

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

# **Revelation2**

**Fel**

## Chapter 2

*Brista, 13 Demaa , 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 30 January 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Brista, 13 Demaa, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Imperial Palace, Dracora, Draconis*

By this point, Jason was glad that this was almost over.

Stretching, he stepped out of the bathroom after relieving himself and prepared for what was going to be a long day. The wedding ceremony was today, and the entire day was going to be on a schedule. The next 17 hours were scripted, with the parents held hostage by the scripted events for the kids, part of the traditions of a state wedding. They were up well before sunrise because the first ceremony was a meal, breakfast, which was steeped in religious tradition and required to be served at sunrise. After that, Rann and Shya would begin the pre-ceremony traditions while their parents had a little free time, but then they had to dress in their formal robes and prepare for the first stages of the ceremony. The ceremony itself would begin two hours after noon, at 1700, but given it would take Rann and Shya nearly six hours to complete their ritual baths after breakfast, it wouldn't be all that long after they finally got out that they'd be leaving for the cathedral. The ceremony would last three hours, then Dahnai and her blood relatives would do that ceremony in the First Garden while the rest of the

family waited. After that ceremony came the processional parade, then the grand feast. For Rann and Shya, it would be a very busy day where their every moment was scheduled. For Jason, it would be a lot of waiting around while wearing his formal robes, required to be there for the ceremony. Luckily, he'd be within range of the biogenic node in the palace at all times, so at least he could cheat by splitting and screwing around. Plus, this would be an opportunity to have some long talks with quite a few other leaders in the Confederation, because many were going to be attending. Most would be attending via their biogenic bionoids, brought over from Karis, but some dozen or so who were already transitioned would be here in person.

They were the ones he needed to speak with the most. They were members of the Accords and those rulers that had jumped on the Ten Year Plan, including Holikk, Shakizarr, Sovial, Shevatt, Bern, and Alros, and he needed to talk to them about their intent to implement the plan early. Those empires would be the beta test of the Ten Year Plan's system, and the first two would be the Subrian Authority and the Verutan Empire. Holikk and Shakizarr had gone out of their way to be first, both to transition personally and get their empires into the plan for transition, so there was a lot for Jason and the two of them to hash over.

It would be good to see everyone in the Accords again, face to face. They were cousins now, like family, and he was good friends with each and every one of them. While Kreel was Jason's best friend, in or out of politics, Kim, Sk'Vrae, Magran, Observer A, Krazrou, Mrrshan, Elrin, Brayrak, they were all friends, good friends, and he was going to enjoy seeing them again, talking to them in person rather than over biogenic comm. While they hung around and waited for Rann and Shya to go through all the ceremonies, he

could discuss things with the other members of the Accords. And he could do it without screwing up the ceremonies.

Splitting was the least flashy but the most useful aspect of being a Generation.

With Jason up and moving around, Aya entered the apartment, who was surprisingly wearing white armor instead of the usual black. But it was still biogenic, he could sense the crystals in it, so that meant that it had to be one of her reserve armor systems. She had three, and clearly, one of them was done in Imperial white...probably just for this ceremony. The rest of his detachment, including Dera and the girls, was part of the security for the ceremony, so no doubt they were already up and out there. The Colonel herself was in charge of the security for the ceremony, so no doubt it was going to be tight and seamless. *[Morning,]* he called to her as she filed in. *[You ready for the chaos?]*

*[We have our assignments,]* Aya answered. *[Me and Ryn are the primary escorts for Rann and Shya. Shen and Suri will be attached to you, and Dera is attached to the Listener team that will be providing overall telepathic observation and security. This is serious, Jason, so don't try to ditch your escorts,]* she warned flintily. *[I've already given Shen and Suri permission to bring you to heel if you misbehave.]*

*[I'm not going to wreck my son's wedding, woman, sheesh.]*

*[That's not what you'll try to do. You'll decide to go somewhere at the spur of the moment, decide that it's too restrictive to have to wait for your escorts, then try to ditch the girls so they don't slow you down.]*

*[I guess I'm getting predictable in my old age,]* he smiled slyly. *[And it's so weird seeing you in white.]*

*[It's a little strange to me too. I've worn Karinne black for so long, it almost feels like I'm a raw recruit again wearing white for the first time.]*

*[Well, it suits you,] he told her. [And when the Dukal Guard's first class graduates, you may want to think about returning the detachment to wearing white to discern the Imperial Guard from the Dukal Guard.]*

*[That's a few years off, but it won't be an issue. The Dukal guard's armor will be in Karinne blue with gold trim,] she answered. [The design has already been finalized.]*

*[It has? I didn't know.]*

*[You don't have to stick your nose into everything, Jason.]*

*[Yes I do. You know how nuts I get when I don't know what's going on.]*

*[Intimately,] she drawled mentally, her thought loaded with sarcasm. That made him chuckle lightly. [If you're up, then you're ready to start preparing.]*

*[Why I set my alarm so early. Jys, love, time to get up,] he called in a way that would penetrate her slumber. Sending or communing with someone asleep was very different from when they were awake.*

*[I'm up,] she replied immediately. [You woke me up getting out of bed. I was going to surprise you when you got back here.]*

*[That's the other reason I'm here, to keep you two on schedule,] Aya injected dryly, which made Jason laugh and Jyslin return pure amusement.*

*[You know us too well, Aya,] Jyslin returned playfully. [Let's get this started, baby.]*

