

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

Revelation11

Fel

Chapter 11

Brista, 5 Keda, 4412, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 19 September 2027, Terran Standard Calendar

Brista, 5 Keda, year 1337 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

“The Meadow” (Karinne Dukal family vacation house), Tir Tairngire

The weather couldn't be more perfect for a wedding.

It was a glorious day, warm, sunny, with a light breeze that carried the intoxicating smell of *oye* flowers from the blossoms high above. The tree here on Tir Tairngire had grown nearly as fast as Jason's tree had, and was now a 500 shakra tall monstrosity whose canopy spread nearly two kathra in every direction. The tree flowered and fruited on a very predictable 43 day cycle, but the wedding had caused the tree to flower out of its cycle, the tree making sure that it was wearing its Sunday best for this most joyous of occasions. The flowers wouldn't produce fruit since it was out of cycle, but that wasn't the reason the tree produced flowers. It had produced flowers *only* for this ceremony. The flat top of the hill beside the trunk was set up for the ceremony, which meant that it had the trellis holding *soka* vines, holy to the Shio religion, under which Kevin and Sano would seal their marriage. Flower arrangements were set on stands flanking the trellis, and hand-woven mats and blankets were laid out in neat patterns on the grass for the guests.

This would be a Shio wedding, and it was following all the traditions. There was no furniture at a Shio wedding outside of the trellis, a small table holding the two small crystal plates and two small silver colored goblets used in the ceremony, and the flower stands. The bride and groom would sit on the ground while the priest stood, and all the guests would also sit on the ground. The only one that would stand would be the priest. There were no bridesmaids or grooms or attendants, Kevin and Sano would walk to the trellis alone and leave alone.

As usual, when it came to Kevin and Sano, Kevin did whatever Sano wanted, to the point where Kevin had converted to the Shio religion. Sometimes it almost seemed like he was slavishly devoted to her, but the honest truth was, Kevin had no traditions or beliefs that he felt strongly enough about to follow. His years on the farm had jaded him, made him reject virtually everything, and now that he had a new life with a woman with whom he was deeply in love, he was adopting her beliefs, her traditions, because it was something *she* believed in. Her belief in them gave him belief in them, mainly because they had nothing to do with what had happened to him on the farm during the subjugation.

The Shio religion was a very curious one. The Shio said they had three, but the reality was, they were three denominations of the same base religion. Loosely, the three sects were known as the Fundamentalists (or the First Religion, as the Shio referred to it), the Orthodoxy, and the Reformists. Sano was a Reformist, which was the “liberal left wing” of the Shio religion. Fundamentalists were ultra-religious and strict adherents to their doctrine, Orthodox were less strict but still very attached to tradition and religious observance, and Reformists were much less strict, much more casual about their worship, up to altering religious observances to take

modern life into account. All three shared a majority of their beliefs, however, with only how strict they were in their observances and a few scriptural interpretations differentiating them. Compared to Terran religions, the three Shio sects most closely resembled a mix between the ancient Celtic Druidic tradition, Wicca, and Japanese Shinto. The Shio revered nature and the land as a god-like figure, as if the Terran concept of Mother Nature (or Gaia) was a goddess, and nature was filled with spirits of natural forces like rivers, forests, oceans, deserts, spirits born from the habitat in which they dwelled. Specific places of exceptional beauty or with special properties often had much more powerful guardian spirits protecting them, which were venerated by Shio religion as servants of the Mother...like angels from Christianity. However, they also believed that the presence of many Shio in one place long enough spawned “spirits of the people,” *ue em ebi* or simply *ebi*, spirits that were more attuned to and interested in the Shio people than to nature, and they were often the souls of Shio that had so loved a certain place or area that they became its guardian spirit after they passed away. The *ebi* were more like Catholic saints than anything else, the souls of mortals that entered divine service after death by becoming a guardian spirit to an area, like a city’s neighborhood or a park, or even an individual building. These spirits tended to the Shio that lived in the area they claimed as their territory, and they could either be helpful or vengeful, depending on if they liked someone or not. Religious festivals followed seasonal cycles where the seasonal cycle was celebrated, with major celebrations at the turning of the seasons. Spring’s renewal festival and the harvest festival were the biggest and most joyous of all religious observances, with the harvest being the more important of the two. The harvest festival was like Terran Thanksgiving and Christmas rolled up into one holiday. So, the Shio religion was, at its core, a nature-worshipping

religion that also believed in the existence of spiritual forces outside of the main deific entity which were venerated, but not worshipped as gods. On Shio, nearly every place had a shrine to the area's guardian spirit, and people would leave offerings to them to either thank them for their protection of the area or bribe them into not playing tricks on them.

Not all Shio *ue*, spirits, were benevolent. Some were impish, some were mischievous, some were capricious, and some were downright malevolent. This behavior was most often attributed to the guardian spirits of special areas or *ebi*, guardian spirits of specific places. The spirits that dwelled in a natural habitat tended to be very passive.

But the one thing that set the Shio religion apart from others similar to it was that the Shio didn't just worship the natural entity of one planet. They saw all nature as a single force, no matter what planet had that nature, no matter what kind of nature it was. What they worshipped wasn't physical nature itself, or the land of a planet, but the *force* of nature, and that force demonstrated itself differently on each planet. Because of that, the Shio had no problems adapting their religion to any planet upon which they lived, but the one unifying aspect of it was that the Shio respected nature wherever they lived. All the planets in the Federation were pollution free, had always been even through the Shio industrial revolution some 900 years ago, and the Shio didn't try to harness or destroy nature, even as they altered it with their cities and their industry. They were a very environmentally conscious people because they saw polluting the environment as a sin against nature.

Their entire religion could be summed up in the very name of the Shio people: *Shio em edo*, "Born from the World," or more accurately, "Children of the Mother" when using the most ancient form of the Shio language. The

Shio referred to themselves as products of their world, of their Mother-god figure which was the force of nature that spawned all life.

Given their religion, it was no surprise at all that food was so central to Shio cultural identity. They were a people whose most sacred holiday was the harvest. Food even played a key role in a Shio wedding, because the covenant between Kevin and Sano would be sealed by them eating specially prepared bread and drinking a special wine made from a type of honey produced on Shio Prime that *literally* contained their own blood, a drop of blood from each of them, and the priest would have each of them place a drop of blood pricked from their finger into the wine before they drank it as part of the ceremony. They would be consuming a part of their spouse, literally, which would bind them together for all eternity in the tenets of the Shio religion.

The ceremony wasn't scheduled to start for nearly an hour, but the vacation house was quite full of guests that were enjoying a pre-ceremony party, mainly there because Shio tradition was that the site of the ceremony was off limits while the priest communed with any local forest or meadow spirits to secure their blessing for the event. The main hall was set up for the pre-ceremony, filled with guests...and not just guests from Karis or Tir Tairngire. Yes, there were quite a few people from the strip here for the wedding, since Rahne was one of Kevin's best friends and he'd come to befriend several people from the neighborhood over the years since he'd become involved with Rahne. Kevin still had an aversion to Faey, but he had also managed to partially conquer that fear by befriendng some of the strip residents, in particular Maya, Vell, their daughter Sami (Kevin's biggest fangirl), and Jenn. He was also very good friends with Temika and Mike, but that wasn't as much of a surprise since they were Terran, but

beyond doubt, his best friend on Karis was Rahne. Rahne considered Kevin to be all but her long-lost brother, and Kevin cared just as deeply for her as she did for him. Estrella and her kids were here, Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were here, Enva, Kreel, Magran, Mrri, and Krazrou were here, and Prime Senator Quord was here, but they were here mainly at Jason's invitation, invited with Kevin and Sano's blessing. Grayhawk was also here, but that was because he wanted to be present at the wedding because Sano was Shio, so he'd more or less invited himself after hearing about it. Of the various rulers, Kevin had only met Kreel and Dahnai, since Kreel spent so much of his time mooching Makati ale out of Jason's wine cellar on Karis. Kreel he rather liked and considered a passing friend—nobody could *not* like Kreel—but he was still a bit too afraid of Dahnai to form a friendship with her, much to her annoyance. Dahnai was Faey, and Kevin was wary of any Faey he didn't know...and wary of most of the Faey he did know.

It had taken Maya and the others *years* to get to where Kevin accepted them as friends.

Kevin and Sano had a life outside of their friendship with Rahne and the friendships on Karis that they'd cultivated over the years. Rita was here, naturally, but six of the biggest names in CO streaming and content creation were also present, fellow pro gamers that Kevin and Sano had come to befriend over their years of pro gaming. Sami had about passed out at the opportunity to meet Crushcrush, Sampi, Eldrik, Vakra, and the newest CO content creation superstars on the block, Misaki and Zippy Pippy, in person. In addition to that, the Champions from Kevin's server that Kevin considered close friends were also here in person, Alandra, Meldo, Bullox, Hinasa, Braggan, Kavak, and Mirri. Or, in the real world, Meghan, David, Oliver, Hiroshi, Orstedd, Amir, and Cleo. In addition to them, several

members of his and Sano's guild were here as well (Sano had succeeded in getting Kevin to join her guild three years ago). Kevin was still the most central figure on the server, so anything that involved him was going to get a whole lot of attention from both on the server and the greater CO community. Xen and Savar getting married in real life was front page news on several CO fan and resource Civnet sites.

He was still one of the most central players in the entire game. Kevin was one of the most popular CO streamer and content creators, having grown into the role and coming across on his vids and streams as a friendly, caring, highly skilled and knowledgeable person who just happened to be an absolute god when it came to playing CO, in several playstyles from crafting to soloing to raiding to PvP. Xen was top-tier at everything he did, which translated to lots of people who liked to watch his viddies because they were both entertaining and informative. His presence on Methrian was the sole reason the server had gone from one of the smallest and least progressed in the Terran cluster to one of the largest and most cutting edge, with Methrian guilds often being among the first to clear new content. People wanted to play on Methrian because Xen played on Methrian, and watching his streams and viddies meant that they already had a good grasp on Methrian's server culture, so they were more easily able to navigate it. He was also the current reigning CO Champion of Champions, having won the annual tournament that pitted all the Champions on all servers against each other in a ladder match style tournament. Kevin had won this year's tournament, which meant he was considered to be the best player in all of CO.

