

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a light gray color, framing the central text.

Revelation10

Fel

Chapter 10

Koira, 1 Kedaa, 4412, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 15 September 2027, Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 1 Kedaa, year 1337 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

The next takir was going to be filled with big days.

The biggest, and most important to Jason, was that Rann's birthday was coming up in two days. It was his 18th birthday (though not on the Terran calendar, that wasn't actually for two months), and that was a *big deal* for an American. That was the first age of majority, when an American gained the power to vote and was commonly the time when they were out of high school. So, in Jason's mind, Rann was about to cross a very big step, was about to enter a new phase of his life that had increased responsibility, and he'd set things up to ram that concept home. Starting the day after his birthday, Rann was going to be working in his office as an assistant, taking an official position he'd been filling unofficially for the last few years. He'd get his own office beside Jason's own (the empty office suite that Jason had set aside long ago just for this), he'd have his own secretarial staff in the form of Kizzik from Chirk's staff that would serve double-duty both in Jason's office and Rann's, and he'd be paid a salary for his new position as Jason's executive assistant, reflecting his first steps into

the world of adult responsibility. He'd be working in the afternoons after school, though he'd be leaving school three hours early and tutoring the missed classes so all his time wasn't taken up by his duties. That would leave him plenty of time off, which Jason considered to be extremely important. That, in Jason's mind, properly maintained a balance between Rann having the chance to be a normal teenager and also bow to the reality that he was not one.

The next big day was going to be two days after Rann's birthday, because he'd be attending a wedding. Finally, after nearly four years of strictly adhering to Shio traditions and customs, Sano Strongblade was finally relenting and marrying Kevin Ball. The funny thing was, however, it was just making something official that had been a thing for over two years. Kevin and Sano lived together in his condo in Jacksonville, and had for two years. Sano ended up there after losing her job due to layoffs and budget cuts at FNN, and she decided to take her video editing skills into the world of viddy and simsense content creation instead of trying to get another job in the news industry, becoming a content creator herself. She, in effect, became a professional gamer like Kevin and Rita, and she was successful enough to make a living at it, when combined with the income from her video editing consulting business she set up and ran on the side, helping other content creators learn how to edit the viddies to make them visually appealing. Just months after moving in with Rita in her villa in Mexico (she'd been in a bit of a financial pickle after being abruptly laid off from FNN), she bowed to the reality of her heart's yearning and moved in with Kevin. They'd been a couple for that long, but because Sano was Shio to the roots of her hair, she would not marry him until a proper amount of time had passed to satisfy the Shio culture's need for courtship...which was to save face with her family much more than it was her personal intention. If

she'd married him any earlier, her family would have taken serious issue with it. She'd pushed it with her parents by moving in with him, but they'd looked the other way in that regard. They did like Kevin, and they were not opposed to the marriage in any way, but Shio society heavily frowned on hasty marriages, so they opposed her marrying him any earlier because of it. Kevin and Sano had known each other for nearly five years and had been officially courting for four, and that was long enough in the eyes of Shio society. So, in four days, he'd be attending a wedding on Tir Tairngire, and one he'd been looking forward to attending for quite a while.

Jason had butted in by offering to host the ceremony at his vacation house, and Kevin and Sano had accepted. That was mainly a nod to the fact that Kevin was *shaman*, and Jason wanted him to marry under an *oye* tree and in a place filled with love and kindness. As *shaman*, the trees deserved to participate in the ceremony too, after all. Kevin belonged to their world, and their world had the right to be there to share in his happiness Kevin had never developed his *shaman* abilities, but the fact that he was sensitive to the light of love meant that he was *shaman*.

What was going to make both of those social events more fun was that he was going to have a special guest along with him. Estrella was scheduled to arrive in person in just a few hours, now that the Republic felt it was safe enough for her to make the trip from C6D to Karis. This wasn't a personal visit, however, it was an official state visit, meaning that she was arriving on her ship and be conducting talks with the Karinnes in what would be the first step of the Karinnes revealing the existence of the Galactic Republic to the rest of the Confederation. Both the Karinnes and the Republic had decided that the need to keep them secret had passed, and that it was time for the galaxy to learn that they had official contacts and ties with

governments outside of it. She wasn't coming by herself, though, she was bringing her two youngest children with her on this official state visit. She visited all the time unofficially in her bionoid, but now she finally had the chance to return in person, and not keep herself a secret.

It was safe enough for her to come in her ship and reveal themselves to the Confederation and beyond because, quite simply, the Republic and their allies in their home galactic cluster had gained an overwhelming advantage in their war against the Bru, and their victory was all but guaranteed at this stage. Their overall strategy had been very, very effective, because they weren't trying to completely eradicate the Bru to eliminate the threat they posed. What the Republic intended to do, and what they had planned to do over the last sixty years, was containing the Bru, eliminating their ability to threaten their neighbors. Their strategy for that laid in the barrier system that enclosed their home galaxy. They were taking those barrier nodes, adding new ones they built partly using the resources the Karinnes had been supplying them the last few years, and they were slowly setting them up around the Bru's galaxy to enclose them within a wall they could not breach, isolating them from the rest of the universe. The Bru would be allowed to do whatever they wanted within their own galaxy, and the rest of the universe would be safe from them.

Being able to do that work without interruption had required them to destroy the Bru's very large and dangerous navy, so they could send out their engineering ships to do the work without being harassed. Over the first three years of the war, the Republic and their allies had worked to destroy the Bru fleet, battle by battle, ship by ship, at first drawing them out of their home galaxy and wiping them out and then entering their galaxy to destroy their ships, and also their shipmaking docks and facilities to keep them from

building replacements. That process had taken three years, and had also cost the Republic and their allies thousands and thousands of ships and other assets. It was ugly, dirty business, but it was the most efficient and effective means to achieve their ultimate objective. Trying to invade the Bru galaxy and destroy their war making capability permanently would have required ghastly amounts of materials and lives to be sacrificed, so what they were doing was the most humane way to do it for everyone involved, friend and foe alike.

It had taken years, but they'd done it. The Bru's ability to stop the Republic from building the wall that would enclose them had been smashed, and now the Republic had begun that phase of their operation, which would take them about five years to complete. During that time, the Republic and their allies would leave the civilian Bru population alone, but would engage and destroy any military assets the Bru built to try to stop the barrier building operation. They were setting in place the nodes that would form the barrier that would enclose the Bru within their galaxy, would allow them to go about their own lives without making war on their neighbors, but would also allow the Republic and their allies to come through the barrier with attack fleets to stop any attempt the Bru made to breach the walls of their prison. It was a very smart and effective means to go about removing the Bru as a threat. But, it also meant that the Republic was now willing to allow Estrella to travel to Karis, since the Bru could no longer threaten any ship within their home cluster, and ships could now travel without risk of attack. The Bru navy had been wiped out, and they no longer had the ability to threaten any ship outside their galactic borders.

The Karinnes hadn't lost a single ship to the Bru, but there had been many close calls. They were no match for Bru ships militarily, but the one

advantage Karinne ships had over them was that they were too fast for Bru ships to catch, both in normal space and in hyperspace. He'd had several freighters and escorting destroyers and frigates take fire from Bru warships over the last four years, mostly at the beginning of the war, but all of them had managed to escape either using mode one or mode three, depending on the circumstances, before being destroyed. The ability of Karinne ships to go FTL in normal space had been surprisingly useful against the Bru, whose ships did not have the same capability. Their ships could only either run in sublight or go FTL in a way similar to jumping hyperspace, and when they did that, they couldn't interact with ships in real space. All they could do was jump and try to get in front of Karinne ships, which wasn't easy since Karinne ships could easily change course in mode one, and they only needed about two seconds to jump into mode three after coming out of mode one, which put them completely out of reach. The Bru had no way to attack Karinne ships that were in a translight state in hyperspace. So, when the ships were attacked by the Bru, they immediately went mode one to get away from them, plotted a jump in mode three while in mode one, then seamlessly dropped out of mode one and entered mode three once the jump was plotted and they could safely drop back into normal space. And if they could not, they executed the emergency maneuver that allowed them to jump directly into mode three while in mode one, though that damaged the ships and the engines. That made mode one a critical escape tool for his ships, one so effective that the Bru had never figured out a way to stop it.

It was necessary, since Karinne ships were no match for the Bru in combat. The Bru utilized some kind of energy pulse weapon that used an energy that their sensors couldn't analyze that went right through their shields, IP system, and armor, but Karinne engineering with its requirement for triple redundancy had given the ships the resilience to escape without

being disabled or destroyed. Thankfully they had lost no lives in those attacks due to the policy of running bionoid-only crews on any ship running supplies to C6, and they would have if they had live crews on them. They'd lost 1,308 bionoids on KMM freighters and 812 bionoids on KMS ships, but each lost bionoid represented a life saved, so that made it more than worth it in Jason's eyes. But they hadn't lost any ships, thanks to the skills of his crew and the solid engineering and construction of their ships. Karinne ships were damn tough, a fact proved during the Consortium and Syndicate Wars, and proven again in attacks from the technologically superior Bru..

Those attacks had taught Jason and the Karinnes that their focus on ship mobility and maneuverability was a critical reason why their ships survived those attacks. Armor and shields meant nothing to their technologically superior foes, but speed was speed and faster was faster, and their ships being faster meant their ships escaped with only minor to moderate damage.

Making the Bru their enemy had made the Republic their friends, and that friendship had produced real benefits far over just having Estrella for a friend. The Republic had signed the Academy Treaty and had gained access to the Academy and its archives, their data traffic flowing through Karis to hide them from the rest of the galaxy, and they had contributed to the Academy over the last few years. They'd released scientific data and information they felt the home galaxy could understand and use, which had opened up new avenues of research and development for the Academy and all the civilizations that had access to it, technologies and research that the Republic felt was safe to share. The Karinnes were the ones that actually got that data, but they had added it to the Academy without redacting or

holding it back, because that was Academy data, not Karinne data. The rest of the galaxy had no idea that the Karinnes had had the opportunity to keep all that information to themselves, but that information was not part of the oaths, and so it was meant to be shared with everyone.

An oath meant nothing if it was not upheld, even when the only ones that knew it had been upheld was the Karinnes themselves.