It took nearly an hour to get ready for breakfast, because they had to eat in formal robes, robes more or less designed just for the occasion. That was because they had to sit on the floor at a traditional Imperial table. The Faey's most ancient traditions went all the way back to their Iron Age, and much like the Japanese, the Faey didn't have all that much furniture back then. They arrived for breakfast to find it laid out on a low table, requiring them to sit on cushions on the floor...and that wasn't easy at all wearing formal robes. That was why the robes they had on were *dining robes*, designed to allow them to easily sit and stand back up while wearing them. Luckily for them, though, they didn't use that kind of table very often, only for the most ancient ceremonies and rites that the Imperial family practiced. The meal was a ceremony, but it was a formidable breakfast, mainly because they weren't going to have the chance to eat again until nearly sunset. The breakfast was only attended by Dahnai and Jason's immediate families, which meant that only Jason and Jyslin's children were in attendance, and among them, only Rann, Aria, and the girls, Bethany and Siyae were in attendance. The toddlers Jon and Julia were too young for a meal like this, where they'd have to wear formal robes and make an ungodly mess, so they were eating with Tim and Symone this morning. Aria was sitting beside Sirri, which was a tiny bit outside of tradition, but Dahnai graciously overlooked it.

Aria herself was a bit of a break of tradition, since she wasn't Jason and Jyslin's biological daughter, but Jason wasn't about to exclude her over something so silly. She *was* his daughter, and he treated her like it in all ways.

After breakfast, they ended up right back in their rooms, but now they had a chance to rest and relax for a couple of hours before they had to start

getting ready. The time after breakfast but before the ceremony was traditionally a time for the bride and groom to rest a bit before the insanity started, as well as give the Empress and the groom's family some time to speak about important matters. But in this case, it was a time for everyone to just relax until the long, boring ceremonies began, time Jason spent sitting at a table with the leaders of the Accords empires, Holikk, Alros, and Shakizarr, discussing the plan to transition their populations, which would test their plans to make sure they were going to work. Since the Rathii were the smallest population of the three, they were going to go first, and if things worked smoothly, the Authority and the Verutan Empire would begin their transition plans at nearly the same time as a stress test of the system, making sure it could handle dealing with an empire with a massive population, like the Crai or the Skaa. The Authority and Empire combined had about the same population as the Crai Empire, so they'd be a good dry run for dealing with Voss' empire. Included in those plans were systems to have the virus die off within their empires just as the plans were complete, so they weren't resetting the quarantine countdown every time their citizens visited another Generation planet.

That was something that not even Jason and his family could avoid. After the wedding, all Accords empires were going into a mandatory 50 day quarantine to kill off the virus on their planets so they could be "clean" when the Rathii transition plan began. Controlling the virus was a critical aspect of the overall plan, to prevent it from mutating, and one of the most important aspects of it was that every empire got the same base virus when they started transition. So, not long after they returned to Karis, the planet was going to completely isolate itself, as were all Karinne holdings, quarantining even from each other and staying isolated until the Medical Service had complete confirmation that the virus had died out.

Alos himself wouldn't be returning to his home after the ceremony. He'd be staying on Draconis as Dahnai's guest and riding out the mandatory quarantine in her palace. He wouldn't return to Rathii space until he was clean of the virus, ensuring that he didn't bring a mutated strain into his empire.

Alos wasn't the only one doing something like that. Both Kreel and Enva were going to be going through quarantine outside of their empires, with Kreel on Karis and Enva on Draconis as Dahnai's guest. And that was no surprise, since Dahnai and Enva were such close friends. Kreel was going to be treating it like a big vacation, with lots of plans for baseball games and general slacking off...which meant that he'd get more work done in those 50 days than he would in three months back on Grimjar.

It was a fundamental paradox of the universe that the more a Grimja partied, the more work they mysteriously got done while they were out there drunk and carousing. It was almost like the universe was laughing at the rest of them for being so serious all the time.

Kreel invited himself into Jason's apartment after they came back, and he was a delightful distraction for both Jason and the kids, lightening the mood and making the upcoming long, boring day seem more tolerable. And he certainly did his job, bantering with Jason and Jyslin, annoying Tim, teasing the kids, even playfully biting Symone on the neck when she tried to pet his fur. He kept them entertained all the way up until it was time to get moving, starting the very long day filled with ancient ceremonies.

And it was *boring*, at least to Jason. He spent nearly as much time privately communing with friends and family as he did paying attention to what was going on, creating a split whose monotonous duty was solely to keep up with the ceremonies so he didn't get busted for not paying



attention...at least after his part of the ceremony was over. Rann and Shya both had insisted that Jason play the march that would bring Rann and Shya to the altar, playing an organ brought in just for the occasion. Jason had learned to play an organ just for this ceremony—while they were keyboards they had more notes from their two keyboards and foot pedals—so it was Jason himself playing the grand, stately music that was accompanying . It did go very smoothly, however, them arriving at the Basilica right on time, taking their seats on the front row—except Kreel, he wasn't family and was banished back among the masses—and then they settled in for the three different ceremonies that would be performed one after the other, as Rann and Shya were married by all three orders of the Faey religion. That part actually wasn't that bad, because the wedding ceremonies for all three orders weren't interminably boring. The ceremony for Aris was probably his favorite, because it involved a lot of singing, and the High Priestess of Aris was one hell of a great singer. The most boring was the ceremony for Demir, because it involved a lot of obscure ritual, and the Archprelate's chanting always sounded like an answering machine.

Eventually, the marriage ceremonies ended, the long wait by the extended family as the guests filed out, as the Imperial family held a ceremony in the First Garden of Trelle. Jason spent the time waiting for them setting up his other little surprise for the ceremony, which would take place during the parade. While Dahnai and her family were in the garden, Jason was sitting in an antechamber with the extended family, waiting for the parade procession to begin, his eyes closed and his consciousness not entirely inside the room. He was using one of the few tricks that the *shaman* had taught him that he could do, something that no doubt would delight Rann and Shya to no end.