Cyvanne had not let the Champions just fade into obscurity after the Grand Crusade and the events that opened up the new content. There were

still Champion-only quests and events that often drove the opening of new content, and there were also the four Champions-only game-wide tournaments she devised, where Champions from all servers in a cluster got to compete against each other, and the winners of those regional cluster tournaments went on to face the winners of other clusters in a game-wide tournament. The Champion of Champions tournament was a one on one duel-style PvP tournament. The Arena of Glory was a team-based PvP tournament where groups of Champions teamed up and battled other teams in a ladder match tournament. There were three separate brackets, with one being teams of two, one being teams of four, and the last being teams of eight. Champions could compete in all three brackets if they wished, they weren't limited to just one. In addition to the ladder brackets, there was a huge deathmatch-style battle royale at the end of the tournament where all the Champions were thrown into the arena and the last Champion standing was the winner. The Dungeon Challenge was a team-based event where teams of eight Champions had to navigate a dungeon filled with monsters, traps, and puzzles, and whoever gathered the most point items and defeated the dungeon's final boss within the time limit was the winner. The Champion's Cup was a much less serious series of highly entertaining and sometimes silly minigames that the Champions took on in teams of eight, from things like parkour to playing hot potato with an actual bomb to in-game recreations of games and other challenges pulled from various cultures, other games, or movies or vidy shows. Last year, Cyvanne had put in a minigame much akin to the opening scenes of the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where teams of champions had to run a gauntlet filled with over the top traps as a giant rolling boulder chased them down the course. The Champion's Cup was meant to be a light-hearted, nearly silly tournament, nowhere near as hardcore as the CoC, AoG, or the Dungeon

Challenge, but it was just as popular as the other three because viewers got to see the Champions just goofing around and having fun as they took on unorthodox, borderline silly minigames.

The Champion's Cup was, by far, Cyvanne's favorite tournament of the four. She often spent months coming up with the minigames to make sure they were both challenging and *fun*, for both the players and the audience.

CO was a game, after all, and people played games to *have fun*. Cyvanne had not forgotten that, and that was one reason why Citadel Online continued to be one of the most popular games in the entire galaxy, with 112 *billion* players at last count.

Because of the Champion-only content, one of the biggest dramas that had developed on many servers in the game was just who held the title of Champion at any given time. Champions could lose their title, so those who wanted to get in on Champion content made a near-career out of hunting Champions to make them lose their titles, and former Champions were usually at the top of the list when it came to who took the title when the current Champion lost it, so they were usually hell-bent to get their title back. Very restless was the head that wore the crown of Champion in CO. It created a little chaos and drama on the servers, but that just made everything far more entertaining for everyone involved, including the Champions trying to defend themselves from hungry title-seekers.

On Methrian, the forty original Champions (there were now 80 champions due to new races and factions being added since Champions were introduced, four Champions each in the 20 separate player factions split between Arca and Netherim) were the same now as when the Champions and Champion content were introduced, and they actively

helped each other protect their titles from upstarts. The Methrian Champions were a formidable force that transcended the four separate guilds holding Champions, existed above them, and they *fiercely* defended their own. It wasn't quite so chummy on other servers, as Champions plotted against Champions to get their own guildmates the titles (much what Emelda had tried to do to Xen long ago), but things were different on Methrian because of its roots as a small server with a tight-knit community. Even now, despite being the largest server on the Terran cluster, it still had that small-server sense of community where people helped each other. Things were different on Methrian, and the Methrian community liked things just the way they were.

The 40 Champions from the races that had been introduced after the Grand Crusade were every bit as much Champions as the original 40, but did not have access to the Champion's Hall. That area was only accessible to the original 40 Champions on a server that participated in the Grand Crusade, the 40 Champions that possessed the ring that served as the key to enter it. But, there was a new Champion's only place called the Hall of Glory, which like its predecessor existed in its own little dimension and worked much the same way as the original, with crafting resources, meeting halls, personal apartments, and even recreational facilities like pools and gyms. That gave all Champions on a server access to Champion-only resources, but preserved the mystique and prestige of being one of the original 40 Champions that participated in the Grand Crusade by keeping their original Hall exclusive only to the players who had the ring that served as the key to get in.

On Methrian, the original Champion's Hall was more or less used as a hangout for the Champions that had bonded and became friends during the

Crusade. They used the Hall of Glory for official business, and the original Hall of Champions served more as a social club.

Cyvanne loved good-natured chaos, which was no doubt why she'd set things up so Champions could lose their titles in the first place. She didn't want the Champions to feel very comfortable with that title. It kept them on their toes.

To say that Kevin was rich now because of CO was an understatement. He was in the top five of most popular CO content creators in the galaxy, his viddies and streams got hundreds of millions of views on average. He made nearly twenty million credits a year streaming and making viddies, primarily of CO but also of a few other games he found fun and challenging. He didn't do it for the money, though, he did it because he loved to do it. But despite his wealth, he still lived in his condo with Sano, his tabi Kishu and his sandracer Zuzu, and the couple had no desire to move. They were happy there, and that was what mattered most to them. Jason could respect that, since he lived in what many considered to be a very modest house for a galactic ruler.

So, it was a bit amusing to stand in the room and see professional and amateur gamers rubbing shoulders with galactic rulers and dignitaries. But they also weren't the most exotic guests here. Honey and Cayenne knew Kevin and Sano from their visits to Karis and were attending as guests, as were their former packs. So, the hundred or so bipedal guests were intermixed with 11 of the giant wolves of Tir Tairngire, but the reason they were there, Kevin and Sano, were currently nowhere to be seen, because Kevin was in a side room trying to calm down after being around so many strangers for so long on a day that was, for him, a bit stressful and nerve-racking. So, it was entirely understandable that the gravity of the day

would eventually get the best of him. Kevin still had serious social anxiety issues from his time on the farm, and many people that met him in real life were surprised to find that he acted very differently in person than he did in game.

Kevin's past was more or less common knowledge within the circles of CO. Virtually everyone that followed him knew that he and Emelda—who was quite a popular game streamer and content creator herself—were farm survivors, and most of their fans had been horrified to find out what the Trillanes did to the Terrans during the subjugation by hearing it from those who had suffered through it first hand. A lot of the PR ground that the Trillanes had made up since they were kicked off Terra was lost again when people got a good look at just what they had done to the Terrans while they had control of the planet, when people saw the reality of what many Terrans still had to deal with even now, some 18 years after they were thrown off the planet. Kevin and Rita were permanently scarred by their time on those farms, both physically and psychologically, and Kevin's celebrity as a highly popular game streamer had exposed Trillane's cruelty and brutality to the rest of the galaxy.

Kevin's bout of nerves was why Sano, Rita, Jason, Mrima, and Rahne were sitting with him in a bedroom in the vacation house, trying to calm him down. He was wearing a traditional wedding garment for Shio marriages, worn by both the bride and the groom, which was a severely plain smock of homespun cloth tied at the waist with a simple woven cord, a representation that he and Sano were coming into this union for who they were, not what they owned. While there were flowers, handmade blankets upon which they would sit that were woven with beautiful patterns, and other decorations, by Shio tradition they were simple, even a little plain,

and were not garishly placed to capture the eye to take away from the marriage trellis or the bridal couple. The focus was on the bride and groom, not the bride's dress, not the groom's tuxedo, not jewelry, not stupefyingly complex stained glass windows or statues or carpets or altars. And Jason could massively appreciate the elegant meaning of that tradition, that marriages were about *people*, not about *spectacle*. This was about Kevin and Sano and the beauty of their loving relationship and devotion to each other, and everything about the ceremony was all about Kevin and Sano.

There was no tradition in Shio marriages about the bride being seen by the groom before the wedding. In fact, they were supposed to be together during the pre-ceremony reception, and would usually be out with the guests chatting with them. That was what Kevin had been doing until his anxiety got the best of him, and Sano quickly and deftly pulled him out of the ballroom to let him calm down a little bit.

It did not surprise Jason at all that Sano was so sensitive to the moods of her soon-to-be husband. She'd been like that since the day he'd met them that day he came to Kevin's shop in CO, long before they were Generations and had formed a pair bond.

Jason also felt oddly happy and humbled that Kevin would let him join the circle of his closest friends like this. Sano, Rita, Mrima, and Rahne were the core of what Kevin considered his family, the love of his life, his "little sister" that was even more fragile and scarred than him that he watched over and nurtured, his "big sister" that had helped teach him who he was as both a Generation and as a person and formed the essence of what he was today, and a mother-figure in the tiny Pai who treated him like one of her own cubs. Sano, Rita, Rahne and Adam and their children, Mrima and her

cubs Mralla and Mrijin, that was the core of Kevin's life, they were his family. And it was a *good* one.

[I'm sorry guys, I just couldn't help it,] Kevin communed guiltily after he got control of his breathing.

[You don't ever have to apologize, Kev,] Jason answered him strongly. *[It's partially my fault. I had no idea that so many people were going to show up that you don't know. Dahnai was a little liberal with her invitations.]*

[No, it's okay, the ruler people were very nice,] Kevin answered. *[It was just too many people period, on top of the fact that I'm already ultra-nervous. I don't want to do something wrong and ruin everything.]*

[This is a Shio wedding, love, all you have to do is literally sit there,] Sano assured him. *[We never speak, and the only things we have to do is walk in, sit down, listen to the priest for a while, eat the bread and drink the wine, then stand up and walk out. The priest does everything else, including all the talking. We just sit there and try not to fall asleep until it's time to seal our marriage.]*

[That about sums it up,] Jason agreed with an audible chuckle. *[I wish my wedding had been that easy.]*

[Didn't you get married in a tiny chapel on Moridon?] Rahne challenged. *[There was no state wedding at all, Jayce!]*

[It was still nerve-wracking,] he countered.