Their assistance had made more than just the Republic their friends... sort of. They'd made diplomatic contact with the other 26 empires that had joined to end the Bru threat, but they didn't trade with them or bring them into the Academy because they were far more of an example of how a much more advanced society treated one that was much less advanced. They weren't interested in sharing, only in taking what they felt they were owed from a "primitive state" that couldn't match their technology. All 26 of them had tried to get the specs for translight drives, either by asking nicely or just outright trying to take it, but they all learned from those attempts was that the technologically backward Karinnes had one trump card to play, and that was their ships were faster than everyone else's and their ship crews were far too alert and wily to be caught off guard. The other empires couldn't chase down Karinne ships, and thanks to the Republic running interference for them, they couldn't track them back to the home galaxy either.

The Republic rather liked their relationship with the Karinnes, saw them as extremely useful, and they didn't want their allies messing that up and causing them to lose access to the supplies and materials the Karinnes provided. The Karinnes were just advanced enough to supply the Republic with the resources it needed to fuel its super-advanced technology, freeing up their own resource production to focus on those things the Karinnes

couldn't provide. Many on the Supreme Council didn't have much higher of an opinion of the Karinnes as their allies in their cluster, but they understood that even now, the Karinnes were highly valuable and valued trading partners, and they didn't want to rock that boat.

Seriously, if the *oye* supply was disrupted, it might cause a government-toppling riot in the Republic. And it wouldn't just be the Ulala that would rebel against the Supreme Council if that happened. If there was one constant that held true in the universe, it was that about any species that ate fruit was absolutely crazy over *oye*, and threatening that supply chain was tantamount to declaring war. It was the one food that everyone liked, no matter their genetic tastes or proclivities, and was quite a bargaining chip for the Karinnes when it came to trading with the Republic.

They also liked their access to the Academy, far more than they had expected. Estrella had told them many times that the Academy had taught their science a few things they hadn't considered, *simsense* being the biggest one, and it had opened new avenues of scientific pursuit within the Republic. Much like the R quadrant empires had taught the Karinnes a whole lot about ion-based tech when they first encountered them, on top of learning about hyperspace catapults and translight drives, the Republic had found that the civilizations of the home galaxy had advanced science in fields the Republic did not pursue in ways that exceeded the Republic. The Academy represented the open exchange of ideas, and the Republic had found new ideas waiting for them when they started perusing the archives.

And that relationship had not been one sided, in the best way. Thanks to clandestine Republic data on viral structures filtered into the Academy's archives, six months ago, the Academy's researchers had finally discovered a vaccine for the Generation virus. And because of that, two months ago,

the travel restrictions on Generations were scheduled to be lifted throughout the galaxy once the empires that had opted out had the opportunity to vaccinate their populations. The vaccine and those vaccinated were harmless to Generations and Kimdori, yet the vaccine supplied complete protection from the virus' ability to rewrite DNA, rendering the vaccinated completely and utterly immune to *any* retrovirus, not just the Generation virus. And that protection was permanent, meaning that anyone that took the vaccine could *never* become a Generation, so they had to think carefully before deciding to take it. The only drawback of the virus was that it would have to be administered to newborns, so the vaccine would have to be continually produced and administered on non-Generation worlds.

The vaccine was even useful to Generations, because its aspect of protecting against any retrovirus worked for them, too. Generations were immune to any Generation retrovirus, but *not* to other kinds of retroviruses, such as the HIV virus, which caused AIDS. Generations were highly resistant to viral infections, including retroviral infections, but not immune. But with the vaccine, they would gain complete immunity to any and all retroviral agents. The Generation worlds would be taking that vaccine as well to help eradicate any kind of retroviral disease, be it natural or engineered, Generation or not.

Soon, the walls would come down and anyone would be allowed to travel anywhere within the galaxy, at least as local laws allowed. After all, not anyone was allowed to visit the Zyagya or the Jun whenever they felt like it.

Songa was researching the vaccine to see if it could be adapted to become a general vaccination against cancer, which was of great importance to the Terrans, who were now all Generations. Their

susceptibility to cancer had been part of the double-edged sword of becoming Generations, and ending cancer as a threat would be a great boon to the entire Terran race.

Life on Karis both hadn't changed much and seemed to be constantly evolving since Estrella came into his life. Things had been chugging along for the House without any real hiccups or crises over the last few years. The House was still exploring (though at a slow, deliberate, careful pace), still producing food at a rate that made it the galaxy's bread basket, still focused on knowledge, education, technological advancement, and research, so the House as a whole had been quite placid. But in his personal life, there had indeed been change, mainly due to (and because of) his children. The biggest change was that he had three (and a half) new ones, a two year old son by Symone named Verann and a three year old daughter by Jyslin named Elisae, as well as Jyslin having a three month old son by Tim whom she named Breiden, but who Tim called Brad. Symone, not to be left out, had just given birth last takir to Jiina, which was her daughter with Jason. Since Breiden was Jyslin's son, that more or less made him Jason's son too.

For all Tim's horndog antics, it was almost weird that he only had children by Symone and Jyslin.

In addition to getting new children to love, his older children had brought change into his life as they grew up. The biggest change was another marriage among his eldest children. Aran had, in three short years, met a girl from House Surrale, fallen in love with her, and then married her and brought her into the house. Kiada was a complete sweetheart, much more of what Jason would consider to be feminine than other Faey women, and was the perfect match for Aran. Aran's marriage wrapped up the

availability of his elder sons, and had also caused Maya and Vell's house to get remodeled to add a floor that became the newlyweds' apartment.

None of his elder girls had married yet, and that wasn't unusual for Faey. Girls were much less apt to settle down young unless it was an arranged marriage, so his girls were being girls as far as the Faey were concerned. And they certainly enjoyed being girls in Karinne society, which was based mostly on Faey culture where they got to chase boys to their hearts' content. All of them went through their "crazy" phase and then settled down to merely being moderately outrageous.

Sirri still spent more time on Karis than on Draconis, and she, Aria, and Yuri were still a tight trio of best friends that hung out and did almost everything together. As his girls got older, they started hanging out with the three of them—picking up way too many bad habits to boot—expanding the core of Sirri's clique. It was focused on Aria and Yuri, and included several girls their own age from Aria and Yuri's school, and now included Danelle, Sora, and Kyri, now that they were old enough to not be a drag on Sirri's shenanigans. She spent so much time here because her friends were here, and also because she had spent the last four years getting trained by Kyva Karinne and the KBB...and that turned Sirri into an *absolute beast* in an exomech. Kyva was nearly as good a teacher as she was a rigger, and Sirri had been an eager, attentive student once Kyva decided to take the girl under her wing and train her properly. The proudest moment of Sirri's young life was when Kyva presented her with a uniform patch with the KBB's heraldry standard, the nude female warrior holding a two-handed sword, and told her she was allowed to have the icon painted on her armor and on her mecha. She was an honorary member of the KBB now, and thus was allowed to use the KBB's heraldry. And Jason could admit, she

deserved that recognition. Sirri was, beyond doubt, one of the best riggers in the entire Confederation now, thanks to a combination of natural talent, desire to learn, and the quality of the riggers that trained her. Sirri Merrane was beyond doubt the equal of about anyone in the KBB except for Kyva herself, and she *deserved* to be recognized as an equal among them.

Sirri walked on air for nearly a month after Kyva did that.

His younger children had grown and matured over the years as well. Bethany and Siyae were turning into complete heartbreakers, approaching their 13th birthday and already starting to fill out, Kevin and Kaelan were showing some serious academic potential, Darran was seriously into baseball, nearly as obsessed with it as Dara was with bachi, and Siyara continued to astound everyone with her mind-boggling telepathic and telekinetic potential, though she retained her very laid back, mellow personality. She still almost never talked, however, but that wasn't an issue anymore since everyone on Karis was a Generation. Jonathon and Terry were both thriving now that they were in elementary school, both of them doing well and very popular among their classmates, and they were in the same class with some of Jason's other children that age, Jon and Julia, Sera, and Jana. The school didn't want entire classrooms dominated by strip kids, so the rest of the class was filled with children from the neighborhood. The rest of his kids that age, Rael, Hera and Halae, Zaen, and Rini and Rili were in another class, with both strip kids and other kids from the neighborhood filling it up.

Jason could understand that policy, and agreed with it. His kids, and the strip kids, needed friends outside of the strip to broaden their social horizons.

The strip also had two new residents, which represented a big change in lifestyle for them. The youngest female from the pack, Honey, had met a young male from another pack, fallen in love, and the pair formally mated. The newly mated pair left their packs and became the alphas of a new pack, which was how the wolves did things. But instead of establishing a new territory, the pair had decided to see what it would be like to live in civilization, at least for a while, to try out something new. So, the pair left Tir Tairngire and immigrated to Karis, leaving behind the hunting lifestyle and getting jobs and living the city life. Jason had moved them onto the strip as a personal favor to the alphas of both packs so he could keep an eye on the youngsters, converting a part of the mecha garage's storage loft into an apartment for them. So, now the strip had two wolves living on it, with Honey and Cayenne working for the KMS as consultants. Their job was to help riggers learn how to move naturally when merged to a Cheetah or Jaguar, to become functional quadrupeds. And they were *very* good at their jobs, riggers were adapting to operating as quadrupeds much faster since they'd taken up their positions.

Another change on the strip was that the first class of the Dukal Guard had finished initial training and was now in what Jason would call a residency internship period with the Imperial Guard. They were still technically in training and would be for three more years, but now that training was on the job, working with the Imperial Guard to learn their role and duties from the inside. Four of them had survived the training and had graduated initial basic training, and those four were now working side by side with the Imperial Guard. In a show of trust, Aya had assigned two of them to permanent positions protecting Rann and Shya along with four Imperial Guards, the two Imperial Guards rotating in and out of the other two slots. That formed a core six member team solely responsible for Rann

and Shya's protection. The other two were assigned to Jason, with his usual four guards rotating in and out of the remaining two slots.

His two Dukal Guard represented the cosmopolitan nature of the House, because neither of them were Faey. One was a Strath woman named Pirikkura di Serem ek Vehan, or just Piri, and the other was a Shio woman named Iriko Brightstone. Strath were much taller than Terrans, Faey, and Shio on the average, so it was a bit of an adjustment for Jason to have to look up at her face. She was as tall as Salira. Both Piri and Iriko were going to make it, in his opinion, because they were talented, they were determined, and they were trained by the best.

