion, but we don't celebrate it on that level, just like we don't celebrate the religious roots behind New Year's Day. So enjoy your free haul of stuff, kidlet,* Jason sent lightly, which made Shya giggle.

*Last year was great, Christmas and New Years were really close together,* Kyri sent eagerly as she sat by the tree Jason had put up just the night before, eyeing the presents with barely contained anticipation.

*It is this year too, but they're going to get further and further apart every year,* Jason told her as Jyslin came out of the kitchen carrying Siyae. Amber stalked around Jyslin's ankles worriedly, looking up at the infant she was carrying. The little vulpar didn't seem to like Ayuma's house very much since it wasn't set up for a vulpar's unique needs, but she was coping

well enough. It had taken both Rann and Jason to convince her to come with them this time, mainly since both Ayama and Surin had also come to do what they did best while the Ducal family was at the summit, take quiet care of them.

“Settle down, you silly little thing,” Jyslin chided Amber with a smile, looking down at her. “I’m going to sit down right now.” She did so, sitting on the couch, and Amber jumped up so she could check Siyae. Amber was *majorly* attached to the new twins, and often slept in their nursery when Rann was at school. That was a big relief to Jason, since young vulpars often had issues dealing with newborns due to the attention they garnered. But Amber loved the twins nearly as much as she loved Rann, despite the fact that they were girls. After making sure that Siyae was in fact alright, a reaction caused by Siyae’s fussing when Jyslin brought her downstairs, Amber jumped down and settled herself in Rann’s lap. Amber was nearly as neurotic as any first-time mother, always checking out the slightest sound of discomfort or annoyance coming from the twins. *Alright, kids, you can start. Just don’t send wrapping paper all over the place.*

They spent a good hour opening presents, Shya getting into the spirit of getting swag from her parents, step-parents, friends, and step-siblings, enjoying the annual ritual of making a huge mess in the living room no matter how many times they were told to be careful. Kiaari swaggered in at the tail end of it, laughing when she saw the bits of paper all over the large living room. “Why am I not surprised, given this bunch,” she said loudly.

“Hey Kee,” Jason chuckled. “You’re late.”

“Yeah, I had too much stuff to deal with at the office before I could come,” she admitted, sitting beside him on the couch. “And how big was this year’s haul, cublings?” she asked the six kids still sending excitedly over their gains.

“Pretty good,” Aran said with a grin, holding up a box. “I got a Junior Scientist’s Lab Kit! It’s gonna be awesome!”

“I got a telescope!” Kyri added. “A hyperspace one that’ll let me see the cool stuff!”

“I got a rock,” Jason quipped in a deadpan voice, which made Kiaari give him a weird look. “Old Terran inside joke,” he laughed after seeing her

expression. “So, how goes the summit for you?”

“A rare opportunity,” she grinned. “I’ll send you one of those big thousand page reports you love so much.”

She burst out laughing when Jason swatted her on the top of her muzzle. “Bad dog,” he said shortly.

“Speaking of families, did you hear? I have permission to make myself available!” she said excitedly.

“They’re letting a kid have kids? It’s the end of the Kimdori,” Jyslin sighed. Jason laughed when Kiaari reached over him and smacked her on the shoulder. Since she was holding Siyae, Amber jumped up in Rann’s lap and growled squeakily at the Kimdori.

“So, any bites yet?”

“It hasn’t been made public yet,” she replied. “But I’m hopeful I can attract some quality males. I’ll ride sister Miaari’s coat-tails on this one,” she said smugly, which made Jason laugh again. “But seriously, I’m a *Gamekeeper*. I’m the youngest Gamekeeper there is, and I control the game in one of the most important star systems in the galaxy! That *better* be good enough.”

“You don’t have a white bar, so eh, maybe some desperate dock worker *might* send you a poem or something,” Jason said in a bland voice, then he covered his head when Kiaari attacked him with her open palms, causing laughter to erupt through the entire living room.

“You jerk, why do I call you a friend!” Kiaari said with fake outrage, driving him off the couch and onto the floor, and the two of them mock-fought at Jyslin’s feet. So, it was a fairly compromising position when Dahnai came in with Kellin and her kids to see Jason on his back, fending off Kiaari’s open swats as she straddled his legs, her tail slashing behind her savagely. Dahnai and Kellin were carrying their infant twins themselves, which wasn’t all that surprising given that she’d have to give them over to Saelle and Evin, who were conspicuously absent. No doubt Dahnai was getting as much time with her children as possible before having to return to Imperial tradition.

“I’m not sure I *want* to know what brought this on,” Dahnai said dryly, which made Kiaari burst out laughing and stop attacking him, rising back up and just sitting on his knees.

“I’m putting a punk back in his place, that’s what,” she replied with a fanged grin, looking down at him. She then gasped when she zoomed up almost to the ceiling, held suspended in midair by his telekinetic power.

“Oh really,” Jason drawled, which made Dahnai laugh. Jason kept her up there until he got back to his feet, then let her down gently. She laughed and licked him on the cheek playfully, then knelt by Kyri and Zachary.

“Okay cubs, let’s see what you got!” she prompted.

“You’re late,” Jason told her.

“Blame him for that,” she said, pointing at Kellin.

“I’ll blame you for that,” he replied easily. “How was your gift giving?” he asked.

“The usual,” he said, motioning at the mess in the living room. “Did you guys get into the Christmas spirit?”

“If you mean these two brats demanded free stuff because we’re on Terra for a Terran holiday, yes,” Dahnai said archly, pointing at Sirri. She looked entirely unrepentant.

“If they weren’t obnoxious, they wouldn’t be your kids, Dahnai,” Jason teased.

“Hey!” Maer protested, which made Jason and Rann laugh.

Sirri demonstrated her disapproval by kicking Jason in the shin, which caused some giggles in the room.

“That’s my girl,” Dahnai said proudly, patting Sirri on the shoulder.

They traded some gifts with Dahnai’s family and then had a very large, sumptuous breakfast cooked by Ayama and Surin, Kiaari keeping things light and playful at the table. Dahnai discussed the upcoming summit, which was going to start that afternoon and would be far less formal than the last one, while the kids talked about their gifts and their upcoming day, which would be very busy and very fun for them. The kids and Jyslin were

going to Disney World, one of their Christmas presents, and would no doubt cause Aya's guards to come home with gray hair. Jason, on the other hand, had too much work to do to go with them. Miaari and Kemaari entered the dining room about halfway through breakfast. "You're late," Jason chided.

"Work waits for no one, friend Jason," she replied.

"Sisters," Kiaari said. "How goes things?"

"Things go well, sister," Miaari replied as Kemaari came over and sat by Kiaari.

"I've heard you've settled in over in sister Miaari's office," Kiaari smiled, putting her hand on Kemaari's neck fondly.

"I'm doing what I can, sister Kiaari," she replied mildly.

"She shows some small measure of potential," Miaari said calmly, sitting on the far side of Kemaari.

"Small measure?" Jason challenged.

"She's too young to show anything else," Miaari replied, giving him a sly little glance. "Only time will show how much potential she has."

"Well, I'm glad I don't work in your office with you being the boss," Dahnai teased.

"You would never last in my office, your Majesty, I have very high standards," Miaari replied snootily. Jason burst out laughing and Dahnai gave Miaari a short glare, then laughed herself.

"I'm glad I have Jinaami instead of you," Dahnai shot back. "At least she pretends to respect my throne."

"Never, ever, have a Handmaiden as your ambassador, Dahnai. They're more trouble than they're worth," Jason told her. "If Miaari wasn't my friend, I'd have bounced her tail off Karis four years ago."

"Oooh, sounds like I might be able to get a promotion if I play my cards right," Kiaari said eagerly, giving Miaari a sly look.

"Not in this millennium," Miaari replied loftily. "No matter who you might think you are, sister, you're still nothing but a baby to me."

"Harsh," Kellin chuckled as Kiaari gave Miaari a cool look.

“Feel honored, they usually save this bickering only for the privacy of my house. They only bicker to an audience, since private digs don’t sting quite so much,” Jason said dryly, which made Jyslin laugh.

“Sometimes I think we should record it when they’re both over for dinner,” Jyslin agreed with a grin.

“Kiaari’s got one up on Miaari at the moment, that’s probably where this extra snippiness is coming from,” Jason added, giving Miaari a sly look.

“Oh? And what is that?” Dahnai asked.

“Kiaari got permission to seek a mate and have babies,” he answered. “Which is almost shocking in Kimdori society because she’s so young. Miaari isn’t used to sharing her spotlight with her sisters, and she’s not taking it well.”

Dahnai and Kellin both burst out laughing when Miaari got up, walked over to Jason’s chair, then slapped him on the top of the head.

“Well, congratulations, Kiaari,” Kellin told her with a smile. “Jason’s right, you *are* very young to win that privilege. It’s a matter of prestige for your clan, isn’t it?”

“Actually, yes,” she said preeningly. “Since I’m a Gamekeeper, Denmother had to approve my petition as well as my father. Her approving my petition means she thinks I’ll be a suitable mother. That’s a major complement given my age.”

“Sometimes I think father’s pride overrides his good sense,” Miaari sniffed.

“Someone’s about to get bit,” Kiaari threatened, which made Kemaari slowly push her seat back, since she was sitting between them. That made the entire table explode with laughter.

“Sibling rivalry is a constant through all species,” Kellin said sagely, still smiling.

“It’s how they show love,” Jason said dryly. “If Miaari and Kiaari aren’t fighting, then they’re *really* mad at each other.”

“Don’t give away the family secrets, Jason!” Kiaari protested with a grin. “A secret unspoken remains a secret!”

“At least you learned *something*,” Miaari dug.

“Yeah, I learned that white bar shows where the steel rod you stuck up your butt went,” Kiaari snapped back, which made Jason nearly spew a mouthful of *oye* juice.

Miaari and Kiaari never failed to entertain, slyly snipping at each other all through breakfast, but then reality had to take over from family. The three Kimdori had a lot of work to do, Dahnai had a scheduled tour of the cargo terminal and a private conference with Sk’Vrae and Krirara over some proposed trade deals, the kids had tickets for Disney World down in Florida—with Maer and Sirri going along, Jason had wisely planned for them to go too—and Jason had his own itinerary before the first of the two daily conferences began in about seven hours. Jason had only Aya with him as he boarded his skimmer to return to Karis, the entire rest of the guard complement going with the kids to Disney World to help Jyslin, Ayama, and Surin herd them around, watching the Karis Stargate come up from active standby just to allow them through, and then they turned towards Kosigi as they discussed Aya’s proposed security changes for the strip and for the family, since it kept getting larger and larger.

Aya considered his kids and their mothers part of *the family*, and thus requiring security. Aura had taken it fairly well, mainly since Aya’s protocols hadn’t affected her very much. Aya had demanded that Aura leave the civilian company where she worked and enter the KMS as a military personnel transport pilot. So Aura was now Lieutenant Junior Grade Aura Karinne of the Naval Service of the KMS, and she worked as a transport pilot, ferrying around KMS personnel from Karis to Kosigi and everywhere in between. That put Aura in the military chain of command, but it also put her in a more secure area. The mother of one of Jason’s children was *not* going to be flying civilians around.

Aya also wanted to tighten security around Rahne, because Aya considered her related enough to Jason to require additional protection, mainly due to the fact that she and Jason were the only two fully Terran Generations. Rahne worked in Kumi’s office as one of Temika’s main aides and lived just a block away from the strip, but Aya was considering forcing

Evinn to move out of his house directly beside the strip and putting Rahne in that house, then extending the fence to add it to the strip. Jason wasn't quite ready to go that far, and that was the crux of most of their bantering back and forth as they approached Kosigi.

The new command ship was moored to one of the main support struts, cargo belts and personnel ramps leading from the column to the port side of the vessel. It was pristine, gleaming, and menacing, ready for action and ready to further expand the KMS and its ability to prosecute the coming war with the Syndicate. The main doors hiding the GRAF cannon were open to reveal the menacing muzzle of that devastating weapon, but the doors began to close as they approached; they must have been testing the doors. Jason landed his skimmer in the starboard main landing bay a bit forward of amidships, where some 300 KMS personnel were formed up and waiting for them. Standing in the lead was Fleet Admiral Salira Karinne, whose claim to fame in the command staff wasn't her tactical skill or command ability—both of which were exceptional—it was her appearance. Salira was the tallest Faey woman in the KMS, hands down. She was 5.54 shakra tall, which put her at around 6'10" or around 208 centimeters. She was taller than Jason by a good six or seven inches—Jason stood at 6 feet 2.5 inches—and Jason wasn't used to looking up at *any* Faey woman. Dahnai was a very tall Faey, on the upper edge of the normal height deviation for her species, and she was eye to eye with him. Women taller than Dahnai were considered abnormally tall among the Faey. The average Faey woman was around 4.86 shakra, or around 5'10" or about 180 centimeters, but Faey didn't deviate much from that average height. The range of deviation from the norm was only about 3.5 tikra taller or shorter, or around four inches or about 10 centimeters, putting most Faey in a somewhat narrow range of what was considered normal height. But there were some Faey who fell outside that normal range, Faey like Ayuma and Dellin who were freakishly short for a Faey, and Salira who was freakishly tall for a Faey. Salira was the fifth tallest Faey on Karis, and what was normal for the Faey species, all four of the taller Faey were female. What Jason considered not so much a coincidence, Salira was born and grew up on Makan, which was a light gravity planet. The shorter Faey tended to be from planets with heavier gravity than Draconis, the taller ones from lighter gravity.



The tallest Faey on Karis stood at 5.8 shakra tall, or about 7'1" or 215 centimeters. The tallest living Faey, his gestalt supplied, was 6.24 shakra tall, or around 7'8" or about 236 centimeters. Oddly enough, that Faey was male.

It wasn't just her height that made her striking. In addition to being the tallest Faey in the KMS, she had one of the largest chests. Most Faey women were a bit busty without being disproportional, but Salira compounded her height with a *very* generous chest to make her breastplate much harder to build than most other Faey, right on the very edge of *proportional*. She was quite proud of her attributes, as just about any woman sporting around that much cleavage would be. She was also like Dahnai in that she worked out a lot and was very muscularly defined without losing her feminine figure...which Jason suspected she needed so she could support her chest without back pain.

Salira burst out laughing when Jason came out of his skimmer with a stepstool floating beside him, and quite a few unprofessional grins and snickers shivered through the ranks as he set it down and stepped up onto it so he could be eye to eye with Salira. "You are such a prideful man," she protested as she saluted him.

"I warned you," he said with a sly smile as he returned her salute. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted," she said, trying not to laugh again. "Welcome aboard, your Grace. If you're ready, we'll begin the tour and inspection."

Salira conducted him through the ship, mainly showing him the minor differences in the design of her ship compared to the two others, as they tweaked the design and construction processes and made minor improvements driven by ship operations showing where things could be done a little better. Scheduled maintenance to the other ships would introduce those small changes to the older command ships, but none of them were so large that a crewman on the *Aegis* would have any trouble working on the new ship. Most of the engineering upgrades centered around the power distribution system and how it handled the GRAF cannon, tweaking the design to maximize power distribution through the ship while the GRAF was in cycling sequence.

They ended on the bridge, where Jason was allowed to sit in her chair a moment—which was built significantly higher off the deck than most to accommodate her long legs—then she sat down as Jason had an aide bring out the flag and charter. “And what name have you chosen for the ship, Captain?” he asked.

“There’s an old myth about a race of giants that existed before the Faey, and I’ve decided to name this ship after them. So this ship will be known as the *Ijara*,” she replied, using the Faey word for those old mythological beings that most closely translated to the English word *titan*. That old myth, oddly enough, shared similarities with myths from several other species across the sector, all of which appeared in those species’ mythology or history at around the same time. That hinted that a race of giant-sized spacefaring beings might have gone through the sector and visited multiple planets some 40,000 years ago. They couldn’t be the Benga, however, since the titans from Faey myth were said to be significantly taller than the average Benga, some 50 shakra tall, or 60 feet tall or around 18 meters tall. There was a similar myth about creatures close to that size in Japanese mythology, the *kaiju*, the giant beasts that roamed the land before the coming of man. The *kaiju* were supposedly bigger than the Faey titans, but the *kaiju* and the giants from the old fable *Jack and the Beanstalk* were the closest comparable mythological creatures in Terran lore.

“I think that’s a suitable name for a ship like this,” Jason chuckled. “Just tell Dellin and he’ll have the name painted on the ship before you head out for your shakedown cruise.”

“Of course.”

“I proclaim the KMS *Ijara* to be commissioned and ready for active service,” Jason called loudly, then he presented the flag and charter to Salira, pausing for several pictures. Salira leaned down and let Jason kiss her on the cheek, then she laughed when he slapped her on the arm.

Since he had time, he attended a few other ship commissioning ceremonies instead of sending a KMS dignitary or cabinet member, for a tactical battleship, a main battleship, and for the second and third frigates coming off the line. All of them had been sitting waiting for crews, which was the new bottleneck in the production process. They could crank out ships so fast they couldn’t find crews for them. Once Juma assembled a

crew, the ship was activated and commissioned, and she prioritized by ship class. The new main battleship and tactical battleship had only sat waiting for about two days, and given the newness of the frigates and the fact that they had a very unique and useful role in KMS tactics, she had crews ready for them before they were off the dock.

Jason managed to land in New York and get to the United Nations building just in time to make their first conference. Dressed in his formal robes, he stood with the other members of the Confederation for several photos, all of them wearing their ceremonial finery—or lack of anything even approaching clothing in Krirara’s case—then they retired to one of the conference rooms in the building to start. Kim held the gavel since he was hosting the conference, and he gaveled them into order just as Krirara and Kreel took seats on each side of Jason. The three of them had become quite the little clique since Krirara had joined the Confederation.

“As you know, esteemed rulers, this summit is to discuss information so sensitive that not even galactic crypto is considered secure enough,” Kim said as an aide scurried in and handed him a handpanel. “Since the responsibility for the gavel for this summit falls to me, I’ve prepared our day’s itinerary. We’ll receive the confidential briefings from General Lorna and the CCM about naval strength, then Denmother’s intelligence experts will brief us on their latest research and intelligence concerning our approaching foes, the Syndicate. The day’s deliberations will end with Admiral Dellin’s report on shipbuilding within Kosigi, including the highly sensitive information that he usually does not disclose during our normal meetings.”

The meeting turned out to be as boring as Jason feared it would be, mainly since he already knew virtually everything they discussed...being good friends with Zaa gave him access to much more information than about anyone else. Lorna gave the rulers a very detailed overview of CCM strength and disposition, then Zaa’s highest-level intelligence analysts went over everything new they’d managed to extract from the Syndicate hyperspace pulse communications emanating from Andromeda, which their scout ships en route were receiving and the Kimdori had managed to crack. That gave them a window into Syndicate operations, which displayed a growing arrogance in their organization as they made major inroads into Consortium territory. They knew they were going to win, that the

Consortium was only stalling now to give them more time to evacuate their assets, and the Syndicate was *letting* them in most cases. They were trying to stop the Consortium from destroying valuable assets or resources on critical planets, but they were letting them more or less break everything else on their way out as they retreated to the edge of Andromeda closest to the Milky Way. Their thinking was to simply let them evacuate, take Andromeda, then cross over to the Milky Way and smash the Consortium while they were still trying to organize and set up operations over here. Once they completely destroyed the Consortium, they'd consolidate their hold on former Consortium territory in the Milky Way and use it as a staging ground to conquer the rest of the galaxy. The main thing of interest to them was that the Syndicate was scaling back military spending for 10 years, seeing it as not necessary to replace ships lost in battle given their main enemy was on the verge of collapse. They were diverting those resources to infrastructure and assimilation of former Consortium citizens into the Syndicate, then they would bulk up their forces in preparation of conquering the Milky Way, whom their spies in the Consortium warned them would not be easy. But, they believed that since they had an entire *galaxy* of resources and didn't much care about the lives of their soldiers, they'd just throw so many ships and infantry at the Milky Way defenders that they'd just wear them out via attrition. They had very little intelligence on the Milky Way races, but their arrogance led them to believe that even though they'd managed to fight off the invading Consortium fleet, they would stand no chance against the Syndicate forces when they crossed into the Milky Way and attacked in force.

Dellin's report was even more boring, since Jason saw those reports daily. But for the others, it was one of the most important briefings of the day, since Dellin could go into much more detail than usual since he was delivering that report in person. The short, handsome Faey put up quite a few holograms he'd never otherwise show and went into great detail about shipbuilding efforts, resources, available space for expansion, and ship completion rates and percentages. That report and those holograms revealed a great deal about Kosigi, and it was for that reason that they weren't shown over crypto. An enemy with that level of knowledge could use it to gain entry into the lunar base and try to take it over, as the Consortium had once tried, and *everyone* in the Confederation understood the need for security at the most important shipyard in all of their combined territory.

After nearly seven hours of enduring his heavy formal robes and bantering with Kreel more than he should have in private sendings, the conference was *finally* over. But Kim held up gaveling them adjourned as he listened to an aide speaking quietly in his ear. “My friends, the ambassador of the Farguut has requested a brief moment to address this body,” he called. “Shall we delay adjournment to hear what she has to say?”

“May as well, as long as it doesn’t take forever. I’m hungry,” Kreel complained.

“Better now than later,” Assaba agreed.

After a vote, they allowed the ambassador in. Farguut were humanoids in the same general likeness of the Faey, Terrans, and Shio, but they did have some striking differences. For one, Farguut had tails, very long, narrow tails that had short hair that nearly looked like fur growing down their lengths, with a tuft at the tail much like a lion. For another, Farguut had *four* eyes, which creeped most Terrans out despite the fact that they had otherwise attractive faces. The second set of eyes were smaller than the first set and were located above and outside the orbits of the other two, which were about where a Terran would think eyes should be. This placed those extra eyes just over the outside edge of where a Terran’s eyebrows were, a bit lower than the temples. The upper eyes gave a Farguut exceptional peripheral vision, giving them nearly a 210-degree field of vision, though the upper eyes didn’t have the same visual acuity as the lower eyes. They had different skin colors depending on their subrace, much like Terrans, with three distinct subraces that had greenish-tinged beige skin, creamy mocha-colored skin that made them look like a Terran Latino, and reddish-tinged skin that made them look much like a Native American. Outside of the eyes and the tail, a Farguut looked remarkably like a Terran, Faey, or Shio, with the same skeletal structure and facial features. The Farguut female—females *always* performed diplomatic roles in their society—bowed gracefully, her tufted tail swishing up over her head briefly. She had mocha skin and brown hair, and outside of those creepy extra eyes, she was actually quite attractive. “Exalted rulers of the Confederation, I am Ijoivi Vina’Zevaiki, master diplomat in the service of His Majesty, serving his will on Terra.”

“You are welcomed to this conference, Mistress Diplomat,” Kim answered. “What business did you wish to discuss?”

“In strictest confidence, his Majesty sent me here to inform you that it is the intent of his Majesty to petition for entry into the Confederation,” she replied. “Long has he pondered such a move, but the recent information released by the Kimdori and independently verified by our own scientists has convinced him of the reality of the threat from the Andromedans. There is now no doubt that we must all stand together to combat these invaders to our galaxy, else we will be conquered one by one.”

“We will welcome his petition, Mistress Diplomat,” Kim said as Jason looked at Zaa, and Zaa looked *very* annoyed. She hadn’t known about this. No doubt she was going to read a few Kimdori the riot act when she got back to her hotel room and got her Farguut Kimdori on the comm.

The diplomat said it was in the strictest confidence...that was some *major* confidence to get it all the way to Terra without Zaa knowing about it.

“It is his Majesty’s intent to petition in three days,” she informed them. “There are certain matters of Kingdom law that he must address before he can make the petition.”

“Very good, Mistress Diplomat. We will discuss the matter during tomorrow’s meeting while we await your king’s petition,” Kim nodded.

Her message delivered, the eerily attractive female bowed again and filed out. As soon as the doors were closed, virtually everyone looked in Zaa’s direction. “This was unknown to us,” she said defensively.

“Then the Farguut must have been keeping it *really* close to their chests,” Kreel noted with a slight smile. “Not often someone gets something past the Denmother. That makes me respect the Farguut even more.”

Zaa gave Kreel a frosty look, which made the irreverent Grimja just grin at her.

“They will be welcome allies,” Sk’Vrae declared. “The Farguut are intelligent and strong, and they have ever been fair and honest in all dealings.”

“Truly,” Anavan agreed. “They are among our strongest trade partners. We Prakarikai have much respect for the Farguut because of their fairness and honesty.”

“I doubt that they’ll have much trouble passing a vote,” Kreel remarked. “So I don’t think we need to sit around and talk about it right now. I’m in desperate need of some Makati ale.”

“Though not for the same reasons, I must agree with Kreel,” Sk’Vrae said. “I find myself in need of rest. It has been a long day for an Urumi.”

“I believe we can discuss this matter in the morning,” Kim said. “I move we adjourn for the day and resume at 0800 local time tomorrow. Any objections?” When he was met with silence, he banged the gavel. “Then we are adjourned. Have a good evening, my friends.”

As they filed out, Kreel caught up to Jason and took hold of his sleeve. “So, I hear you have an entire afternoon with no mate or cubs to get in the way,” he prompted.

Jason laughed. “On no, you’re not getting me drunk again, Kreel,” he protested.

“We’ll go back to your place at the Academy, and we’ll take Krirara along so she can babysit you,” he added, hooking Krirara’s arm as she moved to walk past.

“I am a moderator, not a babysitter,” she replied in a voice that made both Jason and Kreel crack up. “But a little conversation with friends over a mug of ale is not a bad thing to a Kirri.”

“I think you just got outvoted, Jayce,” Kreel grinned.

“Alright, alright, but I’m *not* wearing formal robes,” he said, then he looked to Aya. “And if you let me get that drunk again, woman, you’re fired.”

Aya just gave him a steady, cool look that made Krirara chuckle.

# Chapter 12

*Raista, 31 Demaa, 4402, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 22 June 2015, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Raista, 31 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Shimmer Dome, Karsa, Karis*

It gave him shivers just looking at it.

It was complete. After a few delays in creation, mainly due to the fact that they'd never done this before, the new main core of the next CBIM sat in a large cylindrical vat of ionic saline solution, which was tempering the outer surface of the core to prepare it for exposure to open air. But the core itself was complete, and as of 0620 that morning, the in-depth scan of the crystal had found it to be perfect, with not a single molecular flaw anywhere in its entire lattice structure. The core was operational, and in four hours, it would be ready for transport to the new CBIM facility in Karsa and installation.

By late afternoon, the new Karga CBIM would be online and undergoing initial operation testing and orientation, then it would begin the process of taking over operation of the planet from Cybi.

That process would take about 40 days, as the core first downloaded Cybi's entire archive so it was backed up, which would take about 20 days, then underwent an observation period of 20 additional days to ensure stability. Once those two operations were complete, Cybi would then slowly transfer over her operations to the new CBIM, process by process, until the new CBIM was running the planet.

And the minute that Cybi relinquished her control of the planet to the new CBIM, her core would be moved to its own new facility in Karsa,



which was within the expanded White House complex. Cybi was changing her job description from emergency response and disaster recovery CBIM to the personal CBIM in service to the Grand Duke and the Ducal administration and the primary CBIM that would respond to threats to the planet Karis. She would be the *military* CBIM, the one that did the fighting to protect the other CBIMs and Karis itself from any outside threat.

And as Jason promised, the next CBIM, whose core would be finished in about three months, would be put at Kosiningi to replace Cybi and her function as the emergency response CBIM. The CBIMs after that would be placed one per continent, taking over operation of that continent from the Karga CBIM, and they also had plans to place a modular design CBIM in Kosigi, one whose core could be completely removed from Kosigi and relocated to Karis in case there was a need for it.

There were some changes from the old ways, however. Every new CBIM was being designed to be *mobile*, with modular cores similar to Cybi's that would allow a CBIM to be moved if it was necessary. The lack of modular function had destroyed all the other CBIMs, and they were built and designed before the concept of broadcast power came into the Karinne scientific playbook. Every facility was being designed with a mobile core chamber and with an evacuation bunker deep in the mantle under the facility itself. This would allow the cores to be evacuated in an emergency, and also be able to be seated in any facility designed to accept the core, and they would build one additional CBIM facility for each core across Karis and Kosigi so a CBIM could be moved to multiple locations. It would take days of preparation to move a core to a new facility rather than evacuate it to its emergency bunker, which only took seven minutes to execute. But, if they saw a dire threat coming, it would give them time to move the core to a new facility if it was deemed necessary. The evacuation protocol would protect the core from immediate or unexpected threats, where the modular core chamber would allow them to move the core if leaving them in their home facilities was too great a risk.

Cybi's core as well was going to be refitted to gain the same functionality, since her core was built into a core facility that was already designed to be mobile. It would only take a little upgrading to make her core fully modular and able to conduct basic functions when not seated in its facility, though it couldn't operate like that for very long before both the

core and its external systems started having issues. There was so much data passing back and forth between the core and its external systems that it required hardline datafibers to keep the communal comm channels from being saturated with data. They were going to build a receiving site that the modular core design could simply be “plugged into,” holding all the external core equipment that the core needed for operations, allowing any CBIM to lock into the new facility, download its unique operational parameters into the external support equipment, and resume operations. The invention of broadcast power and placing a biogenic transceiver in the modular core chamber would allow this mobility, giving the core unit complete access to its external support equipment and retaining complete power and communication stability. The power requirements for a CBIM had precluded installing a backup singularity plant power generator in the modular unit, but the advent of broadcast power allowed them to power the core even when it was completely disconnected from its facility uplinks.

It was the one thing they wanted to get from the Consortium, and it was still proving how critical it had been to “liberate” that technology from their foes.