That surprise was dropped on them when the parade began. Jason and Dahnai, as the parents, were in the second carriage in the procession, with Rann and Shya by themselves in the lead carriage, the position of honor, with Rann and Shya's extended family and several extremely close friends of the family riding in carriage behind them. Sirri led the procession in her Knight—her Valkyrie was far too big for what they were doing—carrying a banner holding the Imperial standard just in front of the carriage holding the now wedded couple, with fifteen carriages trailing behind them. Overhead, ships from every empire in the Confederation cruised slowly over Dracora in a grand show, giving the people on the streets and the cameras a show both on the ground and in the air above.

The surprise arrived not long after the carriages started moving, just after a formation of KMS frigates flew slowly over the carriage procession. At first, it was just a formation of large migratory birds known as *suruga*, swan-sized birds with dark gray feathers and white bands on their wings. But then there were more birds, and more birds, and more, until the sky between the ground and the ships flying high above was filled with birds of all sizes and shapes, all flying in the same direction, and many of them flying in V-shaped formations. Some of them flew very low, between the buildings, mainly the most majestic of them, and even had a flock of four-winged birds called *serasu*, which were like very big hummingbirds in that they could easily hover, fly down the avenue carrying a flower garland between the five of them, come to a hover over the lead carriage, then set the garland of flowers down on Shya's head in a Disney movie-esque display.

While most of the people watching had no idea what was really going on, just about everyone in the carriages knew exactly who was doing it. Not

even a talent able to communicate with animals was capable of something like *that*, but those who knew about Jason Karinne's unique capabilities knew that it was something that it was within his purview. And it made both Rann and Shya look back at him with glorious smiles when the aerial parade of Draconian birds started flying over the city. The only real confused faces in the parade came from the carriages holding Dahnai's family, her siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins.

Jason didn't interact with Dahnai's siblings very often, because Imperial tradition actually kept them away from the palace. Her sisters were members of House Merrane, and their primary responsibility was to the house, not the Imperial government. While Dahnai was technically the head of House Merrane, that position was largely ceremonial. It was her younger sister Princess Fiya that did the real day to day management of the house's affairs. Dahnai had two sisters and two brothers, Princesses in the house or Dukes in the houses into which they wed, and while she was on very good terms with them, Imperial tradition required her to keep her distance from them. They didn't come visit her in the palace, and they only saw her during official functions and ceremonies involving the extended family of the Empress, like a state wedding. But she was still good friends with them. Princesses Fiya and Selai and Dukes Vedre and Denn had brought their kids and grandkids, who all got to ride in carriages in the procession.

The parade wound its way through Dracora, visiting the First Cathedral of Aris and the High Temple to Demir, and it was as boring as Jason feared it would be. He spent most of that time communing with other rulers in the Confederation, discussing the upcoming execution of the Ten Year Plan, given they never left his telepathic range to the palace, where they were all waiting for the parade to finish. That kept him busy for the entire two hours

the carriages did their slow circuit to the other two religious compounds, then the parade made its way to the palace, and the only part of this that Jason was eager to partake, and that was the feast.

It was a massive and grand affair, with the entire throne room filled with members of the Siann and the invited galactic rulers and other VIPs. Jason got to sit at the main table up on the dais that held the throne, with two tables up there flanking the throne, which was covered in a white cloth that signified that the Empress wasn't in residence in the throne room as an official court function. The throne was kept covered when it wasn't in use, part of an ancient tradition that had to do as much with keeping the throne clean of dust and protecting it from any accidental spills or stains as it was a symbol that the Empress was not engaged in official state business. The feast was a state ceremony, but it wasn't an official act of state. There were two tables up on the dais, one holding Rann, Shya, their parents, and their siblings, as well as Tim and Symone since they were considered part of Rann's immediate family as the *amu* of their parents, as well as the biogenic bionoids of the CB units, all of whom Jason considered family and thus deserving to sit with the rest of his family. The other table held the couple's aunts, uncles, and cousins, those blood related to the couple but not immediate family. So, that table was dominated by Dahnai's side of the family, where the main table was dominated by the kids who were Rann and Shya's brothers and sisters who were old enough to handle the scrutiny of being so visible. The younger kids weren't ready for that much responsibility, so they were sitting in the main hall with their mothers, foster mother in the case of Raisha, Miyai, and Kaen, or Ayama, Surin, Seido, and Merra in the case of the girls and the twins. The reason he was looking forward to the feast was because Dahnai had some good chefs on her staff,

so good that even Seido and Merrra were impressed by them, and they'd be getting their absolute best effort given it was a state dinner.

It was the second best meal he'd ever had, beaten out only by the graduation dinner he'd had the pleasure of attending on Jun-ara when he served as the guest of honor for the graduation ceremony. The feast lasted nearly three hours, each of the six courses served at regular intervals to give everyone plenty of time to eat. It was a meal of traditional Faey dishes, but that was no knock on its quality, since Jason was very fond of Faey cuisine. He'd better be, after spending so many years having Ayama and Surin cooking his meals.

Sometimes it was easy to forget how long those two had been part of his life. They'd been brought in by Miaari a tiny but under fifteen years ago, and had been as much a fixture in his life as his family and the strip girls. They'd kept his life organized and sane for that long, had managed to keep his household operational despite the absolute chaos that his kids had introduced into it, and he almost didn't deserve them. They were technically his servants, but as far as he was concerned, they were as good as family.