It was also different from the Imperial Guard in that there were now men in the basic training classes. Aya had shown a bit of gender bias in only accepting women for the first three classes, but the most recent class to begin training has four men in it of various species.

Aya's career in the Imperial Guard had also progressed, for she had earned a promotion to Major last year, and was now responsible for all security within Karinne territory...and that was *intergalactic* in scope now. That meant that she was now responsible for Jason's detachment, the detachment stationed at the summer palace, the new permanent detachment of seven Imperial Guard permanently assigned to the vacation house at Tir Tairngire in support of the Karinne Marines (because Rann, Shya, Dahnai, and Sirri visited there so often, the Colonel deemed it important enough to dispatch a small permanent detachment to the site), and the roving guards from the palace that quietly shadowed Sirri, or outright escorted her when the situation demanded it. She would also be the commander of the Karinne Dukal Guard until they were ready to operate as an independent organization. Kaera, shift commander of the second shift, had been

promoted to Captain to replace her as commander of the Karsa detachment, the Colonel deciding to promote from within the detachment rather than bring in another Captain to replace Aya. The choice of Kaera as the new Captain was a choice of which Jason heartily approved. Kaera had been in a leadership role within the detachment since it was formed, and had the respect and loyalty of all the guards stationed there. Mai had been promoted to command the second shift, which was also a good choice. Mai was much more irreverent and playful than most of the other guards, but she knew when to stop joking around and roll up her sleeves when the need arose.

Off of Karis, things were moving according to plan...as in, the Ten Year Plan. They were actually nearly two years ahead of schedule, with 53% of the empires that had opted in either completing transition or in the transition process. And some of the transitioned empires were some of the heaviest hitters in the galaxy; the Subrians, the Skaa, the Verutans, the Crai, the Kesadi, along with every empire in the home sector cluster save the Jun, who were the only empire that had opted out. All of them were cousins now, from the largest to the smallest, from the Verutans to the Jirunji to the Jobodi to the Zyagya, and they were now reaping the rewards from transition.

Some more than others, given that the Jirunji experiment with the males had been a resounding success, and now their male population no longer had to isolate themselves from each other. All males saw all other males as family, which meant that they no longer tried to fight each other when they came within close proximity. This caused a seismic shift in Jirunji culture, causing nearly 75% of the males to all but scatter from homeworld in a mass exodus of joyous freedom, to go where they'd never been allowed to go and experience the life that had always been denied to

them, which also allowed females to move onto homeworld to occupy the space they left behind. Before, homeworld was the planet of the males, where the only females that lived there were the Queen and a city of females that formed the governmental structure, but that was no longer the case. However, not just any female was allowed to move to homeworld. Sovial had declared that homeworld was now the center of all education and scientific pursuit, so the only females allowed to move to homeworld were females that were involved in education or science. Those females occupied the villages the males left behind and took over the education infrastructure they'd built for themselves, and they started doing their jobs of teaching and innovating. And that was a *damn smart* thing for Sovial to do, because it concentrated all of her empire's academic and scientific effort into the one place where there was a robust infrastructure already in place to support it.

The Jirunji homeworld was now much like Terra, an entire planet devoted almost purely to science and education. Sovial had just finished a change to educational policy for the Jirunji where all cubs came to homeworld for school at the age of ten (which was about the same as 14 in Faey years), living in dorms as they attended middle, prep, and primary school, an idea that the Jirunji adopted from the Kirri. That was also smart, since it put the cubs on the planet where their education was virtually the entire planet's primary focus and allowed them to centralize their educational curriculum so all Jirunji received the same education, a critical need for a species as technologically advanced as the Jirunji. The Faey did the same thing through rigorous educational standards that were heavily monitored and enforced throughout the Imperium, but the Jirunji were going the much more efficient route of sending all the children to a centralized school system where high academic standards were all but guaranteed. What was before the planet of the males was now the planet of

the scientists, the teachers, and the cubs, and it was going to make the Jirunji even more formidable once they got everything working smoothly.

The Jirunji *did not* fuck around when it came to education, which was why they were considered one of the most intelligent species in the galaxy. They were held in the same intellectual regard as the Karinnes, the Ruu, the Kimdori, and the Moridon.

Things had been progressing in a satisfactory fashion outside of the galaxy as well. Over in Andromeda, Galaxy Express had only gotten larger and more profitable, which reflected a general increase in profitability for all shipping companies as the pirate scourge was systematically brought under control. The Syndicate's modernization plans included their military, and upgraded ships sporting the newest technologies developed by both the Syndicate and the Karinnes quickly got the upper hand over the pirate organizations, driving them out of the main trade routes and sending them to lurk along the galactic backwaters. Gen was still in command of GE's paramilitary forces, but he had retired from active combat missions and gave command of the Reavers to Bei, who had matured into the role quickly... and much as Jason expected, Bei had taken possession of the first GE Jaguar they'd produced and had never looked back, utterly in love with her mecha. Gen spent most of his time training the soldiers and doing the overall strategizing, leaving the actual fighting to Bei. But he was still the most dangerous rigger in Andromeda, just he now passed on his expertise to his troops instead of doing sorties. The Board and the Karinnes still had a good working relationship, which had expanded into more trade between the two galaxies and a much stronger relationship with Dai Su and Dynamax Technologies, sending more technological upgrades to Andromeda to help the Syndicate modernize, and more or less build a

relationship of mutual aid rather than the Syndicate seeing the Milky Way as a target for conquest. The Board certainly couldn't be trusted, but for now, in the short term, they saw far more advantage in trade than they did in war.

The one area where Jason hadn't seen any major movement was in his training with the Parri. He had managed to look into his memories a few times, but he couldn't do it consistently yet. He had also increased his ability to listen to the trees, able to hear them more clearly, able to more clearly understand their language of emotions. But he was nowhere near fluent yet, nor did he really expect to be. He'd learned over the last six years that it wasn't a simple or easy process to learn what they had to teach, and the *shaman* felt he was learning at an acceptable rate, so he didn't feel like an idiot. He was learning, he was progressing, and that was what mattered most.

There was one thing he'd gotten from it, something that was very dear, very precious to him. His first success in looking at the memories of his soul, he had seen the face of his mother. His soul had not forgotten her, and he had seen her, seen her as clearly as if he'd gone back in time and inhabited his six year old body, looking up at her as they sat on a piano bench and seeing her smile down at him after he finished playing a song without making any mistakes. It had been one of the most moving experiences of his life to finally remember her face, as if it finally set something within his heart and soul back where it was supposed to be.

That memory was now a holopic that hung on the wall in the living room, the image pulled from his memory by a Haumda dream catcher and projected from a portrait frame. And Jyslin had been right, Julia looked *exactly* like his mother. She was named for his mother, and now he knew

that she carried far more of the legacy of Julia Yvette Fox than a name. And it felt so right, so *right*, that French was the language of choice between them.

He didn't have any favorites among his children, but he couldn't deny that he felt a very special connection to Julia because of her connection to her grandmother.

His elder children had been progressing quite satisfactorily in their other pursuits. Aria was still heavily into sports, but Sirri had managed to get her at least interested in rigging, which she mainly pursued because it was fun. She was actually a pretty good rigger now, even though she wasn't sure if it was what she wanted to pursue as a career. Aran had managed to get into a special honors program at his prep school (the school stage between middle school and primary school) that would let him get into a specialty primary school. He had decided to focus his pursuits into astrophysics, which meant that he'd be the kind of scientist that would work on something like translight drive or catapult technology. Dara had signed on with a pro team in Karsa, going the athlete's route, so she tutored for her academic requirements as she focused on bachi. Kyri wanted to attend a telepathy specialty primary school, which was almost a requirement given her extremely powerful talent, but also intended to train with the Pai Masters after primary school, which she did mainly because Zach was more or less being forced to do it, so he could gain full mastery of his formidable telekinetic abilities. His rather arrogant daughter couldn't stand her brother being better than her at something...at *anything*, so she wanted to train with the Masters so she would stand equal to her brother. Danelle was definitely going into academics, but she was more interested in being a teacher than a scientist, which surprised Myleena more than a little bit. It didn't make her

angry or disappointed, she just figured that as smart as Danelle was, she'd prefer to go into science or research. But Jason knew the reason for that. Danelle had always harbored a deep and secret resentment towards the fact that her mother spent so much time away from her when she was a child, and her work, her science, was the reason for it. Danelle didn't want to be a ghost mother to her own children, so she wasn't going to enter the scientific fields. But she did love science and learning, so she saw the path of the teacher would let her indulge in her love of education without letting it dominate her life the way it did Myleena. Sora was already professing interest in becoming a pilot like her mother, but more than that, she was interested in rigging because of hanging out with Sirri, so it was a toss-up if she would pursue pilot training or rigger training after primary school. Sora fully intended on going the military route and entering the KMS after primary school, and that reflected in how she focused on the mandatory military training that all his kids had to undertake. Because of her interest in both piloting and rigging, she had become probably the most consistent of the elder girls' inclusion into Sirri's inner circle. She hung out with Sirri more than Kyri and Danelle because they did a lot of rigger training together with Aria, where her sisters primarily hung out with Sirri for the clubbing and fun.

Sirri certainly partied hard, which was most of the allure of it for his daughters.

So, the lives of his older children were slowly starting to take shape. Three of them were already married, and all seven (Danelle was *his* daughter as far as he was concerned) had chosen careers for themselves, or at least knew what they wanted to do after primary school. The only one

that hadn't fully settled on a direction was Aria, and she had a bit of a pass over that because of her past.