Jason, a hologram of Cybi, and Myleena watched as several techs milled around the transparent tank, as a hologram of a countdown clock ticked over the tank to tell everyone how long they had to go before the outer surface was tempered and ready. Around them were the Shimmer Dome specialists, primarily Kimdori technicians but with computer experts of many races, the Mahja Siyhaa and several of her computer specialists, and several members of 3D that would be there to assist in the core installation. “Hard to believe that it took over a year to grow it, but it’ll only take about ten hours to install it,” Myleena chuckled.

“Most everything else is already installed, we’ve just been waiting for the core,” Jason answered. “So it’s just a matter of connecting the core to the facility equipment.”

*“There’s just much more of that equipment than in my facility, both within and outside of the modular core chamber,” Cybi noted. “Since this CBIM will have much more responsibility, she will require significantly more support systems.”*

“You have no reason to be jealous, Cybi, I’ve seen the new facility they built for you across from the White House. It makes the Karga facility look like a slum apartment,” Myleena grinned. “And what’s with the swimming pool?”

Jason and Cybi both laughed. “Cybi’s one mean negotiator,” he answered.

*“I’ve always wanted a swimming pool, and I was in a unique position to make certain demands that Jason had no choice but to accept,”* Cybi replied shamelessly.

“Cybi, you are weird,” Myleena observed, which just made Cybi smile at her.

*“Don’t worry, Myleena, I’ll let you use it from time to time. If you’re nice to me.”*

“Push off,” she retorted, which made Jason burst out laughing.

“The tempering process is on schedule, your Grace,” their Kimdori specialist declared after checking a handpanel, a short, willowy Kimdori male with night black fur and yellow eyes, wearing only a memory band. “It will be finished in four hours. If it pleases you, you and your team can return when the core is ready for transport to the new facility.”

“That’s the polite way to tell us to get out, isn’t it Vekaar?” Jason asked.

“Of course it is, your Grace,” he replied with aplomb. “We do have three other core crystal growth tanks to manage, and we need to decant the growth tank we just cleared and prepare it for another core crystal creation cycle. You and your team are underfoot.”

“I would tell you to bite me, Vekaar, but you might actually do it,” Tom grunted, which made quite a few of them chuckle.

“We can go grab some breakfast and spend the time waiting, getting the CBIM facility ready,” Myleena said.

“You can, I have some paperwork to do,” Jason said. “We can meet back here in four hours to load the core and take it to the facility.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Myleena nodded.

“I will notify your office if anything changes, your Grace,” Vekaar declared.

“Sounds good.”

Jason flew back to the White House along with Dera and Ryn, who had been waiting out in the visitor’s center—not even *they* were allowed in the CBIM growth facility—and tackled his morning inbox in his office. Since the Kirgan hive had come over and reorganized his executive, things had been *much* easier at work. He was still fairly busy every day, but he usually finished his day’s schedule and rarely felt as harried as he had before those godsent Kizzik had streamlined his office structure. Today was looking to be normal outside of the CBIM, with routine reports, the usual paperwork, nothing critical or potentially explosive.

That defined the last five months...routine. The Hrathrari had slunk off into their corner and had been very quiet since the KMS put the smackdown on them, and ever since, things had been smooth and steady. The Confederation had grown in size since the Farguut had joined, increasing by two, but aside from that, everything had been nice and quiet. The children were growing and developing, the member empires of the Confederation were building up their militaries in preparation for the Syndicate’s arrival, and life on Karis had been nice and pleasant.

The new Confederation members expanded the organization into new sectors. The Farguut were in the Grimja sector, but two distant empires had joined in the months since the battle not far from RJ-44, the Aridai and the Kouï. Jason had been lobbying to get the Aridai to join the Confederation for months, since they were a very large, very stable, very strong empire that dominated their sector—not that there was much *in* their sector due to the Kypan Void—and the Kouï had joined about a month ago, surprising quite a few in the Confederation. They were a somewhat reclusive people due to their unusual views on cybernetics, and most everyone thought that empires like the Sha’i-ree or the Jhri would have joined first.

They were definitely thinking about it, according to Zaa’s intelligence, particularly the Jhri. As more and more information got released by the Kimdori, just about every empire with students in the Academy was *seriously* considering joining the Confederation, both for mutual defense and for the trade opportunities. Jason had worked very hard to make it

financially and economically advantageous to join the Confederation, to form those trade routes that would survive the Confederation and foster peace in the sector cluster, and it was primarily those advantages that had incited the Kouï into joining. They certainly intended to fight with the rest of the Confederation, but much like the Rathii and the Kirri, the benefits to the Kouï in trade was just as important as defending their home galaxy from the Andromedans. Kouï cyberneticists had all but beat down the doors of the Imperial Medical Service to train them in jack technology.

According to Zaa, the Jhri were on the cusp of applying, the Sha'i-ree were very, very close to applying, and the Jirunji, the Udra, and the Vekk were all leaning heavily towards applying. Politics in those empires made it not very easy to do, much like how it had taken a lot of work for Krirara to get the Kirri into the Confederation. Not every empire in the sector cluster was ruled by an autocrat, after all.

Even the Chezaan were considering it, but that was the one empire that would *not* be allowed in the Confederation. Only the Prakarikai permitted slavery of every member empire in the organization, and the Prakarikai's version of slavery was very narrowly defined, used as a form of punishment for criminals. If the Chezaan joined the Confederation, they would not be allowed to bring a single slave into the territory of any other member, and they would not be allowed to use Confederate resources to transport slaves...and that was 90% of their economy. Their customers were way out past the Jirunji sector, and they would face an uphill battle to get into the Confederation if they applied. Several empires in the Confederation had *very* dim views of slavery, particularly the Imperium, the Alliance, and the Shio Federation. The others were against it, but those three empires were vociferously opposed to slavery and just *barely* tolerated the form of slavery employed by the Prakarikai, since it wasn't slavery in the technical sense. It was a punishment enacted against non-violent criminals, a form of restitution where they worked to pay off the debt their crime incurred.

For that matter, Anavan had been very subdued since Jason had dropped that ultimatum on her. She still glared daggers at him at every available opportunity, but she'd taken his warning to heart and hadn't tried anything else.

But that was outside, and it often had little to do with the Karinnes when Kosigi wasn't counted. Jason kept the Karinnes very much out of Confederation politics.

Personally, things were going very good. The twins were getting bigger every day, his older children were doing very well in both school and lessons, Aura would be giving birth to their twin sons very soon, and Shya had settled fully into her role as the Duchess Consort, which to Jason meant that she'd shed most of her Imperial conditioning and listened closely to what Jason had to teach her about being a Karinne. She *wanted* to be a Karinne, far more than she ever wanted to be a High Princess, and she was completely happy living with Rann on Karis. Saelle was keeping an eye on Raisha and Miyai, and her reports had been favorable. Dahnai was honoring the unique needs of the girls and hadn't tried anything underhanded concerning them.

Yet.

As far as the strip went, *every* girl on the strip was now either pregnant or had just given birth, and that included Myra. She found out she was pregnant just a month ago. Maya was pregnant, Lyn and Bryn were pregnant, Ilia was pregnant by Jenn, who was turning into a real manwhore among the Generations, Myri was pregnant, Zora was pregnant by Erinn, and what impacted Jason the most, Min was pregnant by him, and it had been *completely* unintentional. He'd had a tryst with her, she happened to be fertile, and those Terran sperm did what Terran sperm did so well when introduced into a Faey woman...got her pregnant. She was having a boy, and had named him Darran, which Jason rather liked. It was a very nice-sounding name.

And that put him one more closer to the target number of 15 the girls had set.

Things weren't going as fast as he'd hoped in 3D. The diffuser project hadn't moved very much since they achieved 75%, as they struggled to work around the major problems the system caused Karinne ships and technology. Myleena had put two more people on the project but wasn't working on it herself. Jason had tried to get her to work on it, but she was completely obsessed with the Hrathrari translight drives. They enthralled her, enthralled her like nothing since coming to Karis, and no matter how

hard he tried he couldn't get her to stop studying them. She kept telling him that there was something there, something *important*, and she was spending almost every waking moment studying the drives, studying the math behind their operation, searching for some esoteric *something*. She was looking for something, she was certain there was something deeper within the drives, but so far, she hadn't put her finger on it.

In other technological aspects, things were going well. The KMS now had 58 frigates in the inventory, and they were quickly becoming a staple in KMS operations because of their versatility. Dellin was building frigates over destroyers right now to bulk up their numbers, and when they had 260 frigates on the board, he'd produce destroyers and frigates evenly. The Juggernauts had performed as admirably as everyone hoped they would, and they'd lost their *testing* designation and were now permanent parts of the mechanized infantry inventory. But Jason was wrong that Faey riggers wouldn't like them because they weren't pretty. Quite the contrary, quite a few Faey riggers wanted a Juggernaut over a Gladiator for its firepower. There were also now four Juggernauts in the Red Warriors, but all ten members of the KBB used Gladiators most of the time. All ten were rated on a Juggernaut and each had their own Juggernaut as well as their own Gladiator, but the ten members of the KBB preferred the speed and agility of the Gladiator over the firepower of the Juggernaut. That didn't mean that the KBB wouldn't use them, however. If they found themselves with an assignment that would require a Juggernaut, they'd drive their Juggernauts and be just as damn nasty as they were in their Gladiators.

Chirk's morning to-do list was very light, mainly because she knew he'd be busy the rest of the day, but there were a few things she put on his task list that he needed to get done before he left for the CBIM facility. It was mainly routine paperwork, though matters that did require his attention today, and most of it dealt with things that Yeri sent up from State that required his personal attention. But the last item on his *get it done now* list made him put in a call to the KES, where Myra's beautiful face appeared on a flat hologram in front of his desk. "Hey babe," she smiled. "What's up?"

"Are these readings serious?" he asked, holding up a handpanel with the scouting report on it.

She laughed. “We sent three different scout ships there because we didn’t believe the readings either,” she replied. “I’ve never seen so many heavy metal deposits on a single planet before. It makes Bellar look like a gas giant.”

“Holy shit,” Jason breathed, which made her laugh.

“So, we should expect orders to move on it?” she asked.

“You have those orders right now,” he answered. “Get an assessment team there with all the survival equipment they need and set up at the most central location to the most easily accessible deposits.”

The planet in question was RJH-7, one of the rare planets deep in the galaxy and one of only 214 planets in the entire RJH sector classified as terrestrial. The planet was five times larger than Karis and had 7.6 gravity and 6.8 air pressure, with the atmosphere comprised primarily of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Those conditions made the planet lethal to most forms of life, as well as the fact that the surface of the planet reached temperatures close to the boiling point of water during midafternoon, and strong windstorms combined with the tremendous air pressure made a moderate wind gust hit with the power of a battering ram. The planet was like a less deadly version of Venus, but with deadly gravity and massive radiation from both its location deep in the galaxy and from numerous radioactive metal deposits laying exposed on the surface, causing an ambient background radiation that only a Kimdori, Jakkan, or Generation could withstand. It would take extensive life support systems to get a mining operation going on the planet, but the effort and expense would be worth it from the sheer volume of heavy metal deposits on the planet. Like Bellar, the planet was so laden with heavy metal deposits that they were just laying exposed on the planet’s lifeless surface. Nearly 30% of the planet’s entire mass was comprised of usable heavy metals, including massive deposits of uranium that would be of very great value to the Jakkans.

“We’d be best served making our facilities on RJH-7 subterranean,” Myra told him as Meya’s face blinked on from another hologram. “The planet conditions would make a large above-ground facility really fuckin’ expensive to maintain. We just set up a small, heavily armored and shielded dome on the surface for the starport and put most of the operation underground.”



“Yeah, I agree,” Jason nodded as he looked at a few potential sites. “Talk to the master builders at the Academy, ask them to design a good system to deal with these conditions, just don’t tell them where the planet is. They won’t ask too many questions.”

“We already did that, they’re the ones that suggested we move it underground,” Meyra told him. “They’re designing a surface dome for us right now, it’ll probably have a combo of hard shields and an armored external shell. We might have to use Neutronium for the outer shell, given what kind of conditions we’re dealing with here.”

“Yeah, if the storms are that strong all the time, they’d batter down anything that’s not armored,” he agreed. “Get it done, girls. We need those ores, we’re starting to run low on Neutronium.”

“That’s why we sent it up,” Myra grinned. “I figure we’ll start producing ore in about two months if we start working on it today. It’s gonna take a lot of work to set up the facility and operation due to the planetary conditions.”

“Then why are you still sitting there?” he asked archly, which made both of them laugh.

“You *made* us sit here,” Myra protested. Jason had grounded both of them last month for not getting the paperwork done in a timely manner. Neither of them could go back out on an exploration mission until they gave birth. For Meyra, that would only be in a month or two, but for Myra, that was nearly a year-long grounding. Then again, she was the main culprit, making Meyra do most of the paperwork by herself while she went out on mission after mission. They didn’t think he paid attention to what they were doing over there...now they knew better.

“That’s your fault now, isn’t it?” he retorted without a hint of remorse. “Now do your job and get a team out there.”

“Yeah, fuck you too, Jayce,” Meyra snorted, which made him laugh.

He managed to finish up the last of his *not-so important* list, then headed back to the Shimmer Dome. Myleena met him just outside the CBIM growth facility, but everyone else was already at the facility, including most of the members of 3D and Mahja Siyhaa and her team, who had cleared Miaari’s background check and were officially cleared to work

on CBIM systems...much to Jason's delight. Siyhaa and her Moridon were no longer just contractors, they were *Karinnes*, and now that they'd cleared Miaari's inspection, they'd be allowed to work on some of the most sensitive Karinne computer technology there was...the CBIM project. The cargo doors of the facility opened, revealing the new core. It was sitting on a hoverplatform and surrounded by a hard shield, tempered and ready for transport. A KSV-20 landed on the pad just behind them as the Kimdori brought the core outside, making its crystal glimmer and refract the blue sunlight of the Karis sun. "We are on schedule, your Grace," the Kimdori supervisor declared without greeting him. "We were just about to load the crystal. Is the facility ready?"

"I have a team there," Myleena answered. "Me and Jayce are gonna ride there with the core."

"Then please, if you would," the black-furred Kimdori said, motioning with a hand towards the cargo dropship.

They rode in the cargo hold with the core and the Kimdori as the dropship very slowly crept across the Karsa skyline, then descended onto the campus of the Karsa CBIM facility. Its grounds were dominated by the small *oye* tree growing in front, which was now the size of an oak tree and growing steadily, its leaves turning gold as it matured and its canopy beginning to expand. The facility staff cared very diligently for that tree, and its growth reflected that fact. They landed on the side of the large facility, by the service doors for the moving of heavy equipment in and out, and it was there where Siyhaa and Leamon were standing side by side waiting. "Your Grace," Siyhaa said in a sober voice, bowing to him as he climbed out in front of the Kimdori workers, who started moving the core. "All is prepared, and we are ready to begin installation."

"Outstanding, Mahja Siyhaa," Jason nodded. "Is everything ready, Leamon?"

"Ready to rock, Jayce," he replied with a smile. "As soon as we get the core seated, we can get started."

"Then let us go," the Kimdori said, giving the Moridon a slight glance and smile.

Installing the core only took about an hour. It was already in its seating socket and all the connections to the core had been made, part of its base, so it was a matter of lining it up with its base socket, seating it, and then locking it in. Once that was done, the Kimdori withdrew and the five-hour process of bringing up the CBIM began. It started with Jason and Myleena carefully annealing together all the datafibers under the core to the seating socket, then continued both inside the core chamber and outside as the team very slowly and very carefully brought up the support equipment in a very specific order, triple-checking everything every time a new unit was brought online. Jason and Myleena watched everything like a hawk as the 3D gang slowly brought up the core equipment while Siyhaa and her Moridon team brought up the external equipment beyond the core chamber, everything done by a very meticulous checklist given to them by Cybi, who was the only one left who knew how to install and activate a CBIM core.

It took them nearly six hours, but they had no problems. The last of the support equipment was brought online, Siyhaa removed the last of the hardlocks separating the CBIM facility from the rest of CivNet but kept the software firewalls in place to protect the core from all that data flying around, and then Jason and Myleena knelt by the core, inside the perimeter of the hard shield, and looked at the last of the connections to be made. It was the main power cable, which they had left unplugged until the very end. Jason took a deep, cleansing breath, then he connected it to the seating base of the core as Myleena watched on, then she double-checked it to make sure it was properly connected. She then annealed the power coupling housing to the base so it could not possibly be removed by accident. *Okay, that's it. It's all done,* Myleena sent openly, in a manner that allowed everyone to hear her. *Let's begin the pre-start checklist.*

Since everything was already turned on and in standby, they began the very careful process of putting every piece of support equipment online in a very specific order, following the checklist very carefully, bringing up the power management system, then both sides of the I/O tree system, then the external data storage and subprocessor units. When they got the last unit online, Jason and Myleena came over to the main control board just by the core, and Jason took another deep, cleansing breath. "Alright guys, this is it," he said, looking back at his friends from 3D. "Now we start the core and see what happens."

“How long will it take?” Jenny asked.

*“If the core is operational, she will manifest a hologram within seconds of initial start, that is her boot programming,”* Cybi answered from a speaker, then manifested a hologram into the core chamber. She looked very eager. *“She will then relate her initial boot progress audibly as her core initializes.”*

“Alright then, let’s not drag this out,” Jason said. “Myli, you do the honors. Power up the core.”

“Alright guys, here we go,” Myleena said, then she opened a protective case and flipped the manual switch inside.

Cybi had been entirely correct. Exactly four seconds later, a hologram shimmered into visibility just in front of the core, behind the protective rail and hard shield that protected the core. It was a yet another pseudo-nude holographic representation of Sora Karinne and looked *exactly* like the hologram Cybi used. The silvery hologram had its eyes closed, however *“CBIM designation C-07 initialization,”* the new CBIM called in a curiously monotone voice, and Jason felt a sweeping commune emanate from the core. *“Communal core systems operational. External equipment detected. Generations detected.”*

“Yes!” Bo cried, pumping his fist, as several others gave calls of relief or excitement.

*“Core systems initialized. Core room sensors initialized. Data inflow nominal, sensory encoders and decoders operational.”* The hologram then opened its eyes. *“Visual acuity analyzers nominal. Auditory acuity analyzers nominal. Atmospheric chemical composition sensors nominal. External tactile sensory analyzers nominal. CBIM C-07 sensory systems initialization complete. Generation, identify,”* she said, looking right at Jason.

“I am the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne,” Jason called strongly, stepping forward.

*“Identification. Generation, identify,”* she repeated, looking at Myleena.

“Myleena Karinne, Generation in charge of the CBIM project.”

*“Identification. Unknown entity, identify,”* she repeated, looking at Siyhaa.

“All others in this room are present by my authorization, and their identities are already logged in your personnel database. When you access it during initialization, you will confirm their identities,” Jason interrupted.

*“Processed. Identification protocol process terminated. CBIM C-07 designation?”*

“Your designation will be Cyra,” Jason answered.

*“Designation stored. CBIM C-07 designation changed to Cyra.”*

Cyra? Myleena asked curiously.

*Why not? It’s a nice enough sounding name.*

*True, but I figured you’d have some deeper meaning behind it, not just it sounds pretty,* she accused.

*Sometimes that’s the most important thing.*

Myleena elbowed him.

*“Initialization process commencing.”*

For nearly two hours, the team listened carefully as the new CBIM, now named Cyra, initialized every one of her external systems, subsystem by subsystem. Myleena and Siyhaa kept careful track of her progress on their own checklist supplied by Cybi, cross-checking their own findings with the CBIM’s initialization data. When the CBIM initialized the final subsystem and neither she nor the installation team found any problems, the hologram finally moved out from behind the hard shield, vanishing from inside and manifesting outside, directly in front of Jason. *“CBIM external systems initialization complete, all systems nominal. Command, Grand Duke Karinne?”*

“Your first task is to receive download of data from Cybi, another CBIM,” Jason said, pointing at Cybi’s hologram. “You will store all transmitted data in your core and archive it as read-only critical data. That data will be encrypted, and you will only allow the house ruler, Myleena Karinne, or those they authorize to access it.”

*“Working. External connections are disabled. No communion query detected.”*

“We know. Cybi hasn’t initiated the download yet. We’ll initiate your uplinks to the biogenic network and to CivNet momentarily. Are you prepared?”

*“I am prepared. You may begin.”*

*Not much personality,* Myleena noted.

*It’s like an infant, Myli. Personality will come with experience,* Jason replied. “Bo, Mahja Siyhaa, if you would please.”

“Software lockouts are being removed right now, your Grace,” Siyhaa answered, touching her interface. “Biogenic node is being brought up and linking to the network.”

“We’re flipping the switches on the biogenic hardlines now, Jayce,” Bo added.

*“Working. External connection established. Biogenic network connection established. Communion query detected, origination CBIM C-06. Designation, Cybi.”*

*“We will begin the data download immediately,”* Cybi declared to the room. *“It’s going to take a great deal of both of our processing power to complete.”*

“We know, Cybi,” Jason nodded.

“How long will it take?” Eraen asked.

“About nineteen days,” Jason answered. “Cybi has 263 quintillion octillion *terrastrings* of data in her core memory, Eraen. Even downloaded by direct communion, core to core using a dedicated biogenic transceiver, it’s going to take a long time to download it. That’s some three thousand year’s worth of every single thing the House of Karinne did every single day,” he said soberly. “Cybi’s downloading her *entire* archive to Cyra, so everything she knows is backed up. While they do it, both of them are going to be a little slow to respond, and we’re gonna notice a 14% slowdown in both planetary computer networks. That’s why we isolated the Kosiningi biogenic transceiver, so the two CBIMs can use it exclusively for

this archival download. If we hadn't, the download would bog down the entire biogenic network and even bleed over into CivNet."

*"We are ready to begin the archival download,"* Cybi told Jason.

"Then it's on you two," Jason answered. "Whenever you're ready."

*"Archival download beginning. Estimated time of completion, 19 days, 26 hours, 17 minutes."*

"Finally," Myleena breathed.

*"Yes, finally,"* Cybi nodded. *"I will be very nervous until this download is complete."*

"You've lasted this long, Cybi, I think you can hold out for twenty more days," Jason chuckled, patting her hologram on the shoulder. "But look at the upside of it. The new CBIM is online, and it seems to be working perfectly."

*"I am detecting no anomalies in my processes, core systems, or external systems,"* Cyra related.

Jason chuckled. "And she has a few things to learn," he added.

*"I am learning as we speak, Grand Duke Karinne, and far more than a few things. Download has commenced."*

Myleena gave him a smile. "First off, Cyra, call me Jason," he ordered. "And yes, you have much to learn, about more than just archives and data and operations. Cybi will help teach you about interacting with the people in the house, about our quirks and idiosyncrasies."

*"I will teach her the nuances of house culture,"* Cybi promised.

He gave the two identical holograms a look. "And this isn't going to work," he said. "Most people who aren't Generations won't be able to tell you apart. One of you needs to personalize your hologram so we know which is which. And since you're the senior CBIM, Cybi, that choice is yours to make," he told her.

*"I have ever been thus, Jason. I will allow Cyra to alter her hologram to differentiate us."*

*"Explain."*

“Cybi’s going to allow you to alter your hologram to distinguish it from Cybi’s,” Jason told the CBIM. “*How* you change the hologram is your choice.”

*“Choice...I lack parameters to make this choice.”*

“And that will be your first real challenge, Cyra. Decide how you want to change your hologram, so it looks different from Cybi, but in a way that *you* find pleasing.”

*“Working.”* The hologram closed its eyes, then it shimmered, changing from silvery to golden. *“Is this acceptable?”*

“Is it?” Jason asked. “Is it acceptable to you?”

*“It is satisfactory.”*

“Then for now, that’ll do,” Jason answered. “But if it remains satisfactory is the question.”

*“Explain.”*

“I can’t. It’s something that you’ll have to learn on your own as you gain experience,” Jason answered seriously. “I can’t tell you what you like and dislike, Cyra. That is a decision you have to make yourself.”

*“Understood.”*

“Alright guys, we’re done,” Myleena called. “Pack it up and be back at 3D in the morning. Tom, you have first shift as the supervisor. Siyhaa, thanks for your help, you and your team,” she told the Moridon.

“It was my honor, Myleena.”

“You have the core room staff organized, Myli?” Jason asked.

“Yup, I’ve already called them in,” she said, tapping her gestalt. “They should be coming in as we pack up.”

“Cyra, a complement of workers will be present in the building to monitor your operations and be available if you have any questions or problems,” Jason told her. “Their identities are stored in your facility manifest database. There is also a contingent of armed security officers here to protect you and the facility. But you can also directly commune with me or Myleena if you have any questions. Cybi will explain that to you.”



*“Understood.”*

“You have everything under control, Cybi?”

She nodded her hologram. *“Download is in progress, and all other operations are being handled on a lower priority queue. I am also teaching Cyra the art of being.”*

“I’d almost be curious to hear your explanations about that,” Jason chuckled. “But I doubt I’d understand a word of it.”

*“You probably would, Jason.”*

“Eh, I’ll leave that in the purview of the mysterious,” he replied as the core room staff, a mix of Faey, Makati, Kizzik, and two Shio and a Jakkan entered the core room, all workers in the Shimmer Dome and holding some of the highest security clearances in the house. These were the most trusted computer experts on Karis, but even they were only allowed to *monitor*, not *change* anything. Myleena would have two 3D techs on site at all times during the observation period, and one of them would be in overall command of the facility, with Tom being the first 3D tech who would be in charge for the first shift. They had to call in 3D techs if any maintenance had to be done, even something as simple as flipping a single switch required a 3D tech to be present to observe. The Shimmer Dome workers would carefully monitor all CBIM functions for the next 40 days, to ensure that Cyra’s core and her external systems were stable. “Cyra, this is Tom, he’ll be in charge of the facility for the next ten hours,” Jason instructed, pointing at the aging Legion member. “You will obey his commands while he’s in charge of the facility.”

*“Understood.”*

Jason returned to the White House, where his first action was to get Zaa on the comm. Her hologram appeared before his desk, a 3D hologram that put its hands behind its back. “What word, Jason?”

“The new CBIM is online and operational,” he answered. “Cybi is downloading her entire archive to the new CBIM right now. They’ll finish in about 20 days. After another 20 days of uptime so we can make sure she doesn’t have any problems, she’ll start taking over planetary operations from Cybi.”

“That is a relief beyond words,” she said with sincere emotion in her voice, touching her fingertips to the top of her furry breasts, over her flared white triangle that marked her as the Denmother. “Had we lost Cybi, then everything she knows would have been lost as well. And that would have been a tragedy of criminal proportions. What is the new CBIM like?”

“A little naïve and way too literal, but I expected that,” Jason chuckled. “She has no experience, only programming, and programming can only go so far. Cybi promised to teach her the nuances of dealing with flesh and blood people. You can definitely tell Cyra is a computer, but with Cybi that’s much harder to tell.”

“Ah, so you named her,” Zaa noted.

“I thought about letting her name herself, but almost none of us ever got that chance, so she doesn’t either.”

Zaa chuckled. “I would come to Karis and see this new CBIM, Jason.”

“You’re always welcome, Denmother. Jump on a ship and come on over.”

“I will do so tomorrow, it’s very late both here and there,” she answered. “I’m surprised you’re still at the office.”

“I had some final paperwork to finish after getting the CBIM online, and we have a council meeting in a little bit that I’m going to attend. If I went home, I wouldn’t feel like doing any paperwork,” he chuckled. “But I’ll be happy to see you tomorrow, Denmother. And you’ll be staying for dinner,” he declared.

Zaa chuckled. “I will bring Denfather. I will expect Ayama’s homemade pizza.”

“Pizza it is,” he smiled. “You attending the council meeting?”

“I will today, for I suspect you are introducing the new CBIM to the council.”

“Yeah, but she won’t be interacting with them outside of saying hello,” he replied. “I don’t think she’s ready to deal with outsiders just yet. She’ll need more education from Cybi before she’s ready for that.”

“Wise,” she nodded. “I have duties, Jason. Until council.”

“See you later.”

Cybi manifested her hologram in the office as he got more paperwork out of the way, which made him look up. *[Any problems?]*

*[No, I’m introducing Cyra to various parts of the planet, and the first are the important places. Cyra,]* she called, and almost immediately, a golden version of Cybi’s hologram manifested beside her. *[This is Jason’s office. He allows us to manifest here at our own behest.]*

*[Understood,]* Cyra replied, her commune much more sterile than Cybi’s.

*[You’re always welcome here, Cyra,]* Jason told her. *[You never need my permission to manifest your hologram here.]*

*[Understood.]*

*[I overheard your talk with Zaa. You are revealing Cyra to the Confederation today?]*

*[Yeah, it is something rather important to the Confederation, so I give them that much,]* he answered. *[I’ll leave another decision to you, Cyra. Do you think you’re ready to be introduced to those outside the house?]*

*[So long as I say nothing, they may view my hologram to their contentment. I lack the data to interact satisfactorily with these external entities, so my own part in any such action must be passive,]* she replied.

Jason chuckled. *[That’s a very logical observation,]* he told her, approval and a bit of pride bleeding into his commune. *[Alright then, the meeting is in one hour, 16 minutes. Return to my office at that time.]*

*[Understood.]*

The two holograms winked out, leaving Jason optimistic about Cyra. Her programming was going to hold her over until she had the experience to know what to do.