At the end of the meal was the last official ceremonial act of the day, and that was Dahnai ordering Rann and Shya to retire to their bedchamber for the evening, where they were fully expected to consummate the marriage...and no doubt they'd do what they were expected to do with true enthusiasm. Everyone stood and formed two lines from the dais to the main entry, where two Imperial Guards waited to escort the bridal couple to their room. Once they were out of the throne room, the remaining guests waited for the tables to be removed, then they got on with the after-party after the feast, as musicians took positions in the upper gallery above the main entrance and started to play, commencing the ball segment of the feast. All

official state feasts ended with a ball, which was little more than a chance for the guests to mingle and chat. Nobody ever actually danced during them, despite the event being called a ball.

For Jason, it was a chance to chat with some friends he hadn't seen face to face in a while, mainly Princess Mrri and the wolves, Mrri sitting sedately on his shoulder so she was more at an eye level with the alpha pair, who were sitting and hunkering down a bit to get their heads closer to his eye level. Mrri and the wolves represented, in his mind, the tremendous diversity of life, as well as the potential to find intelligence in very different packages. Mrri was tiny, which made her too doll-like or pet-like for most to assign great intelligence, and the wolves were quadrupeds, they *were* animals in the way that most people classified them, yet were even smarter than most people that Jason knew. Theirs was a very different kind of intelligence, much like the Parri, showing that not everyone developed their intellect in the same way. The virus had allowed them to demonstrate their intelligence in a way that those other than Jason could understand, since only a highly developed brain, a brain capable of telepathy, could be affected by the virus.

*[So, was the ceremony as boring as I warned it would be?]* Jason asked lightly as he put his hand over Mrri's ankles to keep her from slipping off his shoulder. His formal robes made his shoulders much more slanted due to all the material, so it wasn't quite as easy for her to hold her perch as usual. The fact that she was wearing a formal Pai kilt, which had three layers, aggravated that fact.

*[I thought it was a very nice ceremony,]* the female objected. *[And it wasn't boring at all. I found it quite fascinating.]*

*[That's because you're still learning about these unfurred simians,]* Mrri teased, giving Jason a sidelong grin. *[Trust me, once you figure them out, they're super, super boring.]*

*[Hey, watch it now, kitty-cat,]* he warned playfully. *[Or I'll feed you to them.]*

*[She's not even a mouthful, Jason,]* the male protested mildly.

*[Then it won't take you too long to digest the evidence,]* Jason returned easily, which made Mrri laugh.

*[Why do I even bother hanging out with you, you big bully,]* she protested.

*[Because you like the punishment,]* he retorted with a smile.

*[I did notice that the young cub Rann seemed a little distracted during the ceremony,]* the male noted.

*[I think it was nerves. He's not used to being put on display like that,]* Jason answered more seriously. *[I shield my kids from that kind of public scrutiny...though in Rann's case, I may be doing more harm than good. He'll be the next Grand Duke, he'll need to be able to function in public to do his job. He has to be comfortable standing in front of a crowd. He doesn't have to like it, I certainly don't, but he has to be comfortable doing it.]*

*[I find it hard to believe that you don't enjoy all the attention,]* Mrri communed, slyness flittering through her thought.

*[I only enjoy it when I get to beat someone up while I'm doing it, either verbally or literally,]* he told her. *[Besides, I'm used to performing in front*

*of an audience. I played a very popular sport when I was in college, and I'd take the field with a hundred thousand people watching my every move.]*

*[Ah yes, the football game you told us about,] the female alpha nodded. [Why don't you still play? Don't you like it?]*

*[It's a very high skill game to play, so no, I don't play it anymore. It requires a devotion to the game that I can't spare, given my other duties. I'm content watching it instead of playing it now. I'd rather be a good spectator than a bad player, given it's a team sport and my ineptness would harm my team.]*

*[That's commendable. The pack comes first,] the alpha male nodded in agreement.*

*[I have to watch Terra TV to get my football fix, sadly. The game hasn't really taken off on Karis, just a few fun leagues around Karsa and Sarsa. The only Terran sports that have found popularity in the house are games I don't play. But I do like to watch them, particularly baseball. Always been a huge baseball fan.]*

*[He took us to one of the games when we were on Karis learning how to use our abilities. I found the game a little slow, but its rules were easy enough to understand,] the male noted to Mrri.*

*[I found it quite entertaining,] the female countered. [In a way, the slowness of the game built up the tension in the later innings, and I found that quite exciting.]*

*[So, you two don't share the same brain,] Mrri grinned. [I was wondering there for a while.]*



*[Of course not. She likes some things, I like others. She's better at some things, me at others,]* the male told her. *[Our differences combine to make us a stronger and more capable unit when it comes to the hunt.]*

*[And that's why we get along so well, you see the strength of diversity,]* Jason smiled up at him. *[That and you'll bite my head off if you don't like me.]*

Mrri laughed when the male opened his jaws wide and leaned his head down, threatening to do just that.

*[Hey now, no getting blood all over my floor!]* Dahnai warned as she joined them, which made both Jason and Mrri laugh.

*[Finally have time to come see us, Dahnai?]* the female teased.

*[Believe me, I'd rather hang out with you guys on the pool deck at Jason's vacation house than do the rounds with this mob,]* she replied with a slight smile. *[Where are the cubs?]*

*[Exploring the palace,]* the female answered. *[The guards are escorting them so they don't cause any undue trouble. You know how they are when they get curious.]*

*[Too well,]* Dahnai agreed with a laugh.