The round of next oldest weren't quite old enough yet to start thinking about careers, but they were certainly starting to demonstrate their unique personalities, which might hint at where they were going to go in life when they grew up. Bethany was a mellow little lady who had a pronounced interest in various styles of art, mainly music, drawing, and painting. Siyae, on the other hand, was a saucy little troublemaker who was all about the digital. She was exceptionally skilled when it came to computers, even at her very young age, and was going to go into computer science. Lyra was into sports, Walter was a complete baseball fan who was already the star of his little league team, Kevin and Kaelan had formed an unholy alliance with Darran to become complete scamps and troublemakers, Siyara was still a happy-go-lucky girl who was happy no matter what she did, and Raisha and Miyai spent almost all their time with Jason just hanging out and enjoying not being in the palace and under the eyes of the rest of the Imperium. They spent a takir a month on Karis to take lessons in being Generations from the OG Generations, but that time was also there to let them relax, have fun, and just be kids, something that was very hard for them to do in the palace. His two sets of twins with the twins, Hera and Harae and Rili and Rini, were just old enough to be considered part of the second wave of kids, the oldest of their "wave" and just a few months younger than the youngest of the others, Darran, so they were considered part of the second older group of kids rather than the third. And not surprisingly, the twins of each pair had similar personality traits. Hera and Harae were precocious and were very bright and interested in learning, and Rili and Rini were athletic and active, and were already professing interest in being riggers from watching their older sisters.

The third wave of kids were only one to two years younger, but they were still too young to be much of anything but kids, and Jason was just happy with them being happy.

But the last few years weren't all filled with good times. The biggest blow had been the passing of Navii Karinne last year, just a few years after retiring. The entire house mourned her loss, and the KMS, her creation, her brainchild, and her legacy, honored her for nearly two months with missing man formations and a holo of her at both entrances into Kosigi. Jason had put her armor on a stand in the Hall of Heroes within an hour of learning of her passing, in a spot that afforded her the most honor...a spot he had left open more or less just for her. She may have never raised a weapon in defense of the house herself, but without her, the house would not be here today, so she *deserved* to be honored in that most hallowed of halls, the most sacred place in the house to any member of the KMS and most of the civilians.

There was political loss as well. Kim Duk Moon had decided to retire after 30 years in government service to Korea before the subjugation and nearly 18 years serving in the UN afterward. The Deputy Secretary General decided to retire as well, which meant that the UN elected a new executive to take their place. The new SG was Mariana Sideris, the Greek Ambassador, and her new Deputy was Canadian Ambassador Michael Dubois. There was that, and there was also that Kreel only had two years left before term limits would force him out as High Councilor, and as was usual within the Union, things were getting murky. The Union had a long track record of demagogues and populists better at talking than governing getting elected, which was why Kreel was so insanely popular, because he was *competent*. Kreel was doing his best to make sure a competent

Councilor replaced him, but despite his popularity, that wasn't a guarantee. Grimja politics were as free-wheeling as every other part of their society, and very few things were guaranteed because of the sheer number of voters in their system..

He still couldn't get over how tall Rann was now. He was eye to eye with his father, and since he exercised quite a bit, he had his father's wide shoulders and same general physique, which made him look like a football player. His hair had settled into quite a pleasing shade of orangish-red, which was a result of it being naturally bleached due to exposure to the sun. Without the bleaching, his hair was closer to his mother's auburn hair. Given Rann hadn't finished growing yet, that meant he was going to be even taller than Jason when all was said and done. And that made Jason... happy.

He wouldn't be the only one. Zach was even taller than his brother, and was going to be a *beast* when he was fully grown...he may end up being around 5 and a half shakra and weight 140 konn, and all of that would be muscle. Not only was he tall, he was built like a Haumda, with a barrel chest, massive shoulders and arms, and legs like tree trunks. Being married to Dara meant he did a *lot* of exercise under the effect of an inducer for additional strength training, and he had turned into a formidable specimen thanks to all of that working out. There would be few Terrans and even fewer Faey and Shio on Karis taller than Zach when he was done growing.

Mike was almost proud of how Zach had developed, given he was still and avid bodybuilder. Zach was *ripped*, and he was only going to get bigger as he finished growing.

He had also become a monster on a bachi pitch, since Dara more or less forced him to help her practice.

He got to see Zach in all his muscular glory as he came down into the kitchen, since Zach and Dara were over and eating breakfast with their siblings. Jason picked up Elisae as she ambled into the kitchen, and she giggled when he kissed her noisily on the cheek. “Hey munchkin,” he greeted his adorable raven-haired daughter, hair so black it made Jyslin nearly jealous.

“Morning Daddy!” she bubbled. She was a very happy, energetic little girl. She gave a squeal and a giggle when he whirled around and down into her high chair, just as Ayama set her plate down for her. “Where’s Mommy?”

“Upstairs, getting Braiden ready to come down,” he answered. “Remember guys, half day at school today,” he reminded the older children, speaking aloud because Elisae was present. Any time an unexpressed child or a Kimdori was in the room, they spoke. “Estrella is bringing her two of her children this time, and I want you to meet them.”

“How old are they?” Bethany asked.

“Thirteen and ten,” he answered. “So they’re around your age, Beth. That means I want you and Siyae to show them around once Estrella lets them go off on their own.”

“No problem, Dad,” Siyae answered between bites of her omelet. “We can grab the boys and Siyara and make a group out of it, show them all the best places in the city.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason told her. “Just don’t do anything crazy. Remember, they’re not used to Karis,” he warned. “And no hijacking the skimmer this time, young lady.”

She laughed. “I told you I could drive it as good as anyone,” she declared. Two years ago, Jason had bought a skimmer with an autonomous autopilot that he allowed the kids too young to drive to use, and that poor thing almost never got to sit on a pad. It was constantly flying all over the city to pick someone up or drop them off, and often didn’t return back home all day on the weekends. Jason allowed the kids Bethany and Siyae’s age to go into Karsa unescorted, and the skimmer was how they got back and forth. The skimmer was programmed with who was allowed to go where, so it also wouldn’t drop them off anywhere they weren’t allowed to go. And since threatening to take away skimmer privileges was the most potent parenting weapon he had against the kids, it was very useful to him as well. Nothing snapped one of his errant children back in line faster than the threat of taking away skimmer privileges.

That Siyae managed to hack the skimmer so she could drive it manually showed off her greatest talent. There was no doubt in his mind Siyae was going to end up on Hadjha Siyhaa’s computer specialist team by the time she was 25. She was *brilliant* when it came to computers at the tender age of 12, both programming and hardware, and she just got better and better as she learned more about them..

“Rules are rules,” he said sternly “You’re not allowed to drive until you’re fifteen, so you wait until you’re fifteen.”

She playfully stuck her tongue out at him, then laughed when he glared at her.

“Watch it, girl, or you’ll be walking for a month,” he threatened, which made her laugh.

“I’ll just hack the skimmer again,” she teased with a grin.

“You’re talking yourself into a month in your room with a locked door.”

“Meanie,” she teased.

“All day every day,” he said forcefully as Danelle came into the kitchen. She’d slept over in her room last night. “Morning Dani.”

“Morning Dad,” she replied, kissing him on the cheek before going by. “When is Estrella arriving?”

“About four hours if they stay on schedule,” he answered. “The *Setrai* and its escorting task force are about to arrive at C5H, and from there the *Setrai* continues here with a small escort squadron, transiting the Stargate chain to get here. That’s all sublight travel.”

“She still bringing her kids?”

“Two of them,” he affirmed. “Beth and Siyae are gonna show them around Karsa.”

“I was so hoping that Herilu was coming,” she sighed. Herilu was her second oldest son and had visited via bionoid several times, after they made bionoids of her three older children for them to use so they could visit Karis and meet their mother’s friends. Him and Danelle were close friends, and possibly maybe even a little more. And for one, Jason had no problem with that.

“Estrella said he has very important exams, and he can’t miss them,” he told her. “Hopefully he can come in person next time. This won’t be the last time she visits in person, now that it’s safe for the Republic to move around in their cluster.”

“Me too. I want to meet him in person. Bionoids just aren’t the same.”

“They’re realistic enough,” Shya noted slyly.

Danelle gave her a short glare, which made Shya laugh.

“Does that mean Estrella’s people beat the bad bro people, Dad?” Julia asked in French. Even around others, she spoke to him only in French, but that wasn’t that big a deal because everyone in the room also spoke French.

“They haven’t won yet, but they have the upper hand,” he answered her in French. “And they’re called the Bru, not bro.”

“Oh, okay.” She gave him a darling smile that showed how lovely his little girl had become. Julia was going to give Sora a run for her money in the looks department when she grew up.

[Jason,] Cybi called privately.

[What’s up, Cybi?]

[I’d like your permission to turn on Songa’s medical scanner in the house. There’s a slight anomaly in Shya’s vitals that I’d like to check out. The security node scanner in the house isn’t the most sensitive, so I want to access the medscanner.]

[Something wrong?]

[Not wrong per se, but if the scanners are right, Shya’s blood chemistry has slightly changed from the last scan. It could be a scanner glitch, or it might be something as simple as her eating something unidentifiable out of the Merchant District’s Diner’s Street again.]

He suppressed a chuckle. *[Go ahead and access it.]*

[Thank you,] she replied. There was a brief pause, then she communed again. *[Oh dear.]*

[Oh dear what?]

[I'm making an appointment with Songa.]

[Over what? What's wrong with Shya?]

[Nothing's wrong with her, but it seems my suspicions are correct.]

[About what? Girl, don't make me come over there and unplug you.]

She returned pure amusement. *[Songa will have to confirm it, Jason, but there's a 96.3% chance that Shya is pregnant.]*

He nearly had his knees unlock, his expression turning shocked. *[Hold on wait wait WHAAAT?]* Shya nearly exploded, communing openly. *[I'm PREGNANT?]*

[Yeah, forgot she was a listener, Cybi?] Jason asked caustically as the entire strip all but blew up.

[I think you are, but we need Songa to give you an exam to confirm it. So, Shya, you should go straight to the annex after breakfast.]

[After breakfast my butt, we go NOW!] she retorted. *[Songa, are you still here?]*

[Yes I am, Shya, give me about twenty minutes and I'll meet you at the annex,] she answered.

And that completely threw the morning on its ear. Instead of taking the kids to school before going to the office, Surin took them while Jason and Jyslin went with Rann and Shya to the annex. Songa arrived about ten

minutes after they got there, time Shya spent all but pacing around the private exam room attached to Songa's office, then she sat down and allowed Songa to do her work. She used a handheld medscanner as Shya laid on the exam table, slowly and carefully sliding it over her abdomen. Miaari arrived not long after she began, which caused her to shift to speaking aloud for Miaari's benefit. "Cybi was very alert to catch it with nothing but the passive scanners," she announced lightly. "She was right. You have a fertilized egg that has just attached itself to your uterine wall, Shya. That means that you are definitely pregnant," she declared, looking at a flat holo to her right as she spoke, which displayed an ultrasound-like image. "The placement looks good, so you shouldn't have any complications in that regard. I dare say that the change in your hormone levels just began last night, your body reacting to the implanted egg."