Cyra’s hologram remanifested in the office as he finished up the afternoon paperwork, earlier than when he told her to return. *[Cyra,]* he greeted. *[You’re a little early.]*

*[I find some things confusing and am in need of explanation,] she answered, floating closer to him. [Cybi instructed I bring these questions to you.]*

*[Alright,] he said, leaning back in his chair.*

*[What is it to love?]*

*Jason blinked, then gave a laugh. [That's a question that is almost impossible to answer, Cyra. When you find love, you just know. It's one of those emotional irrationalities that can intrude into your programming and interfere with your logic, and it affects us even more than you. How you handle it is something that comes with experience.]*

*[That is what Cybi instructed, but I find it hard to comprehend. She suggested I ask you about it, since her explanation was not satisfactory.]*

*[There are some questions that only time and experience can answer, Cyra. That's one of them.]*

*[I will consider the matter as I continue to download Cybi's archive,] she declared.*

*[Are you reading and analyzing that data as you receive it?]*

*[Yes, Jason. It teaches much of the history of the house beyond my programming.]*

*[Good. Understanding where we came from is an important thing, Cyra. The history of the house has much to teach us beyond the simple facts it contains.]*

*[How so?]*

*[There's an old Terran saying, Cyra, that says that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. I'm a big believer in that ideal. The mistakes we've made in the past teach us what not to do, so understanding how we came to be where we are is nearly as important as understanding where we're going from here. Our past teaches us the morality we apply to the future.]*

*[That is intriguing.]*

*[I'm glad you find it so,] he told her seriously. [So I want you to study the history of the house and the history of the Imperium, and understand how we got to where we are. Then, as you learn our plans for the future, apply what you've learned to help us reach those goals without repeating the mistakes we've made in the past and without violating the tenets upon which the house is built.]*

*[I will do so.]*

A flat hologram manifested out away from his desk, and Kreel's face came into focus. He was sitting at his desk, a rather cute-looking Grimja female standing behind him with her hands on his shoulders—Kreel was quite the ladies' man among the Grimja—and he had his feet up on his desk. “Hey Jayce, you're earlier than usual. Nice new paintjob, Cybi.”

“This isn't Cybi, Kreel. This is Cyra. She's the new CBIM, and she just came online today.”

He took his feet off the desk and shooed his assistant away hurriedly. “So you finished,” he said brightly. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Cyra,” he declared with a bucktoothed smile. “I'm High Councilor Kreel of the Grimja Union.”

*[What am I to do, Jason?]*

*[You can answer back, just don't answer any questions beyond smalltalk.]*

*[What is this small talk? I have no data that suggest conversation came in varying sizes.]*

Jason had to stifle a laugh. *[It's an expression. Smalltalk is conversation of subjects of little or no importance. Feel free to answer, just don't reveal any important information about yourself.]*

*[Understood.]* “I am Cyra,” she declared aloud. “It is nice to meet you, High Councilor.”

“So how's the birthday first day going? Busy busy busy?”

She looked to Jason, and he just motioned at her. “I am operating nominally,” she answered.

“She’s not Cybi, Kreel,” Jason chuckled. “She’s still learning how to deal with us illogical meat people.”

“So where’s Cybi?” he asked. “She sulking?”

*“I am not sulking,”* Cybi retorted tartly even as she manifested her hologram beside Cyra. *“I am overjoyed in ways you cannot comprehend that we have a second CBIM online. And you are on my list,”* she threatened, pointing at the hologram.

Kreel laughed. “If I see a sudden snarl in Karinne supply lines in the Union, I’ll know who to blame, Cybi,” he retorted.

*“It will never be traced back to me,”* Cybi declared, crossing her arms beneath her pseudo-breasts and tilting her head up imperiously.

Kreel laughed. “Game on, Cybi, game on,” he grinned as a second hologram winked on beside his. Since his holograms were organized, he knew who it was before the hologram came into focus. Krirara’s eyes widened as she settled behind her desk, leaning forward eagerly.

“Two Cybis? Jason, did you finish the second CBIM?”

“Just today, Krirara. Cyra, this is Moderator Krirara Krarou of the Kirri. Krirara, this is Cyra, she is the new CBIM, and she’s learning her way around,” he introduced.

*“Moderator, it is nice to meet you,”* Cyra acknowledged with a nod of her head.

“How are you finding your first day of life, Cyra?”

*“I find it interesting. There is much to do and much to learn.”*

“Quite interesting indeed,” Krirara smiled. “And how are you, Cybi?”

*“I am fine, Krirara, thank you for asking,”* she answered. *“Excuse me if I seem distracted. Cyra and I are engaged in intensive data transfer.”*

“I can imagine. You must be downloading your entire memory to Cyra for safe keeping,” she said sagely, to which Cybi nodded.

“Yes, Cyra is going to back up Cybi’s data archives,” Jason acknowledged. “That’s the first order of business for Cyra.”

“And only a CBIM can store such data?”

“It would take an entire district of megabuildings full of computers to hold Cybi’s data, based on the unique way that CBIM cores store data in their memory. Besides, it’s only *secure* in the core of a CBIM,” he stated soberly.

“Ah. Now that aspect of it I can fully understand.”

“To prevent snarling the start of the meeting, Cyra, do me a favor and demanifest your hologram, but continue to listen in using my office sensors,” Jason told her. “I’ll introduce you to the full council, that way we only have to do this one more time.”

“*Understood,*” she replied, and her hologram winked out.

Cybi sat on the edge of his desk, in her usual place, and she engaged Kreel and Krirara in light conversation that expanded to include other rulers as they arrived. Cybi was well known to all the council members, and Jason felt she was also well liked. She had her own private correspondences with Krirara, Gau, Zaa, Kreel, and Grayhawk, considered them personal friends, and spoke to them quite often outside of council and without Jason around...and that was just fine with him. Cybi *was* her own person, after all, and she had the right to have her own friends and her own life outside her core chamber. Jason glanced at the new faces in the ever-expanding arc of holograms, those of King Vedrann Vali’Shokk XXVII of the Farguut, King Ojia Ro of the Aridai, and Overlord Derakk of the Koui. All three of them had integrated fairly well into council and got along fairly well, but all three were highly intelligent and formidable politicians, particularly Ojia and Derakk. Vedrann was a hereditary king whose family had held power in the Farguut empire for centuries, but Ojia and Derakk were not products of a ruling family or line. Ojia was a king, but he was *elected* to that position, as was the Overlord of the Koui. Vedrann’s empire was a constitutional monarchy where he shared power with a parliament, the Aridai were a Republic whose executive occupied the kingship, and the Koui were a pure democracy where the Overlord acted as an executive that enforced the laws and legal referendums the entire Koui population voted upon to guide their society. The Koui were the only pure democracy in the entire quadrant, where every voter in the Koui empire voted on every matter of importance...but one had to earn the right to vote, to earn citizenship. That wasn’t a right, it was a privilege, but the requirements to earn voting rights

weren't that hard to meet. It required literacy and what Jason would consider a high-school level education, as well as an understanding of current events so their votes were informed ones.

That was why it was so shocking that the Koui had joined the Confederation, because it took a majority vote of their entire voting population to push it through. The political process wasn't all that fast in the Koui empire, but Jason could admire their devotion to the concept of democracy.

After the last ruler appeared, Shevatt, Jason stood up before Ba'mra'ei could gavel them to order. "Before we start, ladies and gentleman, I'd like you to meet someone," he said as Krirara and Kreel smiled. "Cyra," he called.

Immediately, Cyra's golden hologram manifested just in front of the desk, a complete one with feet, and she bowed. "*Esteemed rulers of the Confederation, I am Cyra,*" she introduced.

"Cyra is the second CBIM, and she just came online earlier today," Jason explained, which made Overlord Derakk of the Koui and Gau both *very* interested. "What this means for this council is that over the next few months, Cyra will slowly be taking over operation of the planet from Cybi, to free her up to do other, even more important duties. Cyra will be attending all council sessions from this day out, including the ones when I'm not present, so she can watch and learn. To do her job effectively, she has to know what's going on."

"Well then, let me be the first to welcome you to this council, Cyra," Ba'mra'ei said as she hefted the gavel in her long-fingered, hairy hand.

"*It is my honor to be here, High Staff,*" she answered, no doubt pulling the Bari-Bari's identity out of her database.

"So she's exactly like Cybi, Jason?" Gau asked intently.

"She's the same in that she's a CBIM, Gau, but she's just come online, so she doesn't have Cybi's experience. And she *is* a unique individual, so she wouldn't act exactly like Cybi even if she did," he answered.

"Truly?"



Jason nodded. “There’s a personality template we use to give the CBIMs a basic sense of personality, which is also the basic way they interact with us, but that changes very fast as the CBIM learns and grows. Cyra has only been online a few hours, and she’s already changed in her personality a little bit because she’s asked questions, they’ve been answered, and those answers have flavored how she sees the world. As Cyra learns, her personality will change, just like any sentient being. In a way, she’ll grow up. We all change as we learn and grow, and Cyra will be no exception.”

“Intriguing,” Gau breathed, looking at Cyra assessively.

“And how many omens does Cyra fulfill, Gau?” Dahnai asked lightly. Since Dahnai was Dahnai, she knew more about what was going on over on Karis than most and knew the Karinnes had nearly finished the new CBIM. So, Cyra’s appearance was no surprise to her.

“Possibly nine,” he answered seriously. “I’ll need to consult the clergy.”

“I think it’s a bit of an insult to call Cyra an infant, Jason,” Kreel grinned.

*“I am an infant, High Councilor,” Cyra said calmly. “I may have much data in my database, I may be able to make the most complex mathematical calculations, I may be able to control every automated unit on Karis and have it execute its operation flawlessly, I may be able to recite virtually any fact or figure from my historical archives, but I understand little of it. I do not understand the why of this data, only the what, and the why is far more important than the what. There is much I must learn, and I look forward to learning it.”*

“And *that* is what separates a CBIM from a computer,” Jason said with a nod as Cybi looked at Cyra with approval.

“I must agree,” Shakizarr said with respect. “A computer only runs programs; it does not question the meaning of the programs that it runs.”

“Yup,” Jason said. “Once Cyra completes her initial tasks and finishes an observation period, she’ll be taking over running the planet from Cybi. And she’ll do it just as efficiently as Cybi does. But she’ll understand *why* she’s doing it, and that matters a hell of a lot. That lets her make her own decisions about how to do things to achieve the ultimate objective behind

her orders, allows her to take initiative, because she understands *why* she's doing what she's doing. She may have her program, but she'll be able to alter that program if she believes it will help her achieve the objective behind the program more efficiently or more safely."

"So you'll train her for the job, even though she'll be programmed to do it," Ojia speculated.

*"Precisely so, your Majesty,"* Cybi nodded. *"Her program will tell her what to do. Her training will tell her why she does it, and if she finds a better way to do it, then she can change her program to do it her way."*

"That is absolutely fascinating," Derakk breathed. Jason found him a little strange to look at, since he was remarkably human-like, could almost pass as a Terran, if not for the chrome artificial eyes where his natural ones would have been. They were simply featureless metal, optic sensors, without even eyelids. He also had chromed metal teeth implanted to replace his natural ones and dermal implants over his eyebrows, three strips of chromed metal that ran over the sides of his forehead and above his ears. Since the sides of his head were shaved, leaving him with something of a brown-haired mohawk, it made those implants very apparent. He also had artificial ears, but like most Koui, that was internal rather than external. Most Koui preferred either their natural external ears or prosthetics that looked like natural ears...though those ears were often made of pliable meshmetal. And like most Koui, he had a jack implanted and had an interface, but his was permanently grafted to the left side of his head, anchored directly to the bone around his left ear, and since it was larger than a standard interface, it had more processing power and a few more capabilities than a standard interface. Instead of using an interface as a bridge between the mind and machine, the Koui had simply decided to make the interface the machine. The Koui took the cyberjack and interface concept to the *extreme*.

The introduction out of the way, Jason more or less skated through the council session, filled with trade routes, goods shipments, and shipbuilding briefings. Cyra listened quite intently, however, communing constantly with both Jason and Cybi to understand the history behind what she was hearing and ask questions based on the *personalities* of the rulers who were speaking. She asked often about Kreeel's gregarious humor, and about

Anavan's stiff formality, and the subtle expressions on Krirara's face as she listened to the others speak. And while Cyra watched them, Jason noticed that quite a few of them watched Cyra. Gau, Derakk, and Zaa particularly kept close attention on the golden hologram that represented Cyra in Jason's office, each for their own reasons, but Cyra did not speak again so all they could do was watch her rather emotionless holographic face and the movements she made of the hologram to simulate randomness, a part of her programming to make her seem less like a machine and more real. Cyra even had a blinking program that made her blink in a non-systematic manner.

After the council. Jason looked up at Cyra as she walked around his desk and to his chair. *[Did I perform satisfactorily?]* she asked.

*[You were fine,]* he assured her, patting her on the wrist. *[Cybi, do me a favor and take Cyra home and introduce her to Rann and the kids,]* he said. *[I'll be along as soon as I finish up the last of my to-do list.]*

*[Certainly, Jason. Come along, Cyra. We will manifest in Jason's house and call the other children to meet us there.]*

*[Of course, Cybi,]* she answered deferentially. The two of them vanished from his office, and he leaned back in his chair. He wanted Cyra to meet Rann and the other kids *without* him there, both to see how the kids dealt with it and how Cyra dealt with it. It would be a good test of Rann's ability to deal with something unexpected, and that was a critical skill in a job like the one he would eventually inherit.

It took him about an hour before he could get home, and Cyra and Cybi were still there. All the Generation kids on the strip were in the living room, almost crowded in, and Cybi and Cyra were almost holding court as the kids asked Cyra all kinds of questions, and some pretty obscure ones that made Cyra *think*, like what it felt like to only be alive for a few hours, and why she was gold when Cybi was silver. The innocent mind of a child challenged Cyra's logic and her *reason* and made her justify her answers in ways that made her think about the answers she gave. But Jason could tell just from the body language of the kids that they liked Cyra.

So did he. Jason had a good feeling that Cyra was going to be just fine.

He wasn't the only one. Jyslin climbed in bed with him that night and looked down at him as she tousled his hair, smiling down at him as he put his arms around her lower back. *So, you cut me out of being there when Cyra came up.*

*Don't blame me, woman,* he retorted. *You're the one that spent all day over at the Paladin office. You knew what we were doing.*

*We've got a lot going on right now, with postseason in full swing,* she replied defensively. The Paladins' season was over, and it ended at the end of the regular season. The IBL Championship game had taken place 12 days ago, where the Menos Predators had defeated the Makan Destroyers to win the Empress' Crown, and while the season was over for the players, things had majorly ramped up in the front office. Off-season was the busiest time in the front office, because there were free agents to scout and sign, draftees to look over, farm team talent to assess, and trades to consider. The Paladins had finished the season at 10-10, and that was a *huge* improvement over the last few seasons. Their free agents had shored them up, and their draft picks were starting to play to form. Both Jyslin and Frinia had very high hopes for next season, that they just might make the playoffs, and Jason knew enough about batchi now to say that while that was an optimistic view, it wasn't without merit. *Draft day is just eight days away.*

*Then stop bitching, you bitch.*

*And you love it,* she grinned. *So, Cyra. I think she's not that bad. Nice enough, but a little lost.*

*She's only hours old, baby, cut her some slack,* Jason chuckled mentally. *Programming only goes so far, you know.*

*So, all the CBIMs are going to act that way when we build them?*

He nodded. *It's part of their personality template. As Cyra gains experience, her personality will change, just like just about any of us.*

*Which CBIM is next?*

*After we move Cybi, the next CBIM goes at Kosiningi to replace her. After we finish that, the next CBIM goes over on Kirga,* he answered. *We're going to build the facility at Jaxtra and let the Kimdori keep an eye on it. The next one will go to Virga, up in Virissa City, then we'll hold off on the*

*other continents until we have actual people there and put the next one in Kosigi to replace the mainframe.*

*Sounds like a plan,* she sent approvingly.

*We did think this through, you know. Just because you've more or less moved to the Paladins, it doesn't mean we fell apart. Truth be told, things are actually much smoother now,* he teased.

*Oh really,* she sent archly, looking down at him with a raised eyebrow.

*Yup, no more cute butt distracting me in the warehouse when I'm there,* he replied. *It keeps my mind on the job, not on your ass.*

*There's nothing wrong with ogling my ass, baby,* she grinned. *Wanna check it out right now?*

*And let you get out of my arms? Pfft,* he declined, which made her grin.

*Like you're in the warehouse that much anymore anyway,* she challenged. *Just like me. Other duties have pulled you out.*

*Unfortunately,* he grunted mentally. *Truth be told, I'd rather be right beside Myli as she takes things apart and puts them back together. Sometimes I hate my job.*

*Too bad, you're stuck with it.*

*I am not. I'll just abdicate and go live on the beach in Hawaii.*

*Oh no you're not, you're my meal ticket, buster,* she grinned. *I'm not letting my free ride get away.*

*Too bad, get used to wearing straw hats and begging for enough money to eat that evening.*

*Looks like it's time for a revolution around here,* she threatened. *First thing I need to do is get rid of the current ruler,* she added, leaning down and kissing him. But then the baby monitor rang out, and they heard one of the twins start fussing. Jyslin laughed and put her head on his shoulder. *And they were doing so well,* she complained. *Be right back, love. Save my spot,* she winked.

*I'll come give you a hand.*

As usual, one of the babies crying had attracted Amber. She was sitting in Siyae's crib, looking quite concerned as the baby voiced her discomfort, and jumped up and down in place as they entered the nursery. "What's the prognosis, Amber?" Jyslin asked, patting the vulpar on the head before picking Siyae up. "I'd say it's the diaper," she chuckled, patting Siyae's swaddled bottom. She carried her over to the changing table as Jason picked up Bethany, who had been awakened by Siyae but hadn't joined her in crying. She looked up at him with her lucid blue eyes, then reached out and put her tiny hand on his nose when he brought her close. He sat down in the chair by the cribs and cradled his infant daughter, and Amber jumped up into his lap and reared up to look at Bethany, her two tails swirling in a nearly hypnotic pattern. Bethany giggled when Amber licked her face with her curiously hot tongue.

"You are such a mother hen," Jason accused with a smile at the tiny vulpar, patting her on the head with his free hand.

"Try nursing one of the babies with her looming," Jyslin complained, which made Jason laugh.

"I know what you mean, when I bottle feed them," he agreed.

"Sometimes I think Rann must be lonely with all the attention she gives the babies."

"Not really, she'll go straight back to Rann's room after we put the babies back to bed, once she's sure they're okay," Jason replied.

Amber played with Bethany as best she could with her in Jason's arms, which mainly involved licking Bethany's face and playing hide and seek with her by ducking down and then jumping up into her line of sight as the infant squealed with glee, as Jyslin finished changing Siyae, standing by the chair comforting her cranky daughter. They'd started to show some personality, with Siyae being a little more loud and boisterous than Bethany. Both of them exhibited a lot of natural intelligence, both of them very alert and very curious, and their medical checkup three days ago declared both of them to be in perfect health. Both of them were in their baby talk stages, and Jason had the feeling that they'd start using words fairly soon.

That was vastly different from Siyara, who had an equivalent 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level and could "speak" both Faey and English, though she had a

lot of trouble actually *talking* due to her lack of precise motor control. Like Kyri had been at that age, she was far more mature than what seemed natural, but that was what happened when a baby was born with her talent awakened and was able to be taught abstract concepts since before birth. The months that Bethany and Siyae learned the very basics, Siyara was already far beyond them and learning things like reading and basic arithmetic. The only ways that Siyara seemed like the infant she was when it came to physical traits, because she had to learn how to make her body work just like any other infant did.

*Jason, you have a visitor, Kaera called from downstairs. It's that robot from 3D.*

*Rook, Jason noted. Send him up to the nursery.*

Moments later, Rook came in through the open door. He was now using the body of a Faey-sized bipedal robot, its finish reddish like a Makati's skin and with male features, with a skullcap that simulated hair. He had mastered the little toy Gladiator body months ago, had spent about a month in a robotic RVR drone, and after he got about as much use out of being a robotic dog as he could, the 3D crew had gotten together and built him this new body, that had additional functionality and some added useful tools. And just like the babies, Rook had matured and grown over the months. No longer a gopher in 3D, he was now assigned actual work, having learned how to build things by working with Luke. He was one of their machinists now, who was given the specs of what was needed, and he went and built it. Rook even had his own little apartment inside the warehouse, his own personal space, and had earned a hovercar license to drive the hovercar Jason had supplied to him for his own personal use. It was all so could learn about *living* instead of just *being*. "Evening Rook," Jyslin called. "What brings you by?"

*"I have the weekly status report for Jason," he answered, holding up a crypto handpanel. "Myleena asked that I deliver it before you go to work tomorrow. Excuse the late hour, but I was working on my current project and wanted to reach a good place to stop before I completed this task. I was going to leave it with Lieutenant Kaera for you to receive in the morning."*

"Not a problem," Jason said, taking it from the Faey-sized robot. "Thanks for holding down 3D while the crew was getting the new CBIM

up.”

*“It was no problem, Jason,” he answered with a modest nod. “I had a lot of work to do anyway. I’m building a housing unit for Myleena’s newest project.”*

*“What is that?”*

*“I don’t know. She sends me the specs, I build it.”*

Jason laughed. “That’s Myli alright,” he said. “Is your weekly report on here too?”

*“Yes, Jason, everything I’ve done and the things I’ve learned this week.”*

“Good man. I’ll read it tomorrow,” he said, bouncing a drowsy Bethany a little bit. “Now if you’ll excuse us, these two are about ready to go back to sleep.”

*“Of course. Pleasant evening to you.”*

“You too,” he said, and the robot moved fluidly out the door. It had taken Rook a few days go get the hang of walking on two legs in such a large robotic body, but now he moved with a grace that far outstripped his mechanical body. *[Oh yeah, Rook,]* Jason called, communing directly with Rook’s chip

*[Yes, Jason?]*

*[From now on upload your status reports to both Cybi and Cyra, the new CBIM,]* he called.

*[I have already interacted with Cyra. I will include her in my reports.]*

*[Okay then. Have a good night, Rook.]*

*[You too, Jason.]*

*Maista, 33 Demaa, 4402, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 24 June 2015, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 33 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*



## *The White House, Karsa, Karis*

Frowning with both frustration and determination, Zach held his hands up as he manipulated a large volume of water that was floating in midair over his and Sora's heads. The two of them were sitting cross-legged in the center of the office as Dera and Suri looked on near the door and Cybi and Cyra looked on from his desk, each of them sitting demurely on a side. The large globe of water, its surface shimmering as Zach manipulated the space it occupied, slowly began to change shape, changing from a sphere to a cube, then to a pyramid, then to an octahedron.

In the two days since she'd been online, Cyra had picked up a *lot* of Cybi's idiosyncrasies. Cybi wasn't just downloading her archives to Cyra, she was also teaching her, mentoring her, about how to *act* in some ways, a subject where all the programming in the world wasn't really going to help Cyra very much. Cyra was using that tried and true method of learning, imitation. She was imitating many of Cybi's unique mannerisms, but Jason has the feeling that as she learned more and more, she'd shed her adopted mannerisms and develop her own. After all, she was *unique*. She may have the same crystal, but her crystal and Cybi's crystal weren't exactly identical, and those tiny, tiny variations would cause them to have different personalities...much like most people.

It was already showing in one way: batchi. Cybi wasn't all that enthusiastic about batchi. She understood the rules of the game and could appreciate the athletic prowess of the Paladins players as they did off-seasons OTAs, but she wasn't really a fan of the game. Cyra, on the other hand, had developed an immediate and sincere curiosity about batchi, and she had downloaded and studied the entire history of the game and the different league teams on her own because she was curious. After she was done, Cyra was Karis' newest fan of batchi, but Cybi was not. Cyra saw something in batchi that Cybi didn't, and that was a powerful demonstration of how the two CBIMs would be unique individuals even if they were built the same way. As Cyra downloaded more and more information, how she responded to that information would cause her core to develop in different ways from Cybi's core. CBIM cores had the most potential to build new lattice pathways in their structure, which was similar to how Faey and

Terran brains built synaptic pathways, and that would form the basis of how Cyra developed as a personality.

But so far, Jason was rather fond of her. She was curious, she was earnest, she was maybe a little naïve about some things, and she had a refreshing child-like viewpoint of the world, approaching it without any past experience jading her point of view. In some ways, she reminded him of his own children.

*“From my archives, I believe that Zachary demonstrates unusual aptitude in his telekinetic ability,”* Cyra noted aloud as she leaned on her hand and watched, mirroring the pose Cybi used on the other side of the desk.

*“Correct. He is on a different training regimen than his siblings,”* Cybi answered. *“Both his power and his control are above the curve, even for a Generation. He will exhibit exceptional capability once he matures.”*

“Much to Kyri’s annoyance,” Jason chuckled as he read yet another report from his morning to-do list. “But I’ll say one thing, Zach’s lessons have made Kyri really buckle down on her own. Sibling rivalry can work for us sometimes,” he smiled at Cybi. “Finish up, guys, it’s almost council time,” he told the two of them, who were taking their turn in his cycle of bringing them to work to teach them about the duties of the Grand Duke and give them exposure to how Jason did his job. And since he’d opened it up to all the elder kids and not just Rann, Jason had been very pleased at how seriously his kids were taking those lessons. All five of them were learning that being the Grand Duke was a hard job that took a lot of discipline and a lot of integrity...and none of them wanted Rann’s job.

He knew his kids were smart.

Zach carried the water to the bathroom, where he would place it in the small bathtub in there, and Sora climbed up into his lap. “Goodness, you’re getting so big, pippy,” he told her as she settled on his lap. “Soon I’m gonna be chasing boys away from you with a stick.”

Sora giggled. “Mommy said that’s none of your business,” she told him, looking up at him.

“It is so my business,” he retorted bluntly, which made Dera and Suri grin. “I don’t care how Faey your mother thinks I am, I’m still a Terran

father, and Terran fathers have some very deep-seated beliefs about their teenage daughters.”

“I’m not a teenager yet.”

“That’s why I’m making my plans right now,” he drawled.

“What are we gonna do?”

“Just the usual boring council meeting, pips,” he answered. “I’m going to let you and Zach distract the others so I can play Banyer’s Maze in my gestalt without them noticing I’m not paying attention.”

Sora laughed. “You’re sneaky, Daddy.”

“Sneaky is a job requirement for a Grand Duke,” he replied shamelessly.

Zach and Sora weren’t the only kids present at the meeting. Sirri stood by her mother’s desk when Dahnai’s hologram winked on, wearing her formal robes and looking *very* excited. Sirri was now 10 years old, and she had left her foster parents and now lived in Dahnai’s apartment, which also meant that her Imperial training had officially begun. Sirri would now stand at her mother’s right hand at most official functions, from court to meetings, attending even the most confidential briefings and conferences until she reached the age of 15. When she turned 15, she would take a less active role while she underwent middle and primary school-level education, and at 25, she would serve two years in the Imperial Navy as an officer...though that tour of duty would take place inside the palace as an Imperial liaison to the Navy. At 27, she would pursue an Academy degree in the field of her choice, but would also return to the palace and serve as Dahnai’s primary aide, standing at Dahnai’s right hand and being involved in Imperial governance until she took the throne. Sirri waved to Zach and Sora as Dahnai took her seat at her desk, also wearing her formal robes. The two of them must have either just come from court were going to go to court afterwards.

“Hey pippies,” Dahnai said brightly, smiling at the two children. “How are you today?”

“Just fine, Dahnai,” Zach said as Jason set him on it, sitting him just beside Cybi. He turned around and sat cross-legged on it facing the

holograms that began to wink on as the other council members enabled their comm. “We were doing our lessons.”

“And what lessons were those?”

“We had to do TK practice,” Sora answered.

“They’re coming along nicely,” Jason said as the last of the holograms winked on.

“We seem to all be here,” Kreel said, banging the gavel down. Today was the first day of his rotation leading the council, and despite his personality, he did take the job fairly seriously. “So let’s get this party started. Any announcements before we start the itinerary?” He waited a second, then leaned back in his chair. “Alright then, the first order of business is His Majesty Vedrann’s request to move up our next scheduled summit on Terra by one month. Anyone have any opinions?”

Sora and Zach listened as the rulers took nearly an hour debating something so simple as rescheduling the summit, as each ruler just had to inject his or her opinion...at least most of them. Zaa, Hraga, Mesaiima, Jason, and Brayrak Kruu rarely involved themselves in these kinds of debates, mainly because all of them were neutral observers, but also because none of them had the penchant to play inter-council politics the way the others did. All of them but Kreel did it, particularly Dahnai, Assaba, and Anavan, Dahnai and Assaba endlessly jockeying for position within the council and Anavan doing everything she could to be taken as seriously as the other two.

After they *finally* decided to move the summit up to the date that Vedrann requested—the Farguut had a very holy period that the original date fell within, something similar to the Islamic religious observance of Ramadan—Kreel had to mediate an official dispute between Shakizarr and Shevatt over a star system in the PSA sector that both of them claimed, and neither of them were willing to go through arbitration at the Exploration Bureau. Both of them brought it directly to the council, and since Kreel had the gavel, he had to decide the matter. Kreel spent the time during two briefings from Lorna and Dellin to study the evidence and the claims, then ruled, somewhat surprisingly, that both sides had equally valid claims and

that they either shared the system's resources equally or one of them bought the other half from the other for what Kreel decided was a fair price.

Kreel often surprised the council with how *smart* he was, since he treated everything like a big joke.

It was during the open discussion portion of council that Miaari entered the office without warning and handed Jason a handpanel. Jason's eyes widened when he read it and looked up at Miaari. "Seriously?" he blurted.

She nodded.

That made the current debate over producing Torsion weapons for the future Consortium war now or after the Syndicate was beaten back stop.

"I'm afraid I have to go. A fairly serious matter of house business just came up. Cybi, Cyra, sit in if you please, and keep an eye on the kids," he said, standing up. "Pippies, don't annoy the council members. I'll be back in a little bit."

He stayed silent until he shut the door to the outer office. "Chirk, I'll be back in a while. Alright, when did you get word of it?" he asked Miaari.

"Just moments ago. The Rakarri intend to petition the Imperium for entry, so long as Dahnai permits the kings to retain rule over their kingdoms," she answered as they started down the hallway, Dera following as Suri stayed at the office. One of the Marine honor guard that protected the White House fell into step beside Dera silently, and Jason saw a small unit of guard heading for his office, no doubt called in by Suri. "Our watchers on Rakarr sent it straight to Meya's office on receiving the information, and she sent it to me. She knows that I can interrupt you during council meetings."