Jason and Dahnai being together inevitably attracted more people, as Sk'Vrae and Kreel joined their little circle almost immediately, Cybi and Cyra wandered over from their discussion with Holikk and Shakizarr, and Anya and Yila insinuated themselves almost immediately afterward. *[Anya, I don't think you've had the opportunity to meet the wolves,]* Jason communed, then he introduced them by their scents, which was something he could do through commune, but not through speech. *They're natives of*

*Tir Tairngire, their territory includes my vacation house. We've been friends ever since I went there to plant the oye tree.]*

*[A friendship we do not in any way regret,] the female communed fondly, giving Jason a kind look. [He is a good neighbor and has introduced much variety and adventure into our lives. To us, this is a good thing.]*

*[I'm glad, else I'd be nothing but bones laying in the meadow under the tree,] he teased in reply, then got snout-butted for his cheekiness, which nearly knocked Mrri off his shoulder.*

*[I was hoping to meet you, I've heard an awful lot about you,] Anya told them, looking up at them. [Dahnai goes on and on about you during meetings of the Highborn Council.]*

*[And what does she say about us, gossiping about us behind our tails?] the male challenged playfully, giving Dahnai a look.*

*[Only the good parts,] Anya assured him. [So, Jason, you have some explaining to do.]*

*[Over what?]*

*[How did you do that thing with the birds?] she demanded. [Cybi said you did it.]*

*[It's a little hard to explain, and explaining it will make Dahnai mad,] he replied lightly, glancing at her. She gave him a rude gesture in return, which made him chuckle.*

*[It's easy enough to explain. Jason Karinne has a pure heart, and when he speaks, those words from that pure heart,] the alpha male answered.*

*[Anyone who listens with their ears unclouded knows that he means them no harm, so they understand the words his heart speaks. For you bipeds, who allow your motivations and your desires cloud the purity of your heart, it is hard to hear. But for us, the truth of his heart is a stroke of thunder on a still night.]*

*[That's about how it works, according to the shaman,] Jason agreed wryly. [When I speak the honest truth, and I believe in my words, she says that even animals can hear and understand. And since I don't want to hurt them, they listen to me. Will do favors for me.]*

*[We were quite surprised to hear the purity of his heart when we first met him,] the female mused, leaning her head down and pushing her muzzle against the side of his head. [But not now. We consider him all but part of our pack. A dear friend always welcome among us.]*

*[Aww, thanks,] he returned, reaching up and scrubbing the fur on the opposite side of her muzzle.*

*[It's that mysticism the Parri infected him with,] Dahnai nearly accused. [What's even more annoying is that I can't refute that he can do it.]*

*[There's far more to the world than what we can see, Dahnai. I've always believed that, but learning from the Parri has opened my eyes in ways that I can't easily explain. What I do know is that the Parri may be the most evolved species in the entire universe, because they rejected technology and instead turned their intellect within instead of without. The shaman is the wisest, most intelligent being I've ever known, even smarter than Myleena, at least in her own way. She's opened my eyes to a world that I never knew was there, but always knew deep inside that I was a part of it. Like remembering a long forgotten dream.]*

*[I find that a little hard to believe.]*

*[It's easy enough to prove. Yila, you have your compact on you?]*

*[Sure, here,]* she said, digging into her formal robes. She pulled out a small silver disc, which was a Terran compact. He opened it and offered it to Anya.

*[Look at me through the mirror, not with your own eyes,]* he told her.

She took it and turned away from him, holding the compact up at an angle, looking down at it. He watched her expression change, from confusion, to disconcertment, then to disbelief as her eyes darted to him, then to the mirror, and back again over and over. *[Is this some kind of trick gadget?]*

*[No. I don't cast a reflection anymore,]* Jason told her. *[It drives Myli absolutely insane, and she's launched a nearly holy crusade to figure out the science behind it. I've done a little experimenting myself, because I find it absolutely fascinating. But the truth is, I don't cast a reflection anymore because I've learned what a mirror really is, something the shaman taught me. I've learned from the Parri that what we the world we see is only an illusion, it's literally onto there to give those of us who can't understand the truth something to see and understand. It's like hading a toddler a toy that keeps her attention away from something she won't understand if she sees, and we're the toddlers,]* he told them. *[The world we know, the world we see, is only a reflection of the reality behind it. We can't see the truth because we're not ready to understand it, we cling to the illusion because it makes more sense to us. But the Parri do understand it, and I've been working to learn at least bits and pieces of that truth from them. I'll never*

*understand it all, I'm nowhere near smart enough, but I can admit that I've made a few advancements in that direction,]* he smiled.

*[So what is a mirror?]* Anya asked.

*[It's not a way to see your reflection. It's a way to see who you really are,]* he answered. *[And once you've seen the truth of yourself, you don't ever cast a reflection again, because the reflection in a mirror is nothing but who and what you think you are. A mirror is a tool to learn the truth of one's self.]*

*[I have absolutely no idea what that means.]*

*[I didn't either, for quite a while. But I eventually figured it out,]* he smiled gently at her, but then his expression turned sober. *[But I don't suggest you play around with this. There's very real danger in looking inside yourself. It shows you who you really are, without your ego or your subconscious getting in the way, and the shaman warned me that it can drive some to suicide. If you're an awful person, the reality of it will be like a sledgehammer to the face, shattering the delusions we build up around ourselves to hide the darkness inside us from the rest of the world. It's not something I'd suggest any member of the Siann attempt.]*

*[Why Jason, are you calling the lot of us black-hearted villains?]* Yila teased.