[Wait, you were married on Moridon? How did that happen?] Mrima asked curiously.

[It's a long story, I'll tell it to you during the celebration feast,] he answered. *[And yeah, I kinda avoided the state wedding thing. That was Rann's burden, not mine.]*

[I watched that, I thought it was quite lovely,] Sano injected.

[Yeah, it wasn't nearly as horrific as I thought it'd be,] Jason agreed lightly. *[By the way, Kev, Rann's looking for revenge.]*

Kevin laughed. *[He's the one that wanted to duel me in CO,]* he replied, his mental state improving from the texture of his commune. *[Besides, I get enough of that from Kyva.]*

Kyva had a weird relationship with Kevin based on a mixture of jealousy and respect. Two years ago, Jason had convinced Kevin to duel Kyva within a special combat simulation simsense that used real-world physics but gave the combatants the same strength and agility as a mecha, which allowed Kevin to display his skills in an environment that benefitted Kyva for training purposes. Within the game, Kevin was one of the most frightening people anyone would ever want to face, was the “Kyva Karinne” of CO, and Jason felt it would be good training for Kyva to have another sparring partner outside of Gen that could keep up with her. And much to Kyva's shock, she *lost* their first fight, after Kevin had time to practice within the program and adapt to how it was different from the game. For the last two years, the two of them had been battling each other in that simsense and outside of it, allowing them to sharpen their claws against one another, which made them even more insanely stupid scary in their respective arenas.

When it came to melee combat, there were few people in the entire cluster more skilled than Kevin Ball, game or no game, because much of

Kevin's terrifying ability was based on his natural talent and experience, not game rules or algorithms. CO may have trained Kevin in melee combat, but he had gone far beyond the game's ability to teach him. Kevin's combat skills were now so high that the CO skill assist algorithm had to be disabled for his character, because they actually *worked against* him. He was literally too good for the algorithm to handle, at a level that few in CO had attained...and two of them were on the same server, Xen and Alandra. They were regarded throughout the game community as the two most deadly dual wielding magic warrior archetypes in the entire game, and Cyvanne had studied them to better refine the skill assist algorithm for high-skill gameplay. There were some players that had super-high skill ratings but didn't have the real world natural talent that Kevin and Meghan—Alandra's name in real life—had, so the skill assist algorithm would need to be able to properly work for them.

Because of how quickly he adapted to that special training program, Kevin had been invited to take rigger training by Kyva, to try out his insane combat skills in a real world environment. Because of it, he was currently the only non-Karinne civilian in the entire galaxy rated on Karinne mecha. Kevin was fully combat rated on every bipedal mecha unit, from a Centurion to a Titan. And Jason could admit, Kevin was a *scary nasty* rigger. He wasn't quite on Kyva's level, but if he were KMS, Kyva would snap him up for the KBB in a heartbeat.

There were non-KMS "civilians" rated on KMS mecha, Gen and Bei, but they lived in another galaxy. So Kevin was the only one in the home galaxy.

But where he truly showed off was with his special combat Rocker. Rook had made a custom bionoid of Xen just for Kevin, with Xen's face

and body dimensions, and since it was a machine, it closely mimicked the physical ability Xen possessed within CO. The bionoid was built using Rocker technology but wasn't built to resemble an armored soldier, so while it was a Rocker, it looked like a conventional bionoid. It had Xen's proportional in-game strength, agility, and speed that he could apply in the real world. And *holy God* was he an absolute nightmare. He could fight with ranged weapons, but once he closed to melee range and he drew his swords, just fucking get on your knees and surrender, cause no way in hell was *anyone* beating him in close quarters. Everyone that had seen Kevin fight using the Xen Rocker was just awed by the display.

Rook had actually made four of them, the Rocker, two civilian bionoids based on Xen's appearance instead of Kevin's, and a bionoid based on Xen's Djinn form. The Rocker and one of the civilian Xen bionoids were biogenic, and the rest were moleculartronic. The civilian bionoids, both human and Djinn, had replicas of all of Xen's gear and weapons, so they looked completely authentic. Kevin used the Xen bionoids at conventions so people he met could interact with Xen instead of Kevin, and also because Kevin's social anxiety made it very hard for him to attend them in person. But in the bionoid, he was able to interact with strangers and be in large crowds. For Kevin, the bionoid was like armor protecting him from the outside world, and he was much more relaxed in public settings using the bionoid than he was in person. The real Kevin could never sit at a table in front of an audience and talk about the game, he'd have a panic attack, but *Xen could*.

Kevin's habit of attending conventions using a bionoid of his in-game character had spawned a tradition of others doing the same, which made going to conventions pretty cool, in Jason's opinion. It was a great example

of how bionoid technology had evolved, since now bionoids were being made of creatures that didn't exist in reality. Rook could build a bionoid of just about anything, all he had to do was get a three dimensional model of it and observe how it moved, and he could build an endoskeleton that could perfectly mimic how it moved as a model.

That was how popular Kevin was, his fame had extended beyond the game he played professionally. Gamer conventions, as well other conventions like comic book or Terran anime conventions, all but begged him to attend, and they were willing to pay him handsomely for his appearances. Outside of conventions, virtually anyone younger than the age of 25 knew exactly who Xen was, and that popularity had started to bleed into mainstream entertainment.

How far had it gone? All the way to the show that inspired Kevin to name his CO character Xen...the original Xen Quickstrike. He'd received quite the nod from the makers of *Starblade*, acknowledging the CO Xen by having him appear in an episode of the latest season...at least sort of. The Xen that appeared in *Starblade* was a doppelganger of Xen the *Starblade* crew encountered. He didn't look like CO Xen, he was a mirror image of *Starblade* Xen because he was Xen Quickstrike from another universe. It was one of those "mirror universe" type stories, and while that kind of story wasn't new, it was still a good one. What identified the AU Xen as a nod to Xen from CO was the fact that he carried and used exact replicas of the Soulblades of Shatra Sha, right down to the runes inscribed on the blades, and boy did the entire fandoms of both *Starblade* and CO go nuts when they recognized those swords. Sami's scream of glee was audible up and down the strip. The plot of the episode was that the *Starblade* crew comes across an escape pod from their own ship and discover another Xen,

discover he's from another universe, then return with him to his own universe so he can rescue the *Starblade* of that universe and its crew from the Zagg Pirates. The *Starblade* crosses into the mirror universe and helps accomplish the mission, rescuing their alter egos in the mirror universe, then returns to its home universe. And the episode was left a little open-ended by keeping the rift between the two universes open, which many fans took as a teaser that the mirror universe *Starblade* and its crew may show up again.

The episode included a sparring match between the two Xens, a gentleman's duel of swords against swords, and Jason had to admit, that fight was one of the single-most incredibly choreographed and awe-inspiring fight scenes he'd ever seen in any vidy show or movie. The showrunners had gone *all out* to make that fight scene, and they had done complete justice to the fighting ability attributed to both characters from their respective universes. People were still talking about it *months* after the episode aired.

Kevin had named his character Xen as an homage to the character, his favorite vidy show character, and the show that inspired the CO Xen had paid homage to him for doing the name Xen justice.

Jason was impressed at how Cyvanne had handled the potential copyright issues of Kevin using his in-game likeness at conventions, and proprietary in-game likenesses and models being used outside the game, like the Soulblades of Shatra Sha appearing in *Starblade*. Most games would have brought the legal hammer down on such things, but Cyvanne had not. In fact, she had licensed Xen's likeness and the likeness of his gear to Kevin so she got a portion of the profits from him using it. She did that for all of the streamers and content creators, giving them partial ownership

of what provided their income. Virtually any player could apply for a license to use his character in external for-profit art, advertising, and content creation, they just had to agree to share a portion of their profits to the game company.

[Yeah well, Kyva's a hypercompetitive pain in the ass,] Jason communed lightly, intentionally including Kyva in his commune.

[I heard that,] Kyva shot back from the ballroom.

[You were supposed to. And is it a lie?]

[Ass. You are so dead the next time we're on the range, Jayce.]

That made Kevin laugh, which looked to improve his mood even more. He calmed completely down with a little more relaxing conversation, and they came back out to mingle with the guests. Jason joined Zaa, Kreel, Honey, and Grayhawk, the Shio getting to know the giant wolf, who was wearing a collar holding an external speaker that was translating her commune into audio for Zaa's benefit. "Everything alright, cousin?" Zaa asked.

"Kev had a bout of nerves, but he's okay now. This is stressful for him," he answered, reaching over and scrubbing his fingers into Honey's fur. "He doesn't do well in crowds, and this is definitely a crowd."

"I'm surprised he allowed so many guests to attend," Grayhawk said.

"I don't think he expected this many," Jason grunted. "But I think he'll be okay during the ceremony. He won't have to do anything but sit there for most of it."

“I read up on Shio weddings, and yeah, they’re not all that hard for the participants,” Kreel agreed.

“There is certainly a simple elegance to their customs,” Honey’s speaker intoned. *“The fact that it places all the attention on the people and not the ceremony makes sense to me.”*

“A wedding isn’t about the pageantry. It’s about two lives joining to become one, about the formation of a family,” Grayhawk said with a nod. “And our wedding ceremony makes sure that that is never forgotten. That’s why the bride and groom don’t speak during the ceremony. They let their actions say everything.”

“Way different from ours. Mates write bloody *speeches* when they exchange vows,” Kreel said wryly. “Sometimes I wonder if we’re not distantly related to the Prakarikai when it comes to weddings.”

“It’s the one and only time you ever see a Grimja being serious,” Jason said slyly.

“Says you,” Kreel retorted. “If I ever get married, I guarantee you, I’m gonna have fun during the ceremony.”

“And that’s why you will be the eternal bachelor, Kreel,” Zaa teased with a slight smile on her muzzle.