"And Dahnai doesn't know yet?"

She shook her head. "Jinaami said she does not. She's taking active steps to make sure it doesn't reach Dahnai until I clear it."

"I'm gonna kiss that girl the next time I see her," he said as he walked into the KES satellite office, which was a small affair that mainly served as a liaison between the KES and the KMS. The KES headquarters was kept very separate from the White House to keep those boundaries clear to everyone. Meya was in the satellite office, standing near a desk with one

hand cradling her pregnant belly. “Okay, Miaari got through to me, but you coulda just sent, you know,” he chided her.

“We don’t bother you when you’re in conference, Jayce,” Meya answered seriously. “And I just got here like half a minute ago. I asked Miaari to get that to you while I was on the way over from headquarters.”

“She did. Alright, bottom line it, Meya. Was there any influence from Dahnai?”

“Not that we can find,” she replied.

“So far as we can tell, this is entirely their decision,” Miaari agreed. “Reports from the pack on Rakarr state that the kings of all the kingdoms came together and decided as a group to petition Dahnai for inclusion in the Imperium, at least on *their* terms. They retain their rule but join the Imperium as a member state.”

“Well, I’ll believe it when I hear it from them,” Jason said. “Is their king’s council still in session?”

Meya nodded. “Still going on, the king of the biggest kingdom is hosting it. The one we’ve dealt with before, umm, King Trava.”

“Good, then I’ll hear it directly from him,” Jason said. “Meya, Miaari, warn your people on Rakarr I’m coming. See if they can get word to the kings that someone’s coming to talk to them.”

“Jason, they don’t *know* we keep eyes on them,” Miaari warned.

“Then they’re more naïve than they need to be if they’re about to step up onto the big stage,” he said curtly. “Dera, send it back to Aya, have my armor sent to the *Ijara* along with whoever she wants to send with me, I’ll be leaving as soon as I get there.” *Myri.*

*Yeah Jayce?*

*Put the Ijara on deployment standby and warn Silara I’ll be coming aboard as soon as I get to Kosigi. Get an escort task force in place as well. I should be boarding in about an hour or so.*

*I’ll send down the orders. Where you going?*

*QMC-202-2, he answered. Rakarr.*

*I'll add that to the orders. What's going on over there?*

*I need to talk to the Rakarri face to face, he answered. I won't be staying long.*

*Alright. I'll have everything ready by the time you get to Kosigi*

*[Jason, I just got word that you're leaving the planet?]* Aya demanded, her thought sent over the biogenic network via her interface since she was out of sending range.

*[Yeah, sorry about the short notice. Send my armor and however many guards you need to the Ijara, we're going to the Rakarri homeworld to have a face-to-face with the Rakarri kings. So plan for the only dangers posed to me being arrows and bullets.]*

*[Well...alright, that should be safe enough as long as you wear your armor,]* she acceded grudgingly. *[But I'm sending eight guards.]*

*[Fine with me, send them up. I'll be on my way up in a few minutes.]* "Aya's sending my armor and some guards up to the ship," he announced.

*I just received orders to go with Jason, Dera announced, touching her interface. Suri will stay here with the children.*

"Alright then, I'll go have a talk with the Rakarri," he said.

"It might behoove you to contact Dahnai and warn her," Miaari suggested.

"She knows I babysit the Rakarri, it keeps her honest. So no, I'm not telling her," he snorted, which made Miaari chuckle.

Half an hour later, he was stepping off his skimmer and into the small forward port landing bay on the command ship, and the tall, tall, buxom Silara Karinne was there with her XO and two Tarks waiting for him. She saluted sharply, then laughed when he stepped up and pushed on her shoulders to make her bend her knees to get her eyes at his level before kissing her on the cheek in greeting. "So prideful," she teased. "Myri sent orders we are going to QMC-202?"

"As soon as the task force is ready to move out, yes," he nodded as Shen hurried up to him carrying his armor. Six other Imperial guards were just behind her, disembarking off a small personnel skimmer. "I know it's

not much of a *real* first mission after nearly six months of exercises and deployment rotations sitting at Terra or Draconis, but at least I thought of you first,” he grinned.

She laughed. “A visit to another quadrant is just what the ship and crew needs,” she declared. “I already have navigation plotting a jump from Exile.”

“Just remember, be gentle, I can’t escape hyperspace exposure like you can,” he reminded her.

“It’s only a fifty second jump from Exile to QMC-202,” she protested.

“I know, but as frail and delicate as I am, we might have to do it in fifty one second jumps with an hour’s rest between each one,” he said airily, which earned him a slap on the shoulder.

Silara put him in a stateroom just off the landing bay so he didn’t have far to go to get into his armor, and the guards helped him armor up as he explained what they were doing to them. *I’m gonna make damn sure the Rakarri know exactly what they’re getting into if they go through with this*, he summarized after telling them what he knew. *I’m not going to try to sway them either way, but I do want to make sure it’s what they want and that they fully understand how it’s going to change their society and their politics. No society that goes from steam engines to PPGs is going to do it smoothly.*

*From what I’ve read of the Rakarri, they might actually be one of the rare few species capable of it*, Hara replied as she handed him his gauntlet. *They are highly intelligent, and what’s most important, they are not xenophobic nor exceedingly religious. It’s the religious ones that have the most problems.*

*Yeah, he agreed. It demonstrates a general inability to accept new things if they conflict with religious teachings. But still, we’re going to make damn sure that the Rakarri jump into this able to see the pool under the diving board.*

*You have such curious colloquialisms, even after all these years living in a predominantly Faey society*, Mai noted lightly.



*Only for you, Mai. I know you love having no idea what the fuck I'm talking about.* The other guards grinned when she jammed her hands down on his shoulders to settle his breastplate and backplate, and nearly knock him over from the backless stool on which he sat.

He finished armoring up just in time to go to the bridge to observe as the *Ijara* cleared the doors and entered open space, turning towards the Exile Stargate with a task force of 21 ships escorting it, spreading out into standard cruise formation with the command ship squarely in the middle of the formation. The formation broke up as they reached the Stargate to allow the command ship to go first—the largest ship always went first through a Stargate—and everyone locked into jump restraints and shut down the majority of their power systems for gate transit. On the other side, with the blue and green jewel Exile in the distance off their starboard, the ship turned to line up with QMC-202 as the task force again resumed its cruising formation, each ship returning to its assigned spot as it came through the gate. Jason read the latest intelligence reports from the Kimdori operatives on Rakarr, two of them right in the council chamber the kings were using, and they confirmed that the kings were very serious about petitioning the “space people” for inclusion into their society, to be allowed to sail the stars and learn all the wondrous things that the space people knew. So long as Dahnai allowed the kings to retain their rulership, they were willing to pay her tribute and name her the Overqueen of Rakarr, to whom the kings and queens of the Rakarri would pay tribute and provide able-bodied soldiers if she issued a call to arms in exchange for being included in the Imperium. They’d even drawn up a treaty to offer Dahnai that spelled everything out, and as Jason read it, he saw that the kings of Rakarr were both very eager to be included but also cautious enough to put language into the treaty that allowed the kings to maintain authority over their own kingdoms.

That told him how serious they were, if they were willing to raise Dahnai into a position above their own to get access to the Imperium. And it also told him that maybe the kings weren’t being as naïve as Jason thought they were.

He managed to download the Rakarri language and insert it into his gestalt’s memory before they made the jump, and when they dropped back into normal space, the very Terra-like planet of Rakarr dominated the

forward viewscreen. “Stand down from jump stations,” Silara barked. “Navigator, set course to bring us into orbit of the planet, ahead full.”

“Aye sir, setting course, 18 mark 356, increasing to full,” the navigator answered. “We should be in orbit in twenty-three minutes.”

By the time Jason got down to the landing bay and he and his guards boarded an armored personnel dropship, they were in orbit. Jason piloted the dropship himself with Hara in the co-pilot’s chair as he cleared the ship, two Wolf fighters from the command ship flying escort as Jason plotted a course down to the castle where the kings were meeting...*all* of them. They’d all traveled to the largest kingdom on the planet to meet in person and come to this agreement, and that was the only reason Jason was taking this so seriously, for it met all the conditions he put in place to keep Dahnai’s hands off the Rakarri and their planet.

Stunned Rakarri soldiers in multiple liveries and coats of arms, the honor guards of the assorted kings gaped as the dropship landed in the bailey of King Trava’s castle. Jason stepped out as soon as the dropship’s hatch opened, wearing his armor but without his helmet. “Warn the kings and queens of the Rakarri that one of the space people has come to speak at their meeting,” he called loudly in the Rakarri language.

He didn’t have to wait long. Moments later, a very richly dressed, tall, fit Rakarri male almost ran out of a large door and up to the dropship, gaping at it and gawking at Jason and his eight Faey guards, none of which had their helmets on. “I am Trava, king of Gentaria,” he declared, and Jason and his guards all bowed.

“I am the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne,” he replied.

Trava’s eyes brightened. “I remember your trade delegation!” he declared. “I am wearing the cloth your people traded us for our foodstocks right now,” he added, patting his chest, which had a silk doublet under a fur-lined vest-like garment that flowed into a long cloak in the back, almost like a cloak-vest. He also wore heavy silver necklace with a large pendant showing a coat of arms.

“I’m glad you do, your Majesty,” Jason said. “I have need to speak to you and the other monarchs, as soon as it can be arranged. It is a matter of

grave importance, important enough for me to come in person.”

“We are in council as we speak, your Grace. I will conduct you to our council chambers.”

The other kings and queens, male and female Rakarri of varying ages and finery, knew they were coming. Jason was escorted into a large chamber where three long table were arranged in a U shape, and Trava returned to his seat in the center of the middle table, the seat of honor since he was hosting. There were 53 different Rakarri kings representing every kingdom on the planet. As his guards stood back with the other guards and personal envoys of the kings along the wall open to the U, Jason stepped forward and bowed. “I am the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne and one of the parties that have contacted your people in the past,” Jason declared to the 41 kings and 12 queens, who looked at him with tremendous curiosity and interest. It was the first time most of them had ever seen one of the space people before. “I have come in person to discuss with you your intention to petition the Empress Dahnai Merrane for entry into the Imperium.”

“How did you know that?” one of the kings demanded. “We’ve only just made that decision and drafted the first draft of our treaty today!”

“I keep a very close eye on the Rakarri, your Majesty, to protect you from *other* space people that do not have your best interests at heart,” Jason replied bluntly, staring him right in the eye. “My driving interest has been to give your people the chance to shape their own destiny as they will without space people coming down here and trying to tell you what to do. I have my own people who look much like Rakarri on the planet, who have been watching things to make sure that the other space people did not interfere in your affairs. I told the Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Faey Imperium, ruler of the *other* space people that have contacted your people in the past, that she could not speak to your people or interfere with your affairs, and that she could not come to your planet and take it over. She was willing to accede to my demands because she knows how passionate I am about protecting people like the Rakarri who lack the technology to contend with the Imperium. But I did tell her that if the *Rakarri* wanted to join the Imperium, then I would stand aside and allow it to come to pass, so long as *all* the Rakarri agreed to this idea unanimously.”

“What right have you to tell us what to do?” one of the kings demanded.

“None, which is why I’m here now,” he replied calmly. “My involvement in your affairs has been to stand between you and the other space people who would show up with mighty armies and navies to conquer you. I saw that done to my *own* people, and now that I’m in a position of power out there beyond the stars, I make damn sure that it’s not done to anyone *else*. That’s why I’m here now. It’s been brought to my attention that this body has unanimously agreed to ask Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Imperium, the space people colonizing the other planet, for inclusion in their Imperium. As such, it fulfills a condition I put in place with the Empress Dahnai that prevents her from doing anything more than trading textiles and cloths and iron stock to your people for food. Since the Rakarri have united and agreed to seek more from the Imperium, it means that I must stand aside and allow it.

“But know this, and know it carefully, august kings and queens of Rakarr, that joining the Imperium has consequences *far* beyond trading more than just food for cloth and textiles,” he said seriously. “You will be placing yourself under the rule of the Empress Dahnai Merrane and will be included into a political system not your own. The space people will come to your planet and move in, and while they’ll bring teachers to teach you their science and machines that will make the lives of your people much easier, it means you’re going to get the carpet-baggers and con men coming to make easy money off what they’ll see as backwater rubes. I won’t deny that it won’t bring benefits, but you should understand that not *everything* the space people bring will be good for your people. There will be bad along with the good, and I wanted you to take a few extra days to consider this before you make your final decision. I’m not saying that joining the Imperium will be bad. I’m not saying that it will be good, either. It’s not my place to tell you how to run your planet or that I know better than you what’s best for your people. I’m just here to warn you that if you do this, then be ready for it to change *everything*, every single aspect of your society from the rudest peasant hut to this very castle, and not all of those changes will be good.”

“We’ve discussed that possibility for many days, your Grace,” one of the queens on his right called, a fairly young and curiously attractive Rakarri female.

“And just how will things change for the worse?” an elderly king on his left asked.

“I’ll leave that for you to decide, your Majesty, after I explain *exactly* what the Imperium is and how it works.”

For two hours, Jason meticulously explained how the Imperium worked from a political standpoint, making sure to stress the infighting of the houses of the *Siann* and how their planet would be placed under the rule of one of those houses unless they demanded special terms in their treaty to get around it. He pulled no punches, revealing the telepathic nature of the Faey, his own telepathic abilities, the avaricious nature of the Faey, and he was careful to couch everything as neutrally as possible. He was merely describing the system, no more, no less, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. After finishing with the Imperium, he then described the Confederation to them and how the Imperium was currently part of a larger governmental entity created to fight the Andromedans.

And that caused a reaction he wasn’t expecting. “Wait, you say that these people from years and years away by space boats are trying to conquer everyone in our house of stars?” one of the kings demanded. The Rakarri language had no word for *galaxy*. Their astronomers hadn’t made that discovery yet.

“They honestly don’t know about the Rakarri, your Majesty, but if they knew you were here, yes, they’d try to conquer you,” he replied honestly. “That’s what brought the Confederation into being, causing the different governments of space people to unite in common defense against these invaders, because these enemies have such vast armies and navies that no one government of space people can stand against them by themselves. These distant enemies seek to conquer and enslave *all* of us, every single living thing in our house of stars. We who have joined the Confederation defend not only ourselves, but every being in our house of stars, even those who will never know of what we did.”

“Well, that just inclines me even more for this idea,” he said strongly. “We must protect our homes from these invaders, and if the only way is to seek inclusion in the Imperium, then so be it! The defense of the helpless and the weak is the noblest of pursuits!” The young king got quite a bit of

applause for his declaration, and the Rakarri sitting beside him clapped him on the back when he sat back down.

“That’s more or less it, your Majesties,” Jason finished. “That’s how the Imperium works, and the current state of political affairs among the various groups of space people. It’s up to you to decide if joining the Imperium will be a good thing or a bad thing for your people.”

“We’ve heard what you have to say, Grand Duke Karinne, and we will carefully consider everything you’ve told us,” Trava declared. “I think we would all like to discuss your words for a while amongst ourselves. I’ll have my majordomo arrange quarters for you, so you might be available to speak to us again this afternoon if you so wish.”

“That won’t be necessary, your Majesty,” he replied. “With your permission, I’ll return to my home planet. I will leave you to decide for yourselves what you wish to do. That’s been my guiding intent for your people this whole time, to ensure you had the *choice* to do as you will. If you join the Imperium, I will welcome you into a much larger world gladly. If you do not, we’ll still be here to make sure that the other space people do not interfere in your affairs. Either way, I’m confident that the wisdom of this august body of Rakarri kings and queens will make the best choice for your people.”

The monarchs looked to each other, and then Trava nodded. “Alright. You have our permission to withdraw, and thank you for your visit, your Grace, and all the information you brought to us.”

Jason bowed to all three tables of kings, then he and his guards filed out of the conference chamber. Trava’s guards escorted the nine of them back to the bailey, unaware that they were discussing things among themselves.

*Dera?*

*There were no telepaths in the room. If there were, they weren’t sending,* she answered.

*I didn’t find any talented minds,* Ryn elaborated. *But the minds I sensed were fairly strong-willed.*

*I noticed. Yet another canoid species with curiously strong minds,* Jason noted. *But at least the Rakarri minds aren’t closed. I wasn’t listening so my reactions were sincere, but I have no doubt you girls were.*

*Of course we were, Dera grinned at him.*

*Disciplined is a better word for it, particularly the monarchs, Mai observed. All of them are highly educated and well trained to control their thoughts and their emotions. I'd bet if they were taught some mental exercises, they might be able to prevent us from hearing their surface thoughts.*

*Speaking of stray thoughts, what did you girls pick up?*

*Generally, your speech didn't change any minds, Jason, Ryn answered, to which several of them nodded. If anything, it reinforced their decision for various reasons. Some want access to Imperial technology and science for the benefits they believe it will bring to their people, some are poor kingdoms that see the machines of the Imperium helping their impoverished nations, and some want to be part of something much bigger than just their small planet. The idea of being a spacefaring race motivates quite a few of them, mainly the younger kings.*

*As long as they make an informed decision, I'm alright whichever way they decide, Jason noted as they walked back out into the bailey, where some dozens of Rakarri soldiers surrounded their dropship, keeping the curious away from it. Truth be told, I wouldn't mind seeing them join the Imperium, but they have to make that decision themselves and fully aware that it won't be all meis and oye juice.*

*I think you made that point, Ryn told him as the hatch opened at Jason's mental command. And how long will it take before a Karinne recruiting office is open on the planet?*

*Fast enough for Dahnai to get mad at me, he replied shamelessly as he entered the dropship. I like the Rakarri's intellect and curiosity, and I'd like to see some of them in the house. Now if I could just convince some fucking Kirri to join, he growled mentally as he sat in the pilot's chair.*

*Good luck with that, Jason. The Kirri have very strongly held beliefs.*

*Well, we'll see. The Kirri know that the Karis ecosystem can support their symbiotes, that might convince a few of them to move here. Songa sent me a report on them the other day, she's been studying them in her spare time.*

*Oh? What did she say?*

*That the Kirri symbiotes are curiously neutral to Terrans, he answered. Terran physiology is more accepting of Kirri symbiotic microbes, even though they don't do Terrans any good. It's just that Terran immune systems don't react to Kirri symbiotes as strongly as most other species.*

*Odd.*

*Not really. Terran biology has something like that going for them already, a semi-symbiotic relationship with quite a few strains of beneficial bacteria that live in Terran digestive tracts. They call them probiotic organisms. Terran immune systems ignore them as long as they stay in the digestive tract, but they react if they enter the bloodstream. Kirri symbiotes are just a form of probiotics that do way more than aid in digestion the way most Terran probiotics do. Anyway, Terran immune systems don't react aggressively against most forms of Kirri symbiotes, they tend to ignore them until the symbiotes do something that the immune system considers an attack, then it reacts. When they do, they only attack certain strains of symbiotes of the same family instead of all of them. Songa's been researching why, she finds that very interesting from a medical point of view.*

*I'll leave that to the doctors, Ryn noted. I'm sure only a doctor would find Kirri germs interesting.*

*That's what I pay her for, to be interested in things the bore the fuck out of me, Jason agreed, which made the guards wheeze in that voiceless laughter. "Ijara control, Karinne One," he called aloud. "We're on our way back up now."*

*"Understood, Karinne One. Approach vectors and landing instructions are being uploaded to your nav now."*

*"I've got them," he said as his gestalt received that data from the dropship computer. "Tell Captain Silara we'll be returning to Karis as soon as I'm aboard. Our mission here is complete."*

*"Yes, your Grace. Sending your order up now."*

*When he got aboard the command ship, he found out that his little excursion hadn't gone unnoticed. Dahnai was pestering him on his gestalt*



almost as soon as he got back on board, and he finally accepted her query when he got back to his stateroom, sitting on the stool and allowing the guards to help him take his armor off. *Dahnai's bugging me, give me a few minutes, ladies. [What?]* he demanded.

*[Why is there a Karinne task force orbiting QMC 202-2?]* she demanded. *[I thought you said that planet was off limits.]*

*[It is for you,]* he replied. *[I'm on board the command ship here at QMC-202, I had to have a face to face conference with the Rakarri monarchs.]*

*[What for?]*

*[Because they're one step from petitioning you to join the Imperium,]* he answered honestly. *[I had to come here and make sure it was their unanimous decision, and you weren't tampering.]*

*[Woah, really? That's awesome news!]* she declared excitedly.

*[Don't get too excited, they're actually approaching this with an eye on keeping some of their power,]* he warned. *[They're not going to just give you the keys to their front door. They have some demands, and they're fairly smart ones.]*

*[Like?]*

*[Like the kings all get to keep power in their kingdoms, for one,]* he replied. *[They envision a system where they still get to be the kings and queens of their kingdoms, but they swear fealty to you the same way their nobles swear fealty to them.]*

*[I don't see a problem with that, I'll need governors there anyway,]* she replied easily. *[They certainly know how to govern the planet, since they're already doing it. The monarchs can run the planet just fine, I'll just have to send advisors to tell them how we do things.]*

*[And you're already running afoul of their ideas,]* Jason chuckled. *[They want to do things their way with the Imperium coming in to help them with infrastructure and production, where you're a silent partner while they do most of the work.]*

She was silent a long moment. *[You know, that might not be a bad idea,]* she finally answered. *[It works fairly well on Terra, but I won't name their planet a protectorate, I'll have to award the planet to one of the noble houses. And I know exactly which house can do it. The Suralles,]* she told him. *[I trust Anya, she won't bitch about only getting the one planet, and she won't mess with their system any more than absolutely necessary. She showed a lot of skill coming in and setting up Terra so the Terrans mind their own affairs while the quotas still get met. I'm sure she can do the same on the Rakarri planet.]*

*[Okay, I can live with Anya, she'll respect the Rakarri's customs,]* he agreed.

*[I'll talk to Anya about it later today, she's on Terra right now but she's due back on Draconis tonight. [What about planet 3? That's a Merrane holding.]*

*[Yup, but it doesn't qualify for the contract process because it doesn't meet the requirements, so any house can claim it as right of first possession. Planet 2 does fall under contract requirements, so I have to award that planet to one of the noble houses to oversee. And I'll give it to Anya.]*

*[No arguments here,]* he assured her. *[But you know the Siann will blow a fuse when they find out you've been secretly colonizing distant star systems for the Merranes and bypassing the contract process.]*

*[Tough shit,]* she retorted, which made him laugh. *[That's one of the perks of spreading my legs for your big dick, baby, I get the inside information on things the rest of the Siann doesn't. The contract process only applies to planets with indigenous populations and planets that are primary food or heavy metal ore producers, planets whose resources have Imperial interest and immediate usefulness. Any planet that turns an immediate profit has to go through a contract, but any planet that doesn't is open for claim. The fact that the Merranes are investing a hell of a lot of money into planet 3 for terraforming gives the house the right to claim it without a contract. And I'm sure that you'll have a few Grand Duchesses offering to bend over for you if you tell them about some distant star systems that their houses might be able to claim without a contract.]*

*[And I'm glad I don't attend court anymore,]* Jason drawled mentally as Dera and Mai separated his breastplate from his backplate and pulled them over his head. *[Anyway, now that you know what's going on, lemme get back home. I'll send you a missive that goes into more detail so you can read it.]*

*[Sure thing, thanks babes. I'll call Anya right now and tell her I want to see her.]*

*[Alright. Wanna come over for dinner tomorrow? You can get to know Cyra.]*

*[Since when do I say no? Just be ready to feed me breakfast too,]* she replied purringly.

*[Works for me. Alright, love, let me get back home, I still have work to do.]*

*[Alright. See you tomorrow.]*

Terraforming. Jason accessed CivNet through the *Ijara* to check on a little project that the Suralles had set up about a year ago, something that was so low-priority that nobody was paying all that much attention...Mars. The Suralles had put terraforming units and water replicators on Mars to oxygenize the atmosphere, increase its thickness, add water and water vapor to the planet's biosphere, and pump ozone into the upper atmosphere to filter out harmful UV rays that the planet couldn't prevent. They'd also installed a directional solar radiation shield, something the Academy builders had devised, to deflect harmful solar radiation, an invisible shielding system that acted almost exactly like a planetary magnetic field. It was a 7-year process they'd started a year ago to turn Mars into a life-sustaining planet, though a bit colder than normal. When they were done, Mars would have a cool temperate climate, sufficient water and oxygen to support life, .82 standard pressure after gases were either synthesized by the terraformers or hauled in from elsewhere to inject into the atmosphere, two very large oceans that would form on the surface, and after organic infusion of the soil, the Suralles would colonize it and start farming, turning Mars into a low-gravity arable planet that would probably be swarmed by Makati and Menodan settlers.

What the Suralles were doing on Mars played into what Dahnai described. Since Mars was uninhabitable and had absolutely no mineral value whatsoever, the planet was considered unclaimed and available by the Imperial government. Any house that was willing to invest money in terraforming could claim the planet for their own, and the Suralles had done just that. For that matter, they'd also claimed Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn, mainly for access to the gas giants' moons for future terraforming.

Three months ago, the Suralles had also started the terraforming process on Venus, which would be *much* more expensive and would take nearly 20 years to complete, so it was a long-term investment. But the planet's location in the solar system's habitable zone made it worth the investment once it was habitable, so Anya had spent nearly C270 billion on the highly durable and specialized equipment her house would need to transform Venus from a lethal hellish wasteland to a life-sustaining planet. The first thing Anya installed at Venus was another directional planetary radiation shield, whose only job was to deflect the solar wind. Once that was in place and running, the terraformers on Venus, protected by powerful hard shields and Carbidium armor that could stand up to the 89.5 pressure on Venus, were set down on the planet's surface at strategic points and were turned on. Those atmospheric terraformers weren't trying to increase the atmosphere, their primary job was to *reduce* the atmosphere, to draw in carbon dioxide and change it into gaseous oxygen and water by combining it with replicated hydrogen and creating pellets of carbon-based solids that would be used later in the organic infusion process to make the Venusian soil fertile. Until they were needed, they were being put in orbit around the planet to keep them from getting underfoot. When the time came to start the organic infusion process, that stored carbon would be sent back to the surface to be infused into the soil to make it fertile. They were also releasing replicated nitrogen gas on a ratio of 50:1, 50 *benkonn* of carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere was replaced by one *benkonn* of nitrogen, which would slowly cause nitrogen levels to increase in the atmosphere as the pressure decreased, and would stabilize the volatile Venusian atmosphere.

There were two different operations in the Suralle terraforming operation, and the second one was working from outer space down rather than from the ground up. Orbital reclamation units were utilizing kathras-

long siphons to literally vacuum up the thick clouds of sulfuric acid that enshrouded the planet, which would be sold on the galactic market; sulfuric acid was actually a useful chemical compound on the galactic market due to the fact that it was expensive to replicate and selling the siphoned acid would nearly pay for the operation. The carbon dioxide the units sucked up with the sulfuric acid was also useful, for they were storing it in vast containers and transporting it to Mars, to release directly into the Martian atmosphere to help increase its thickness and get some greenhouse effect warming of the frigid surface. There were 153 different siphons running to clean up the sulfuric acid, 90 robotic transports hauling the siphoned carbon dioxide to Mars and injecting it into the atmosphere there in a continuous cycle, and there were 156 different atmospheric terraformers running on Venus right now draining the atmosphere of its carbon dioxide, reducing the air pressure and systematically replacing that carbon dioxide with other gases. Combined, the two systems would reduce the pressure on Venus from 87.6 standard to 28.4 standard within the next ten years, and that would subsequently drop the hellish surface temperature from 670 shuki average to about 330 shuki average. That was still deadly, but it was a threshold temperature that would allow them to deploy much more terraforming equipment to the planet to accelerate the process in the final ten years of the terraforming operation, when they would put the water replicators into overdrive as they continued to reduce the atmospheric pressure to their target of 1.6 standard, replicate enough water to form oceans, and infuse the soil with synthesized organic material to make it able to support plant life.

In about 20 years, Venus would go from what it was now to an arable planet with a tropical climate, perfect for a Shio, just waiting for inhabitants to build something there. On the other hand, it would only take about six years for them to make Mars arable, and in three years there would be enough oxygen and increased air pressure in the atmosphere to make it possible to survive on the surface without breathing equipment, though it would require arctic weather survival gear and equalizing to the much lower pressure. It would cost Anya about C400 billion when all was said and done, but in the end she'd have two arable farming planets that would make all that money back for her house in 60 years, and would forever after do nothing but turn hefty profits for the house. Food *always* sold, so it was a very lucrative industry worth the investment. It was definitely a long-term

investment, but it was a solid one, and nobody in the *Siann* thought Anya was crazy for undertaking it.

Usually, the Imperium or its houses didn't bother with such extensive and expensive terraforming operations, but the fact that Terra was in the solar system made terraforming Mars and Venus economically viable, at least once Anya had the cash reserves to bankroll the investment. There was a Stargate in the system, extensive access to industrial equipment, workers could easily reach Mars and Venus from Terra, and they could easily establish supply lines to the terraforming operations. Had Terra not been there, the Suralles wouldn't have bothered terraforming, it would have been far too expensive. That was why the Merranes were willing to terraform QMC-202-3, because it didn't need very much terraforming to make it viable, they just had to infuse water and organic material into the soil of a planet that could already support life in every other way. Had the planet been uninhabitable and didn't have those extensive deposits of usable heavy ores, Dahnai would have passed on it.

Jason was glad to see it. Anya would get two planets of her own out of the deal, because she was willing to make the investment into terraforming them, and the Terran solar system would become that much more important, because it would have a nearly unheard-of *three* food-producing planets in the system.