*[Let's just say that the requirements for sitting on a house throne don't make you very good candidates for learning the truth of who you are as a person,]* he said diplomatically. *[I love you ladies too much to see you kill yourselves over what you saw when you saw the truth of yourselves.]*

*[Oh? And what did you see? You seem to have come through it alright.]*

*[That's because I am a father far more than I am a ruler,] he answered honestly. [When I saw the truth of myself, I saw myself as an old man surrounded by my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. That's who I am. That's who I want to be more than anything else in the world. This galactic ruler shit doesn't hold a candle to holding a child in my arms and seeing them smile when they look up at me,] he communed with pure love radiating through his thought. [My life is my family. My soul is my children.]*

*[And thus why we can understand him, because his heart is pure, filled with love for the pack,] the male communed with gentle dignity.*

Jyslin took his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. *[Am I the luckiest woman in the world, or what?]* she asked with gentle love permeating her thought.

*[Who knows, maybe you are,] Jason countered cheekily, which made her laugh and smack her flat palm on his chest playfully. [But I'm certain that I'm the luckiest man alive. A wonderful wife, two amu that help complete me, dear friends that are like family to me, and children that will fill my older years with love and laughter. If there's such a thing as heaven, I think I'm already in it. Just without all the wars, anyway,] he added wryly.*

Jyslin leaned over and kissed him tenderly.

*[I think you like the wars, Jason,] Yila teased lightly.*

*[I enjoy being a rigger. I don't enjoy using it to kill people,] he amended her statement forcefully. [But I will if I have to. I may be a*

*bleeding heart hippie, but I'm a militant bleeding heart hippie.]*

That caused some laughter. *[I have no idea what a hippie is, it's not framed, but it's still funny,]* Anya smiled.

*[There's no equivalent in Faey culture,]* he replied. *[So it's impossible to frame. Wait, actually, the shaishain would be the closest comparison. Hippies are from decades ago, a social movement about peace and love and pacifism. While the doctors don't embrace every aspect of hippie culture, their devotion to peace and to caring for others do.]*

The party slowly started to wind down after Rann and Shya retired for the evening, during which Jason ended up chatting with the rulers that had come in person, friends in the Siann, and a few dignitaries that he knew from his visits to the palace. But ultimately, the feast ended, which sent Jason back to the apartment that Dahnai had given to him and Jyslin. It was still fairly early in the evening, so Dahnai and Kellin invited them, Tim, and Symone to their apartment to hang out, where they discussed the wedding and how smoothly everything went all day...at least after changing out of their formal robes. Jason, however, ended up sitting out in the private garden that opened to both theirs and Dahnai's apartments, a recent renovation to accommodate her amu dozei, linking their apartments together. He sat at a bench in front of a small pond, an affectation she'd seen on Terra, in Japan, so she'd had a koi pond installed that had several small fish native to Draconis in it.

The day had been a distraction, but it had been a good one. He'd enjoyed it more than he expected, mainly because of the company and him cheating a little by splitting during the really boring parts. He'd never been one for pomp and circumstance, and the day all but oozed it, but he'd become so adept at splitting that he now felt comfortable splitting during

the interminable annoying parts and enjoying himself. Kreeel being there had certainly aided that, since the two of them spent most of the ceremony bantering with each other privately.

If only his parents could see him now. Marrying off his son at 15—14, damn it all—his best friend a tall, bipedal chinchilla, and ruling a civilization that stood on the vanguard of technological advancement in the galaxy. He smiled as he looked down into the water, almost hearing the faint echo of a piano in the back of his mind, hearing the soft, subdued sound, the words without meaning that were one of the few memories he had of his mother. He could remember her talking to him, always in French—never anything but French—and while he never remembered the words, he always remembered her voice. Soft, clear, shimmering like crystal, that was a voice that he could still identify with absolute clarity even now, after so many years since he'd heard it. He'd always found it so odd that he couldn't remember his mother's face, but he could remember her voice. And her hands. Everything about her had been musical, even her hands, how they danced over the keys in a musical treat for the eyes instead of the ears.

He slid down and sat at the edge of the pond, enough to where he might have been able to see his reflection, reaching down and trailing his fingers through the water. The motion attracted the fish, who investigated these invaders into the tiny universe, swimming around his fingers curiously before deciding that they were neither food nor were going to feed them, then went back to the important business of being fish. The *shaman* had been working with him to teach him how to use reflections to look into his own mind, and he couldn't resist trying again, going through the calming exercises she taught him, centering himself on a single concept,



memory, impulse, which he hoped would open the window of the reflection and show him the parts of his memory that he couldn't access anymore. She'd told him that the soul remembers everything, even that which the brain forgets, so the key was to try to remember with the soul. There was a trick to it that he hadn't figured out yet, hadn't even come close to figuring out. But he would, eventually.

But not today. He saw nothing but the evening sky reflected in the water, the image wavering as tiny ripples flowed over the surface, and then a gust of wind managed to penetrate the towers of the palace and swirl through the fairly large garden, one of the few green spaces in the interior of the palace. He leaned back on his hands, uncoiling his legs and dipping his feet and shins into the water, looking up at the sky. The *Tianne* was visible from the ground, sitting almost directly over the palace at the moment, visible as a small but distinct long sliver of light in the darkening sky overhead. The Draconis Entry Station was also visible at the moment, a tiny wheel of light close to the edge of the garden wall. That was the entry station on the other side of the Stargate from their Terra Entry Station, where deliveries into the Imperium were received and then routed to their destination system. That was a big job, so they had a *big* station there to do it, only recently built and commissioned into service...a big enough job to install an orbital station visible from the ground with the naked eye.

A shape ghosted at the edge of his vision, and he glanced over to see Dahnai sitting down beside him. She was wearing a Faey-style robe that wasn't belted in the front, letting the glory of her bare breasts, stomach, and hips out for the world to see. [*What are you up to, babe?*] she asked.