“Barka’s truth,” he agreed fervently. “Since odds are my bride will kill me after the ceremony, staying single is the only way I guarantee my own survival.”

It wasn’t much longer until it was time. The priest’s acolyte helpers stepped in and used a holder with nearly a dozen small bells on it to announce that the site of the ceremony was prepared, and that was the

signal for the guests to take their seats. Jason joined Jyslin, Symone, and Rahne and walked out with them at the vanguard of the crowd, then took their seats on the grass under the *oye* tree on a hand-embroidered blanket. Zaa, Kreel, and Grayhawk came up to one side and sat down, and Dahnai, Enva, Sirri, and Aria took their place on the other. In the front were those that were considered family of the couple, Sano's parents, Mikano, and her brother, her aunts and uncles and cousins, and representing Kevin were Rita, Mrima and her cubs, and Rahne and Adam and their children. The rest of the kids took up about the entire row past Dahnai, then they sat in respectful silence, communing privately, as they waited. Not long after all the guests were seated, the priest exited the house and started a stately march towards the trellis with Kevin and Sano following behind, hand in hand, as the priest shook his string of bells every other time he stepped forward with his right foot. The priest was wearing a very simple yellow robe with white trim on the cuffs, a robe worn only for marriages. That was a part of the religious tradition of the ceremony, but exactly what it represented, Jason didn't know. Kevin looked very nervous, but Sano was keeping him from freaking out, gripping his hand gently and squeezing it as they walked behind the priest. They walked up to the trellis and seated themselves in front of the small low table holding the sacraments for the ceremony, sitting on their feet facing each other on a special blanket made just for the ceremony, and would be hung on the wall of their bedroom afterward. The blanket had been hand-made by Sano's mother, which was Shio tradition.

The priest stepped around the table and turned to face them, placing his string of bells over his head to wear them as a necklace. He then spread his arms and chanted in the Shio language, reciting one of the ritual prayers that opened a religious ceremony. After the invocation, he shook the bells

around his neck. “We are gathered here today to witness the union of the lives of Kevin Bartholemew Ball, son of Arthur William Ball and Katherine Louise Jones, and heir of the Ball lineage, and Sano Strongblade, daughter of Alio Strongblade and Senik Darkbranch, and heir of the Strongblade lineage. These two have come to this place to join their lives together under the eyes of the spirits, to walk a single path together, side by side, from now until the end of all things. For yea, while this is a union of the body, it is also a union of the spirit, as two spirits come together and complete one another, to move with a single purpose, a single goal, a single life. That is why this day we celebrate the birth of a new spirit, who will guide and watch over the lives that created it, and will welcome them unto itself when the time comes that they shed their mortal coils.” He then recited more liturgy from the Shio religion, which was a standard sermon used during marriages, which was the story of the first marriage, the first formation of a family spirit from the separate spirits of the couple. The Shio religion believed that a marriage created a new spirit, which was the “guardian angel” that looked out for the married couple. It was for this reason that Shio were so careful about marrying, because marriage wasn’t just for life, it was *for eternity* in Shio society. The souls of Kevin and Sano would join with their guardian spirit once they died and exist as a singular spiritual being comprised of three parts, allowing the couple to continue to be together for eternity. There was no such thing as divorce or annulment among the Shio, because the spirit that was formed from the marriage was something that could not be undone.

Jason often thought it was curious that a religion that had such a powerful marriage custom was from a society where the married couple did not have a single family name.

After he finished the sermon, the main part of the ceremony began. An acolyte carried a silver tray holding a small crystal goblet and two small saucer-sized crystal plates holding what looked like dark bread. The acolyte set them on the table behind Kevin and Sano, between the priest and the couple. “In Shio society, marriage is a sacrament formed by the formation of the family spirit, which is born from the sharing of body and soul between husband and wife,” the priest intoned. “Sano Strongblade, before you holds a cup which represents the mingling of your blood with your groom’s blood. Kevin Ball, before you holds a cup which represents the mingling of your blood with the blood of your bride. Take up the cup and drink, so that your bloodlines may mingle and become one.” The two of them moved in unison, picking up the small silvery cup between them, and Sano kept hold of it as Kevin drank first, as was the custom since he was older. He then kept his hand on the goblet as Sano did the same, finishing the small amount of liquid in the cup. They set the cup back on the table together, then bowed to each other while seated. “Sano Strongblade, before you lies bread made of the body of your groom. Kevin Ball, before you lies bread made of the body of your bride. Take them up and consume them, so that your bodies might be forever joined by a bond that will connect your family spirit to you, and you to each other.” The two of them did so, but this time, they took up the pieces of bread and held hands as they ate the small pieces of bread in a single bite, Kevin’s right hand to Sano’s right hand, which made them reach across the table and their bodies to do so. After they were done, they put their now free hands with their clasped hands, Kevin’s on top and Sano’s on the bottom. Sano gave a glorious smile as a tear formed in her eye.

The priest took off the bells around his neck and held them up in both hands, then shook them vigorously. He then lowered them and gave a sign

that was significant in the Shio religion. He then put the bells back around his neck, then clapped his hands together. “The bond is formed, and it is true. Now, children of Shio, you may go forth under the protection of the spirit formed from your union and devotion to one another. *Mesem em Shio sekieste orust*. Honored guests, it is my matchless honor to present to you Kevin Ball and Sano Strongblade, husband and wife. May the spirits bless their union.”

The guests applauded as the newlyweds stood, still holding hands, and then walked back down the aisle. They didn’t stop to greet or talk to anyone, as per Shio marriage custom, and wouldn’t until they changed out of their marriage tunics. That was the entire ceremony, which lasted barely twenty minutes, but that was a good example of what the Shio religion was about. It was a religion, but it wasn’t overly ceremonial or bogged down in dusty rites and traditions. The Fundamentalist version of the ceremony was only about ten minutes longer, since it did have some ancient customs that Reformists didn’t observe, but even then, that was short and to the point as religion went. It was a simple, brief ceremony, and it was over nearly as quickly as it began.

The guests filed out behind them after they passed, which turned into the newlyweds leading them all back to the vacation house. Once they got there, the newlyweds went to a bedroom to change as everyone else moved to the main ballroom, where a large reception feast was being laid out for them. It was a special meal for a special occasion, and Shio tradition was that it was catered by the best chefs that the newlyweds could find, and no expense was spared. And this was where Kevin being friends with Jason came into play, because Jason called in a favor not with Grayhawk, not with Seido, not with Cybri with her connections to Shio resorts all over Sarga,

but with Prime Senator Quord of the Jun Fatherland...which was why Quord was attending the ceremony. It was only fair to invite him since he arranged the reception feast. The reception was catered by the same caliber of Jun master chefs that prepared the graduation dinner for the military academy. It was an opportunity for the Jun to display some of their very rich culture to the outside world, and since Shio and Jun shared the same taste in food, it was a guarantee that the newlyweds would enjoy the feast. And it was quite the feast, as everyone sat down at the large circular tables spread through the ballroom and almost started drooling in unison as staff hired by Miaari started carting out platters and trays holding the first course. The smells were heavenly, and each course was matched to the guest to accommodate dietary requirements. The *epsiru* salad set out in front of Kreel was very different from the bowl of *jashig* soup set out in front of Dahnai, since it had meat in it. The host applauded again when Kevin and Sano came out wearing casual clothes to join the feast, and joined Jason and their families at the table of honor, with only Dahnai and Kreel added to it outside of Kevin and Sano's circle of family, Jason, and Jyslin. That put Sano's parents at the table with them, which was a little amusing since her father was seated beside Dahnai, and didn't seem to quite know how to handle it. To her credit, Dahnai didn't make him feel uncomfortable, engaging him in light conversation via commune as they started eating. There was little serious conversation as they worked through the three courses of the meal, since the food was way too good to dishonor it with distractions, though the conversation did pick up after dessert was served. The chefs had prepared *sekga*, which was a cobbler-like dish served piping hot, consisting of a blend of berries and fruits native to the Jun homeworld baked inside a pastry shell. Though, recently, *oye* fruit had been added to the recipe, as it blended in perfectly with the native fruits used in the dish.

That would almost make it a pie, but it was actually closer to a cobbler in that it had breaded filling mixed in with the vegetables. It was one of Jason's favorite desserts, because he'd always been partial to cobblers and pies.

After the wonderful meal, the tables were cleared and it became more of a typical reception, with a live five piece Shio arrangement playing their version of classical music as the guests mingled in the room. There was no dancing at a Shio reception, but that didn't dissuade Estrella in the slightest, performing a dance meant to celebrate a marriage in Ulalan culture with only drums played by her children for music, and her dancing absolutely mesmerized the entire reception. Jason often forgot just how incredibly good she was, since he was used to seeing it after dealing with her for four years. Jason was more or less forced to play the piano with the arrangement, playing using sheet music they prepared for him, and doing a pretty good job of blending in his piano with the three woodwinds and two stringed instruments common in a Shio quintet. It was also a rare chance to remind his friends and fellow galactic rulers that he had a few of his own rather unusual talents, as they would measure things, though it wasn't exactly fair to call it a talent given how hard he'd worked to be a good piano player over the majority of his life. It was also a bit amusing for him to watch the reception as he played, to see so many different people, in both appearance and profession, standing in one place and interacting, because they were unified in their warm wishes for Kevin and Sano's happiness. It was a chance to see galactic power players rubbing elbows with pro gamers, to see the giant wolves native to the planet chatting with much smaller bipeds, to see that it was possible to bring people who were so very different together if only one offered them something with which all of them could agree.

In a way, it was the essence of what the House of Karinne was, at its core. The house was built on diversity, where anyone, from anywhere, could stand evenly with everyone else, a place where all of the people were united in a common interest, a common goal, and that was the Academy, education, science, and community. It didn't matter what you looked like if you had fur, or scales, or talons. It didn't matter what gas you breathed, if you breathed at all. In the House of Karinne, everyone was welcome, their viewpoints were appreciated, and everyone knew that they were a valued member of the House. It was still a place where any member of the House could walk up to Jason and just talk to him, to ask him questions, to give him their opinion, offer advice, and they knew that their opinions were not dismissed.