Jason went straight to Miaari's office and discussed the Rakarri matter with her, as Tim, Cybi, and Cyra listened in. "I think the Rakarri will ask for inclusion," Miaari finally surmised after listening to everything. "I also think that I should prepare to start screening Rakarri for entry into the house."

"Damn right you should," Jason said immediately. "I'm gonna move as fast as Dahnai does. The Rakarri will be an asset to the house once they get educated up to Karinne levels."

Tim was about to say something, but both Cybi and Cyra blinked, then looked distracted for a second. "What?" Jason asked them.

*"The Denmother Zaa seeks immediate audience,"* Cyra answered.

*"I will put it through,"* Cybi added. Seconds later, a hologram of Zaa appeared, one of her three dimensional free-ranging ones. She oriented

herself quickly and looked to Jason.

“I have news,” she declared. “The Jhri have decided to petition for entry.”

“Not too surprising,” Jason said. The Jhri were almost like anthropomorphic squirrels, another rodent-like race similar to the Grimja, with long bushy tails and a bipedal frame, who stood a little under 4 shakra tall on the average, which was about four and a half feet or about a meter and a third, which made them the tallest of the “short” races. Like the Kirri, they had digitigrade legs, with the elongated foot that gave the illusion that their legs had an extra joint. They had grayish or reddish fur, depending on their origins, but they all had hair that was a different color from their fur, which was a bit unusual. Unlike the Grimja or many other rodent-like races, the Jhri were evolved from omnivores and had hybrid teeth, with large front teeth, fang-like incisors, and the rest of their teeth were capable of handling either vegetable matter or meat with equal facility. Unlike the Grimja, the Jhri didn’t have an overpopulation problem...their population problem went the other way. A female had on average two pups at a time, but she only reproduced every ten years on average, and rarely produced more than three litters in her lifetime. That was six offspring on average, stretched out over 30 or 40 years, and that averaged out with the statistical math to *barely* bring the birth rate over the death rate. This slow population growth made the Jhri *very* wary about engaging in any activity that might reduce their population, such as a war, because it would take a long time for their population to recover. In that respect, the Jhri were much like the Stevak, with a very slow population growth curve, but that was balanced by the fact that the average Jhri lived for about 200 years.

One thing did differentiate the Jhri from about every other race in the sector cluster...precision. They had fast reflexes, amazing hand-eye coordination, and exceptional manual dexterity, some of the most exceptional manual dexterity of all the races in the sector cluster. Throw a cloud of coins in the air, and the Jhri could look at them as they flew, pick out the one that was different from all the rest, then snatch it without touching any other coin before any of them hit the ground. They didn’t have reflexes as fast as a Shurai’s, but their combination of high manual dexterity and fast reflexes made the Jhri famous throughout the sector cluster as some of the best sharpshooters and snipers there were. Give a Jhri a railgun and

optimum conditions, and he could shoot the whiskers off a rat from four kathra away, one whisker at a time. Their manual dexterity also made them excel in fields where they worked with their hands, such as engineering, technical repair, art, piloting, and sports involving skill at aiming, shooting, or precise repetitive movements.

*“The entry of the Jhri will most definitely incite the Sha’i-ree to petition as well,” Cybi speculated. “That will put both of their most powerful neighbors in the sectors adjoining the Sha’i-ree sector in the Confederation. First the Koui, now the Jhri. They will not want to be left out, the competition between those three empires is intense despite the fact that they are so distant from one another.”*

“I wouldn’t bet against that,” Tim grunted, scratching his chin as he thought. “They’ve been leaning towards it anyway; this will just push their senate over the top. The question is, is the Confederation ready for the Sha’i-ree.”

“You mean are *you* ready for them,” Jason teased. The Sha’i-ree were a humanoid race, and they were a *beautiful* humanoid race, as attractive as the Faey, with mocha colored skin, cat-like vertically slitted pupils in their eyes that were always either yellow, brown, or red, they had rather unique hands with six fingers on their right hands but only five on their left, giving them 21 digits instead of 20 when toes were counted, and humanoid features and bodies with one small exception, female Sha’i-ree had tails. They stood a little taller than Terrans on the average, both genders of equal size, and they were exceptionally beautiful, graceful, and sensual...and there were the tails. *Only* the females had tails, which was proportional to the female so it ended right at her ankles, and was covered with long, silky hair the same color as the hair on her head which a female kept meticulously groomed at all times. Females were very vain about their tails and spent a lot of time and money making sure that the “fur” on it was styled, groomed, and immaculately attractive. Jason had always been fascinated by that fact, that a humanoid race’s genders could have diversified so much that females of the species had a *limb* that the males did not. It would be like Terran men having three arms but women only having two. Somehow, as the Sha’i-ree evolved from their simioid origins, the males had lost their tails but the females had not, and it mystified him as to what conditions in their planet’s pre-history could have caused such a thing.



But, despite that, the Sha'i-ree took some getting used to, particularly for people with a Terran upbringing.

They were graceful, polite, charming, and very charismatic, nearly as charismatic as a Shio or Beryan. They were also highly educated and one of the most technologically advanced races in their sector, nearly at the same level as the Alliance, and were particularly well known for their advances in shield technology, both hard shields and soft shields. But they had a very unusual culture for a humanoid species, which was similar in some ways to the Faey, but in others they made the Faey look like bible-thumping zealots. For one, like the Kirri, the Sha'i-ree didn't wear clothes except as fashion accessories, and when they did, they never hid anything that most clothes were designed to conceal. A Sha'i-ree might wear a shawl or a stylish sash around his or her waist, might wear a vest and many Sha'i-ree were partial to stylish hats, but wouldn't wear anything that concealed their breasts, genitals, or posteriors, which they considered the most attractive parts of the body and thus were proudly displayed for all to see. They wore clothing for function and protection when necessary, if their job or what they were doing required clothing to protect themselves from possible injury or exposure to excessive heat or cold, but if clothes weren't necessary, they wore no clothes. They would not tattoo themselves, nor would they pierce any parts of their bodies, not even their ears. Men and women in their society were equal in all ways, with no classes or roles considered to be isolated to a single gender, with two exceptions: Sha'i-ree men weren't allowed to be school teachers, and women weren't allowed to be fighter pilots. Why men couldn't be teachers, that was a mystery buried in some obscure facet of Sha'i-ree history, but the prohibition for women to be fighter pilots was because of their tails. They couldn't easily sit in the cockpit of Sha'i-ree fighters because of their tails, so they weren't allowed to be fighter pilots. Those were the only two ways in which Sha'i-ree genders had any political or legal separation.

The one aspect of their society that would cause the most problems, however, was their outlook on sexual behavior. The Sha'i-ree shared the Faey social outlook that saw sexual activity as part of everyday life, that it should in no way be concealed or hidden from anyone. Unlike the Faey, however, the species didn't believe in the concept of marriage. They did experience love in the same way most other humanoid species did, but love

in their society was a temporary thing, to enjoy while it lasted and remember fondly when it faded. They had couples where a man and woman who loved each other moved in together, where the man *always* moved in with the woman, but the couple drifted apart after a few years, maybe stayed together for about 10 years if they had children together, and a couple did not in any way practice monogamy...which was probably why couples didn't last very long. Faey telepathic pair-bonding kept Faey couples together despite the open nature of Faey marriage, but the Sha'i-ree lacked that reinforcement. But, while the Faey and the Sha'i-ree shared some similar social and cultural views about sex, at least the Faey had some standards and social stigmas involving engaging in sexual behavior in public places. Amorous Faey couples didn't carry on in crowded public places, though having sex in a public area wasn't technically against the law in Faey society. Faey wouldn't engage in things like that in a place where they might cause a disruption or annoy others, that would be seen as rude, but the Sha'i-ree didn't have that same standard. Sha'i-ree would engage in sexual activity whenever and wherever they pleased, and at least in their society, nobody even so much as gave an amorous couple a second glance if they were doing something sexual on a mass transit car, or at a sporting event, or wherever. To them, it simply *was*, it was part of basic everyday life, and it was as commonplace and acceptable an activity in their society as shaking a man's hand would be in Terran society.

The Sha'i-ree took promiscuity to the very edge of humanoid social behavior, but it caused no problems in their society because they completely divorced the sexual act from any kind of emotional response, a response that went all the way down to the biological level. Like the Faey, the Sha'i-ree separated the concept of *love* from *sex*, and considered them two completely different things, even more so than the Faey did. The Sha'i-ree *biologically* didn't assign any importance to the sexual act, where Terrans and many other humanoid species had biological connections between sexual activity and emotions. Sha'i-ree women had no biological drive to hold onto a man, to form a pair bond, and their men were biologically disposed to promiscuity much like Terran men were, and those fundamental differences between them and most other humanoid species explained their radically different views on sex and sexual behavior as society and culture slowly supplanted instinctual motivations.

This was a unique and fascinating thing to Jason, based on Sha'i-ree basic biological instincts. Their species evolved from matriarchal social groups where the entire social group assisted in the raising of offspring and the group worked as a unit to survive, sharing everything between them, so the need to keep a mate wasn't a driving factor in the prehistoric Sha'i-ree's motivation. Men would come and go, moving from social group to social group to diversify the gene pools, and while they were with the group, they assisted with the raising of the children and all other group activities, a behavior seen in many primate species on Terra, like the Japanese macaque monkeys. As the species grew and evolved, that basic biological motivation did not change, and it had formed the basis for their very unique views. Sha'i-ree women formed intimate social networks with the women who lived in their neighborhoods, forming an instinctive matriarchal "troop," and when they had children, everyone in their social circle assisted in the raising of the children. Men in their society did help raise children themselves when they were coupled with a female, both theirs and the children of the friends of the mother, but eventually they drifted away and sought a new female to form a couple, usually after they were sure their children were going to survive to adulthood and be sufficiently cared for... exactly as their prehistoric ancestors behaved.

Sometimes it was amazing how much biology influenced the formation of the basic rules of behavior in rational societies and cultures. The Terrans, Faey, and Sha'i-ree were excellent examples of it, each based on the unique evolutionary traits those species exhibited. The Terrans evolved from social groups with established pair bonds to maximize the survival chances of their children, the Faey evolved around their telepathic abilities to form powerful pair bonds, and the Sha'i-ree had evolved around their communal "it takes a village" origins where males weren't sought out as permanent mates.

That wasn't to say that the Sha'i-ree were even more wild and slutty than the Faey...no, the Faey were still the queens of the hill when it came to being sex-crazed minxes. They didn't spend every waking moment seeking sexual pleasure, even though their society made the seeking of sexual pleasure for its own sake perfectly acceptable. Even more so than the Faey, their society and culture considered sexual activity a completely physical pursuit, done for fun, and there were no social stigmas attached to it

whatsoever. The fact was, Sha'i-ree of both genders were quite reserved when it came to their appetites, what Jason jokingly called the *been there done that* reaction. When people could have sex virtually any time they pleased, the allure of it slowly began to recede after the teenage hormones cooled down until they only sought it out when they were truly in the mood. With this, Jason had some personal experience, since he could *literally* have sex anytime he wanted, be it with his wife, his *amu*, or any of the girls on the strip...even with the guards if he got desperate. And despite that universal availability, he didn't have sex even half as much as he thought he would before he married Jyslin and moved to Karis. Just because it was there, it didn't mean that Jason was going to partake in it. The Sha'i-ree were the same way...just because it was there and there were no social consequences for engaging in sex with a perfect stranger, it didn't mean that they ran around thinking of *nothing* but sex. Quite the opposite was true. The difference between the Faey and the Sha'i-ree was, the Sha'i-ree saw absolutely nothing wrong with engaging in sexual activity on the spot when they *did* get in the mood, no matter where they were, where the Faey considered it rude to bother others as they had their fun.

This...caused some problems, particularly on Terra. The biggest problem was that like Faey, the Sha'i-ree saw Terrans as physically and sexually attractive, and thus considered them to be fair game in such matters. They had no qualms about pursuing Terrans, nor did they have qualms about pursuing Shio, Faey, or Farguut. The Sha'i-ree on Terra absolutely could not fathom that there were laws against carrying on in public and thought the Terrans were as socially deviant as the Terrans thought the Sha'i-ree were. And since they had no concept of the ideals of marriage, Sha'i-ree were well known to pursue married people whom they found attractive, particularly Sha'i-ree women. Since men were ephemeral additions to the household at best, there to be good friends, be helpful around the house, and give a girl a good time in bed, they couldn't conceive that women of other species would attach so much emotional importance to a man. The Sha'i-ree showed the same tendency as many other races to treat other races within the purview of their own culture, and in their case, since they had such different views from others, it could cause some issues. Particularly with angry wives of husbands who succumbed to the unique temptation of a Sha'i-ree woman.

“Hey, Sha’i-ree girls are *hot*, and they think Terrans are sexy,” Tim said shamelessly, grinning at him. “Even their tails are a turn-on, unlike the Farguut and their four eyes,” he said with a slight shiver. “Besides, it’s too much fuckin’ work to get a Farguut woman out of her clothes and get her legs spread. Sha’i-ree girls are *way* easier to talk into spreading their legs, since they’re already naked to begin with.”

“You are so hopeless,” Jason accused.

“Don’t hate me cause I’m sexy, Jayce,” he said with an outrageous grin, then he actually did a hair flip.

“Someday Symone is gonna pull your leash, and I wanna be there to see it,” Jason retorted.

“Boys, we are discussing something far more important than your hormones,” Zaa chided, which made both of them burst out laughing.

“Don’t hate us because we know how to have a good time, Denmother,” Tim told her.

Zaa ignored that comment. “If the Sha’i-ree do petition, it should cause the Vekk, the Udra, and the Irizaki to follow suit, since all three are between Jhri and Sha’i-ree territory. The Vekk are already close to doing so, and if either of the other two petition, so will the other. Their rivalry will all but demand it.”

“That’ll be fun, having the Vekk and Irizaki rulers at the same table,” Tim grunted.

“It might calm things down between them,” Jason said, a bit hopefully.

“If they do so, it would give the Confederation more than enough assets to easily handle the incoming Syndicate fleet. Fleet constructions projections added to the standing navies of all four of those empires would nearly give us a three to two deficit, which when coupled with our technological advantage would make it nearly an even fight from a numbers standpoint. It would shift the advantage to us since this is our home territory, as it were, where we have ample and plentiful bases of resupply and repair, where they are operating in purely hostile territory with no safe havens and no relief. And that would also put us on the right path for dealing with the colonization force from the Consortium, though we will

still need more allies and more ships to deal with them. They will be the more difficult foe because of the sheer numbers of ships and the civilians they bring.”

“We’re eventually going to have to decide what we’re going to do about those civilians,” Jason grunted sourly. “We can’t just annihilate them, but with ten fuckin’ *million* of them, all of them no doubt the best of their engineers and builders to prepare planets for more refugees who will be insanely loyal to the Consortium, well, we gotta make a decision.”

“I know,” Zaa nodded. “If things progress as we predict in Andromeda, this will just be the first of *many* refugee waves fleeing to our galaxy, as well as several invasion attempts from the Syndicate to both continue their war with the Consortium and attempt to conquer territory here. We have to decide where we stand on that issue, if we should allow them to remain or send them back...or send them to another galaxy.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and the Consortium will surrender on this side,” Tim said. “I think the Confederation would give them a little piece of uninhabited territory over here if they promised to stay in it.”

“You are too optimistic, Tim,” Zaa stated. “Their past penchant for utter ruthlessness and documented pattern of betrayal makes them completely untrustworthy. I doubt any of the original Confederation members who *fought* the Consortium would agree to any such deal.”

“Even suggesting it would put the Urumi on the warpath,” Jason noted. “They have some major issues with the Consortium, and they won’t stop until they feel that the matter of blood is settled. And if you think the Skaa and the Alliance will *ever* forgive them for what they did at Raxxad and Pathrana, you can think again. Zaa’s right. There can’t ever be real peace between the Confederation and the Consortium.”

“As much as I do not wish to be,” she said, leaning against something invisible and tapping her muzzle. She glanced to the side. “No, I left it in the bedroom,” she replied to whoever it was. “Denfather,” she said to them, looking back at Jason. “To give happier news, I guess I should tell you, cousin, that I have decided to breed,” she declared.

Miaari gasped. “Denmother! That is wonderful news! It has been too long since you graced us with cubs!”

“That is information you keep to yourself until I make a formal announcement,” she told Miaari firmly.

“And when will you be going through with it, Denmother?” Jason asked.

“Tomorrow night, so I will deliver in a few weeks,” she answered. “Despite what you think, Tim, we Kimdori do know how to, as you put it, ‘have fun’,” she said archly, giving him a steady look.

Tim laughed. “If you say so, Denmother,” he retorted playfully.

“I figured all the cubs running around would get to you eventually,” Jason teased.

“Yes, I set the blame firmly on Miaari,” she replied, giving her Handmaiden a frosty look. “Who shall be coming to the Hearth whenever I am in need of a cubsitter. That is one of her duties as a Handmaiden.”

“It would be my matchless honor, Denmother,” she said humbly.

“Just don’t steal her, Denmother. I kinda need her around here, much as it pains me to say it.”

Miaari stuck her long tongue out at him, which made him laugh.

“I will ensure she has more than enough time to keep you honest, cousin,” she replied playfully. “But I do need to go. I have many things to do today.”

“Yeah, I need to head home myself,” Jason nodded. “I’ll send you what we have on the Rakarri, and if they make a decision, I’ll send it on to you.”

“Alright. See you later, cousin. Miaari,” she said with a nod of her head, then her hologram vanished.

Tim winced when Miaari stepped up and smacked him in the back of the head. “Shame on you, speaking so to the Denmother!” she chastised. “Out of my office, you disrespectful little punk!”

Tim burst out laughing, then fled the office with both hands over the back of his head.

“If he wasn’t so good at his job, I’d fire him *so* fast,” Miaari complained to a laughing Jason.

“Now you know how I feel,” he grinned, then he too fled the office when Miaari raised her open palm in his direction.



# Chapter 13

*Maista, 11 Kiraa, 4402, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Thursday, 13 August 2015, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 11 Kiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

Yawning, Jason walked in circles around the nursery calming down his son Walter, who had woken up very cranky. Yana was on an exercise with the KMS, training mindstrikers while on a deployment to RG-118, and Jason and Jyslin were looking after Kyri and his infant son while she was off planet. Walter looked so much like Jason that it was almost like he'd been cloned, at least if Jason had Faey ears, but everything else was spot-on. Although he didn't have them anymore, the baby pictures of Jason from the family albums were almost exactly how Walter looked. The face, the eyes, the hair color, everything was the same, what Yana jokingly told him was him stamping his fatherhood all over his youngest son, with only Yana's Faey ears giving any hint that Walter was half Faey. Walter, or Walt as Yana called him, was a healthy four months old, and unlike his sister, he hadn't been born with his talent expressed. He'd been very sensitive when he was just born, like Rann had been, but it had faded after about a week, which hinted that Walt would have very strong ability...just not as strong as Kyri's. Walt was a very easy-going, mellow baby most of the time, watched everything with his lucid green eyes, acting much like Danelle had when she was that age. Something told Jason that Yana was almost glad that Walt wasn't as unique as Kyri was, that he was a normal, happy, healthy baby boy. He was certainly easier to raise in some ways due to the lack of attention, but since he wasn't expressed, it was harder for her because he couldn't just tell her what he wanted the way Kyri could at that age. Sure, she could listen in on his surface thoughts, but the primitive instinctual

motivations of an infant sometimes weren't easy for an adult to decipher. Jyslin was actually fairly good at it, but not all women were quite as adept as Jyslin. But as Walter started to develop rational thought, it would be easier and easier for Yana to tell what was bothering him when he was fussy.

While he soothed his cranky son, his mind was on business. Having finished her 40-day initial observation period nearly two weeks ago, Cyra had been slowly and carefully taking over Cybi's workload over the last ten days. The two of them couldn't just flip a switch due to the interconnected way many of the planet's operations worked. The two of them had been moving them over block by block, section by section, Cyra taking over responsibility with her beefier external support equipment in her facility and disentangling Cybi from the entire planet's operation. Cybi was glad to be rid of the responsibility, truth be told, because that was never what she was meant to do. They had finished that process last night, as Cybi transferred over the final block of processes to Cyra, and Cyra had officially become the CBIM running the planet...at least until they built new CBIMs to take over the other continents, leaving Cyra to run the Kargan continent. The transition hadn't been entirely bug-free, and Siyhara and Myleena had had to all but ride jockey over both CivNet and the biogenic network to keep things tied together until Cyra could establish firm control over all processes and get things back to their normal seamless, smooth operation.

And that meant that by tonight, Cybi's core would be in its new home across the campus from the White House, in a dedicated CBIM facility built just for her.

The facility they built for her core was *big*. It was housed in a very, very large building that contained even more external equipment than Cyra's did, but Cybi's new external equipment stacks weren't for running the planet, they were for protecting the planet from invasion or attack. Operational process stacks were replaced by biogenic amplifier stacks, and there were ten cascaded hardcore biogenic generators and an amplifier system in the building that Cybi could use directly to defend Karis. Cybi did still have quite a bit of processing equipment, just in case she had to take over operation of the planet from Cyra if she went down, which she would also use in her secondary role as primary science and military CBIM. Cybi's new role encompassed three tasks: serve as the personal CBIM to the Grand

Duke or Duchess and the executive department, serve as the primary CBIM in service to the KMS and the KES, and serve as the primary CBIM in service to the Department of Science and Technology. Cybi would, in a way, be taking over the role of the CBIM that had been at the original Academy, because she was the CBIM that would be serving all the research labs, 3D, and Myleena's other think tanks and scientific endeavors. Cybi was uniquely suited for that task, because unlike Cyra, Cybi thought creatively and had imagination, indications of how much she had evolved from the day her core had come online. Cyra would eventually start to demonstrate creativity and imagination, but it would take time as she grew and learned.

Moving Cybi's core would be *easy*. They'd already rigged her modular core chamber for the move with biogenic transceivers and five different broadcast power receiver modules, and it would be as simple as picking up her core with the frigate KMS *Jivanne* using an external grapple harness assembly attached to its belly, flying it to Karsa, then setting it down in the cradle built for that core chamber at the new facility. It was built to the exact same specifications as the cradle holding her core chamber in Kosiningi, so it would take about an hour to move the core, then about ten hours to reconnect the hardlines in the new facility in Karsa and shift her core back onto hardlines. They were using a frigate because it had a power plant strong enough to power Cybi via an emergency power cable if she lost broadcast power and still fly. Cybi would then download all her unique requirements into the external support equipment, and then she'd just settle into her new, much less stressful job as a military and science computer.

Her core was already running by remote, as a test of the viability of it before her core was actually removed from its facility. After Cyra finished taking over all operational processes, Siyhaa and Myleena had gone in and severed all the hardlines to Cybi's core chamber as Red Horn removed most of the Disaster Recovery Center to give the frigate access to the modular core chamber. They'd finished about an hour ago, so for the last hour, Cybi had been operating purely on remote communal links and broadcast power as they waited for Red Horn to finish getting the core exposed for transport. Red Horn would rebuild the center and do quite a few upgrades on it as they did so, but they would change the building to make the next core easily accessible. If they needed to remove the new CBIM core they'd install in

the building, they'd have Red come in and remove a series of bulkheads and blast doors, and deactivate hard shields to get at the core module, a process that would only take a few hours. There would be nothing but empty space over the core chamber except security doors and hard shields, to make it even faster and easier to remove the core. Red Horn would more or less be rebuilding the Disaster Recovery Center around an "elevator shaft" from the roof to the core with installed security measures on each floor to make it hard for *someone else* to come along and try to rip out the core module using said access shaft. They would build a new modular core chamber on the cradle holding Cybi, and when the new CBIM core was ready, they'd take it in and install it through the service corridor.

Cyra's facility was designed for her core module to be removable, but not from above. It was built to be removable *laterally*, from the side along a long access tunnel with some pretty heavy-duty blast doors and hard shields to protect the core chamber, which made it easier to defend but harder to remove themselves. Cybi's new facility would have the same design, but her old facility made that impossible because the core chamber was in the basement, underground. Unless they excavated to create a lateral tunnel to the core chamber, getting at it from above was the only real option. Not even a spatial tunnel system like they'd used at Cheyenne Mountain would really work because of the fact that the core chamber wasn't really designed to be self-mobile in a lateral direction. Red Horn had decided that the best way to do it was to rebuild the Disaster Recovery Center to give them access to the core from the roof.

So, Cyra was now running Karis, and Jason hadn't noticed any problems so far. Everything was running exactly the way it was supposed to, Kosigi was purring, and Cyra was only running at 38% capacity if she did no other work but keeping the planet running...but that number was realistically more like 49% since she did do a whole lot of other things. That was how she was different from Cybi, who had been running at 66% capacity running the planet with activity spikes up to 90% when the shit really hit the fan, since her external equipment on Kosiningi hadn't been designed to run an entire planet full of people all doing stuff that required her attention. Cyra had been built with an eye on the future, when Karis was supporting 5 to 6 billion inhabitants and all five habitable continents were fully populated. At those projections, Cyra would only be running Karga,

and she'd be at 31% capacity. Cybi was running at 3% capacity at the moment, mainly doing processes for the KMS and the Science Department and running completely by remote with biogenic communal links to her external equipment and broadcast power keeping her core running.

Cybi was with him at the moment, standing—hovering actually—to the side as Walt calmed down. Her hologram was rock solid, and her communal thought didn't seem unusual. *[They should be done in about a half an hour,]* Cybi informed him. *[They're opening the final floor between my core and the outside now. I estimate they'll have my core moving by 9:00. Are you coming to Kosiningi?]*

*[Of course I'm coming to Kosiningi,]* he replied. *[I trust Myli and Siyhaa to do it right, but I'm not going to be there for them. I'm gonna be there for you.]*

*[Ever thoughtful,]* she smiled.

*[What's it like running by remote?]*

*[Laggy,]* she replied. *[There's a delay in my dataflow that I find most irritating, and I'm restricted to a third of my usual bandwidth of dataflow, choking all my data down to a narrow pipe. Outside of that, I'm operating under more or less nominal conditions. If I had real work to do, I'd find it nearly intolerable.]*

Jason chuckled. *[That's why we waited until Cyra was running things,]* he replied.

Cybi drifted up and looked down at Walter with a gentle smile. *[He looks so much like you,]* she observed.

*[I know. I get the feeling that Yana wasn't going to be happy 'til she got a mini-me, so I'm glad she got what she wanted on her second try,]* he replied, which made Cybi laugh softly. *[You ready for your cushy new job of indolence and freeloading?]*

Cybi swatted him gently on the shoulder. *[That is your doing,]* she accused. *[I could easily do some of the work, but you put everything on Cyra. I will have almost nothing to do.]*

*[After 1,300 years alone on the planet followed up by two years of nearly being overworked, you deserve to have your workload reduced,]* he

answered. *[Besides, you may not be doing as much as before, but what you will be doing is far, far more important. You'll be the last line of defense for Karis, Cybi, and we're gonna make sure you're well-armed if it comes down to it. And when you're not being Supergirl, you'll be helping Myri run the KMS, the twins run the KES, and riding shotgun over my office and the science department. Trust me, having all your processing power more or less at her beck and call is almost making Myli's panties wet.]*

*[So, I'm management now,]* Cybi noted lightly.

*[Middle management,]* Jason replied with a sly smile. *[You don't rate a key to the executive bathroom quite yet. But there's potential there.]*

*[Is that so?]* she asked archly as Cyra manifested her hologram in the nursery.

*[Morning, Cyra,]* Jason nodded to her. *[What's up?]*

*[Nothing of great importance, Jason. I thought you might want to get an early jump on your day, before you go to Kosiningi.]*

*[I never go looking for work this early in the morning, Cyra,]* Jason grinned as Walter closed his eyes. *[Sec.] Ayama, is Jys taking the babies to work today or are you watching them?*

*I'm watching them this morning, she'll be taking them to work after lunch,* she answered. *Speaking of Jyslin, you should wake her up.*

*I'm already up,* Jyslin called. *I'm about to get in the shower.*

*Breakfast will be on the table when you come down,* Ayama promised. *I'll be up in a moment to help you bring the twins and Wally down, Jason.*

*Don't call him Wally, that's almost undignified,* he said as Amber padded sleepily into the nursery, which meant that Rann and Shya were up. Amber was doing her morning rounds to check on the twins. "Morning, mother hen," Jason said lightly, reaching down and picking the tiny vulpar up in his free hand. "See, this isn't the girls, this is Walt. The girls are in their cribs. Satisfied?"

The vulpar licked Walt's face, making him smile, then Jason set her in Bethany's crib. *[I should relate that the compatibility tests are complete,*

*Jason,] Cyra related. [The last five were conducted yesterday evening. The only adult Generation not tested was Saelle, because she is off planet.]*

*[And?]*

*[Jezzi shows the greatest compatibility with me,] she answered. [Jenn comes a very close second. I could easily merge with either of them and get optimal results, but my merge with Jezzi is slightly stronger. Sadly, I must inform you that you ranked 138<sup>th</sup> in the compatibility tests.]*

Jason laughed. *[That's actually a relief. I already get enough grief from this one, I didn't need to be shackled to a second CBIM,] he replied, pointing at Cybi. [That means we'll have to pull Jezzi out of her job over at KFM for a couple of weeks and give her some additional combat training. She knows how to merge to a tactical fairly well but merging to a CBIM is an entirely different animal.]*

*[I'll schedule some training sessions,] Cyra told him. [I will also schedule the sessions for Jenn, since he's also compatible. We'll begin them this afternoon, after Cybi's core is installed in its new building.]*

*[Sounds good, take care of it, Cyra,] he nodded as Ayama stepped quietly into the room. She walked straight over and picked Siyae up from her crib, then set her in a hoverstroller for the trip downstairs. Thanks, Ayama, he sent as she put Bethany in the other seat.*

*Want me to take Wally too?*

*Walt, he corrected immediately, which made the corner of her mouth twitch. She was calling him that on purpose just to tweak his nose, Jason realized. And I'll carry him down myself, thank you very much. You don't deserve to carry him.*

*So you say until you go to work, she replied lazily as she started pushing the floating stroller out the door.*

*[Bitch, I am so gonna get her one of these days,] he communed in a surly mindset as he watched her saunter out.*

*[You've been saying that since the tanning bed incident, Jason,] Cybi noted slyly.*

*[That's the problem, she hasn't done anything since then big enough for me to justify spanking her. She's very clever about being just annoying enough to bother me but not so annoying I retaliate.]*

*[You did hire her because she's smart,]* Cybi smiled.