[*Just musing,*] he replied. [*I've been sitting here trying to figure out when I got so old.*]

She laughed audibly. *[I know. Maer's fully grown and almost ready to graduate from primary school, Sirri's almost fully grown, and now Shya's formally married. My babies have grown up on me, and I don't know how it happened so fast.]*

*[At least you have the girls and Kaen to make you feel young again,]*  
he smiled over at her.

*[When Saelle lets me see them,]* she retorted with a playful smile.

*[I heard that,]* Saelle communed archly, which made both Jason and Dahnai laugh.

*[Our fault for not communing privately,]* Jason winked. *[But I know how you feel. I can look at my children and see the marching of the years, almost like a road map, from Rann all the way down to Sera.]*

*[Your daughter with Aura?]*

He nodded. *[My youngest at the moment. Who knows if that'll hold true in a month.]*

*[And what number is Sera? 23?]*

*[24<sup>th</sup>,]* he corrected mildly. *[That number seems both so obscenely wrong and so perfectly right at the same time. I sometimes just can't wrap my head around it.]*

*[Just proves you're exactly the kind of man a Faey girl wants, baby,]*  
she purred mentally, running her hand up and down his arm.

*[That has nothing to do with it. Songa did some science, and she figured out why I have so many kids.]*

*[I'd say basic biology,]* Dahnai grinned.

*[Actually, yes. It turns out that male Terran men have a nine times better chance of making a Faey woman pregnant than a Faey man, because of biology. Simply put, a Terran woman's immune system attacks sperm inside her, where a Faey woman's immune system doesn't. That means a Terran man's sperm has a much better chance to reach the egg than a Faey man's sperm. It explains the large gap between Faey human couples that have kids. Couples where the female is Faey have way more kids than the couples where the male is Faey. Faey sperm isn't designed to deal with a hostile immune system, so most of it gets killed off before it reaches the egg.]*

*[Well, good thing I'm the woman in this relationship, then,]* she grinned.

Jason chuckled and glanced at her, then reached out his hand and allowed a *priki* bird to land on his finger. They were a lovely Draconis songbird that had been transplanted to Karis, blue with red and orange accents to their plumage. They were extremely smart birds, clever and opportunistic, smart enough to be able to identify individuals by sight and learn from those experiences. *Priki* birds would be very friendly with people that had won their trust, but not with other people, demonstrating that they could tell people apart by sight even if they changed their clothes. They were also a bit unusual in that they were a bird species that wasn't afraid to fly around at night. They had excellent night vision, though they weren't nocturnal, and the lights illuminating the Imperial Palace gave them more than enough light to see by to fly. The ones that visited Dahnai's

garden weren't afraid of anyone inside the garden, had learned that it was a safe space and that everyone inside that space wasn't dangerous to them, so they weren't afraid to interact with people inside it. So, the bird landing on his hand wasn't all that unusual, since they'd do it with nearly anyone that was in the garden. *[What is it saying?]* Dahnai asked gently, leaning her head on his shoulder.

*[Scolding me for the bird feeder being empty,]* he replied as the bird chirped pleasantly, looking at them.

*[That doesn't sound like scolding.]*

*[Trust me, it is,]* he answered. "Calm down, you silly thing. I'll have someone refill the feeder," he chided the bird in a soft voice. *[I'm surprised the tabis don't terrorize them.]*

*[Someone come refill the bird feeder,]* Dahnai ordered openly. *[The tabis don't really chase animals because we keep them well fed, That, and they learned quickly that the priki birds can beat them up.]*

*[Our tabis are much the same, well, except for the mice. They don't chase birds, but they do like to chase mice and other rodents. They just don't kill them. They're toys more than anything else, though the mice certainly don't appreciate being chased around by something they think is trying to eat them.]*

*[They're certainly odd little furballs, but I'm glad to have them around. They're a delight,]* Dahnai mused.

*[Give them a hundred years, and they'll be ruling the universe. I should have never allowed them to be taken off Prakka,]* he grunted in a mental tone that made her laugh, one filled with chagrin and regret and

irritation. The bird flitted off and landed on the feeder expectantly when one of Dahnai's servants scurried out carrying a box of seed, and then attended to the empty feeder. *[I guess it's about time we headed in, love,]* he told her. *[We have to be on the way back to Karis early in the morning.]*

*[Can't you stay a little while longer?]*

*[We have to get the quarantine going, love. Just think, in 50 days, there won't be any more restrictions at all, for any of the Accords empires. We can get back to normal and open the borders again. That means you can come to the summer palace anytime you please again.]*

*[And see if the Ten Year Plan's going to work in reality.]*

*[Yup. Gotta give props to Alros and the Aridai for volunteering to be the guinea pigs to see if the system we devised for the Ten Year Plan will work properly. You got your people ready to go?]*

*[Yah, they're all organized, thanks to Cynna. She's been an absolute gods-send in all this.]*

*[They're not the most powerful computers known to science for nothing, love,]* he bragged with an audible chuckle. *[And I'm sure she'd love to hear you praise her.]*

*[I already did,]* Cynna injected cheekily.

*[Never make the mistake of giving them access to your local biogenic nodes,]* Jason told her with a smile, which made her laugh ruefully. *[Bunch of creepy stalkers, they are. Especially Cyvanne.]*

*[Hey!]* Cyvanne protested, which made both Jason and Dahnai laugh.

*[Someday she's gonna get you, Jason.]*

*[It's my revenge for her messing with me in CO,] he replied urbanely.*

*Maista, 28 Keda, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 22 March 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 13 Keda, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

Things were getting hectic, but thankfully it was only a convergence of events rather than a disaster.