"I'm pregnant? I'm pregnant!" Shya nearly squealed, almost convulsing off the table before Songa's firm hand on her lower chest, below her pulled-up shirt, dissuaded her attempt. "Ranny, we're gonna have a baby!" she nearly shouted. "I'm so happy!"

"Well, that proves that Faey teens can indeed get pregnant," Miaari mused lightly. "But then again, it's Shya. She was always one to bend to rules to her whim."

"I'm not complaining!" Shya laughed happily as Jason's somewhat startled son awkwardly hugged his wife as best he could with Songa in the way.

"It's certainly exceptionally rare for a girl as young as Shya to conceive, but you're right, Miaari. She *is* Shya," Songa said with a smile towards her patient.

Jyslin crushed him in a hug as he processed this new information. His daughter in law was pregnant. He was going to be a grandfather. A *grandfather*. That just...just boggled his mind. He didn't feel old enough to have kids as old as Rann and his siblings, let alone to be looking at being a grandfather in about ten months. Rann looked equally scattered from his expression, as if it had never even occurred to him that it could be possible, and in a way Jason could understand that. While Faey girls were technically able to get pregnant as soon as they started menstruating, they rarely if ever released an egg from their ovaries during their teenage years. The menstrual cycles were sterile ones. A Faey woman didn't release an egg with every menstrual cycle until she was about 25, which was most likely why 25 was considered the age of majority in Faey society. Simply put, the younger a Faey was, the rarer a chance that she might conceive, to the point where young teens around Bethany and Siyae's age had a statistical 0% chance of conceiving. Even for a teen Shya's age, that chance was exceptionally low, around 1%.

The children of such extremely rare pregnancies were considered to be blessed by Aris in the Faey religion, and a disproportionate number of them ended up as priests in her church. In fact, to achieve the higher ranks within the church, they *had* to be blessed. They even had a title, *Aris te si*, Child of Aris, that was placed on their birth certificates and they were allowed to use almost like a title of nobility in Faey society. His grandchild would have the right to be addressed by the contraction of that title *Arissi*, and that title mattered more to those who had it than any noble rank they might hold.

Those who primarily worshipped Aris were known as Arissi, much like those who followed Islam were called Muslims, but the children of Aris used that as a formal title, and were the only ones allowed to use it as such.

A lay Faey could say they were an Arissi, meaning a follower of Aris, but only a blessed child could use that term as a title, to be addressed as “*Arissi whoever*.” It was a subtle differentiation, but it was there.

“I have to tell Mom!” Shya squealed, putting a finger to her interface.

“Given half the neighborhood heard Shya this morning, we should do a press release,” Jason noted calmly.

“*I’ve got one ready to go,*” Cybi told him from a speaker in the ceiling. “*I should release it?*”

“Go for it,” he affirmed, glancing towards the camera in the room the CB units were no doubt using to observe.

They heard the reaction seconds later, as they heard several shouts and cries of delight from the nursing staff down the hall from Songa’s office. The congratulations hit the room like a deluge, as all of Shya’s friends and family showered her with congratulations, to the point where she most likely had to split to make sense of the cacophony. But Jason and Jyslin got one as well. [*I can’t believe I wasn’t there to get the news! Why didn’t you call me!*] Dahnai complained.

[*Blame Shya, she hustled us over here the instant Cybi told her that she suspected she might be pregnant,*] he answered. [*By the way, congratulations, love, you’re gonna be a grandmother.*]

[*I’m ecstatic!*] she replied joyously, her happiness shimmering through her thought. [*I was gonna be there in time to greet Estrella, but change of plans. I’m literally running towards the nearest dropship as we commune. I should be there in about forty minutes.*]

[*I’ll have them clear the lanes for you,*] he answered.

They were done at the annex in just a few more moments, but that was enough time for a huge crowd to spontaneously gather around the perimeter, as just about everyone nearby rushed to the annex when word got out that Shya was there. Understanding it might cause a near-riot if they just left, Jason had Rann and Shya go down and exit the main doors on ground level and at least make themselves visible to the crowd. To their credit, despite having no security around the annex borders, the crowd respected the annex grounds and didn't come onto the annex's front lawn. That was not how Karinnes did things. Shya and Rann had their four guards with them, two Imperial guards and two Dukal guards, who stood behind them as they waved to the crowd. They didn't just stay at the entrance, however, they advanced down and mingled with the crowd, which no doubt gave their guards a bit of a seizure, but also showed the major difference between Karinne rulers and most other rulers. Jason and Rann had absolutely no fear of or concern for their safety around the subjects of the house, so Rann had no qualms about going into the throng and accepting their congratulations. Jason and Jyslin stayed inside, since this wasn't about them, giving their son and his wife their proper moment in the sun.

Dahnai arrived as they were out with the members, and she just waded right in, to the strenuous objection of her guards, and gave Shya a crushing hug, which caused a riotous cheer to erupt from the surrounding crowd. That was when Jason and Jyslin joined them, along with their older and middle kids, joining what became a growing open celebration in the plaza outside the annex.

That celebration just got bigger and bigger. The daily business of the house all but ground to a halt as the news swept through the house, as members flooded the sidewalks and streets and plazas and celebrated like

the Paladins had won another Empress' Crown. After about an hour of growing celebration, after Jason managed to extricate himself from the throng and get to the office so he could prepare for the arrival of Estrella, he succumbed to reality and declared a house holiday. That meant that everyone that skipped out on work or school to go out and celebrate wouldn't get in trouble for it. He also had trouble dragging the family out of the celebration to get them gathered together for the arrival of Estrella. By the time he got all the kids gathered together in the White House and ready to go meet Estrella, the *Setrai* was coming through the Stargate to C1A-A01-2, a planet in cluster C1 that was their permanent outpost named Persephone (out of Greek mythology). Estrella's ship was escorted by a squadron of Republic military vessels, 20 sleek cruiser-sized ships, as well as the *Pegasus* and a task force of 24 KMS vessels.

Seeing the *Setrai* and the *Pegasus* side by side was a great indicator of just how big Estrella's ship was. It was noticeably larger than the escorting KMS fleet flagship, but not outrageously so. It was an island-sized ship that held tens of thousands of Ulala who served as a functioning governmental body within the Republic. The *Setrai* was not a warship, even though it was heavily armed, it was a government ship that served as an extension of the Republic's governmental structure. It was Estrella's home, and her home being mobile meant that she could move about the Republic and attend to her duties without ever leaving home. That let her execute her council duties within the Republic much more easily. The Ulala's entire governing structure was on that ship...something that Jason felt was a bit of a security risk. Take out that ship, and the entire Ulalan government would be in chaos. But that was the way the Republic did things, and it wasn't his place to gainsay them.

When Estrella retired from the council, she would be awarded a “retirement” ship about the size of a KMS battleship, that would be crewed by the Republic Navy for the rest of her life. That way she would have a permanent home and be allowed to go anywhere she wanted to go. The *Setrai* would then be passed to the new Ulalan member of the Supreme Council, who would be given the option to rename the ship if she so pleased, though none had done so for the last 300 years.

Jason, Dahnai, and Symone herded the kids out to the main landing pad of the White House, joined almost at the last minute by Krirara, who had just arrived from Kirri’arr to start her work day, Enva, who like Kreeel had come to know Estrella over the last few years through her very close friendship with Dahnai, and Sirri and Aria, who had been lingering a bit too long in the compound. It wasn’t long before a small flotilla of fighters and exomechs, both Republic and KMS, escorted a Republic shuttle down into the city. It came in under the canopy of Cybi’s tree slowly, and they watched as it came in over the fence, extended landing skids, and landed. The shuttle was made of a shiny, nearly reflective silvery-bronze colored metal that looked nearly liquid, with not a single mar or blemish on its shiny surface. There wasn’t even lines for the hatch, which simply appeared after the shuttle was fully on the ground as if the hatch was unannealed from the surrounding hull. The hatch swung down and changed to form stairs, making Jason much more certain the metal wasn’t solid, and Estrella appeared in the hatchway. Her two kids ran out in front of her, all but jumping down the steps, a rakishly handsome dark-haired young man and his adorable silver-haired younger sister, the pair looking to be about twelve and ten. Much like Estrella, they were dressed in flowing silk-like materials, the son in a knee-length kilt with sleek trousers under it that had scarves over it and the young lady in a long skirt made of strips of material. Both of

them had elegant gold and silver chains attached to their clothes, and jingling bangles that would make chiming sounds when they danced. The main difference in their attire was that it was much more concealing, the young man in a tunic with a vest over it and the girl with a blouse, clothes that covered their torsos rather than the bustier or bra-like garments that Estrella favored. But their clothing was still brightly colored and nearly joyous in cut and style, meant to accent their movements as they danced. The two of them stopped at the base of the steps and turned to face each other, then made a motioning movement with both arms as Estrella came down the steps behind them. She smiled and put her hand fondly on her daughter's shoulder, then took Jason's hands when he stepped up, giving him a gloriously smile. *It's wonderful to see you again in person, Jason,* she declared in greeting.

It is indeed, he replied as six members of Estrella's personal guard filed down behind her, each of them wearing archaic armor and carrying spears with colorful scarf-like tassels attached just under the head instead of rifles or other modern weapons. This was an official state visit, so it was no surprise she was escorted by guards. She then turned and gave fond hugs to her true best friends on Karis, Myleena, Jyslin and Symone, hugged Enva fondly, then took Dahnai's hands with a bright smile. *Now, it's my honor and pleasure to present to you my youngest son Leseni and second youngest daughter Kirim. Children,* she prompted.

The two of them stepped up and bowed, in nearly perfect unison, as the guards spread in a loose arc behind them. *It's our honor to meet you,* they sent, also in unison. Both of them were lucid and strong, hinting that they were telepaths on the same level as their formidable mother. The fact that

the younger of them was expressed and clearly very well trained in her gift made that even more clear.

Well, there won't be a sending barrier, but don't worry, all of us speak Ulala if you prefer to speak, Jason assured them.

“They learned Faey, just for this visit,” Estrella said aloud in Faey, giving her children a loving smile. “It’s always polite to be able to speak to your hosts in the language they find most comfortable.”