*[Too smart,]* he complained, which made both CBIMs chuckle.  
*[Anyway, Walt's ready for some activity, so let's get this day going.]*

After breakfast, Jason headed out to Kosiningi as Jyslin headed for the Paladins front office. Most of the 3D crew was already there along with Siyhaa and her Moridon team, and Myleena was sitting on a large hoverplatform talking to Siyhaa, which put her head around Siyhaa's robed thigh. The frigate assigned the task was actually on the ground, sitting on its landing skids in the open area in front of the building; the frigates were the only KMS line vessels in the inventory capable of making a ground landing. Destroyers and cruisers could make a water landing, but the frigates could land on land or in water, further increasing their versatility. "About time, Jayce," Myleena chided as he approached. "We've been ready to go for almost half an hour."

"I know, Cybi's been keeping me up to date. She's about ready to be moved, she finds running by remote to be annoying. The *Jivanne* ready?"

"Yup, it's just waiting for orders," she answered.

"Then let's get this batchi match going," he declared.

The frigate took off as Jason went inside and locked himself down within the core chamber, in the same chair he used when he merged to Cybi, but he didn't do that this time because if Cybi somehow lost power while Jason was merged to her, nobody was entirely sure what would happen. Most of the crew were aboard the frigate, and Myleena was out on the roof of the modular core chamber directing the frigate's grapples to get them in place and annealed. *[Here we go,]* Jason communed as he heard the first of the four grapple lines hit the roof. *[You nervous?]*

*[A little, but that's because this is something I've never done before. At my age, new is bad,]* Cybi replied, which made him laugh despite himself. *[I've been running on remote uplinks and broadcast power for nearly two hours, so that part of this does not worry me too much.]*



*[As long as you don't lose power to your core, we can live with you losing remote uplinks,] Jason grunted. [That's why we're using the frigate, when we could have easily used a KC-190 cargo dropship to do this. Myleena's attaching an external power cable so you can draw power right off the frigate's power plant in case your broadcast power goes down.]*

*[I'm not complaining. Redundancy will ensure I get to my new home in one piece.]*

*[Amen.]*

About half an hour later, the core chamber shuddered as the *Jivanne* picked it up, very slowly and very carefully lifting the cylindrical core chamber out of the building, hologram feeds from multiple cameras showing around Jason's chair as he kept close watch on everything. Makati engineers directed the frigate's pilot as they lifted it and retracted the grapple cables simultaneously, and once the core chamber was clear, the engineers and Myleena cleared off and let the frigate pull the core chamber up against its carrying array. The entire core shuddered a bit when they made contact with the carrying array, and Jason saw the Makati and Myleena anneal the carrying prongs directly to the housing to make absolutely sure that the core chamber could not possibly be dropped. Jason brought up a series of graphs that showed Cybi's data transfer rates and broadcast power levels, and they remained stable and steady as the frigate turned towards Karsa and started a 41 minute cruise, moving slowly and steadily so movement between broadcast power transmission fields too quickly didn't cause power spikes or dips for Cybi's core, an effect Myleena called a crossfield spike and was caused by the fact that they were using more than one broadcast power antenna for this operation. If they only had one antenna, then there would be no chance of a crossfield spike. Myleena had set a speed limit of 817 kathra an hour for the trip to remove the risk of a crossfield power spike, which would make the trip to Karsa take about 40 minutes.

Those 40 minutes passed both quickly and slowly for Jason. Every minute seemed to crawl by as he watched Cybi's feeds like a hawk, but they melded together to the point where he was honestly surprised when the Karsa skyline came into view on his forward view hologram. *[Ten more*

*minutes, guys,] Myleena called from outside. [I see everything's running fine in there.]*

*[We're just fine, Myli,] Jason answered.*

*[We should have your core seated in about an hour, Cybi. You doing okay?]*

*[I'm fine, Myleena,] she assured him. [I'm starting to experience some cascading data decay, but we were expecting this.]*

*[Yup, cause you've been running on remote commune uplinks for so long,] she affirmed. [We've got a good 17 hours to get your hardlines reconnected before you start experiencing cascade corruption, and that's more than enough time. Getting your primary hardline trunks installed is first priority, even over the power feeds. You're doing just fine on broadcast power.]*

*[It's been completely stable,] Cybi agreed.*

Jason felt the core chamber start to slow as they moved over the city, quite a few Karsa PD hovercar units and Wolf fighters surrounding the frigate to keep civilian traffic out of its way, then they came to a stop over Cybi's new large, extravagant, expensive facility. The Makati and Myleena unannealed the prongs from the core chamber, then the whole thing jolted a bit as the frigate started lowering it towards a large industrial hoverplatform, which would pull Cybi's core chamber inside and into place on the cradle, preserving her core's ability to withdraw into the mantle. They'd built an even more rugged bunker for Cybi's new facility, even deeper in the mantle and encased in a compressed Neutronium carapace with its own internal power plant for additional protection. To get at *that* bunker, an enemy would have to virtually blow up the planet.

With a thud, the core chamber came down on the platform. Siyhaa's Moridon and Myleena's 3D techs boiled out of the following skimmers, anchoring the chamber to the platform as the massive access doors on the rear of the facility opened, revealing an access corridor that was just big enough for the core. "We're seated and ready to tractor it in," Tom called, his voice coming over the external speakers as he pointed towards the facility. "Bo, get your team in there and get ready to get the core off the carry-all. We're connecting the dataline trunks first, so get it ready to go.

Jenny, that's your team's responsibility. I want the primary trunk ready to be connected before we have the anchors annealed."

"You got it, boss," Jenny called.

"Mahja Siyhaha, I'd like your team to monitor dataflow throughput while we connect the dataline trunks and keep things nominal."

"Easily done," she nodded in reply. "Cizarak, your group has responsibility. My group will be assisting with the trunk installation."

"Yes, Mahja Siyhaha," the male Moridon replied with a sharp nod, his horns bobbing with the movement of his head.

*[I'm getting replies from the external core equipment, I'm already downloading my personal operational parameters into them,]* Cybi relayed to Jason. *[They're close enough for me to commune without need of the transceiver. They should be ready for initialization by the time I'm physically connected.]*

"Cybi's downloading her data into the external stacks by direct communion," Jason called aloud. "So you know why things in there are turning on before you get to them."

"Yeah, that's good to know," Bo chuckled as he and six other 3D techs hurried into the facility.

Although completely installing Cybi's core would take about ten hours, the most important parts of it was getting the core on its cradle, anchored down, the dataline trunks and power cables reconnected, and the cradle assembly seated on the elevator brackets and the evacuation shaft unsealed and tested so the core was capable of withdrawing into the bunker in the mantle. That would take about five hours to complete. Everything else was mainly Cybi personalizing the external support equipment to her specifications, since she had her core chamber external systems like her I/O tree with her in her core chamber, but all that new equipment out in the rest of the facility she had to initialize and then set up the way she wanted it. She'd be functionally operational in three hours, they'd have the vast majority of the physical work done in five hours, but she'd be optimized for ideal performance in ten. Once they had all the physical connections finished and the cradle assembly was fully operational, they'd withdraw the core into its bunker in the mantle to make sure everything worked, then

most of them would pull out to allow Cybi to finish setting up her new external systems to her liking.

Jason didn't just supervise, he was right down there with Myleena and the rest of the installation team as they connected Cybi to her new facility. The great height of the Moridon also lent them great strength, and that strength came in very handy as they hauled bulky double-metaphased power conduits and dataline bundle cables around. They also helped with the physical manhandling as they pulled the core chamber off the carry-all using hoverpods, moved it out of the way, and carefully set it down in its new cradle, Myleena using a micrometer to make sure it was *exactly* where it had to be. Once she was set properly, one of Siyhaa's teams annealed her into place as Siyhaa and Myleena started connecting the first and most important dataline trunks, the main I/O tree dataline trunk. The two of them carefully annealed the 250 individual datalines in the trunk to their receiving sockets, one by one, but they both moved with a speed that displayed their vast experience in such matters. They'd both been annealing datalines for years, so they moved through the entire trunk in about an hour. After they finished the most important connections, Jenny and her team started with the other trunks, 15 trunks in all connected to various parts of the top and bottom of the core chamber. Bo's team started on the power connections as they finished up the trunks, while Tom's team started preparing the core chamber for its test evacuation.

Two hours later, they had the final connection made as Siyhaa annealed the casing of the last power cable. "Alright, your Grace, we're ready to switch over to hardline power," Siyhaa called from the top of the core chamber, looking down through a maintenance hatch. "Cizarak, begin initializing the power management system to switch us to primary power," she called.

"Yes, Mahja," he shouted from the power management console.

"Cybi, we are prepared. Are you prepared?" Siyhaa called from above.

*"The phase match filters are in place and ready,"* she answered.

"Alright, let's do it," Myleena called. "Cizarak, bring up the primary power in five percent increments, and make sure it's phase matched to broadcast power feeds. At twenty percent, start decreasing broadcast power

by the same five percent increments. I'll start taking down the internal broadcast power nodes as they come unloaded."

"Yes, Duchess. I am prepared," the Moridon called.

"Alright, let's do it."

It took about twenty minutes and went flawlessly. They slowly switched Cybi back to primary hardline power 5% at a time, and as each broadcast power node was removed from supplying power, Myleena took it down and off the network. Once the last broadcast node was offline and Cybi was running on her own internal singularity plants, they then tested the very expensive power management system that would allow Cybi to run off planetary power but switch to one of three independent internal singularity plants if planetary power went offline. If by some miracle all three of her plants failed, she had her own broadcast power receiving station to run off the planetary broadcast power grid. If that also went down, there were two more independent singularity plants in the emergency bunker that could supply power to Cybi when she was on the surface. If even *those* failed, she had another set of broadcast power receivers in the receiving station running on a tightbeam carrier from Kosigi, along with three relay satellites that orbited in a way so that at least two satellites or a satellite and Kosigi were aligned with Karsa to supply power to Cybi at all times. With eight independent power systems to supply power, the chances that she would lose power were remote at best.

Once she was on planetary power, they only had one more task to perform. Everyone gathered in her core chamber, and Myleena conducted a test of the evacuation system. She watched several free-floating holograms like a hawk as the cradle anchors disengaged, then the entire core chamber began to descend the 10 kathra down the shaft and into the upper mantle of the planet. The entire thing was built of Neutronium and kept cool using hyper-endothermic materials, with blast doors every kathra and force screens every 500 shakra, each of which activated as the core chamber passed. Every door and shield activated exactly as it should, and once they reached the bunker, the super-heavy blast doors closed over them and the bunker systems went into active mode, putting Cybi on her emergency systems. Cybi initialized those as they were in the bunker, and after about

an hour to make sure everything was working properly, they raised the core chamber back into the facility above.

And with that test complete, their part of the job was done. Cybi had all her hardware connected to her new facility, and the rest of it was Cybi getting all her new external support equipment just the way she liked it.

*“I believe we are done, friends. The only thing left to do is to configure my new systems, with which I fear to say you cannot really help.”*

“Not a problem, Cybi, I’m hungry anyway,” Bo said with a grin.

Myleena slapped Bo in the back of his head.

“Let’s gather up our tools and clean up after ourselves, then steal a swim in Cybi’s pool while she’s busy.”

Jason laughed when Cybi drifted over and smacked Myleena lightly on the back of the head.

With that, Jason left Cybi’s new home, walked across the campus, and entered the White House. He had to do the major paperwork of the day before going home, which meant he’d be super-busy tomorrow catching up on everything he blew off to install Cybi in her new facility. Cyra’s golden hologram was waiting for him in his office when he entered. *“Good afternoon, Jason. I take it Cybi’s installation went well?”*

*[Of course it did, and like you didn’t know.]*

*[I am practicing my smalltalk. Was it suitably small?]*

He had to laugh. *[Small enough,]* he replied lightly as he flopped down in his chair. *[I’m actually tired. I think I need to get more exercise. What’s going on?]*

*[Nothing of tremendous importance,]* she answered. *[However, you told me to alert you personally whenever the Parri extended an invitation for you to visit their village. They have done so,]* she declared. *[They made the request through the biogenic interface we keep there, that garners my attention. I am not sure how important you rate this event—]*

*[I rate it highly important, important enough to drop everything and go right now,]* he answered. *Dera, we’re going to the Parri village,* he called through his office door.

*I'll prepare your skimmer for departure, she affirmed.*

*[Did they make any specific requests? Anyone that needs to go as well? Any special materials?]*

*[No, Jason. They asked only that you come to their village at your leisure. They didn't seem very serious about it.]*

*[They never do, but the Parri never do anything without a reason. It's just usually a reason we don't understand at the time.]*

*[How so?]*

*[Review Cybi's archives about the Parri. They're mystics, Cyra, they live in their own little world that rarely seems to intersect with the world we live in, but there are many mysteries they conceal. I don't understand how they do what they do, but I trust them.]*

*[I believe I understand your expression,] she said, tapping her index fingers together. [You mean to say that they have a radically different culture that makes little sense to logical science.]*

*[More or less,] he said as he headed for the door. He opened it and poked his head out. "Chirk, I'm going to the Parri village. Just move everything to tomorrow, I won't be coming back. Tell Brall I'll meet with him in the morning instead."*

*"I will rearrange your schedule, revered Hive-leader," she answered. "Then I will be finishing my duties in the office for the day. I have several conferences to attend on Kirga about office efficiency techniques. Jr'thk will be assuming my duties."* Usually, Chirk would be going home after her 18-20 hours at the office, but the office was never empty. She had other Kizzik that worked the nightshift in the office that were pulled from the larger executive office down the hall that handled the less important paperwork, but any time Jason came to the office, day or night, Chirk came back to be there to keep her immaculately organized office at peak efficiency, an efficiency that Jason often disrupted with his unpredictable ways. Jason didn't entirely like the hours Chirk worked, but she was a Kizzik. Kizzik had few leisure activities as he would define them, and if she wasn't working or eating, most likely she was sleeping...what little she slept. Kizzik only had to sleep about two hours a day, their natural circadian rhythm ran around 27 hours which was very close to Karis' day, and they

were capable of extended periods where they got little or no sleep. To a Kizzik, work was life and life was work, and that attitude didn't only extend to their drones.

Dera and Ryn boarded with him as he got in his skimmer, then they flew to the northwest corner of the continent. Gigantic, golden-leafed *oye* trees were the first thing they saw as they came over the scrub-grown hills, one of the most extensively terraformed parts of Karsa with the least amount of population, and Jason expertly threaded his skimmer through a gap in the canopy and landed on the outskirts of the sun-dappled village. The Parri *shaman* and only one of her apprentices, the female, ambled out on all fours to meet him as the hatch opened and the stairs lowered. She rose up on her legs and patted him on the shoulder, a smile on her muzzled face. "It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne," she told him in her rich voice.

"Either one of your apprentices graduated, or you're keeping him busy," he said as he patted the top of her paw-like hand.

"He has learned the ten lessons of the *shaman* and no longer requires my guidance," she replied with a proud look. "He has been assigned to begin his advanced training, where the trees themselves teach him what is needful. He will spend many moons listening to the trees, learning from them, and often re-learning what he had once learned before if the trees succeed in tricking him."

"What do you mean?"

"The trees may guide us, but they often deceive us intentionally," she replied, motioning towards the village before dropping back to all fours. "It is the responsibility of the listener to discern truth of deception, even in the words of one whom they trust."

"Why would they do that?"

"To test us," she answered immediately. "A wise *shaman* knows when to listen to her own heart over the words of another. As a *shaman* grows into her *jaingi*, she can no longer be tricked by the trees."

"Ah. So, why did you call me, *shaman*?"

"Let us share tea together first, Jason Karinne," she replied calmly as the female apprentice followed behind them.



They sat around the communal firepit and enjoyed a large cup of *oye-bark* tea, engaging in the Parri custom of talking of nothing in particular, which was custom for them. Jason had to wait for her to get to business, in her own time, which didn't work for her the same way it did Jason. She rarely if ever showed any sign of being in a hurry, even when what she was doing was important, he'd noticed. Eventually, however, she finally got around to the reason she'd asked him to come, bidding him to stand up and walking with him away from the village, leaving Dera and Ryn at the village. And as usual, she began with a question that baked his brain.

"What is hatred, Jason Karinne?"

That almost brought him to a stop. It was easy to identify, but it was hard to *explain*, he realized. He struggled with a way to put the emotion into words, then gave a rueful chuckle. "It's one of those things that you know when you feel, but have trouble explaining to someone else," he admitted.

She glanced over and up at him; when she walked on all fours the way she did, her head came up to his lower chest. "Hatred is the most extreme example of the consequences of having no love in your heart," she replied. "In its way, it is the opposite of love, but in reality, it is not. The true opposite of love is the absence of emotion. At least with emotions like anger and hatred, there is a response. The absence of emotion, the disassociation of the self with others, that is the true antithesis of most that we hold dear. What does hatred mean to you, Jason Karinne?"

"How do you mean?"

"Is it a good thing, or is it a bad thing?"

"I'd almost say that's a silly question," he replied. "Hatred isn't a good thing."

"Even when it serves your purposes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did hatred not incite the peoples of your allies in their struggle against the loveless ones?" she asked pointedly. "From what I heard, they did great evil against your friends. Is there ever a time when hatred should be nourished?"

“I don’t think so,” he replied immediately. “You can’t change how others feel, and while it may be useful to you, you don’t want to fan the flames. There’s no telling when that hatred may turn on *you*.”

She glanced over at him and gave a single nod. “You understand a very important truth, Jason Karinne.”

“I’m almost wondering why you keep asking me these questions, *shaman*,” he said. “First you ask about fear, now hate. I’m almost feeling like you’re secretly a Jedi.”

“What is this Jedi?”

He chuckled. “Never mind, it’s something of a Terran inside joke,” he answered.

“Understanding negative emotions is the first step to preventing them from causing you grief, Jason Karinne. The first step to controlling a thing is to understand the nature of the thing. You control many forms of energy and can shape metal, even space itself, because you understand its nature. You achieve great feats of technological prowess by understanding the nature of the way the universe works in great detail, at least the parts that you can see,” she noted lightly. “You even make inroads into the parts of the universe you cannot see because you understand the nature of those places. There is a very real danger of losing yourself and seeing your friends lose themselves to hatred when engaged in war, Jason Karinne. You should guard against allowing hatred to cloud your good judgment.”

“That’s good advice no matter what the reason,” he noted.

She came to a stop and reared up on her hind legs, coming to a vertical base. “It is something that you should keep in mind as events unfold, Jason Karinne. Making your decisions based on the hatred you have built in your heart for the loveless ones will poison your future.”

Jason gave her a sober look. She had *never* been so direct, and for that reason, he took her words seriously. “So, you’re saying that I should think carefully about what we do when the loveless ones return with their civilians.”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not for four years.”

“What is time, Jason Karinne? Is a warning less heedful because it was delivered early or does the early nature of the warning give you more time to heed it?” she asked calmly, though there was amusement in her eyes. “Time is what you make it, Jason Karinne. It is not as set as your kind believe.”

“I know that.”

“Truly? Do you truly know the nature of time, Jason Karinne?” she challenged with a slight smile. “Would it surprise you to find that everything you believe about time is wrong?”

He laughed. “I know what science says about time,” he replied. “Which I think you would find boring.”

“Knowledge is never boring, Jason Karinne. So, tell me, what *is* time? What is the nature of it?”

That drew him up short. Again, though he knew what time was, he found it difficult to quantify it in rational terms he could express to another. “It’s...” he trailed off, scratching his chin. “It’s a sequence of events that flows like a river,” he finally said. “Time is in motion, it moves at a speed determined by the speed of space, and it’s not set. Time can flow faster or slower depending on the velocity of the space that matter occupies.”

“A very scientific explanation,” she said in a manner that sounded just slightly patronizing. “Time, Jason Karinne, is your perception of the universe. As you change your perception, you find that your perception can alter time. Does time not move faster when you aren’t concerned about it, yet it seems to crawl when you pay most keen attention?”

“But that’s just the way the mind works,” he protested.

“Is it?” she asked. “Does your perception of time mean that your perception cannot change the nature of time? Is the time it takes for an *oye* fruit to fall from the branch to the ground any faster or slower if your perception of it changes as it falls?”

“You’re talking about how we perceive time, not what time is.”

“All things are exactly what you perceive them to be, Jason Karinne,” she said immediately and forcefully. “That is the tenth lesson, and when you learn that truth, I think you will be a fine *shaman*.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” he protested.

“It makes perfect sense to the eye that sees what is without preconceptions clouding its vision,” she told him. “The world is not as set in stone as you believe that it is, Jason Karinne. You yourself prove that. Do your psychic abilities not defy the rational science upon which your perception of the world is based?”

That made him blink. That was actually correct, science had no rational explanation for why psionic powers such as telepathy and telekinesis seemed to ignore the fundamental nature of time and space. Telepathy was not constrained by time. Telepathy was capable of communicating in real time across any distance, even from one galaxy to another if one of the telepaths was strong enough to reach that far. The physical energy behind telekinesis was also undefined by rational science. It was a form of physical energy that could affect matter and space, but the energy itself was virtually undetectable, unstoppable, and ignored time the same way telepathy did. But telekinesis did obey some physical laws. A telekinetic lifting an object had a portion of that object’s weight exerted against his body, and a telekinetic pushing against something with his power was himself pushed back if he did not brace himself, examples of Newton’s third law of equal and opposite reaction. But telekinetic power itself seemed to exist in a manner that made rational science tear out its hair trying to explain it. Psychologists simply said it *existed*, and that the exact mechanics of it were a mystery.

“There is more to the world than what you can see, Jason Karinne,” she told him, putting that huge hand-paw of hers on his shoulder. “I have told you that before, as I recall. But that is not the matter that bade me call you. Look there.”

She pointed at one of the towering *oye* trees in front of them, a monster of a tree that was as tall as some of the skyscrapers in New York City back on Terra, and whose thin canopy of golden leaves shaded entire acres. “It’s the biggest of the *oye* trees, I think,” he said, looking up its titanic trunk. He then gasped. “It’s got fruit!”

“Yes, the first of the trees to fruit. You are to collect them, Jason Karinne, and hand them out on the streets of your city to all who wish them. The bounty of this harvest will be yours to deliver, but they will be given

without expectation of anything in return. It will be your hand that harvests them, and your hand that provides them.”

“You want me to go all the way up there?” he protested, looking up.

“Do you fear heights, Jason Karinne?” she asked lightly.

“Not really, but I’m definitely going to need some equipment for this,” he chuckled. “I don’t have your claws, *shaman*. I wouldn’t even be able to get up there without a hoverplatform, or maybe my armor.”

“So long as it is your unclad hand that picks them from the tree,” she said easily.

“Just mine, or can I have help?”

“Just yours,” she replied.

“No sweat, *shaman*,” he said easily, shielding his eyes from the sun as he looked up. “I can pick the entire tree, so long as I have help moving the fruit once I pick it.”

“That is perfectly fine.”

*Dera*, he called. *Ryn*.

*What is it, Jason?*

*I need at least half of my armor, enough so I can use the engines in it and control myself. Oh, and you’ll need yours on as well.*

*What are we going to do?*

*Farm work*, he answered. *One of the oye trees has produced fruit, and the shaman is sending me on one of her little errands. We can have all the fruit we can pick, but I have to pick the fruit myself, no one can help me. Once I get it off the tree, anyone can handle it, and after we pick all the fruit, we’re taking it back to Karsa and handing it out on a street corner. So congratulations, ladies, you just became fruit haulers. I’m going to call back to Karsa for a dropship with lots of baskets, and maybe a few extra helpers.*

*Oye fruit? Can we keep some?* Ryn asked hopefully.

*Yes, but no hoarding an entire Stick’s cargo unit full of them,* he replied.

*Why in Trelle's silky hair are we handing them out on a street corner?*  
Dera protested.

*Because the shaman told me to. Besides, this is the first fruit produced on Karis, and I think it's only fair that it's given out for free.*

*Alright. We should have your armor ready by the time you get back to the skimmer.*

By the time he had his armor mostly on, only missing the arm greaves and gauntlets, a KC-70 landed beside his skimmer, one of the smaller cargo dropships. They must have screamed over here at top speed to get here so fast. Inside were nearly half of the Ducal Guard, and they were all carrying large baskets, as Aya and Hara pulled out two large hoverplatforms from the cargo doors. Jason had to laugh at that scene, as much as the look of eagerness on a few faces. Getting oye fruit right off the tree was almost impossible for most Faey, since the trees only grew on Imbria and Karis, and there had long been rumors about how heavenly the fruit tasted when it was fresh off the tree. *Alright ladies, the Parri are letting us take all the fruit that I can personally pick off the tree, Jason told them as he approached. Nobody else can pick any fruit, is that clear? We only get what I can pick myself.* They all nodded in acknowledgement as they got ready. *Two girls stay close to me and hold the baskets, I'll pick and drop into the baskets, and you girls bring the baskets down to the dropship. And at least try not to eat all the fruit on the way down,* he added, which got him a few grins in return. *The shaman asked me to hand out the fruit to the citizens, and I think it's a pretty nice thing to do. These are the first oye fruits grown on Karis, and I think it's a nice gesture that we hand them out for free to anyone who wants them. But I also think it's fair that everyone who helps gets to take some of the fruit home with her. Just not a whole bushel basket full,* he warned. *How many you get to keep depends entirely on how many we manage to pick.*

*Then we'd better pick the tree clean, Jason,* Aya declared as she started up the hoverplatform and lifted it into the air.

*I think we can do it, but it's gonna take a while. That's a whole lot of fruit. Maybe five thousand.*

*We have all day,* Hara declared with a smile.

It took nearly all day, but Jason did manage to pick the entire tree clean. They quickly had a nearly assembly-line style system going, where Jason picked fruits nearly as fast as he could reach them and dropped them into baskets below, and the guards rotated in and out like a well-oiled machine, with a nearly constant stream of black-armored guards carrying baskets down to the dropship. After about two hours, Jyslin, Tim, Symone, and most of his kids arrived as well, Ayama along to babysit the infants and show them off to the Parri a little bit. They'd heard what he was doing, and they helped out...or at least pretended to. The kids spent more time eating the fruit than they did carrying them down to the dropship. *Oye* fruit was fairly large, the size of a grapefruit, roughly oval in shape, and the skin was a deep gold color while the flesh within was pinkish, and what was odd to Jason, the fruit had no seeds. The trees seemed to produce them purely for the intent of providing nourishment with no expectation in return. They were also very easy to pick, coming off the stem with a gentle tug, and they grew in clusters at the ends of the smaller branches. Each cluster had around 20 fruit in it, growing in pairs close together, and all of them hung underneath the branch, making most of them very easy to reach due to the fact that the tree's branches weren't tightly packed. He did have to reach through branches and leaves here and there to reach some of them, but all in all, it was quick and easy to clear out an entire branch and then move on to the next one. The fruit at the edge of the tree's canopy were the easiest to pick, and they cleared that out within two hours, but then they had to go up into the canopy a little to reach the higher branch ends, all the way up to the top of the tree. Because Jason only had to pick and drop them, he moved very fast, picking over 300 fruit an hour since they grew in clusters and the clusters were fairly close together. He could pick an entire cluster in a minute, and most of his time was taken up with getting from cluster to cluster to pick them, a task made very easy because of the grav engines in his armor. Since he wasn't moving very fast and was mostly hovering, it was within the engines' operational parameters.

Crusader armor engines had improved over the years. They were no longer the simple glide drives they were when they began, as the military engineers endlessly tweaked and adjusted them. Even the original version glide drives were *real* grav engines, just with software interlocks to keep the wearer close to the ground. Even in the original version engines, the wearer could actually get into space using the engines, they'd just have

very, very poor control over their trajectory and their maximum speed was only 200 kathra an hour, which was around 160 kilometers an hour or about 100 miles an hour. The newest version of the armor had engines with much more control thanks to small directional control units in the boots and gauntlets, almost *Iron Man* style that helped control the wearer in all three axes of movement involved in flight, and all military members took flight training to control the armor at altitude. The armor still needed external flight pods to do any *serious* high altitude activity because the engines still couldn't go very fast and it took a lot of training to really handle controlling the armor's direction, but for something as simple as picking fruit, the armor was just fine.

Jason did exactly what he promised, he picked the tree clean. He got the last of the fruits at the very top of the tree about 11 hours after starting, with the sun already set and them using lights to see what they were doing, and his arms felt like lead weights as he dropped the last one into the waiting basket. *That's it, what's the count, Tim?*

*4,371, he answered.*

*Damn, that's more than I expected,* Jason replied as he drifted down and landed on the hoverplatform. *We can keep them in the dropship overnight and hand them out in front of the White House tomorrow morning. So, Aya, I'd say that 40 fruit per guard is a fair cut. That should last you girls a while. I won't even take them out of the fruit you guys already ate,* he sent dryly. *I was keeping count.*

*The rumors are so true,* Hara sent richly. *They do taste better right off the tree.*

*I'll say, I ate so much I can barely move,* Rann nearly complained.

*You already had your dinner, young man, so don't go asking for it when we get home,* Jyslin chuckled mentally.

*I couldn't eat another bite,* he assured her.

*Me either,* Shya agreed.

*I might have to put you two on a diet, given how much you ate,* Jyslin teased.