Jason Karinne served the House. The House did not serve Jason Karinne.

As much as he might not want it, however, work never failed to find him no matter where he might be hiding, and it arrived in the form of Serreth, which was a Kimdori nearly as tall as Kraal but not nearly as heavy-shouldered. Senneth was a Gamekeeper, and his territory encompassed Galaxy D1A, which was the galaxy in the B string where they had their permanent research outpost. He gathered information on the empires and civilizations in that galaxy, and since there were no other Gamekeepers in the B string, upon him fell most anything that involved their research efforts there. If Senneth was here, crashing the reception, that meant that he had information in from the mission to see what happened at DA5K. If he was here, then he had news, and it was too important to convey in any way but in person.

[Excuse me, guys, work just walked in. Aya, if you would please, quietly inform the other rulers that I might need to have a conference with them, depending on what I learn. And if she didn't see him come in, warn Zaa that Serreth has arrived.]

Zaa beat him to Serreth, quickly stepping over to lean down and whisper to him—Zaa was slightly taller than him, and Jason often forgot that she was as tall as she was—and he was whisked away to his work office in the compound. He barely had time to sit down before Serreth accessed the room's node with his memory band. “We have the surveillance in, cousin,” he announced.

“Have you had the chance to look at it?”

“Yes, but it's best to show it to you to explain why it won't help all that much.” A holo appeared in the air in front of his desk, and Zaa stepped around to stand beside his chair. “Watch.”

The holo changed to an image of the planet he remembered from before, a still image showing the military vessels he remembered moving away from the planet. This had to be just before whatever happened happened, for he didn't see any civilian ships fleeing in the other direction. The angle of the image was such that the planet was on the left and the ships were moving to the right, and the view zoomed out as the ships started moving very fast. The image pulled back more and more to show a possible destination, but there was nothing.

No. there was something. It was a...a void. There was a amorphous area where there were no stars, and with close observation he could see that the void was moving. It looked to be fairly large, and after he had his gestalt map it out, he found that it was nearly 1,000 kathra in length and 300 kathra

high. How wide it was he couldn't tell, since it appeared two dimensional, just a hole in space. A *moving* hole in space.

“It's some kind of void,” Jason said. “See how the stars in front of it vanish and the stars behind it become visible again?”

Serreth nodded. “We had sensors running along with the telescope, and they were unable to get any readings at all,” he relayed. “Watch what happens.”

They continued to observe as the military ships approached. They then fired energy weapons of some kind into the void, which simply vanished, as if their energy was swallowed up. The ships continued to fire, for long, long moments, then they turned and tried to flee just as the void seemed to surge forward. It enveloped the ships in a matter of seconds, and when they appeared from the other side when the void moved beyond them, they were adrift. Jason knew then that they had no crews on them, just their uniforms left behind. “The anomaly travels to the planet from here, which takes approximately four hours. I'll jump to that point, but during that time, the civilian ships we observed had begun to start fleeing from the planet. But this, your Grace, this is what you have to see.”

Jason watched as the black void seemed to approach the planet, then it zoomed in to the surface as the void seemed to pass the planet by, going behind it and vanishing from view. There, they saw a feline species in a state of pure panic, rushing towards ships, and they all just started *vanishing*. In mid-stride, where they stood, vanishing in a moving wave that traveled in a linear fashion across the surface of the planet, moving fast enough to sweep from one edge of the planet to the other in about nine minutes. The way it moved told Jason that it was some kind of planar projection from the void behind the planet, moving past the planet and

doing...whatever it was it did, which made the sentient feline species simply vanish into thin air, leaving their clothes and possessions behind.

In ten minutes, it was over. The entire planet was depopulated. But where those people went, what happened to them...there was no sign. No clue. The dimensions of the void were too small to hold around 5 billion sentient beings whose average size was about the same as a Jirunji. The void, after finishing with the planet, then chased down the ships that had managed to escape, overtaking them by moving faster than light as they fled at sublight, the ships disappearing into the void one by one. And when they appeared from the other side, they were no longer moving at high speed, were instead adrift at a velocity that put them in a stable solar orbit synchronous with the planet.

He had no idea what he'd just seen. The camera couldn't penetrate the void, and the sensor data layered onto the viddy showed nothing. Just a hole in space. But the reaction of the ships made it clear that *they* could see what was there. They had all fired at a central point about in the center of the void, not at the void itself, making it clear that they were aiming at something specific.

They had seen it. They could see it, but for some reason, the camera could not. The only reasonable explanation Jason could see was that the ship or whatever that did it could indeed scramble light, which hid it from the telescope.

"I...I don't know," he breathed. "The ships could see it. They were aiming at something specific within the void."

"Our guess is that they had sensor technology that could penetrate the effect, giving them an exact location," Serreth answered.

“Possible. But I don’t see how they did it. The image—we could see the population vanish, but no indication of how. No energy readings. No visible signs of it. Those people just...vanished.”

“That’s the part we can’t explain as well,” Serreth agreed. “No elder that’s seen this can explain it.”

“Get ready to send this to the *Setrai*, Serreth,” Jason said, to which Zaa nodded in agreement. “The Republic’s scanners and sensors are better than ours. Let’s see if they can get anything out of this. In the meantime.” *Estie, can you come to my office?*

Certainly my friend. I’ll be right there.

Actually, it’d be best if everyone comes. Sk’Vrae, Enva, all the rulers. Dahnai, can you find Quord and bring him with you?

I’m talking to him right now, babes. We’re on our way.

“I called in the other rulers. This is something they need to see.”

“Agreed, cousin,” Zaa nodded.

They only had to wait a moment for the others to enter his office, though they had nowhere to sit. It also made it a tiny bit cramped, given the office wasn’t that big and Sk’Vrae was. “What goes on, Jason?” she asked in her husky voice after coming in, standing nearest the door so her tail didn’t smack anyone if she turned.

“I don’t think I told everyone about this, because I was waiting for more information, so let me go over things.” He explained what they’d seen and what they did about it, in fairly exacting detail, and that made them look a little surprised. “The Kimdori have sent us the vidy of what the

telescope found, but...I don't know what to make of it. So, I want everyone to watch this, and see what you make of it."

Serreth played the video back for them, and when it was done, it left nothing but silence in the room, for a good few minutes. "I don't know what to make of it either, Jason," Quord grunted. "If there's no physical evidence from the inhabitants to prove they never left the planet, then...where did they go? The dimensions of the darkness aren't big enough to hold them."

"And that's getting into why this has me confused to hell and back," Jason growled. "I just don't get it. It makes no sense, it's physically impossible given what we can see, and there's no indication on the sensors that anything happened. Estrella, your people have highly advanced sensor technology. If I send a copy of this to you, can your people look it over?"

"Yes," she replied soberly. "Can you transmit it to my ship?"

"Serreth," he prompted, which caused the tall Kimdori to put a hand over his memory band. "One thing I think here is that they could see it. If you look back on the vidy, it shows their ships firing at a fixed point. I think they could see what was coming, either with their eyes or with the scanners, but their weapons didn't do anything to it. But I'm not sure about that, our sensor scans of the system showed that their technology level is actually below ours, so I don't see how their sensors could see it."

"Just because they're not as advanced overall, that doesn't mean that they weren't advanced in some ways," Enva said.

"True. I'm almost tempted to find out by sending a ship to salvage one of their warships, but no. No way in hell do we go anywhere near that place," he said adamantly. "I don't want to attract the attention of whatever did that. And I mean I've ordered my ships not to come within a literal

billion light years of that galaxy,” he stated strongly. “I won’t order another observation, either. Something deep in my gut tells me that even that may have been too much, and I won’t risk it again. This *scares* me, ladies and gentlemen, and I think all of you know that I am not a man who scares easily,” he stated.

“You’re not the only one, Jayce,” Grayhawk said grimly. “I’ve never seen anything like that before, and I don’t ever want to see it again.”

“There’s no doubt that whatever it is must be hostile,” Magran said in his mellow voice. “So avoiding it is the wisest course of action. We shouldn’t go looking for trouble from something that can clearly bring us far more than we can handle. But I think that this is the time for you share the burden, Jason. Can you send copies of all your sensor logs and this video to all of us? Let our people study it, maybe one of us will find something the others miss.”

“Done,” Jason said immediately. “Serreth is our point of contact for this. I’ll have him send all the data we have to all of you, and if you find anything, send it to him. He’s handling all aspects of this investigation.”

Serreth nodded calmly. “I will have my office contact your science departments to arrange lines of communication. We can centralize all our findings using the Academy mainframe.”

“Since there’s little more we can do until our investigators have a chance to look things over, might we return to the party? We don’t want to make anyone worry,” Enva offered.

“That is the prudent course,” Krazrou agreed. “There are guests who no doubt wonder why we vanished, the most important of which are the

bride and groom. Let's not cast a shadow over what is supposed to be their day."

"Well said, Kraz," Jason agreed, standing up. "But I think we need to meet and discuss this, because I consider this to be a remote but potential threat to the entire galaxy. How about in 35 standard hours? I think that'll be close to daytime cycle for all of us."

"That should give our science divisions time to analyze the data," Sk'Vrae said.

"Alright, we'll meet in 35 standard hours, umm, at the Academy's main campus," he said. "I'll talk to Ayuma and have her set up some mainframe space for this. It *is* best if we centralize this using the mainframe. Plus, it'll let me put Cybi on it. I've been having Cyrsi manage this, but this has now gone beyond the KES. Cyrsi and Cybi can run point on this for the CBIMs."

"Then it sounds like we have a plan," Dahnai declared. "I take it we don't spread this beyond this little circle?"