“Well said. Kids, might I present to you my daughters, Siyae and Bethany Karinne. They’ve agreed to show you around the city while your mother and I talk business,” he introduced, motioning to the girls. They stepped up and bowed formally, but then Bethany stepped up and took the hands of the older boy, Leseni.

It's so nice to meet you! Bethany sent warmly.

The girls won't be the only ones, we're all gonna go with you Kaelan added. *There are tons of great places in Karis you need to visit.*

I brought some Confederation credits for them to do some shopping, Estrella sent lightly. *They've been looking forward to touring the Merchant District for months.*

Mom said you can find so many amazing things there! the girl, Kirim, sent eagerly.

I'm more interested in the big park with all the water slides, Leseni sent with excitement. *I love to swim, and that looked so fun!*

You should have plenty of time to enjoy the park, the days here are considerably longer than in the Republic, Jason told him. *You're welcome*

to explore the entire city, kids, and without us looking over your shoulder. My kids know the rules, and they're experienced. They'll keep you out of trouble.

What kind of trouble could there be here?

This is a multicultural city, Leseni, Jason answered. And some of our citizens have customs and traditions that you would consider to be dangerous, which we do not forbid because they are part of their cultural identity. Some, you could consider even barbaric. The last thing I need is for you two to get into a match of Zyagya grazkaur, or to wander into an Urumi rite of un'kreh, he noted in a dry mental tone. My kids know what to not get involved in, and they'll keep you two out of unnecessary trouble while you're here. Though, I'm sure they'll get you into all kinds of necessary trouble, he added blandly, which made Siyae laugh. My kids are incorrigible rogues, guys, and they love nothing more than to get their friends into trouble with them. Fair warning.

Now it just sounds more fun, Leseni sent impishly, giving Kaelan a slight smile.

I just get here and you're already teaching my children bad habits? Estrella challenged playfully.

Kids need space to be kids. If they can get away with it, then they deserve the rewards of their labor, Jason sent shamelessly.

Yeah, now you know why Dad is the most awesome Dad ever, Siyae grinned.

What she's not telling you is the penalty for getting caught, Jason added ominously, which made all his kids laugh. Big risks have big

rewards, but also carry big punishments for failure.

The danger makes it fun, Danelle declared.

Estrella glanced at Jason. We saw lots of people in the streets, and it looked like a giant party. What's going on?

We found out a couple of hours ago that Shya is pregnant, Jason informed her, which made her gasp.

What wonderful news! I rejoice for you! she sent formally, giving Shya a sudden hug.

Aww, thanks, Estrella, Shya answered.

Faey must be different from us in more than just skin tone. It's almost unheard of for a girl your age to become pregnant.

It's the same for us, Jyslin informed her. Shya's child is considered blessed by the goddess Aris because she was conceived when Shya is very young.

Ah. We don't have that custom, but I can see why you'd have it, she answered. Among the Ulala, such a child would be the responsibility of the grandmother; since the mother isn't old enough to carry such a responsibility by herself. But it's a responsibility we would accept with joy, she smiled.

Shya will get lots of help from us, but she'll still be responsible for her baby, Dahnai told her.

As it should be. She can't learn if she's not involved, Estrella agreed. Now then, what do you have planned, or is there anything planned?

Not really. We'll let the kids go explore the city, and it's whatever you wanna do first, Jason told her. We can do business first or have fun first, up to you.

First? A meal at Seido's café, then we hit the Merchant District. I've traded a lot of Confederation credits with the supply run crews, enough to do some real damage this time. And since I came on my own ship, getting my booty home's gonna be easy, she declared immediately, which made Jason laugh.

I think the planet is about to be robbed, Symone sent slyly.

Your merchants had best sharpened their negotiation skills, or I'm going back home with half the planet, she warned impishly.

It must be a universal constant in gender that women love to shop, Jason noted lightly.

I rarely get the chance to do it seriously, because I'm on the Supreme Council. Here, I'm delightfully anonymous, she grinned.

And now you see the appeal of coming here for me, Dahnai sent with an audible laugh. Here, I can just be me, not the Empress.

It's a boon for me too, it's hard to do normal things at home. But here, I can, Enva agreed.

Yeah, that's why I'm here more than at home, Sirri agreed with her own laugh. Mom yells at me all the time because I'd rather be over here training or hanging out with my friends than be in the palace.

You do have duties, girl, and you're ignoring them, Dahnai reminded her.

Estrella set the agenda, so they carried it out. They let the kids go so they could explore the city, and the adults first went to Seido's café—one of Estrella's favorite places to eat on Karis—then they ended up doing a little actual business when Estrella found out that a lot of the shops were closed in the Merchant District because of the sudden holiday. Shop owners and clerks were too busy celebrating out on the streets to keep the shops open. So, Jason, Dahnai, Enva, and Estrella ended up at the table out on the deck beside his house discussing the official unveiling of the Republic to the rest of the galaxy, a move that the Republic wanted for two reasons. Firstly, other races in the Republic wanted to send researchers to the Academy to study its data on site, which would be much faster for them, something they couldn't do as easily as the Ulala since they could pass as Dreamers. Secondly, they wanted to send students to the Academy so they could take classes from the Pai instructors that taught telekinesis, something that couldn't easily be done over remote. They could access the data and books and academic coursework about Pai TK, but to actually learn their techniques from a practical standpoint, that required them to be there in person. Only the Ulala could attend Academy while pretending to be from another government, so the Republic was willing to reveal itself to the galaxy in order to get what they wanted out of the Academy.

It took Estrella nearly a year to talk Jason into allowing it, mainly through promises to not bring Republic technology into the galaxy and to pretend that they weren't as advanced as they were. The students here would be using "local technology" that they'd bought, stock Confederation Standard technology from the Imperium, Union, and Sha'i-ree, and would not bring *anything* from the Republic, not even clothes or personal effects. They'd have the ability to communicate with home, but they couldn't bring anything from home. They would do that to further hide the truth of them

from the rest of the galaxy. The students and researchers here would further be very evasive about just what kind of technology the Republic possessed, pretending that the Republic had equal and comparable technology to the Confederation.

Estrella was going to publicly sign the Academy Treaty while she was here, becoming the first exo-galactic civilization that would become part of the Academy system...at least officially, anyway. The truth was, they'd been part of the system for nearly four years.

Most of what they talked about was how much Estrella was going to reveal about the Republic and how much she was going to conceal, and that was mainly surrounding Republic technology. But they didn't have that discussion with just the four of them. Denmother Zaa arrived not long after they settled in and joined them. Estrella knew Zaa from both her first visit and her years of contact with the Karinnes, and she was as fond of Zaa as Zaa was of her. She had also come to know Krirara much better since her first visit, to the point where the two considered each other good friends. They were also joined by Kreel not too long after she arrived, who had work back in the Union he couldn't put off to come greet her when she arrived.

This was the majority of Jason's innermost circle of closest friends outside the House—plus Krirara despite her all but being a House member due to her working for Jason—missing only Magran, Krazrou, Sk'Vrae, and Grayhawk. Over the last few years, Estrella had managed to become a part of it, to the point where she was rather well versed in the politics of the home galaxy.

The discussion expanded to include Ayuma when she arrived from Terra, the short, middle-aged woman coming in from the landing pad and

coming up the steps in the act of taking off her coat. Ayuma knew Estrella and knew the truth of the Ulala—she *had* to know to do her job—and the two of them were fairly good friends on top of that. “Ayuma, good to see you in person for once,” Estrella greeted with a smile, taking Ayuma’s hand after she reached the table.

“I would have been here an hour ago if I could have gotten out of a meeting,” she chuckled in reply, leaning down and kissing Estrella on the cheek. She used her power to float her coat over to the rail and laid it over it as she sat in the empty seat beside Krirara. “So, where are we?”

“Ironing out the last of the details about the Republic going public,” Jason answered.

“You have your people who are coming here ready?” Ayuma asked her.

“Yes, they’ve been taught the rules, and issued the clothing and equipment they’ll need,” she answered.

“I’ve talked to the TK school, and they’re more than happy to expand their classes to include your students at the start of the next semester. We’ll have an entire new complex of school buildings open in a couple of Terran weeks that are slated for them. The number of TK students increases almost geometrically with every semester,” she chuckled.

“Ah, the Ten Year Plan. More and more Generations?”

“Precisely, love,” she nodded. “We’re getting a lot more people taking the advanced courses than we expected, so we’re expanding the school to accommodate them.”

“Sometimes I wish I could be telekinetic,” Estrella said wistfully. “Even more so since I’ve seen those recordings of the Pai Masters.”

“Well, what they do is far beyond us normal folks,” Kreel chuckled. “I couldn’t even do half of that crazy stuff with a gestalt.”

“Not quite a Master, Kreel?” Estrella asked.

“Barely mediocre,” he admitted with a rueful laugh. “Afraid I didn’t get long whiskers when it comes to TK. I’m just your standard, every day, perfectly average TK.”

“With teachers that can show him tricks to get past his glaring deficiency,” Jason added teasingly.

“Yah yah, bite my furry butt, Jayce,” Kreel said archly, which made them laugh. “We all can’t be as glorious as you. And I’m not surprised the Republic wants to send their TKs here after seeing the Pai, Estie. They put us all to shame.”

“I’m just glad we talked Jason into allowing it,” she smiled over at him.

“It only took you a year,” he reminded her. “But I think we can handle it, as long as your people don’t draw too much attention to themselves.”

“They’ve been told exactly that,” she nodded.

“I’ve told my children to keep a close eye on just how much attention Republic students draw,” Zaa said. “So rest assured that nothing is going to take us by surprise.”

“I think it’s going to work out fairly well,” Enva mused. “And they’ll be here for the big ceremony.”

“What ceremony?” Estrella asked.

“They’re taking down the dome, nearly two years ahead of schedule,” Jason told her. “Luna’s surface is now life-sustaining, so they’re taking down the dome to open Academy City up to the rest of the moon. It’s still a barren rock, but now it has an atmosphere and it’s within standard tolerance for temperature and air pressure. We can walk around on the surface now.”