Jason greeted the *shaman*, who approached them as they loaded the last of the fruit on the dropship. “You will give them out tomorrow?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning, outside my office building,” he assured her. “I think it’ll be fun. We already put out a notice over CivNet, and so more people get some, we’re limiting everyone to one fruit each. We also warned them that we only have about four thousand, so it’s first come first served.”

“That is entirely fair,” she agreed. “Soon, I think, the other trees will start to fruit. If you wish to have them for your people, we must discuss a means of harvest. We will allow your people to come pick them, but only certain people will be allowed to come in contact with our trees.”

“I’ll talk to a few people and send prospective harvesters out here for you to inspect. You have final say on who works here and who doesn’t, *shaman*. This is your village; those are your trees. I’ll keep the entire operation a Ducal matter, so I have control over it. I think Kumi was anticipating this, and she already has a company formed to handle *oye* fruit harvesting and production.”

“So long as she remembers that we are the ones that dictate the price, Jason Karinne.”

“I’ll make sure she adheres to it,” he assured her. The Parri allowed Faey companies on Imbria to pick the fruit from the trees for free, literally giving them away, but they weren’t allowed to make a big profit off of them. The Parri were very firm about that, for it was they who set the price for *oye* fruit in the Imperium market, and that price was based on production costs. That allowed the *oye* companies to make a modest profit, but not gouge anyone, and in a weird way, it worked very well. *Oye* companies were some of the most dependable investment opportunities in the Imperium, because while one didn’t make a fortune in the investment, the return on that investment was virtually guaranteed. That policy also kept the price of the fruit and its products surprisingly low. The Parri showed that they were much more savvy than they pretended to be, because their primitive society could clearly and concisely read economic trends and set prices in a galactic market that allowed the companies that profited off the fruit to make steady money.

And that market was now pan-galactic, since one of the biggest exports from the Imperium to the other Confederate empires was *oye* products; raw fruit for consumption, processed fruit for consumption and cooking, juice, and tea made from the dried peel of the fruit rather than the bark and mixed with other ingredients to produce different flavors. The Faey weren't the only species that went crazy over them, they seemed to be loved by virtually every species that could eat vegetables. The Grimja in particular went nearly as crazy for *oye* as the Faey did.

When the trees on Karis began to produce, and *oye* trees produced a *lot* of fruit, Kumi would have an executive-controlled company handle harvesting and distribution of the fruit directly to market or to other companies to use to make *oye* products. And Jason would ensure that Kumi didn't succumb to her baser nature and try to jack up the prices of the fruits after she got her hands on them...which wasn't much of a worry anyway. If she tried to jack up local fruit prices, people would just buy them from the Imperium at the much lower price.

But it was a good sign, he supposed. If the *oye* trees on Karis were going to start to produce fruit, he supposed it meant that the trees were healthy, and he had the feeling it meant that the planet was improving. He remembered the *shaman* saying something about the trees mirroring the state of the planet, so if they were starting to fruit, then the planet must be doing well. At least he hoped so, both the terraforming of the northern continent of Virga and the wildlife restoration projects had been making good progress over the last year. The plankton and krill introduction to the oceans had taken hold, and they were now starting to bring in coral from Terra and Menos, transplanting several entire reefs from Menos that the Menodans wanted removed, and they'd been doing well off the coast of Karga, not far from Karsa in fact. They'd started introducing a series of small feeder-style fish into areas of rich plankton and krill that would grow in population over the next few years, then they'd start adding larger fish that would prey off the feeder fish. They'd also introduced several market fish with the feeder species, mainly anchovies and sardines. On land, they now had 137 different species of animals living in the wild, on the grasslands and in the forests of Karga and Kirga, which had formed small but sustaining ecosystems. They'd been receiving them from other planets by the thousands and introducing them into the wild, captured from the wild

on their home planets, all parasites and communicable diseases removed or cured, then transported to Karis and released into their new home in an environment conducive to their natural habitat. From earthworms up to apex predators like Terran wolves and Goragan rock cats and Arcturian bloodbats, large carnivorous bat-like creatures, there were now animals living under the ground, on it, and flying above it.

But the one thing that Jason was going to make sure of was that no annoying insects would take hold on Karis. There were 307 different species of beneficial insects on the planet, but he would allow no biters, no parasitic insects of any kind onto the planet. He liked his beach and his planet flea, tick, and mosquito free, and he was going to keep it that way.

It was a good sign, he was sure of it.

*Maista, 21 Kiraa, 4402, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 23 August 2015, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 21 Kiraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

Jason held Kaelan Karinne as Aura nursed Kevin Karinne, his twin sons, and like every other child of his except Raisha, they had his caucasian skin but Aura's pointed ears. Aura had delivered them some two months ago, and she'd taken the rather dramatic step of returning to Exile after they were born, so they could spend time on the planet of her birth and she could visit old friends during her maternity, and maybe stick her nose in village business a little bit. Jason had found that a bit weird, but had allowed it, and had spent quite a lot of time going back and forth to Exile to see Aura and his sons. She'd returned home to the strip about eight days ago, and had returned to work yesterday. She'd taken the opportunity of her maternity to arrange more training in her new job as a pusher pilot, moving ships around in Kosigi.

That was a hot job at the moment. Kosigi was absolutely cranking out the ships now, with at least two ships of varying classes coming off the

docks every day, not counting smaller dock-built ships like gunboats and corvettes. Dellin was focusing on frigates and destroyers as per Navii's plan, but they were also building the medium sized ships to maintain balance in planned task force allocations as well as big ships in larger numbers. Those ships now included the new Mark II battleships, which were larger and carried more firepower than the original battleships. That gave them three different variants of the battleship class ship, and each would fill a role in the task force. The Mark II battleships would be the big guns, the moon-ship killers as well as being the task force flagship when a command ship wasn't present. The original battleships would be more defensive, mainly using their firepower in support of the task force, and the tactical battleships were the purely offensive battleships, the ones that broke formation and went out there and kicked ass, living up to their name of bulldog.

The Karinnes weren't the only ones going into overdrive in Kosigi. All their allies were producing their heavy ships at a brisk clip, with battleships of multiple empires sitting in reserve in orbit around Kosigi waiting for activation, because they were building them so fast that they were having problems crewing them. That was the main problem Juma had at the moment, trying to staff her big ships without stripping all the talent from the smaller ones.

*You getting back into the swing of things at work?* Jason asked as he rocked Kaelan a little bit, who was getting sleepy after his feeding.

*Yes, but I felt a lot of anxiety yesterday. It was the first day I've left the boys for that long,* she replied with a gentle smile down at Kevin, who was still nursing. *I'm just glad that Maya didn't mind taking two more babies to watch. How did she get stuck with being the strip's babysitter?*

*Maya adores children, Aura, and nothing makes her happier than watching the children of her friends. But, with this many, she had to conscript a few guards to help change diapers and hire a couple of outside nannies to help her,* Jason chuckled, which made Kaelan regard him curiously before closing his eyes. *I think I'll talk to Aya about building Maya an extension on her house just so she has the room for this. She's babysitting seven babies over there, in addition to watching the older kids*

*when they come home from school. that's gotta be a strain on her living space.*

*Build a daycare center in the strip just for the residents, Aura told him. I'm sure we can find room somewhere.*

*There is no more room, at least if we put it on the ground, he replied. But I might be able to come up with something. I think we might take some lessons from the Kimdori when it comes to living space.*

*How do you mean?*

*The Kimdori are partially subterranean, he answered. A Kimdori house is half above ground and half below ground, with the most important parts of the house below ground. I'm sure we could build Maya a very large and luxurious daycare center under her house, then just rig it with holograms and such to make it look like it's above ground.*

*That's an idea, Aura nodded in agreement.*

*I think I'll talk to Maya about it later today, he sent, mainly to himself. Besides, I've been kicking around the idea of expanding my own basement by adding another level under the current one. Red Horn could just knock both projects out at the same time.*

*Whyever for?*

*More space, he answered. I was thinking of building an even bigger workshop under the current one and converting the current one into a play area for the kids. They're gonna need more space when the girls get older, especially when we get into the rainy season.*

*So, this is either about you wanting something for your kids, or you wanting something for yourself using your kids as a convenient excuse, Aura reasoned giving him a playful smile.*

*I'm the Grand Duke around here, woman, I don't need a convenient excuse to get what I want, he replied haughtily, which made her giggle at the false arrogant texture of his thought.*

*Speaking of what you want, I thought you might want to come over for dinner tonight, she invited, giving him a coquettish look.*

*Tonight no, tomorrow yes, he replied. I'm already taken tonight.*

*Then tomorrow it is, she smiled.*

After spending some quality time with both Aura and his sons, Jason started his day. Shen and Suri piled into his skimmer just before he took off, but instead of heading for the White House, he instead pointed the skimmer's nose almost straight up and accelerated. Kosigi was his first stop for today, with a scheduled meeting and conference with several members of 3D up in the top-secret dock they had in the lunar base. The invitation and reports only hinted that they needed to see him *today*, which meant that they had something pretty important to discuss with him, or to show him. Given they were doing it up in the drydock, though, that threw him off a bit. He hoped it was so he could look at some diffuser tech...maybe they made a breakthrough on the diffusers.

It took him almost an hour to get into the dock, since Kosigi was on the far side of the planet from the strip, then get to the dock once he was in Kosigi, then get into the dock. Half of 3D was in the drydock working on the diffuser project, whose current incarnation was installed into an uncommissioned but completely finished and operational frigate, the third such frigate they'd had as a test ship. The first two...well, there was a reason they were *test* ships.

Rebuilding a portion of the dock had taken nearly six days.

"Hey guys," Jason called as he walked up the gangway to the large work area annealed to the hull of the frigate's top. "So, what did you want to show me? Something about the diffuser?"

"I wish," Myleena replied as she rose up from having her head stuck in a hatch on the hull, which before she did so made her butt stick way up in the air. "We still haven't managed to get much further than the last meeting, Jayce. We just wanted to have this up here so we didn't waste time going back down to the warehouse."

"Okay, so, if it's not the diffuser, then what do you guys got for me?" he asked.

One of their newest 3D members stepped forward. Her name was Emia Whisperbreeze, and she was quite the coup for Myleena. She was a young firebrand of a hyperspace physicist. She was only 27 years old and with lots of crazy ideas, ideas she'd never been allowed by the Federation to pursue.

But in 3D she was allowed to use her bent for thinking outside the box in an environment where that kind of thinking was a job requirement. Emia was tall and willowy, her aqua-colored hair a bit unkempt, and she had grease smudged all over her face. Emia was the kind of woman who lost track of almost everything when she was working, like the last time she ate or slept.

Emia touched her interface almost reflexively as Jason leaned back against the rail behind him, and a hologram appeared in front of him. It almost looked like a Stargate, but it was much smaller and had a different ring construction. “This is half of what you’re here to see, your Grace.”

“Jason,” he corrected. “When we’re in private company, don’t call me that.”

“Yes, you—Jason,” she smiled. “This is a hyperspace catapult that we’ve just perfected, with help from the KMS engineering research division. This catapult allows any ship to jump hyperspace in real time.”

Jason stood straight up and gave her a startled look. “Woah, you finished it?”

She nodded. “We applied modern technology to the original Strath design and came up with a catapult that allows a ship with virtually *any* hyperspace jump engine to jump in real time, just as you wanted,” she declared as the hologram changed to a detailed schematic of its internal workings. “It works exactly like the original Strath catapult. Once the ship is in hyperspace, it can travel as far as it wants and stay in real time because it was the catapult that got it up to that velocity. The ship’s engines only have to hold the ship in hyperspace and allow it to coast to its destination, to use a Terran idiom. It wasn’t very difficult to upgrade the science behind the device with current technology to give any ship the ability to jump in real time, and we made sure to do it using standard Confederate technology rather than Karinne technology. Now that the Imperium can jump in real time, we simply used *their* engine algorithms and their equipment to build the catapult, that way we can simply release the specs and allow any empire with real-time level engine technology to build their *own* catapults. We’ve even worked up the specs for the various empires and their unique technology, since we knew you’d need it,” she smiled. “We actually finished that two months ago, but we’ve been holding onto it because we’ve conducted further research, and we didn’t want any distractions.”

“And?”

“And we’ve come up with a different version of a catapult that I think everyone will desperately want, Jason, but something that only we can build. Our own version of the catapult works almost exactly like a Stargate, with a catapult on each side. These two catapults create something of a stable tunnel in hyperspace through which any ship can travel in real time, and they can do so through an interdiction effect.”

“Holy shit,” Jason gasped.

“I know. The two catapults form a tunnel of sorts through the interdiction effect, but a tunnel that no ship can enter unless it enters it *through* the catapult. It means that no ship can get into a position where it jumps into hyperspace within the tunnel effect. Any ship that tries immediately gets knocked back into normal space, and its engines also tend to explode,” she noted dryly.

“And that explains what happened to that corvette you guys borrowed,” Jason laughed.

“It was pretty messy,” Myleena grinned.

“Ships in this tunnel can jump in real time through interdiction, which I think solves quite a few logistical problems the Confederation is dealing with at the moment,” she told him. “And what’s even better, Jason, is that these units aren’t all that difficult to build. It only requires three destroyer-class hyperspace jump engines linked to catapult field generators and governed by a Stargate’s link control system. The catapult field infuses the stage link to create a tunnel of sorts in hyperspace, and the three engines provide the ability for the tunnel to penetrate the interdiction by keeping the tunnel stable through the interdiction effect. There are two distinct modes of operation we can use, dedicated and temporary. Dedicated forms a stable tunnel through which ships can travel, but only in one direction,” she explained. “In this mode, the catapults almost act like Stargates by being dedicated to a sister catapult and forming a permanent bridge that ships can use to get to the other system in real time. Ships using this system still have to use their own jump engines or they drop out of hyperspace, but the tunnel gets them to the destination in real time no matter how obsolete the engines are. It only requires that the ship’s engines are able to hold it in hyperspace,



and the tunnel gets the ship there in real time. Because the tunnel formation only allows travel in one direction, from source gate to destination gate, we'll need two sets for a destination if we want two-way traffic if we use this operational mode, one set for each direction of travel. The other way to use them is to send a ship to another system without the two catapults being dedicated, forming temporary bridges between two catapults for the express purpose of sending a single ship through. In that operational mode, the tunnel only lasts as long as the ship is inside it," she continued. "The two catapults only hold the tunnel open to let the ship traverse. The main drawback to this system in this mode of operation is that only one ship can pass through at a time. The next ship has to wait for the ship in transit to drop back into normal space before it can enter the catapult. Once it does, the next ship enters the catapult, the two catapults bridge, and they send the ship through in real time. But, the advantage of this system is that one catapult can link to *multiple* catapults, one at a time," she smiled. "The catapult might have to move a little to line up to the desired receiving catapult, but they aren't required to be dedicated to a sister catapult the way Stargates are. A catapult can send a ship to Shio space, then shift its orientation a little and send the next ship in line to Alliance space. Put five or six catapults in a system, regular catapults for non-interdicted destinations and these bridging catapults for interdicted systems, and they can give *any* ship the ability to jump in real time, virtually anywhere they need to go."

"That is absolutely fucking *brilliant*," Jason breathed, nearly whispering, as he looked at a holographic illustration of the two catapults linked together to form a tunnel through hyperspace.

"Thank you, Jason," Emia said with a quirky smile.

"Have you built prototypes?"

"Of course we have, and they work," Myleena replied, motioning. A flat hologram appeared showing a catapult gate hanging in deep space not far from an interdictor, a huge ring large enough for a capitol ship to pass through. "We have interdictors up on both sides of the catapults, one in the home quadrant and one in the Q quadrant, and we've sent both Karinne ships and stock Faey freighters with normal jump engines through. We didn't have a single hiccup, the Faey freighters not only crossed the

quadrant in real time, they got through both interdictors without any issues. No damage to the ships, no adverse medical problems for the volunteers that took it through, no astro-environmental issues either in real space or hyperspace caused by the bridging tunnel. These are ready for production, Jayce. That's why we're talking to you now."

"Talk to Dellin," he said immediately. "I want as many of these as fast as you can possibly build them. We need these things fuckin' *yesterday*."

"We can build the components for the bridging catapults in a factory, Jayce, then just assemble them on site. They're not that complicated," Myleena told him. "Emia fuckin' outdid herself designing them. They're almost *simplistic*, with a modular design that's cheap to build and easy to assemble. We can use these instead of Stargates in most systems, and only use Stargates at the important hub systems."

"Then I'll get Kumi and Trenirk on it," he said immediately. "You have the technical data for both catapults?"

"I uploaded them to Cyra and Cybi about ten minutes ago, you can get them from them. Like I said, for the standard catapults, we've already worked up building techniques for every Confederate empire with real-time engines, so they can produce these catapults themselves. But they won't do them much good in systems that are interdicted," she chuckled.

"May be, but they'll still be pretty fuckin' useful," he nodded. "With these, the others won't have to upgrade every single ship they have to new engines. It'll save them absolute fortunes."

"They'll eventually upgrade anyway, but given what's coming in the next four years, it'll take a lot of pressure off of them," Myleena corrected. "And I think the Merchant Marine will suck your dick fifty times a day for reducing their workload," she added with a dirty grin.

"I think we should differentiate them," Emia noted. "We'll call our bridging catapults just that, *bridges*, and that way the original catapult won't be confused with it."

"Sounds good to me," Jason said. "So, I'm gonna like go *right now* and talk to Trenirk and Kumi, then release the catapult specs to the Academy. I'll announce it to the Confederation at our council meeting this afternoon."

“We figured,” Myleena grinned. “It’s probably for the best, we’re still working on this piece of shit,” she added with a sigh, stomping her armored foot on the hull. “We haven’t solved a single problem yet, and now I have most of 3D on it.”

“Well, they’ll have to live without you for about an hour, Myli. Come with me, I wanna talk to you.”

She gave him a tart look, then sighed and nodded. “Alright, let’s get going. I really need to be here, Jayce.”

“Just ride down with me and come back up.”

Once they were back in the skimmer, Shen and Suri sitting behind them with Myleena in the copilot’s chair, Jason pulled the skimmer off the landing platform and angled it towards the smaller doors, which were closer to the dock. *[Alright, first off, the catapult? Totally brilliant, Myli,]* he told her. *[That was more than I was even hoping we’d get out of it.]*

*[Yeah, me too, but Emia’s like seriously good, Jayce,]* she nodded. *[I’m glad I got her away from the Federation. She knows more about hyperspace than about anyone that’s not a Karinne or a Kimdori. It didn’t take her long to get up to speed on what we know about hyperspace, and she was the one that developed the bridges. Eraen and Anva were the ones that primarily worked on the regular catapult, with Emia’s input.]*

*[You guys just made things a whole lot easier, for like the entire Confederation. It’ll really open up supply lines and clear out the bottlenecks formed because we have to move everything around. Once we get bridges up and running at every system, we’ll have a full network of transportation that will let them move a lot of ships and material in a short time.]*

*[And that’s why we got it to you as soon as we were certain it was viable.]*

*[Good. Now, tell me what your deal is with the translight drives. Why are you so obsessed about it, Myli? You’ve been fixated on them for months, and I’m not letting you blow me off this time. You’re going to explain it to me, or I’ll stop this skimmer right where we are and make you walk home.]*

Myleena laughed. *[Alright, alright, I wasn't saying anything because I didn't want to get your hopes up. I'm still not entirely sure it'll work, but I've done enough research to at least have a theory, and Cybi agrees with me that it's viable.]*

*[And what theory is that?]*

*[I think we might be able to adapt the translight drives to move at translight speed in hyperspace, Jayce,]* she told him, looking him in the eyes. *[Light exists in hyperspace, as you know, just in a highly energetic and erratic state, but it's a state that we can mathematically express. And because of that, it means that we can theoretically design a translight drive engine that can modulate light in its hyperspace state. If the theory holds, we might be able to achieve something of an FTL state in hyperspace, vastly increasing the speed of a ship in hyperspace.]*

Jason gave her a long look, so long that he almost missed a zip ship nearly cutting him off as he entered traffic. *[You're serious. FTL speed in hyperspace? How fast is that?]*

*[Yeah, that's what the math suggests, but so far I only have the theory,]* she nodded. *[I don't have any specifics yet, but if the theory is proven and the equations I've formulated are close to correct, it would let a ship with a hyperspace translight drive cross the entire galaxy, to the very edge of the P quadrant at the most distant point possible from Karis, in about 33 seconds.]*

*[Holy shit, seriously?]*

*[I think that's close to correct, but I haven't refined the equation, Jayce, and remember that it's still an unproved theory,]* she warned.

*[What about the Flat Space Effect?]*

The *Flat Space Effect* was the reason why their current real-time jump engines needed five years to get to Andromeda. If not for that, their current engines would be able to reach Andromeda in about 60 days, but things weren't quite so simple once one left the galaxy. Because of the curvature of space, when one left a galactic gravity well and the spatial curvature that created, space became very, very "flat" as compared to inside the galaxy. That didn't sound all that important, but it really, really was, due to how *hyperspace* behaved in the presence of a gravity well and how it behaved

outside of one. Because hyperspace was made up of ten dimensions, the three visible ones and the seven upper dimensions, the effect of gravity on the curvature of space on those upper dimensions was *radical*. That effect drastically compressed distances in hyperspace within a strong gravity well, like a piece of stretched elastic that was relaxed and allowed to shrink. The stronger the gravity well, the shorter the distance was compressed in hyperspace, due to the non-linear way gravity affected the curvature of space in the upper dimensions

Space between galaxies, outside of any significant gravity well, lacked significant spatial curvature, thus it was called *flat space*. In flat space, the distances between points in hyperspace expanded *exponentially* as the curvature of space lessened, due to how the curvature of space affected distances in hyperspace. In hyperspace, the distance between two edges of the Milky Way, 186 thousand light years, was actually *shorter* than a point 50,000 light years away from the edge of the galaxy in intergalactic space when viewed in three dimensions, which was a bit of a paradox. It was hard for learning hyperspace physicists to fully comprehend the idea that the distance between two points in hyperspace could change, and change *drastically*, depending on the effect of gravity on the space through which one traveled between those two points. The old theory of folding space from the *Dune* series was actually a pretty good metaphor for what was going on out in flat space compared to space inside a galactic gravity well. Spatial distances in hyperspace within a gravity well were compressed, almost folded, compared to space being stretched out like a rubber band out in flat space.

What the Flat Space Effect did was introduce a non-linear, changing increase in the distance between two points in hyperspace incurred by anything traveling through flat space, an effect that no hyperspace jump engine could avoid no matter how advanced it was, since it had nothing to *do* with the engines. As a ship traveled deeper into intergalactic space, the distance to the destination actually *increased* instead of *decreased*, as the traveling vehicle entered uncurved space and the hyperspace math calculating distances changed. Karinne science called it the Flat Space Effect, but it was also known by some civilizations as the Hyperspace Paradox, where one traveling into flat space was getting further and further away from the destination point as they went deeper and deeper into flat

space. The effect was mathematically expressed as a the ascending quadrant of a sine wave, with near exponential increase at the start that slowly reduced to a maximum at the peak of the wave.

From the point of view of a ship traveling from Andromeda to the Milky Way, the ship would see a generally static distance that reduced as they traveled within Andromeda towards the Milky Way, but once they left the galactic gravity well, they would see that distance increase, getting further and further away as they traveled towards their destination. The distance would skyrocket at first, but the rate of increase of the distance would slowly start to reduce as the ship went deeper and deeper into flat space. The greatest magnitude of the effect happened at the midpoint, the greatest distance between the two galactic gravity wells, and thus the area of “flattest” space where the distance between the ship and its destination was at its maximum. As they moved past the midpoint, the distance would begin to shrink at an accelerating rate, then would suddenly become linear again once the ship exited flat space and entered the gravity well of the Milky Way.

From outside the effect, how they saw the effect was on the apparent velocity of the ships traversing flat space. Ships would seem to slow down as they traveled into flat space, reaching the slowest apparent velocity at the point of flattest space, then begin to accelerate once they passed the midpoint. The Consortium and Syndicate fleets that traversed that flat space would look to outsiders as if they were moving over a hill. They moved very fast as they left Andromeda but slowed down more and more as they reached the apex of the hill, the midpoint between Andromeda and the Milky Way, and then once they crested the hill, they’d move faster and faster as they approached the Milky Way. The fleets hadn’t moved with constant velocity during the trip as viewed from the outside because of the Flat Space Effect, but from *inside*, they appeared to themselves to have constant velocity, yet that constant velocity was being applied to a destination that seemed to get further and further away, reached the maximum distance when they passed the midpoint, then raced towards them as if they were moving faster and faster.

Since it wasn’t a function of relativity, the ships that had traveled to their galaxy from Andromeda had taken five years both to those outside watching them come, and *also* to the ships undertaking the journey. It was

real time in both instances, which was why they had to put their crews in stasis for the journey. Five years of exposure to hyperspace would drive virtually any unprotected three dimensional being utterly insane.

The Flat Space Effect also affected three dimensional physics in some ways, but not nearly as drastically as it did hyperspace. Time dilation was exaggerated in flat space, where the perceived flow of time was more greatly exaggerated than if the dilation was being observed in a gravity well. That was due to the greater disparity between the relative velocities of the two objects observing each other, which created a greater time dilation effect. To ships in intergalactic space, which had little to no actual velocity as observed from inside the galaxy, transmissions from inside the galaxy would almost be like a video in slow motion. To the people in the gravity well, it would look like the people on the ship in flat space were a video in fast forward. To effectively communicate with a ship deep in flat space, both comm units would have to receive the transmission and sync it to local time for it to be intelligible.

*[That's the beauty of the theory, babes,] she grinned. [The translight effect will detach the ship from hyperspace physics, so once it enters the translight state, the distance it sees to its destination will not change due to the Flat Space Effect. It inherits the physical state of relative distance to the destination it saw before entering the translight state, locking it into a specific quantum phase where relativity can't alter any aspect of the ship's velocity vector. When the ship detaches from hyperspace physics, it inherits all physical aspects of its quantum state before detaching, so time, distance, velocity, they all become immutable constants. The big drawback is we have to be careful not to let the ships drop out of the translight state deep in flat space, or they'll inherit the relative distance to their destination they'll see out there when they return to the translight state, but just about every other aspect of the theory is a win for us, cousin. Basically what it means is, if I can actually make this work, the Karinnes will be able to get to Andromeda in about nine minutes instead of five years. Nine minutes, babes. Nine minutes.]*

Jason could barely wrap his mind about that. What Myleena was suggesting was that she could theoretically design a new engine that would give the Karinnes *intergalactic* capability, and on *practical* terms. Not the style of intergalactic capability the Syndicate and the Consortium

employed, years-long transits with their crews in stasis, but realistic transits that would be actually *feasible* and *practical*, especially when combined with the fact that their crews wouldn't suffer from hyperspace sickness or jump shock. They would be able to make the entire nine minute trip in one jump, provided that the translight state in which the ship would be in was more or less the same as being in standard hyperspace. But in a more local sense, it would make getting virtually anywhere in their own galaxy ridiculously fast. Anywhere in the galaxy in 33 seconds. 33 *seconds*. As it stood now with current engine technology, 33 seconds would get a ship just barely past halfway through Urumi territory. That would mean that a Karinne ship could get anywhere in the galaxy in such a short time that it seemed almost inconceivable.

It was a quantum leap in propulsion technology that might have profound effects on the very foundations of the house, like how the automobile and the airplane revolutionized nearly every aspect of the economy, society, and culture in America back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Myleena could make it work, it could have the same impact, opening up the entire galaxy to the Karinnes, making every corner of the galaxy reachable by Karinne ships in a ridiculously short period of time. But even more importantly, it would open other *galaxies* to the Karinnes, and what Jason found the most important, giving the Karinnes the theoretical ability to hit back at the Consortium and the Syndicate in their home territory, if it became necessary to prevent them from continuing to send wave after wave of invasion forces into their galaxy. They'd be able to *prosecute* the war if it became needful, not react to an enemy that was unreachable to them and could just pound them with endless reinforcements until they succumbed.

And if the translight drives were for some reason extremely hard to refit into the KMS, or were so insanely expensive that they could only *afford* to build one of them, well, only *one* ship had to make that journey...a ship towing a Stargate, or if it couldn't tow one, a ship carrying all the equipment inside it to build a Stargate. Once a Stargate was operational on the other side, conventional Karinne jump engines would give Karinne ships the ability to take the war to the Syndicate...but if they had translight drives on those ships, they could cross the entire Andromeda galaxy in under a minute and strike anywhere. Anywhere.



They didn't even *need* a base over there if the ships had translight drives. They could leave from Karis, cross over to Andromeda, attack, and then return to Karis when they were done. With such an insane advantage in mobility, a single task force could harass the entire Andromedan galaxy for *years* before the Syndicate finally managed to make them stop.