"For now. I don't want to cause a potential panic. I don't want anyone thinking that this is suddenly going to happen here, ignore the fact that this happened ten years ago all the way over in the B string," Jason agreed with a nod. "We can discuss bringing this to the Confederation later, once we know more. If we find out any more," he grunted. "But if it looks like this is something that everyone else needs to know, we can discuss how we're gonna reveal it to make sure nobody jumps to conclusions."

"Wise," Krazrou nodded in assent. "Serreth, can you prepare a presentation that gets up to speed? Everything that Jason knows about this,

we should know. Especially the background information Jason didn't have time to reveal to us."

"Do so," Zaa ordered.

"As you command, my Denmother," Serreth said with a slight bow towards here. "I will give the presentation at the upcoming meeting."

"Very good," Krazrou said calmly. "Now, let us return the party, friends, before we are missed."

The group left the office and returned to the reception, and as Krazrou predicted, their absence was noted. He joined Kevin, Sano, Rita, Mrima, and Rahne as they sat at a table and chatted, Kevin and Sano still holding hands. *[Did something happen, Jayce? You pulled all the rulers into your office.]* Rahne inquired.

[We got in some information and needed to be briefed on it, nothing earth-shattering,] he answered. *[So, you guys ready for the honeymoon?]*

[There's no real need for one, given we live together,] Sano answered with a tiny bit of a blush, *[But yeah, I'm looking forward to it. We've never been to Sua before, they say it's one of the loveliest planets in the galaxy.]*

[It is if you love beaches and the ocean,] Jason affirmed. Sua, in the Crai Empire, was an ocean planet renowned as one of the biggest vacation destinations for about any species that liked the water in the entire galaxy, with a reputation that rivalled Menos in the Imperium and Sarga on Karis. It was populated by one of the races of the empire, the Suaru, an amphibious species that looked vaguely like long-legged frog men who were very friendly and very happy to host guests. They had turned hospitality into the primary industry of their homeworld, making the entire planet one gigantic

vacation resort, and the Sua were *very, very good* at providing their guests with amazing vacation experiences. Nobody had a bad vacation experience when they went to Sua. It was the biggest travel destination for people visiting the Crai Empire, for obvious reasons. And since it was a Generation world, that meant that Kevin and Sano could visit in person instead of having to use bionoids. *[You guys should really enjoy it. Sua is gorgeous, and the Suaru are masters of showing their guests a great time.]*

[We've heard,] Kevin noted mentally.

[Kishu and Zuzu staying with you, Rita?]

[They're already at the villa,] she answered with a smile. *[I love having them, so it's no bother at all.]*

Cyvanne wandered up to the table and leaned down, then blew impishly in Kevin's ear. That made him laugh. *[Stop that!]* he protested lightly.

[I can't let one of my favorite Champions think he's safe, now can I?] she retorted impishly.

[At least she doesn't troll you in-game, Kev,] Jason noted slyly. *[She does that to me all the time.]*

[Oh, she's trolled me before. Thankfully never when I'm streaming or recording, else people might think I'm cheating somehow,] he replied with a look at the bionoid.

[Yeah, that's a big no, I don't want anyone thinking Kev gets any special treatment. Nobody gets special treatment in CO, not even Jason,] Cyvanne declared with a smile. *[I talked a bit with Crushcrush. He's debating starting an alt on Methrian as a new playthrough series of viddies.]*

Others have done them before, but given how great he is at vidy making, I'm sure they'll be popular.]

[Is he gonna fast track or do everything from the ground up like a new player?] One of the features Cyvanne had implemented was a way to accelerate the growth of an alt. If a player had a main with high skills, then the alt, if the mode was enabled, greatly increased the speed that their skills increased, up to about 500 skill points below his main. There was also a similar catch-up mechanic set up for brand new players, since there were characters running around the game with their primary skills as high as 5,000...and three of them were sitting at the table in Kevin, Sano, and Rita. That put a massive gulf between new players and veteran players, so the catch-up system was there for anyone who wanted to accelerate their skill growth. If someone opted in to the fast track system, their skills raised quickly up to 2,000, when before it was 1,000. But that could be disabled by talking to an NPC in any faction capital, which slowed the game way down for those people that wanted to enjoy taking their time and go through the content as originally designed, and weren't interested in speeding towards endgame content. Brand new players didn't fast track as fast as alts with established mains, but they still increased skills faster than someone who had the fast track option turned off.

But it wasn't a complete shortcut, since the game had two aspects; skills and gear. Skills mattered more than gear, but gear was also a very important aspect of a character, mainly because a character's stats—and most importantly, their health—was determined by their gear. That forced players to grind through the game to get geared up, but it also greatly reduced the most crippling time gate in the game for newer players,

grinding skills. A guy with a sword skill of 2,000 but only 200 hit points wasn't going to last long against monsters that had equivalent skill ratings.

For those who hit 2,000, skill crystals were still a thing in the game and were a viable means of raising skills up to what was considered minimum floor level for late game grouping, which was around 3,500. Raiding, however, that took even more of an investment. If your skills weren't 3,500 minimum, you were going to have a rough time in the later raids in the Elemental Planes or the World's Heart, the expansion that was after the Elemental Planes. And if you wanted to raid in the current high-end raid zones in the Dark Dimension, which was the most recent expansion content, you'd better have a skill average closer to 4,000 than 3,500 and gear at least from dungeons in the Dark Dimension.

That meant that Kevin, Sano, and Rita had skills far higher than required for the current endgame, but they had those stupid high skills because they were pro gamers. Right now, the average endgame raider had an average skill level of around 4,500, at least when considering only the combat skills needed to do the raid. The pro gamers played a hell of a lot more than the average player and usually had means to raise their skill levels faster than average players, so their skills were significantly higher than the average endgame player. The average skill level for players like them was around 5,000.

[Fast track as a new player, which is the current new player experience.]

[I remember when I did that with that split boxing group, it was a lot of fun. I think he'll enjoy doing it,] Kevin mused. [I think I enjoyed it more for the challenge of playing multiple players at once, though. I will say one thing, that taught me how to manage splits like nothing else.]

[So that explains where those godly splitting skills came from,] Jason declared with amusement and admiration in his thought.

[I get dizzy when I watch him do that. It's way beyond me,] Sano communed with an audible laugh.

[You could do it if you practice.]

[I don't want to practice. I'm not a masochist like you are, love,] she communed impishly with a wink.

[She's got you there, Kev,] Mrima grinned.

[I've got him every way. He's all mine now,] Sano nearly purred mentally, squeezing his hand.

[You coulda had him three years ago, you know,] Rita teased.

[And get murdered by my parents? Think again,] she retorted.

Sami scurried up to them, still looking a little too gleeful and scattered. *[I got Zippy Pippy's autograph!]* she declared happily to Jason.

[I keep thinking he's like a kid,] Kevin admitted. *[He's like a hobbit from the Lord of the Rings books, and he looks more like he's 12, not 22.]*

[He's actually fairly tall for an Eridar,] Jason noted. The Eridar were another of the races of the Crai Empire. *[They're about the same size as a Prakarikai on the average, so Zippy's tall for his people. Given he lives on Terra, he must go through life being treated like someone's lost little boy,]* he added lightly.

[I know that feeling. I've had way too many people try to pet me like a cat,] Mrima nearly bristled, then she hissed threateningly when Jason did

just that, which descended the entire table into bright laughter. *[Watch it, buster, I don't care if you are the Grand Duke,]* she threatened playfully.

[I have to get my pets in with you, it's way too dangerous to do that to Mrar or Mrii. Mrar would turn me inside out, and Mrri would go straight to Jyslin and get me in big, big trouble.]

Mrima gave him an adorably hostile look, which just made him laugh again.

Sami rushed off when she saw Sampi and Eldrik walk by, no doubt to get their autographs as well, and she was replaced almost immediately by Estrella and her children, Kirim and Leseni. *It's past time I offered my respects and well wishes to you,* she sent richly, her thought rippling with the immense power lurking behind it. Estrella was a *powerful* telepath. *It is a long tradition among my people to perform a dance for the newlyweds. Might we be allowed to celebrate your union in the Ulalan way?*

I thought you were a Dreamer, Kevin admitted almost with a flush.

I know, we get that a lot, Estrella smiled, her thought diplomatically gracious.

I'd suggest you say yes. Ulalans are the best dancers on this side of the string, so you're in for a treat, Jason prompted.

I've never heard of your people, madam, Mrima noted.

We're not from your galaxy, my dear Pai. We're here to join the Academy system so we can send our students here to learn, and establish permanent relations with the Confederation and other governments within your galaxy.

Estrella is a dignitary from a nation in another galaxy known as the Galactic Republic, Jason explained. We met them during our exogalactic explorations. Since she looks so much like a Faey, her people are the established diplomats from her government that deal with us. When we deal with the Republic, we do so primarily through the Ulala.

Just so, Estrella smiled. When we learned of the Academy, we decided to sign on to the treaty that allows us to send students and scientists to it. That's why I'm here, to sign that treaty and introduce my government to the empires of your galaxy.

Oh. So, it's important ruler stuff, Kevin sent.

True, but I consider getting the chance to attend the wedding of Jason's friends as important as signing that treaty, she smiled radiantly. We Ulala have a saying, that the true worth of a man is not the status of the woman who owns him, but of the quality of the friends that he keeps. The friends I see before me tells me much of what kind of a man Jason is. A good man, she smiled.

Owned? Kevin asked, a bit warily.

Jason decided to step on that immediately. It's a bit of an unusual custom, at least from our point of view. Men in Ulalan society always live with a female partner. They're not allowed to live by themselves, unless they're in the military. Despite that, men live their own lives and are free to pursue virtually any career they want. Women provide them a place to live and see to their needs, leaving them free to pursue their own careers and interests. If the couple find they're compatible and fall in love, then marriages form out of these arrangements. In their ancient past, it was a form of ownership, but more like a form of marriage than a form of slavery.