“Yeah, a bunch of us have been helping the Academy with that, that’s why it’s ahead of schedule,” Kreel said. “About half of Luna’s atmosphere came from one of our planets, Samijjar IV. We were happy to get rid of it, the air pressure there would kill you instantly if you were exposed to it. So that atmosphere went somewhere it can do some good.”

“Yeah, and the other half of it came from Venus, in the Terran system, which has the same problem,” Jason nodded. “Thanks to the help of governments like the Union, they’re two full years ahead of schedule in the terraforming project. The atmospheric heaters on Luna have the temperature up to where they wanted it and the water replicators have finished their job with the help of the Skaa, who brought in some water from their territory to augment the replicators, so the moon is ready for the next phase of terraforming. Organic soil infusion. The soil should be infused and able to grow flora just as the moon’s atmosphere starts to produce weather patterns. Until they do, we’ll have to go with artificial rain to water the growing flora, which will be done by the Skaa. Skaa water seeders are going to be dropping water to simulate rain until weather patterns form. The Skaa have a lot of experience with the process since they terraform their planets to be extra wet to create jungle and rain forest environments similar to their home planet, so we’ll be relying on their expertise during this phase of the project.”

“That’s planning, not luck,” Ayuma chuckled. “The terraforming team has done a smashing job with Luna. We’ve all been very impressed with their work.”

“I hope we have the chance to tour the moon,” Estrella said.

“You can go in person, but we’ll have to use bionoids. Luna is off limits to Generations, at least for the time being,” Ayuma told her. “We can’t go there until the entire galaxy votes to remove the restrictions, which won’t happen until the Generation vaccine has been administered to all interested parties.”

“Ah yes, that pan-galactic agreement,” Estrella nodded. “We need to add that to the tour, Ayuma. I’d very much like to be there when you open the dome.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she nodded. “It’s scheduled for three days after your signing ceremony, and I’m sure you’ll still be here then.”

“Oh yes, I’ll be here for a good ten days at least,” she nodded. “I have to introduce myself to the other members of the Confederation and do all the typical diplomacy.”

“Most of them know about you,” Enva chuckled. “They don’t know exactly who you are or where you come from, but they know that Jason has extended diplomatic contact with several exo-galactic civilizations.”

“Oh? And who are they, Jason?”

“Empires from galaxies on the other side of the string from where you are, over on the A side of the string. All from the A2 cluster. That’s the next cluster over,” he explained. “They’re spacefaring civilizations in the same galaxy that holds the Iri. I didn’t want them to be harassed, so I made

contact with the spacefaring empires closest to them to ensure they were left alone. As a general rule, we don't get involved with exo-galactic civilizations unless we have a material need or interest. To protect the Iri, I made contact with their closest neighbors that could theoretically reach their home planet. And I have to say, those relations have been very good. We've formed trading partnerships with them."

"Ah yes, the Iri. I hope to meet them someday," Estrella said.

"We don't have what you'd call a regular relationship with them, because they're still fragmented into kingdoms and their technology level is so low," Jason told her. "Only one Iri knows the truth of who and what we really are. Her name is Kio, and she's a personal friend of mine. We've made official diplomatic contact with about a dozen of their largest kingdoms, but none of them know the truth. As far as they know, we live on a small, remote island in the middle of the Great Sea and we sail over every few months with a hold full of textiles to trade for crop seed. We talk to them a while, catch up on current events, then we take the goods we got back in trade and sail away."

"Have they ever tried to follow you back?"

"More than once, but the ships we have there are faster than theirs," he chuckled. "Once they get out of sight of their pursuers, they're picked up by a freighter. So to the Iri, the ships just sail off over the horizon and disappear. Our next scheduled visit is in 23 days. I suppose we could arrange to have you controlling a bionoid on the ship," he mused. "You could do that from home."

"I'd very much like that, Jason," she affirmed. "I'm very curious about the Iri. They are of us, after all."

“I will say that you’ve already met the Iri in one way. The iceberries we’ve been trading with you are native to the Iri home planet,” he told her. “They’ve become one of the house’s most popular food exports with plant-eating species.”

“They are? Those things are delicious!” she laughed. “Right up there with *oye* fruit and strawberries!”

“Grimjara’s whiskers, those things go for crazy credits in the Union, makes me glad I have a direct connection to the source,” Kreel laughed. “And it’s not just us and the Faey crazy for them. The Shio especially have gone nuts over them. Seems they go very well with a lot of established Shio recipes, and a whole slew of new Shio pastries and confections have popped up that use them.”

“Seido has nearly a full barrel of them in the pantry,” Jason chuckled. “She’s been experimenting with them to come up with new recipes to use at the café.”

“Gotta give that to the Shio. They have their established culinary traditions, but they also love to experiment and come up with new dishes,” Enva said with a smile.

“Every serious chef wants to create a new popular dish, that’s like celebrity status in the Federation,” Ayuma explained to Estrella. “So most Shio chefs constantly experiment to come up with new recipes. And that’s easy for them now, since new trading opportunities means they have access to so many new kinds of foods. They have all these new ingredients to use to come up with the next popular dish. Many Shio culinarians say this is the golden age of Shio cooking tradition.”

“Yeah, and believe me, being a guinea pig for Seido and Merra’s experiments isn’t always a good thing,” Jason laughed. “They love to test their new ideas with us, since they can feed their experiments to Faey, Terrans, Shio, Dreamers, Grimja, Colonists, Urumi, and Sha’i-ree if they serve it at one of our regular dinners. If all of us love it, then it’s surely a winner.”

“Urumi eat plants? I thought they only ate meat.”

“No, they’re omnivores, they just require a fairly substantial amount of raw meat in their diet to stay healthy,” he answered. “If you get between Sk’Vrae and Seido’s *eka pako* bread, she’ll spray you with venom.”

“Ask us how we know that,” Kreel said dryly, which made Estrella and the others burst into laughter.

“That was your fault, Kreel. She warned you twice,” Jason grinned.

“I didn’t think she was serious!”

“If she says it, she means it,” Enva chuckled.

“I’m looking forward to coming to know her. You and Dahnai speak so highly of her,” Estrella said.

“She’s a little intimidating, and she’s got some rough edges, but she’s a true friend,” Jason said glowingly.

“Yes, I’ve seen Urumi here on Karis. They are a very physically intimidating species,” she chuckled.

“You know you’re dealing with a complete badass in a fight when you see one, that’s for sure,” Kreel said with a smile. “All that bone armor and

the claws and the teeth, and yet despite it all they're a very civilized and approachable species."

"Just an example of not judging a species by its appearance. There are several similar examples in the Republic. Visibly intimidating people who happen to be highly cultured and peaceful. They just *look* scary."

"Diversity is strength," Jason said sonorously, one of his favorite sayings.

"It is indeed, my friend," Estrella nodded.

Jason looked up when someone stalked up to the table, and he saw that it was Cyrsi's bionoid. "Cyrsi," Estrella said with a fond smile.

"I'm sorry to intrude," she said.

"You're a friend, Cyrsi! I was wondering where you'd gone off to!"

"I'm afraid I've been busy, and what I'm doing requires me to borrow Jason for a while," she said apologetically.

"Sure, what do you need?" he asked, looking up at her bionoid.

"The twins need you at KES HQ," she answered. "*Now.*"

That was as blatant as Cyrsi got. "Alright," he said, standing up. "If you'll excuse me for a while, friends, seems there's something I need to do."

"I'm sure I'll be quite well entertained until you return," Estrella smiled.

He walked with the bionoid towards the pad. [*What's going on?*] he asked.

[The short of it is that the scout ship Ekre has come across something that you need to see, as it may impact the KES' operations in the D string,] she answered.

[That doesn't sound good. Fill me in as we fly over.]

She did so. Two hours ago, the Vanguard class scout ship *Ekre* entered cluster DA5 and surveyed the closest system, in galaxy DA5K. What it found was utter desolation. They had entered a system that had planets that showed inhabitation, but there were no inhabitants. The planets were empty, leaving the cities and other constructions behind. The images showed signs of an attempt to evacuate, with a massive cluster of what looked like civilian ships drifting about 12 million katra from the system, but scans showed that the ships were empty. No people...not even any *bodies*. There were signs that there had been bodies, in the form of piles of clothing and personal effects left behind on the ships, something that they couldn't really see on the planet because weather and wild animals had most likely moved what was left behind after ten years. But in a ship, with its controlled environment and no weather, the clothing and effects lay where they had fallen when the body that had been within them just...*vanished*. There were also large numbers of what looked like military vessels drifting within the system in a different location, and they showed the same thing, the ships eerily undamaged, untouched, but with no crews. Just uniforms and armor left behind. Not even residue or organic remnants that would be there if the bodies were somehow disintegrated or vaporized without damaging the clothing they wore.

Every living soul was just...*gone*.

Whatever had happened had happened not just at this system. The *Ekre* had sent out probes to neighboring systems, and four of them had found the

exact same scenario. Ships drifting in orbit, planets showing inhabitation but with no inhabitants, looking to have happened at the same time as the first. The military ships at each system made it clear that whoever they were also saw it coming, and the civilian ships showed that the attempt to flee had been to no avail. Four different systems, all showing the same thing. Planets that showed signs of inhabitation, ships drifting in the systems, but no people. No bodies. Just clothing left behind where they had been when they vanished.

Like they were fucking *raptured* or something.

This was some kind of an attack, and it resulted in the capture and kidnapping of entire planetary populations. But where those people had gone, what happened to them...there was no clue.

Something about this gave him a cold feeling. Before he even got the details, something about this...it *scared* him. And he was not a man that was easily frightened. He didn't know why he felt that way, but he did, and it was a powerful feeling. It was a feeling that didn't come from his mind, or his heart...it came from his *soul*.

By the time he reached KES HQ, he was fully up to speed on things. He met with the twins, Cyrsi, the other CBIMs, and the Kimdori liaison to the KES that coordinated exploration between the KES and Kimdori Expeditionary Forces, the Kimdori's Navy. "Have the Kimdori been in that cluster, Zerom?" he asked the large honey-colored male.

"No, we went in the other direction from D1," he replied. "But we haven't seen anything like this in any galaxy we've explored."

"Jayce, I don't like this," Myra said grimly. "I think we should pull back from D5. Whatever happened was clearly some kind of attack or the

result of a war, and I don't think I want to even find out who could just make entire populations disappear without any signs of battle or destruction, to do something like *that*. We should just quarantine the entire cluster.”