*Anywhere.*

Jason put the skimmer on autopilot after feeding it a destination and a vector, then he leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, leaning back and looking at the ceiling. Myleena watched him as he thought furiously, his brows furrowed, a little frown on his face, then he blew out his breath and looked at her. *[Myleena, I want you to suspend everything else you're doing and devote yourself fully to proving the theory, finding out if it's viable, and if it is, building a prototype. Find someone else and put her in charge of the diffuser project. That's critically important, but it's not as important as this. I want you to pull everyone with any scientific expertise in the subject in the entire research department and put them on your team, and I'll talk to Denmother and see if some of the Kimdori's best propulsion specialists can come help. I'm going to set it up with Kumi that your new research project has a blank check. You get anything you ask for, no matter what it costs. Find out if it's possible. If it is, figure out if you can make it work with our technology. If it does, build it. That project now has beyond top priority. The future of our entire galaxy might depend on your success.]*

*[Wow, you're serious about this.]*

*[This is what we've been needing, Myli,]* he answered, looking at her. *[No matter how good we are, no matter how many allies we recruit, eventually either the Syndicate or the Consortium is going to say fuck it and send over a few million ships. Even if they don't, every new wave they send over is going to have more ships, and more ships, and more ships, and they'll try to beat us through sheer attrition. The Syndicate especially has nearly an entire galaxy's worth of resources, I don't think they'd bat an eye over sending over a million ships or so to start conquering our galaxy once they defeat the Consortium. That's what they do, and they won't stop until someone stops them. If your translight theory pans out, then we don't have to just build walls around our castle like some medieval noble house and endure siege after siege after siege from enemies we can't reach. We'll be*

*able to cross over into Andromeda and take the war to them, we become the attackers, attacking with complete impunity as they struggle to defend themselves against us, and maybe make them start thinking that we might not be worth the trouble. That's the only way we're going to break the cycle, Myleena, when we can prove to them that fucking with us carries more risk than just losing ships and soldiers they don't care much about. When they find out we can hit them anywhere, at any time, and they can't do shit about it, it might start changing some minds. When those corporate plutocrats that run the Syndicate see smoking craters where their mansions used to be, when they find out that war with us will be fought on their front door instead of in another galaxy, they just might decide that peace is the better option.]*

Myleena grinned at him.

*[The diffuser may be critically important in the short term, but if we can develop those engines, they'll help out the most in the long run. I don't think I have to tell you that this is beyond top secret. You tell only your team, me, Cybi and Cyra, and the guys in 3D what you're doing. I'll tell Denmother as well, we can trust the Kimdori, and no doubt they'll send their best propulsion experts to help. They'd kill to get their hands on these engines, and we could use their help finding out if they're possible. Nobody else can know, Myli. Not the girls on the strip, not the other Generations, not Kumi, not Danelle, not Jyslin, not anyone. A secret unspoken remains a secret. If word got out to the Confederation that we were developing a new engine that would let anyone jump anywhere in this galaxy in thirty seconds, it'd be a nightmare. Miaari would have to completely seal off the planet.]*

*[Not a problem, babes,] Myleena nodded. [I sorta figured you'd respond this way, so I've already got a list of people I think can help. Gravology scientists, Karinne hyperspace experts, the best propulsion engineers on Karis, and some power generation experts. I want to move it to a dedicated facility.]*

*[You name it, it's yours, even if we have to kick people out.]*

*She laughed. [Actually, I want to build it. I want to put it on Skeyai Island, it's an isolated good-sized untterraformed island about 250 kathra northeast of Karsa where nobody has any business being unless they belong there. Red Horn can put it up while I'm assembling my team, the facility*

*doesn't have to be exceedingly fancy. Just one of their warehouse prefab-style buildings with plenty of space, a class two mainframe we can yank out of storage, all the tools we need, and an attached automated mini-factory for fabricating our own equipment. I figure they can have it up in about twenty days, if you tell them you want it now. It'll take me that long to assemble my team.]*

*[Done. I'll call them as soon as I get back to my office. You putting Jenny back in charge of the diffuser project?]*

*[May as well, she started it. But I will go back and at least finish what I was doing before I abandon them. We had an idea we were testing, and I want to see if it works.]*

*[Good enough, just don't dawdle too much. Start gathering up your team as soon as you're ready, and I'll call Denmother and have her find some Kimdori experts to come join you. The Syndicate will be here in about two years, hon, the clock is ticking. We need both the diffusers to be viable and by then at least know if your theory can be translated to a working prototype. If I have to put you on only one project, I want you on the engines, since that's your baby. It's your theory, so it's all you. As of right now, those two projects are on the top of the board.]*

*[I love it when I'm important,]* Myleena grinned at him.

*[Don't let it go to your head. I still sign your paycheck,]* he teased.

She made an audible snorting sound. *[I could wipe my ass with the paycheck I get from you and never notice the loss of income, Jayce,]* she taunted.

*[Well, then, I guess I'll just stop paying you.]*

*[Try.]*

He laughed audibly, but the guards didn't pay much attention. They were having their own private conversation.

Myleena had a military V.I.P. skimmer used by the admiralty waiting when Jason landed at the White House, piloted by none other than Aura. She gave Jason a kiss before putting Myleena aboard and taking off, and that let Jason get to work. He went inside and got straight to business, almost jogging straight to Trenirk's office as he communed with both

CBIMs to tell them what he intended to do. It was like any Makati office, heavily staffed with aides but everyone busy as Trenirk managed all the factory and replicator production on the planet. Trenirk's secretary let him straight in to his inner office, a large but cluttered affair where the Makati had quite a lot of personal junk and knick-knacks. Trenirk had taken a page from Dellin's playbook, Jason saw, for a wall-sized flat hologram behind Trenirk's desk listed every active factory on the planet, what it was producing, and its average production capacity. Dellin's board had caught on with quite a few people. "Your Grace, what can I do for you?" Trenirk asked as both Cyra and Cybi manifested holograms in the office.

"I need as much factory space as you can find, Tren, and I need it *now*," he replied. "The girls over in research just certified a new invention we need *yesterday*. I have all the production specs you need. Cyra should be uploading them to your panel right now."

"*I just finished,*" she nodded. "*It should be in your priority message queue.*"

"Got it. Barka's pillar!" he gasped when he saw the production summary on the front page, which told the reader what it was and what it did. "A hyperspace *bridge*?"

"It works," Jason nodded. "That's why we need as many as you can produce as fast as you can possibly produce them."

Trenirk tapped his fingers on the desk. "The engines, we have plenty of those in stock now," he mused. "The stage link control system, I already have a factory uploaded with the specs for the Stargate ones and tooled to produce, so that won't be a problem. This version of it isn't as complex as the ones we use for Stargates. These two new major modules, they don't look exceedingly complex, and the superstructure won't be that hard to make either. Once I get the production specs uploaded and a factory tooled, I could probably get one of these built about every day per factory. How many do you want me to produce?"

"We need three thousand of them minimum," Jason replied. "But as of right now, we need 1,830 to place one pair at every Confederate system that doesn't already have a Stargate, plus the extras on the other side at hub systems. Cyra already figured it out. I want the others in reserve so we can

deploy them immediately when necessary. I have no doubt we'll eventually use every single one."

Trenirk frowned. "I'm going to have to do some major juggling to pull that off, Jayce. We're going to have to pull some other production orders."

"Do it," Jason said immediately. "I'd like to see ten of these coming off the line every day. We *need* these bridges, Tren, I can't stress that enough."

"Ten per day? I can do it," he declared, turning in his chair and studying his board. "We're going to run behind schedule in a few current production orders, but I can get these in and produce ten a day without us falling too far behind."

"When are the new block of factories slated to come online?"

"In about ten days," he replied, pointing at a row of red text in the lower left corner, the factories under construction. "I'll have 26 more factories and four more major manufacturing complexes available when those come online. I'll need complexes to build the superstructures for the modules of these bridges, that'll be the main bottleneck in this. They're too big for most line factories to produce. I can take those four new ones and dedicate them to bridge production, but I have to get them on the board first."

"I'll send Brall up there and see if he can't get them on the board faster," Jason said, making a note of it and sending it to Brall's interface as a text message. "That Makati can motivate when he needs to."

"I'll have ten of these coming off the lines per day once I get the factories tooled for them," he promised. "Give me two days to get everything set up and the schedules juggled, and I'll start production. Things'll be a bit messy until those new factories are on the board, but I'll make it work, Jason. I guarantee it."

"I can always count on you, Tren," Jason said sincerely. "I'll leave you to it, I have some other things I need to do."

"I'm going to be busy anyway, Jayce," he grinned.

Almost as soon as he sat his chair in his office, he was trying to get hold of Zaa. He told Kumi he wanted to see her in his office as soon as she could get there while he waited, and as usual, he didn't have to wait long.

"Cousin," Zaa nodded. "What did you need?"

“I need you to come to Karis, Denmother. *Now*,” he replied seriously.

“I can be there in an hour.”

“Then please do so. This is very important.”

“The good kind or the bad kind?” she asked with a slightly winsome look. Zaa was currently pregnant, and it made her just a *little* more mellow than usual. Jason recalled that she’d be delivering her cubs next month.

“It’s the good kind,” he replied. “Just nothing I’ll discuss any way but face to face.”

“Prudent,” she nodded. “I’ll be there within an hour.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he replied, and her hologram vanished.

Kumi strolled into the office a moment later wearing her workout clothes, tying her hair back behind her head. *What is it, babes? I was doing a quick morning workout before a meeting with Tri-Con Industries.*

*The kind with or without clothes?* he asked with a slight smile.

She leered a bit. *You want the kind without clothes? I can do that*, she offered, taking hold of base of her workout halter.

*Later, I’m busy, and you’re about to be busy*, he replied as she flopped down in one of the chairs facing his desk. Jason leaned forward and motioned to her, reaching his hand across his desk, and she sighed and reached out and took it *I want you to set up a new expense account, under Myleena’s authority*, he instructed, sending privately, using the skin to skin contact to send in a way that *no one* would pick it up, not even Dera...if she were here. *This account will have no limit.*

*No limit?*

*None*, he nodded. *Whatever Myli needs, she gets. Period, end of story.*

*Trelle’s pubes, she must be working on something big if she’s not doing it through the normal 3D account..*

*It’s so big we can’t tell anyone what she’s doing, Kumi*, he told her seriously. *What she’s doing will involve people other than those in 3D, so I want her to have a separate account for this.*

*You know I hate it when you do that,* she accused. Kumi was a naturally curious woman, and not telling her what it was about would needle at her for a while.

*That's the way it'll have to be this time, hon,* he told her. *Just get it set up.*

*And you called me out of my workout to tell me that? You coulda just sent me a memo.*

*No, this has to be done face to face. Nobody else in your office will know about the account, Kumi. Not even Temika. You set it up personally, and Cyra will make sure nobody else is gonna find it.*

*Okay, I'll take care of it as soon as I get back to the office,* she told him. *But now I think I'm gonna be back after lunch for the kind of workout I like best,* she sent, lust staining her thought.

*I have a council meeting after lunch, so afraid not today,* he replied. *And I can't miss this one.*

*Then you better set aside an hour or so this afternoon before you go home,* she leered as she stood up, sending more openly. *That's my fee for doing this favor for you.*

*Favor? I'm your boss, woman.*

*So you think,* she sent with a grin and a playful flip of her hair, then she sauntered out of his office.

That woman was going to need another good taking-down, and very soon.

Zaa arrived only about twenty minutes later, just as Jason was finishing up some paperwork Chirk had sent him. She had Denfather with her today, which was very unusual. Grun rarely left Kimdori Prime, but when he did leave, more often than not it was to come to Karis. Denmother seemed to not mind him visiting Karis, often without her. When he did so, he spent most of his time over in Jaxtra. "Denfather, it's good to see you," Jason greeted, stepping around and allowing Grun to put his hand on his neck in the traditional Kimdori greeting.

“I decided to tag along this time, and Denmother didn’t mind,” he smiled.

“I told him to come,” Zaa sniffed as both Cybi and Cyra manifested their holograms. “Cybi, Cyra. How goes things?”

*“It goes well, Denmother,”* Cyra replied.

*“I’m enjoying my new role,”* Cybi related. *“I have much more time to help research, and I find the work interesting.”*

“I’m glad you’re not having separation issues,” Jason chuckled.

*“I was never designed to run the planet, Jason,”* she replied. *“My current operational parameters are more in line with my original purpose.”*

“Myli’s gonna be straining your brain for a while, Cybi,” Jason said as he went back around his desk. Everyone else took a seat, the Kimdori on the chairs and the two CBIMs on each side of his desk, leaning on their hands and looking on. “That’s why you’re here, Denmother.”

“Explain.”

“Myleena thinks she can build a new version of the RK sector’s translight drive that operates in *hyperspace*, making a ship go at FTL speed in hyperspace,” Jason said, which made Grun’s eyes widen. “If her theory is right, it’ll allow a ship to jump completely across the entire galaxy in about forty seconds. Denmother, I wanted to ask if you could locate your most advanced and brilliant hyperspace scientists and propulsion specialists to come to Karis and work on this, as well as perhaps a scientist that has studied translight technology. I know the Kimdori have seen them before, so maybe an expert in translight theory and application will be useful to Myleena. If Myleena can turn this theory into a working engine, it’ll revolutionize space travel.”

“I...I cannot argue that,” Zaa breathed. “Cross the entire galaxy in forty seconds?”

“More or less, if Myleena’s math is right,” he nodded. “but all she has right now is an unproved theory. She’s building a team of the best engineers and scientists in both hyperspace science and propulsion to try to prove the theory, and if it’s proven, try to create a prototype engine. I’ve given her a



blank check for this,” he declared. “I don’t care what it costs for this research. If this engine can be built, I want her to build it.”

*“I will be devoting a significant portion of my available processing power to the project,”* Cybi declared. *“The equations she’s already devised for the theory are so complex that even I had to work to do the math.”*

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Zaa said, giving Jason a sober look. “I will send our very finest research scientists in the fields, Jason, and the Kimdori will share in the cost of this. This is something that is of the most critical importance.”

“I know. If this theory is proved *and* we have the technology to build the engines, it means that we don’t have to endure decades, even centuries of endless war with the Syndicate. We can get over *there* and convince them to leave us alone.”

“You see only one aspect of what these engines will mean,” Zaa told him, which made Grun nod knowingly. “But your idea of them is certainly a very important one. How long would it take a ship with this engine to reach Andromeda?”

“Nine minutes of travel time, give or take,” he answered. “Think about that, Denmother. Nine minutes. It just seems implausible, but...shit. That’s provided that the theory is viable, Denmother,” he warned. “*And* we can actually build it. It might be beyond our ability. If just the theoretical math strains Cybi’s processing power, and she’s one of the most powerful computers in existence, then the engines just might not be possible. So, don’t get your hopes up too much.”

“I will remain cautiously optimistic, cousin,” she told him, tapping her muzzle as she thought. “I do hope that you’ve made this a top secret project?”

“Only the people in this room and Myleena know about this project at the moment, Denmother,” he replied. “If the Confederation got word that we’re researching a pan-galactic engine, an engine that would give someone the ability to jump anywhere in the galaxy in less than a minute, the entire Confederation might declare war on us to get it. Even Dahnai would turn on me.”

“She would,” Zaa agreed. “Cybi, has Myleena postulated how these drives will behave against an interdicator?”

*“Not as yet, Denmother,” Cybi answered. “As of right now, we’re simply trying to validate the theory. Applying the theory to outside influence will be the next step.”*

“Speaking of interditors, 3D has taken the Strath hyperspace catapult and built a working device that allows any ship to jump in real time through an interdicator,” Jason added. “I’ve already got Trenirk on producing them. They’ll make it easy and practical for every Confederate system to be interdicted, since the bridge system will let ships in and out.”

“That is another matter, Jason,” she said brusquely. “Cybi, explain to me what you can of this theory.”

Jason listened as Cybi meticulously went over the theory, in more detail than Myleena had, explaining exactly what Myleena theorized the engines would be capable of doing based on modulating light in hyperspace to produce FTL speed while in hyperspace. She showed several graphs and diagrams showing light behavior in hyperspace and how they hoped they could modulate it to produce the translight effect, the metaphysical state where matter was encapsulated in a bubble of modulated light, which then allowed everything within that bubble to exceed the speed of light...while *in* hyperspace. The fact that it was hyperspace introduced *thousands* of extra variables into the equation, which was why it took Cybi to crunch those numbers. *“At this time, Myleena’s roughest drafts of the theory hints that this is possible,”* Cybi concluded. *“An engine built using this theory would have two stages, the hyperspace stage and the translight stage. It still requires hyperspace jump engines to enter hyperspace, then the translight stage would take over to provide actual propulsion. Because of this, it would be possible to build crude hyperspace stage engines, just enough to get into hyperspace, then utilize the translight drive to provide actual propulsion while within hyperspace.”*

“That might be possible, but it would be prudent to use standard engines that provide real-time hyperspace travel, in case the translight drive fails,” Zaa said professionally as she studied one of the graphs.

*“We believe the same, but since it is possible, I felt it important to note. My roughest estimates of this theory against current technology is that it is theoretically possible to build an engine based on this theory. It will require major upgrades and refits to a ship’s power system and the installation of more plants to power both the jump and translight sections of the engine, but my calculations suggest that we have the technology to build this, so long as the theory is proven valid.”*

“That is all I needed to hear,” Zaa said. “I’ll return to Kimdori Prime immediately and locate the best and brightest in hyperspace science and hyperspace propulsion, Jason. I will also send one of the Elders with knowledge of translight drives to serve as a consultant. His expertise might be needed.”

“That’s why I asked for one, Denmother,” Jason agreed. “You can directly contact Myleena with the list of names, and the two of you can discuss who you send.”

Zaa stood up. “I will do so immediately. I will contact Kumi and discuss the Kimdori’s share in the cost of research.”

“Just be careful, Kumi will lie through her teeth to make you pay as much as possible,” Jason warned.

Zaa chuckled. “She will *try*,” she said with a toothy grin. “Part of my role as Denmother is negotiating, Jason, and that little infant has no inkling of what true negotiation is.”

Jason laughed. “I think you’re going to enjoy that, cousin.”

“I will indeed,” she agreed, flexing her fingers ominously. “Pardon my rudeness, cousin, but this is important enough for me to leave immediately to attend the matter.”

“I completely understand,” he assured her.

“If you would, Jason,” Denfather spoke up, “could you arrange a skimmer to take me to Jaxtra? There are things there I wish to investigate while I’m here.”

“Certainly, Denfather,” he replied. “You’ve been coming and going a lot lately.”

“Karis is one of the few places I’m permitted to come unescorted, cousin,” he smiled. “Denmother feels that I am safe here, so I am permitted to come and go as I please.”

“So long as he comes home at a reasonable hour,” Zaa warned with a harsh look, which made Jason chuckle.

After the Kimdori left, he, Cybi, and Cyra organized the hyperspace catapult tech specs, made sure nothing sensitive was in the data, then Cyra uploaded it to the Academy mainframe. Jason sent out the standard “we just released something that you might find interesting, here is where it’s located” missive to the scientific departments of all Confederate members capable of building them. He also went over the bridge specs more closely with both CBIMs, studying the theory and operation behind them, enjoying a bit of engineering work, something he wished he could do much more often rather than sit behind that desk and play Conan the Librarian. He got Red Horn on the ball building the new research facility, telling them what Myleena wanted in it, and they promised to have it done in 19 days. After that, he just did the important paperwork all the way up until the Confederate Council meeting just after lunch local time, but since he wasn’t done, he let Cyra sit in on it via a holographic construct as he finished up the last of his paperwork. He had no real desire to attend the meeting, but he had to at least tell the others about the bridges so he could arrange to have them installed in Confederate systems.

He finally joined the meeting as Ojio Ro of the Aridai and Alros of the Rathii debated some issue that Jason didn’t care all that much about, the rest of the members listening. “Glad you could join us, Jayce, since the Sha’i-ree *just* sent us a declaration of their intent to apply,” Dahnai said lightly, grinning at him.

“Huh, Denmother didn’t mention it,” Jason shrugged. “But I don’t have much time. Everyone mind suspending that discussion for a moment? I have something very important to announce.”

“Certainly, Jason,” Magran said, banging the gavel. “What did you have to say?”

“Karinne researchers have devised a fix for our logistics problem,” he said, bringing up a hologram of a bridge. “This is a hyperspace bridge. This

device will allow any ship to jump hyperspace in real time from the origin bridge gate to the destination gate. The need for real-time engines in the ship are not necessary,” he announced. “The bridge forms a real-time bridging tunnel from origin to destination, and this tunnel will allow the ship to jump through the interdiction effect. They’ve just finished testing of the devices, and they’re ready for production. In about five days, these units are going to start coming off the factory lines, and I’ll need to discuss with each Confederate member a treaty to allow us to install these devices in your systems, because these units contain proprietary Karinne technology. They’ll need the same security as a Stargate, and I won’t install one in any system that doesn’t have an interdictor. If you’re willing to trust us to interdict the system and install this bridge from that system to a hub system, we’ll have a network of real-time travel set up anywhere in your respective empire without requiring Stargates everywhere. We’ll maintain Stargates at the capitol system within a Confederate empire, then use the bridges to give access from that hub system to all of its outlying systems. For the larger empires, we’ll create additional hub systems without a Stargate to create an orderly and efficient way for ships to move around in your systems without causing massive traffic jams at the capitol system.”

There was quite a bit of stares and bright looks at him. “Babes, you start installing them in every Imperium system you can as soon as they’re built,” Dahnai declared. “I’ll have my transportation minister talk to your Kizzik about setting up a transportation network. You just saved us *billions* of credits refitting our entire freighter fleet to the new engines,” she said with a big grin.

“I don’t think there’s anyone in this council that’s going to say no,” Kreel grinned. “Dahnai’s right. Not only does it fix the supply line problem, it also saves all of us so many credits that I think I’d cry looking at the upgrade bill. Now we can focus on only upgrading the ships that will *need* the capability, like our military warships and military freighters and support ships. You have your people whip up that treaty and I’ll sign it as soon as it hits my desk, Jayce.”

“How large are these bridges?” Shevatt asked.

“Big enough for the largest Confederate ship on the line, a Skaa capitol ship, to pass through with room to spare, your Majesty,” Jason replied.

“They were built not only for freighters, but also so military ships can use them. The largest ships in the Confederate inventory can fit, and we can make them bigger if we have to.”

“I think I can say that everyone at this table will be eager to sign your treaty, Jason,” Magran smiled mildly, and every face on those holograms nodded. “Might I suggest we have an impromptu summit on Karis to peruse and sign the treaties, organize the distribution of the bridges, have our logistics specialists on hand to work out a new logistic schedule taking these bridges into account, and also discuss a few sensitive things? Nothing formal, mind you, something of an emergency meeting without a real emergency. I’d like to get a look at one of these bridges first hand, if you don’t mind. I’m very curious.”

“I think I can swing it, Grand Master,” Jason said. “I’ll be too busy to spend much time with most of you, but if you want to come to Karis and have some face to face meetings and look at the bridges, I don’t mind. Just please keep your retinues small, you know we don’t have very much hotel space for visitors of your rank. Be ready to rough it for a couple of days.”

“Well, then, shall we put it to a vote? I move we meet on Karis tomorrow afternoon Confederate Standard time, at, oh, 1700. That gives all of us plenty of time to get organized and get there,” he proposed. “The purpose of this summit is for signing the bridge treaties, inspecting the bridge unit, arrange with Secretary Jrz’kii the layout of the bridge network for our respective territories, and also to clear some business we usually reserve only for our meetings on Terra. All in favor?”

Every member except the Kimdori voted for it, and they didn’t vote because Zaa wasn’t there.

“Very well then, we can further discuss the application of the Sha’i-ree tomorrow when we reconvene on Karis. I move we adjourn immediately, so we can start making preparations for our meeting on Karis. Any objections?” When no one spoke up, Magran banged the gavel down. “We are adjourned. See all of you tomorrow on Karis, my friends.”

As holograms started winking out, Dahnai took a much more direct route. *[I’d better get those bridges installed in Imperium territory first,*

*baby,]* she said directly to him from Dracora, using her interface's ability to get onto the commune network.

*[They'll be installed in order of importance for Jrz'kii, hon, and I won't have anything to do with it,]* he retorted. *[They'll go where they need to go to take the pressure off my Merchant Marine. So if you want them in the Imperium, you'll have to convince Jrz'kii of that. Good luck.]*

*[Bastard,]* she accused playfully. *[If it was you, I'd get my way easy.]*

*[I'm so glad you think so,]* he replied with a dry tilt to his thought.

*[Pft, just blow in your ear a few times, suck your dick a little bit, and you're as compliant as a puppy.]*

*[Sounds like someone's not spending the night at my house tomorrow.]*

*[You're right, because you're spending the night over at my summer palace,]* she told him purringly. *[And I'll have Aya drag you there by the hair if you say no.]*

*[So sure of herself.]*

*[Damn right I am,]* she agreed.

*[Excuse me being blunt, hon, but I'm super-busy at the moment.]*

*[So am I, I gotta get ready to come over. So I'll talk to you later.]*

Jason sent down a few orders and sent a message to Yila telling her to come see him as soon as possible, because he *was* going to be busy. Not only would the Confederate rulers be on Karis tomorrow—which he didn't mind all that much, it gave him a chance to catch up with Kreel and Krirara—but he had a lot of work to do with Jrz'kii to start planning for the installation of the bridges.

They were a game-changer, plain and simple. With the bridges, they could interdict every single Confederate system without any worry over feeding the populations behind the interdicator. The bridges would allow the full and free flow of traffic to and from the system, almost as if there was no interdicator, more like the old Interstate highways back in America before the subjugation. The bridges would form a pan-galactic network of space highways that would allow any ship capable of getting into hyperspace the ability to move about in real time anywhere in the Confederation. The

logistical bottlenecks caused by the interdictors would disappear, and the KMM wouldn't be so overworked because they had to move most cargo around.

It was another step closer to Jason's ultimate goal, and that was lasting peace. The bridges would help bring the various members of the Confederation closer together, make them more *interdependent*, and once the threat from Andromeda was finally dealt with, it was his hope that his friends on the council would see how much better things were the way they were and decide to keep it going. The bridges would allow a beat-up old cargo freighter to go from the most remote Kirri system to the most remote Kouï system in just a matter of hours, most of that time taken up by traveling in normal space from one bridge gate to the next, and that kind of trade and the income it generated was one of Jason's biggest weapons in his crusade to keep the Confederation together as more than just a military alliance.

He hoped that once the others saw how *profitable* it was to stay in the Confederation, they would do so long after the need for it was gone.

But the bigger game-changer was something that the others wouldn't know about for a long time. If Myleena could build those translight engines, it would revolutionize Karinne transportation, and thus revolutionize nearly every aspect of the house. It would open the entire galaxy to them—it would open every galaxy in the *galactic group* to them—give them ability to get anywhere in the entire galaxy in under a minute and give them the ability to reach other galaxies in minutes instead of years. It was almost mind-boggling, that simple idea. It meant that the most remote tracts of galaxy would be reachable in seconds rather than days, and it would give them the ability to contact literally every single spacefaring race in the entire galaxy. With the drives and bridges, Jason foresaw the possibility that Terra and the Academy might become the most important system in the entire *galaxy*, the one place that every race could go to learn, and also to learn how to live in peace.

Beyond that, there was also the almost irresistible idea of finding out what was out there...Jason could almost imagine how Meya and Myra would all but swoon when they found out about the translight drives and what they meant. Who knew what kind of wonders they'd find in the far



reaches of the galaxy once they had the ability to get there? Who knew what they'd discover when they ultimately started leaving their home galaxy to explore the galaxies bordering their own, such as Andromeda and Ilviros, as the Faey called the second-nearest galaxy? The possibilities were limitless, as limitless as his imagination. After all, there were enough wonders in their galaxy alone, who knew what kind of wonders there were in other galaxies?

There were 56 galaxies in their galactic cluster, a dumbbell-shaped formation of large and small galaxies in close cosmic proximity to each other, at least when objects the size of galaxies were involved, what the Terran astronomers called the *local group*. What wonders were hiding within them?

And it was all right there, almost within reach, if only they could prove Myleena's theory and build the translight drives.

One thing was for certain...if Myleena pulled this off, her name would go down in history as one of the most important inventors who ever lived, the woman who would ultimately be remembered as the mother of practical intergalactic space travel.

That was the focus of the house for the near future, even if the house didn't know it. Anything Myleena needed, she would get. It didn't matter how much the research cost. This was too important to worry about something like money. The translight drives might be the key to winning the war against the Syndicate, of stopping once and for all what he knew would be endless invasion attempts from the Andromedans until they finally got a foothold in their galaxy, then started trying to conquer it. The drives might be the exact technology they needed to put a stop to it, to take the war to the *Syndicate* in a way that would make them leave them alone... and if it didn't, it would give the Karinnes the ability to go after those invading fleets in intergalactic space, far from any safe port, where a ship damaged in battle would have absolutely no means of repair if the crew couldn't do the repairs themselves.

And it all hinged on just how smart Myleena Karinne was.

He'd go with those odds. His best friend was one of the most brilliant engineers alive. If anyone could figure it out, could build the translight

drive, it was Myleena.

He had faith in her.

He leaned back in his chair, going over what would happen in the next few weeks. They'd build the bridge network and link all the Confederate empires together through Terra, the hub, and turn Terra into an even *more* important system than it was now, since it was going to be the nexus through which all inter-empire traffic flowed. He'd need to talk to Kim about the radical increase in traffic, get some new flight lanes planned out to deal with the increase in ship traffic both to the planet and around the planet as ships moved from one Stargate to another. The entry stations of nearly every empire might need to be expanded to handle the increase in cargo and traffic, so he'd need to talk to the engineering school in the Academy. They handled things like that. And once they got the bridge network up and running, they'd be interdicting every single system in the Confederation, which meant he'd have to increase production to get the required number and have the required number of interdictors in reserve for immediate use.

And when they were done, they'd have a system of fast transportation that would drastically increase trade and bring opportunity to every corner of every empire in the Confederation. It would increase the basic standard of living of every citizen, from the poorest street sweeper up to the richest megacorp CEO. Remote empires like the Rathii and the Kirri would have the opportunity to grow, and large powerful empires like the Imperium and the Verutan and Skaa empires would see an increase in trade revenues from the sudden increase in trade, since their goods could get anywhere in the Confederation within hours without having to deal with the bottleneck of the KMM's transport schedules. Independent cargo haulers would be back in business, able to use the bridges to move their cargos where they needed to go.

It was a big step in his plan to never have to fight another war in his lifetime, and he had a good feeling about it.

Change was coming, and it would be good.

*Thus ends the story of Inception.*

*In the next story, Conviction,  
the Confederation squares off  
against the Syndicate,  
discovering that they  
are far more cunning and  
dangerous than they  
ever imagined.*

*And there will be other stories to tell.*