It isn't like that anymore, but the name of the custom hasn't changed. Men aren't slaves in Ulalan society, Kevin.

Just so, Estrella agreed, her mental tone mild and reassuring. When my son comes of age, women will offer to take him into their households. I will choose the woman that I feel will be best for my son, who will nurture him and help him achieve his career goals, so he might live a life of fulfillment and prosperity. While legally it is considered a form of ownership, I can assure you, no man in our society does anything he does not want to do. We may own them on paper, but men own us in virtually every other way imaginable, she smiled.

Like I said, it's a bit of weird custom, Jason repeated. I've never met an Ulalan man that doesn't like the system, since they get to do virtually anything they want, even if it's just to sit on a couch all day and read cheesy romance novels. The woman provides him with a home and food and even an allowance, which frees him up to do what he wants to do, not what he may need to do just to make ends meet.

Oh. Well, that doesn't sound all that bad, Kevin declared, his mental tone much less defensive.

Believe me, sometimes I wish I was a man, Estrella smiled. I'd love to live my life without a care in the world and able to pursue anything that crosses my fancy.

Do you own a man, Estrella? Rita asked.

I own three. It's expected that women of station like myself take in multiple men to provide them a stable foundation from which they can achieve their goals. One of them is an entrepreneur who owns and runs an export business. One is a teacher. The last is a systems analyst that works

with the Republic Navy, but is not himself in the military. None of them actually live with me, however. I support them as they pursue their careers back on our home planet. I also have a husband, the father of my children, but his legal status is different from an unmarried man. A married man is not owned in the conventional sense, because it creates inequality within the marriage. My husband stands as my equal within our marriage, and he can't be equal to me if I own him. He's currently with our other three children, taking care of them while I'm here.

Oh, so you get money from the business one of them runs?

No, dear, that is his business. I have no claim over it. He has become quite wealthy and successful, he is a good businessman, she sent with pride in her thought. But despite him being a wealthy and successful businessman, I would still provide him a home and a stipend if he wanted them, because that is what women do in my society. In his case, the fact that I own him is a mere technicality, since he has his own home and his own life, and I suspect that soon the young lady he's been dating will be approaching me to buy his paper so they can get married. The money he makes, that is his money, and he can do with it whatever he wishes. I don't pay him a stipend, but that was by his choice, and he no longer lives in the house I provided for him because he found a much bigger and nicer house that better reflects his financial success. He owns that house, not me. If he demanded it, however, I'd still be financially supporting him. He had me split his stipend up to increase the stipend for the other two men I own, which was very nice of him.

Oh, okay. Now I think I get it, Kevin told her. It's like it's just technical.

Precisely, my friend, she smiled. I may own my men, but it's just a word on a piece of paper. I provide them with a home, support them, and they can

do most anything they please.

But you do have to spend money to buy them, Rita noted.

Of course. A woman has to be able to prove that she can provide a man a good home, and one way is by literally buying the privilege of supporting him. That price is evenly split between the seller and the man being sold, she stressed. So men are usually quite keen on getting a high price when they are sold, since half of that will be their money. But money isn't always the primary reason. When Seviri's girlfriend comes to me to buy his paper so she can marry him, I'll sell him for one siva, which is our currency. That is the custom, because love is far more important than mere money, she sent richly. No woman would have the gall to hold another woman hostage over her love's paper by demanding a high price for him. She would become a pariah among her sister women.

Okay, now I get it. It doesn't sound bad at all, Kevin declared.

I'm happy you understand, Estrella sent diplomatically. She knew Kevin's background, so she probably realized that he'd be afraid of the Ulala if she didn't fully explain their customs to him right up front. So, would you allow us to dance for you to celebrate your happiness?

Of course, Sano answered before Kevin could.

Major Aya, would you be so kind as to fetch your tamirin? Estrella called, looking in the direction where Aya stood, watching over the ballroom with her usual hawkish stare.

It would be my honor, my Lady. One moment.

Aya fetched her tamirin from the conservatory and sat on a stool near the edge of the area that quickly cleared out for Estrella and her children.

Do you remember the Aisuri, Aya?

Certainly. Estrella had taught Jason and the guards quite a few Ulalan songs over the years she'd been involved with them, so Aya started right into the song by tapping the flat of her hand against the body of the instrument, creating a rich drumming sound that set the tempo. She then started to play the song, which was a lively, fast-paced one that conveyed joy and celebration in its melody, and that caused Estrella and her children to explode into perfectly synchronous motion. The many chains and bangles and baubles on their clothing suddenly made sense to everyone watching as they began to chime and jingle, and their movements caused the sounds to perfectly match the beat of the song, becoming part of the music, as their movements captivated every single person who watched with their matchless grace and fluidity. Estrella was the most agile, supple, graceful woman that Jason had ever known, and it became the most apparent when she danced. Every move was effortless, every motion perfectly controlled and measured, and she glided and swayed and stepped along the floor as if she weighed nothing, as if gravity was hers to command and the very laws of physics bent to the movements of her body. Her children proved they were worthy of their mother as they matched her movements, but they didn't have Estrella's matchless grace. The spectators spontaneously began clapping along with the music as the three Ulalans danced, as they became completely entranced by Estrella's unrivalled dancing mastery.

When the three of them slowed to a stop at the end of the song, there was a moment of sudden silence as everyone stopped clapping almost in unison, then it picked back up as loud applause. Estrella bowed several times with her unmatched, sinuous grace, a look of serene content on her

face. Estrella and her kids approached the table of honor and were met with awed looks from those seated, *I do hope you enjoyed it*, she sent modestly.

That was astounding! Sano blurted mentally.

Aww, thank you, dear Sano, she replied with a calm smile. *I hope it brought joy to you on this, the most special of days.*

Dance is a major aspect of Ulalan culture, so they are all very good at it, Jason supplied with a bit of amusement in his thought. *When we first made contact with the Ulala, they asked me to perform a dance with them as part of the process of us getting to know each other better. I still feel like I messed that up so bad.*

You did fine, Jason! Estrella protested with a smile.

And I must say, Leseni, Kirim, you are going to rival your mother within the ring someday, Jason told them, which made both of them beam at him.

Thank you, Uncle Jason! That means a lot to me! Kirim replied exuberantly.

I'll never step as well as Mother, but I certainly won't stop trying to be equal to her, Leseni answered.

Oh yeah, speaking of backstories, Jason, sit and spill! Mrima ordered, pointing at the empty seat. *I want to know how you ended up getting married on Moridon!*

He laughed and patted Estrella on the shoulder, then moved over and sat down.

He spent the rest of the reception sitting with the newlyweds and their closest friends and just chatting, sharing some stories as people came and went to join them, until the party finally started to wind down. Jason lingered, however, to get the chance to talk to Kevin alone, the two of them walking along the meadow as the brilliant light of the gas giant around which it orbited shone in the night sky, taking up nearly half of it. Jason led Kevin up to the tree, then the two of them sat down with their backs against it, looking down over the vacation house. *[I hope I don't mess this up,]* Kevin confided to him. *[I know we've lived together for a long time, but it feels different now.]*

[It's just a title, Kev,] Jason assured him. *[Just continue loving her the way you do, and you'll never have anything to worry about.]*

[I still can't get over it. That a woman like her would ever marry a man like me,] he relayed, doubt and the shame of a survivor of trauma lurking within his thought, proving that he still carried deep scars from his time on that farm.

[She can see who you really are, Kevin, and she thinks it's beautiful. Don't rock that boat.]

Kevin laughed ruefully, his voice muted by the night. *[I'll be terrified to argue with her.]*

[That won't last long.]

[I guess not.] He was silent a long moment. *[I can see why you built your vacation house here. This place, it smells...different. I felt at peace the moment I got off the skimmer last Sunday when we came to do the rehearsal.]*

[This is a very special place,] he affirmed, patting the ground between them. [I won't explain why, but it is. I know this is going to sound a little crazy, but half the reason I offered to host the wedding is because I wanted you to marry under an oye tree. I wanted to give the trees the chance to witness your marriage, to share in your happiness.]

[It's a tree, Jason.]

[Yes, it's a tree. But it's a very special tree,] he smiled over at him. [It's a Parri thing, Kevin, and you know that I study with them to learn more about them and their abilities. The trees have a special interest in you, so I felt it was appropriate that they got to be part of your happiness. The tree flowered just for your wedding, after all.]

[Seriously?]

Jason nodded. *[Oye trees have an awareness, a sentience, that goes far beyond just being a tree. They are intelligent beings, it's just that their intelligence is so alien to us that we can't really understand them all that well. I've spent the last seven years of my life trying to learn their language, to use a term, but I've barely learned enough to hold a broken conversation with them. But I know enough to know that the tree wanted to look its best on this special day, so it flowered just so it could present itself properly for the ceremony.]*

Kevin turned a little and looked up, his gaze sweeping up the vast distance from the ground to the canopy, some 500 shakra overhead. The tree had grown into an absolute monster over the last four years, it was so tall that a good-sized skyscraper could be built under it and still not touch the base of the canopy. *[Huh,] he burbled mentally. [Why would they be*

interested in someone like me? I'm a nobody. I mean, I'm just a regular guy. The only thing special about me is that I have some unusual friends.]

[They don't think you're a nobody, and neither does Sano. Or me,] he answered strongly. [And you don't have to be incredible to be special. Sometimes, the most special things can be found in something you look at every day, and just never see it for what it really is.]

[I suppose so. I have to admit, I'm a little nervous. I didn't think I'd be. I mean, about the fact that it's different now. I feel like I have more responsibility to Sano, to prove to her that I was worth marrying.]

[Relax, friend. Just be yourself. You don't have to prove anything to her,] Jason assured him. [Save the feeling of responsibility for when you have your first baby. Take it from me, the first time you look into the eyes of your child, you will know that you are a family,] he added.

[I'm equal parts eager and terrified of that idea. I'd love to have children of my own, but I'm terrified that I'll let them down.]