“I agree,” Jason said immediately. “If we go poking around, we may attract the attention of whoever's responsible. Have the *Ekre* pull back to D1, but not directly. Zerom, are there any SCM assets in the B string?”

“Several,” he replied. “I can have them intersect the ship's course and cover its tracks.”

“Do it,” Jason said. “Myra, have the *Ekre* set course deeper into the string, away from D1, and hold that course until the Kimdori SCM ship gets there. How long, Zerom?”

“Six days,” he answered.

Jason nodded. “In the meantime, we completely avoid that entire section of the B string.” He brought up a holo of the cluster map of that area. “DA4, DA6, and DA7 are off limits,” he declared. “Any exploration of clusters past that have to avoid the quarantine area completely. I don't want any ship of ours to pass within a million light years of DA5, and no comm or nav assets are placed in a way that places the quarantine zone between the asset and D1.”

“That's what I hoped you were going to say, Jayce,” Myra told him. “I've had the creeps over this ever since we got the feed in from the *Ekre*.”

“I know how you feel. So did I.”

“Do we leave probes?” Meya asked.

He shook his head. “No. I want nothing that can be traced back to us in any way,” he replied. “Zerom, you think you can get an image of what happened without sending any direct assets? I doubt the light leaving that system was scrambled.”

He nodded. “We can six hyperspace telescope arrays in D1, and we can augment one of them using a one way wormhole to open to the coordinates ten light years from the system and look back and see what happened,” he answered. “We have what we need at the D1 outpost to build it, given we’ll only be using it for visual observation. It doesn’t need to be large, which means we can make it fairly stable.”

“Alright, but don’t do it at D1. Do it way out in flat space near another cluster, and I mean like way out at like DB3, far away from anything, and cover the unit’s tracks both coming and going so the wormhole isn’t tracked back to our outpost. A wormhole’s two ends can be tracked and located, the Republic proved that to us when they used our Stargate links to track us back to Karis. So we exercise maximum caution, Zerom. Maximum caution.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” he assured them. “I’ll have them survey other systems in the galaxy beyond the ones the *Ekre* did, to see if it happened in other systems.”

“Alright, but have them do it fast,” he said. “I don’t want the Kimdori exposed for more than an hour, Zerom. Set up, open the wormhole, look, then shut it down and get the hell out.”

“I’ll make it clear they insure that they operate using maximum caution,” Zerom assured him.

“Make that absolutely, undeniably, abundantly clear to them,” he said strongly. “I’m with Myra on this one. This gives me the creeps, and I don’t entirely understand why. I just...*know* it.”

“That’s good enough for us, Jayce,” Meya told him. “Your gut feelings are right far more than they’re wrong.”

“Alright. I need to get back to my guest, but keep me updated,” he said, looking at Cyrsi.

“We will.”

The meeting put him out of sorts enough to not talk very much when he got back, sitting in his chair with his arms crossed, head bowed, thinking it over and thinking it over and thinking it over...and it just made him more and more...*afraid*. It wasn’t entirely rational for him to react like this, to something so far away, but he couldn’t help it. Something about this had struck him, jarred him, and just thinking about it created a feeling of dread inside him.

He needed to know what happened...but he was afraid of the answer that he would find. He didn’t want to know, but he *had* to know...like some actor in a horror movie that couldn’t help but open the door and look inside, when the entire audience was screaming at her to not be a moron. But he couldn’t help it. He had to know. He just had to know. It was...it was the haunting nature of it, he supposed, that had brought about this need. An entire planet where the people just vanished, no physical damage, everything untouched, pristine...just no people. Like something had come along and just made them disappear without a trace, something they saw coming and tried to stop, something from which they tried to flee, but their effort was in vain.

It was the clothing. If there were signs of violence, it wouldn't have disturbed him so much. No, it was the clothing. It was the idea that someone had come along and just *disappeared* the body within the clothing, leaving the clothing behind undamaged, that was what was so damn *fucking* creepy about this. He could not conceive of anything that could do that without damaging the clothing or leaving behind some kind of trace, like the aerosolized organic matter that Kimdori gave off when they shed mass during a shapeshift. There was just nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing but the clothes. Plants undamaged, animals still on the planets, but the people, all the people, they were just, just *gone*.

“Jason? Are you alright?” Estrella asked, looking over at him.

He glanced at her, his expression grim. “I’m sorry, Estie,” he said. “But this has really thrown me.”

“Is it something you can share?”

“I suppose so,” he said. “If anything, Denmother’s gonna hear about it any minute now when her explorers report back to her.” He leaned on the table and explained to them what the *Ekre* had found. “It’s just so...I don’t know what,” he grunted. “All the people gone, their clothing left behind, but *only* the people. No signs of it happening to the planet’s flora and fauna. No visible damage. No signs of combat, even though there were signs of military mobilization. They saw it coming, they tried to stop it, then they tried to run from it, but it just swept over them like some kind of wave of doom. But what disturbs me most is that the bodies are gone, but the clothing *isn’t*,” he stressed. “Whatever did this just made everyone vanish without damaging anything, not even leaving behind any kind of trace of them that forensic scans can detect. It’s like those people just vanished into thin air.”

“My,” Estrella breathed as the others took much more serious expressions. “I’ve never heard of anything like that. If you don’t mind, can you relay all your sensor data to my ship? I’ll send it back to the Republic and have my experts look it over. They may find something that you missed.”

“I can do that. Cybi,” he called, looking up.

“I’m sending it to the Setrai now,” her voice came from a pod hovering over the deck.

“Thank you, Cybi. Let me tell my people what I want them to do,” she said, then she leaned back and took a distant expression as she used the resonance node at the strip to communicate with her ship.

“I agree, Jayce. That’s just beyond creepy,” Kreel said in a sober tone. “And I think staying way the hell away from it is the smart move.”

“It very much is,” Enva agreed.

“I’m getting a request for counsel from my children,” Zaa said, putting her hand over her memory band. “Let me go speak to them. May I use your office, Jason?”

“Sure,” he replied.

“I’ll inform you of anything new I find out,” she said as she stood up, then she strode into the house.

They discussed it while Zaa was in the house, but she came back out quickly. “There’s nothing new that they told me,” she reported. “Jason asked them to get a visual image of what happened ten years ago using a telescope, and that’s something they felt I had to approve personally, given

the potential danger of it. I approved it,” she said as she sat back down. “The precautions Jason ordered are acceptable. They’re what I would have ordered myself.”

“So, now there’s little we can do but wait,” Dahnai said. “How long will it take your people to get the telescope images?”

“Three days,” she answered. “They’re going to set up the telescope far, far away from our exploration outpost in the B string. That way there’s nothing that can trace the act back to us.”

“Smart,” Kreel approved.

“That was something else I wanted to talk to you about, Jason. With us going public, I’d like to get some of our scientists into the B string so they can conduct research. It would be far, far faster for our ships to come here and use your Stargate string than try to travel to the B string on our own. That would be a nearly six month long trip, and only one way.”

“We can discuss that, Estie,” he answered. “We’ll have to arrange it so no outside scientists see your ships, and they’ll have to do the last leg of it under their own power so they’re not seen entering the system where we have our outpost. That’d be about a twelve day trip for your ships, which is nothing outrageous that they can’t handle. I don’t allow anyone else to use them except the Kimdori and the Ruu, so I don’t want any demands for answers as to why I’m letting you use them.”

“That’s not a problem,” she replied. “I didn’t know you restricted access to the B string.”

“The fact that we rely on the Stargate string is why,” he replied. “If they do something stupid like get us into a war with someone over there and

force us to take it down, that cuts us off from easy access to the B string. And we've got way too many research projects going on over there to be cut off."

"Well, I feel dissed now," Kreel said with airy objection.

Jason laughed. "You've never asked for right of passage to the B string."

"True, but still, stop showing everyone just who your favorite is, Jayce. I'll feel like my position as your best friend is threatened."

"That ship sailed long ago," he replied playfully, though his voice wasn't nearly as light as usual.

"Why do you allow access to the Ruu?" Estrella asked.

"Because they're established pacifists and wouldn't start a war with anyone they met over there, and they have intergalactic capability, so their ships can reach other galaxies," he answered her. "Officially, I allow the Kimdori to use it for the same reason. Unofficially, Zaa would bite me if I told her no, then set up her own Stargate string."

Zaa gave him a toothy grin.

"I plan on opening the galaxy where our outpost is to scientific research missions by anyone after we're sure it's safe to do so," he told her. "But the KES hasn't fully explored the galaxy yet. I don't want anyone to stumble across any spacefaring civilization by accident and start a war."

"Are there any there?"

"Quite a few," he answered with a nod. "Fortunately, we've had peaceful contact with all of them so far. We respect their territory, and in

return they leave the outpost alone. When I relax the restrictions, that will let anyone go there and conduct research, but no one can establish any colonies. That's part of the deal we have with the D1A civilizations. They let us conduct research and exploration of unclaimed space so long as we don't try to move in permanently. We also share some of our research results with them, so they can compare it against their own findings."

"That sounds eminently fair," Estrella nodded. "Do they know you're from the other string?"

"No, we keep that hidden, to prevent them from trying to attack us for our drives," he replied. "They think we're from galaxy D1B in the cluster, which is a sister galaxy to D1A. They're very close together in a cosmic sense, within reasonable reach for a ship with a real-time hyperspace jump engine. It's a fifteen day trip using a real time jump engine. That's within reasonable travel range, so it makes our story believable."

"Ah. Smart."

"Thank you," he said graciously. "Anyway, there's nothing more we can do, and just sitting around talking is gonna make me obsess over it. So let's go out and do something," he said, standing up. "The Merchant District may be half closed because of the holiday, but there are lots of other things for us to do to help me keep my mind off it."

"Oh yes, there are several other things we can do," Estrella agreed, standing up herself. "You said that the prettiest beach on Karis is on Sarga. Well, I think I'd like to go see it."

"This would be a good time, we'll get there just before sunrise," he said. "That's quite a view."

“Then let’s go!” she declared.

“Sounds good to me,” Enva said. “I think I know which beach Jason is talking about, and it really is quite lovely.”

“Alright then. Let me call in a ship big enough to carry all of us plus the guards,” Jason said. “And then we’ll go sightseeing.”