[Kevin. You're a wealthy professional who sets his own work schedule, you're going to be just fine,] Jason winked. [I'm positive that you'll be able to provide your kids everything they could ever want or need. The only thing you need to worry about is giving them the love and attention they deserve. Remember, money can't ever replace you being there for your children. Trust me, this is something I have a lot of experience with,] he commended wryly. [But for me, it's a matter of finding the time to be there for all my kids so they don't feel ignored or neglected. I try my best, but there are only 24 hours in a day, so sometimes I feel like I'm not doing enough.]

[Where are you at now, 28? An hour a day for each of them and you're set. That gives you one hour a day to sleep.]

Jason laughed brightly. *[Biologically, but I count 30 that I consider mine, even if I'm not their sire. Danelle, Aria, Breiden, they're not mine by blood but they are mine by right. They're still my children, and I love them just like I do the others. So that murders your brilliant plan,]* he grinned. *[And the strangest thing is that 30 doesn't sound like I have enough.]*

[Sounds like you need to move to a planet with a longer day, or order your science people to slow down Karis' rotation to make the days longer,] Kevin noted with a sly undertone, which made Jason laugh again.

[Being the Grand Duke does have some advantages, even above and beyond being able to execute any boy that gets too fresh with my daughters.]

Kevin barked out a sudden laugh. *[That must be a war. Your wife is Faey, and they see things way differently.]*

[They think they beat me into submission, but I keep a list. And I have plans,] he communed darkly, which made Kevin laugh again.

[I hope we don't run into any issues like that. Me and Sano I mean.]

[Probably not. Socially, Terrans and Shio are very like-minded,] he replied. *[It's why we get along so well with them.]*

[True. There are differences, but nothing like giant or major.]

[Since you've lived together, you've already seen how she's different, and I'm sure you've already adapted to it.]

[True. I just hope I can make her happy, since it's for real now. There's no turning back, and I guess that's what's making me a little nervous. Shio don't divorce, so her happiness for the rest of her life depends on me.]

[She trusts you, Kevin, so don't worry. I think she'll be very happy. And so will you.]

[God, I hope so. I'm happy now, and I don't ever want it to end.]

[Then work to make sure it doesn't.]

[Now that's good advice.] A shadow hawk, a nocturnal raptor native to the moon, landed on the ground beside Jason, and he held his arm up for it. It hopped up onto his forearm and gave a surprisingly mellow chirping sound as Jason scratched into the dark gray feathers along its neck. *[I keep forgetting you do that.]*

[I don't do anything,] Jason chuckled. *[It's the bird that made that decision, not me.]* “Out hunting, my friend?” he asked the bird.

It gave another chirp, bowing its head to allow Jason to continue scratching.

“Just remember, no hunting in the meadow,” he reminded it.

“Why not?” Kevin asked.

“Because the tree doesn't like violence in the meadow,” he answered. “The tree doesn't begrudge predators doing their thing, it just doesn't want them doing it here. This is a place of peace, and the animals respect the tree's wishes. This shadow hawk just moved into the area and established her territory, and it includes the meadow. But she doesn't hunt here,” he said with a gentle smile. “The tree would be cross with her if she did.”

“What can it do about it?”

“Plenty,” Jason answered dryly. “The tree has its own ways of enforcing its rules over the meadow. It’s not a normal tree, Kev. Trust me, the animals know better than to make it mad. Any of them that break the rules gets schooled, in ways that really drives the point home over just who’s the boss in this meadow. And it sure as hell ain’t me.”

Kevin looked up at the tree again, then gave a grunting sound of noncommittal. “I’ll take your word for it,” he said. He looked a little uncertain when the shadow hawk jumped over to perch on his leg, but with Jason’s gentle urging, he began tentatively petting the bird’s head. “Nice, uh, bird,” he called. “Does she have a name?”

“Not one that we can pronounce,” he answered. “The shadow hawks name themselves not by a word, but by their appearance. So, in a way, her name is what she looks like. Like the wolves, their names are their scents. Since we can’t smell the way they can, we can’t really say their names.” Honey padded up to them and sat down. “That’s why Honey goes by Honey. It’s the closest Terran approximation to her real name. Hey Honey. Surprised your pack let you go.”

Her tongue lolled out a little bit, a way she showed her amusement. *[My father finished interrogating me, so my time is my own again,]* she told them. *[Cayenne, however, is not quite so lucky.]*

Jason laughed. “In laws will be in laws, no matter what species,” he said lightly. “Let me guess, lambasting him for not giving you a litter?”

[That’s very important to us, so yes, he’s a little worried,] she replied lightly. *[But Songa says there’s nothing wrong medically. It’s just bad luck,*

that's all. It's certainly not for lack of trying,] she added with a naughty tilt to her thought that made Kevin blush a little.

“Be nice, Kevin’s Terran to the roots of his hair. He’s not used to that,” Jason said almost teasingly, glancing at him. “You’re about to get a new class, right?”

She nodded. *[We’ll start in two days. I looked over their files, and I think they’ll do fine. I’ve noticed more and more that my trainees are more open to the concept of having four legs.]*

[Simsense,] Kevin declared. *[I mean, on Terra, there’s a lot more simsense about being not Terran. I mean, Sano’s character in CO has a tail, and she’s played a Savasa for so long she has phantom tail for hours after she delinks. Stuff like that. People are exploring beyond how they were born, learning what it’s like to have a tail, or wings, or retractable claws. I think it’s making people more open to the idea of being a quadruped.]*

[That’s a good point,] Jason nodded. *[Simsense does have more of an effect on people than they think. It expands horizons, and in my opinion, that’s always a good thing. When we can see beyond ourselves, when we can understand what it’s like to be someone, something else, it helps us relate to them better. And better relations means peace.]*

[A wise observation. The Parri have indeed taught you much, Jason.]

[After seven years, I’d better have learned something.]

[Walking a mile in someone else’s shoes,] Kevin mused mentally. *[Simsense lets you do it. Kinda, anyway.]*

[And again, simsense shows it’s much more than entertainment,] Jason mused.

[As long as CO stays as it is, I don't care how else it's used,] Kevin declared.

[Cyvanne would absolutely murder me if I did anything to mess with CO,] Jason noted lightly.

[If you do, let me know, I want to watch,] Honey communed playfully. Kevin laughed and nearly startled the shadow hawk when Jason leaned over and smacked her on the foreleg. She retaliated by demonstrating why puny little Terrans shouldn't harass giant wolves, pulling him away from the tree with her teeth on his ankle and pinning him down, then licking his face roughly as he struggled under her weight.

[Kev! Kev, help! She's drowning me!] he pleaded.

[You want me to fight a one ton wolf with fangs longer than my fingers? You're on your own, Jayce,]

[Just pick her up! Get her off me!]

[Oh no, I'm not getting into this,] Kevin declared.

[You do well to know your place, morsel,] Honey taunted playfully, giving Kevin a challenging look. In reply, Kevin thrust out his open palm and then raised it, which lifted the giant wolf off of Jason, and the ground. It was a rare display of Kevin's true gift, which was his awe-inspiring telekinetic power. Over the years since he became a Generation, he had trained with the Pai Masters, to the point where he was capable of some truly stunning feats of telekinetic skill. And nothing demonstrated that more than him being able to easily lift a wolf weighing nearly a ton off the ground, and do it without hurting her or sinking himself into the ground from bearing her weight against him. When he first unlocked his power,

Mrima estimated he could lift maybe 600 konn with his power. But years of training had honed and strengthened his raw power, and now he was capable of lifting nearly 1200 konn by pure strength. Using advanced techniques, he was capable of lifting nearly two benkonn, 2,000 konn. That was nearly 2200 kilograms, or well over two tons in English measurements. Kevin Ball had enough strength to pick up an unloaded Stick or a large dropship or skimmer, *without a gestalt*.

Much like being the only non-Karinne civilian in the galaxy rated on KMS mecha, Kevin was one of the few non-Karinnes who was fully trained in using a gestalt. And not just a personal gestalt, either. Kevin was the only non-Karinne who had ever merged to a CB-level unit, having trained in strategic-class gestalts with Codi aboard the *Saiva*.

Merged to Codi, with her amplifier stacks augmenting his power, he was absolutely *terrifying*.

And Kevin wasn't even the strongest of the farm survivors who demonstrated immense telekinetic ability. He was merely *above average*. He wasn't the strongest of the farm survivors, but he was probably the best trained. He was the only farm survivor that was trained by the Masters in the advanced techniques, where all the others were rejected because of their many psychological issues. The Pai taught them how to control their power, knew the basic skills, but that was it. Kevin had enough psychological issues of his own, but the Masters felt that he was mature and responsible enough to not abuse the skills they'd taught him.

[Now you made this personal,] Kevin called teasingly as Honey glared at him a little bit, then returned pure amusement through her commune. He laughed when he was picked up by Honey's telekinetic power—she was a

very strong TK herself, and was very well trained in her power by Mrima—and the two of them squared off, hovering in the air by each other's ability.

[Hey now, that's my husband you're accosting,] Sano called as she walked up the hill towards them. *[Put him down or you're gonna meet with a messy accident involving a shaver.]*

[You wouldn't dare!] Honey challenged playfully. *[I know where you live, Sano!]*

[You won't fit through the front door!] Sano retorted with a grin as she approached. *[Now put him down!]*

[When he puts me down.]

[Kevin, love,] she prompted.

[Saved by my wife,] Kevin teased as he set her down.

[She saved you, not me,] Honey retorted, showing him a fanged grin as she did the same.

[Come back to the house, love, Jayce, Honey. Seido baked some iceberry tarts for us, and you don't want to miss it.]

[I hope she made more of that seasoned jerky,] Honey communed hopefully. *[Because biped sweets are not my thing.]*

[I'm sure she has something for you,] Sano smiled as Kevin put his arm around her. She smiled radiantly up at him, and Jason smiled when he leaned down and kissed her tenderly. If there was any doubt before, there was none now. That was love.

True love.