Today was going to be a big day for the house, because the quarantine would be officially lifted in just under six hours, and the house would again be open to tourism from the other Accords members, as well as business being returned to normal across the house both internally and externally. That meant that the Stargate and the Nexus station to Terra would be put back on active status, and trade and visitors would flow once again to and from Karis. For them, things would get back to normal.

But not for everyone. Terra was still in a bit of flux at the moment, mainly because of the Academy. Ayuma was still juggling things, trying to keep classes going despite the fact that the Academy was on a Generation planet. It was easy enough for the upperclassmen, who had been on Terra when the virus hit and were already Generations, but the freshmen class was a bit more challenging because many of them were restricted from coming to the campus, and had to take classes by remote. But things were

starting to settle down, and once the Luna campus was open, they'd have everything ironed out and the Academy would start its new normal.

The new normal. It really was normal now, and Jason had decided that he liked it. He liked that his friends were now Generations, he liked seeing people on the street and knowing they were cousins. He liked living in a place where, no matter where he looked, he saw people he knew were cousins and knew he *belonged*. He liked living on a planet where everyone felt a connection to everyone else, a connection that made them feel welcome, made them feel like they had a place. He liked the new Karis, the new House of Karinne, and he also had come to like the idea that other empires had the chance to enjoy the same feeling of community.

And there was reason to celebrate this morning, because of a report that Seido and Merra didn't know that he'd intercepted, calling in a favor with Ethikk to be put in the communication chain. The procedure to get Merra pregnant had been a success, and the report he'd received just before dawn had declared that Merra was comfortably pregnant with fraternal twin girls. The girls were the biological children of Merra and Seido thanks to an egg fusion technique, using the DNA of one egg to fertilize the other. They had implanted two eggs hoping that one of them would successfully attach to her uterus, but both had, so they were going to have twin girls. The DNA was taken after they transitioned, so the girls would be born Generations, so there was no issues there with possible infection.

So, in about seven months or so, the house was going to be graced with new babies. And even though they weren't his, he'd love them like his own daughters, just like he did Danelle, Shya, and Sanjira. Any child that lived in his house was as good as *his* child. And since Seido and Merra were both

women, it meant that he'd have no competition to be the greatest daddy in the universe, in the children's eyes.

That made him happy. The house just didn't seem normal, complete if there wasn't a baby about. He'd spent most of his adult life on Karis with an infant in a cradle somewhere in his house, so it seemed very wrong when there wasn't one.

With the quarantine operation complete, clearing the virus out of every Generation world and making it safe for both Generations to travel to other worlds without bringing the virus and resetting the quarantine timer and non-Generations to visit them once again, that meant that the initial test of the Ten Year Plan's transition was going to start. The Aridai were going to send their initial trainers to Terra, some 50,000 Aridai, so they could be deliberately infected with stored samples of the virus that were triple-checked to ensure they were an unmutated version. After they completed transition, they would begin the training that they would take back to Aridai territory as they waited out their quarantine period, being fully trained in the various aspects of being a Generation, from commune to splitting to the basics of telekinesis. They wouldn't need telepathic training, because Alros was only sending telepaths to be transitioned, which Jason thought was a smart idea. That way they'd already be skilled in telepathy and would be more effective teachers for the Aridai population that weren't telepaths. Once the trainers cleared quarantine, they'd go back to Aridai territory and prepare to start teaching the population, which would be transitioned in a six month schedule that allowed the population to cycle through the transition process in an orderly fashion, prevented uncontained releases of the virus, and didn't allow the Aridai economy to collapse due to businesses being forced to close because of an outbreak. There would be some



disruptions, but not the same chaos that gripped the Accords nations when the virus ran rampant through them.

It was going to take six months, and during those six months, the other empires that had signed on to the Ten Year Plan were going to be getting ready for their own turn, and the first of them would be the Subrians and the Verutans, as Jason had promised them. And if the system they'd designed and tested with the Aridai proved to be effective, then the other empires were going to begin their own transition plans in about eight months.

There were some things they could do early, and the biggest one was get their trainers transitioned. Some of them were going to need *tens of millions* of trainers, mainly the huge empires like the Skaa and the Crai, and that very large number of trainers meant that they had to start getting them transitioned and trained as early as possible. For that reason, they'd start transitioning in just a couple of months, during the Aridai transition period, so they'd have time to transition all the teachers they were going to need for their transition schedules. The Skaa had brought in several orbital stations and put them in solar orbit in a track that kept them close to Terra without clogging up the planet's orbital tracks or mess up Terra's orbit to house their trainers, some of their huge residential facilities.

The CBIMs were deeply involved in the plan. Each CBIM was going to be supervising the transition of certain empires, helping the empires create schedules and managing assets. Cybi and Cynna were going to be handling the largest empires, since Cybi had the most operational uptime and thus the most general experience and Cynna had the most extensive organizational skills given her work as the Kosigi CBIM, but every CBIM was going to be managing the transition schedules of multiple empires simultaneously...in other words, showing off their immense capabilities. In

reality, a single CBIM could do all of it, run the entire House of Karinne, manage the biogenic network, and do about a trillion other miscellaneous operations all at the same time, but Jason didn't like to load them down with work. He didn't like any of them going over 20% capacity, because that 80% of free processing capacity was their personal time, their personal processing space, and he wanted them to use it to pursue their interests, learn, and grow. The CBIMs and CBMOMs deserved the opportunity to grow, to have free time and enjoy themselves,, and he made damn sure they had the time, space, and opportunity to do so. He, Myleena, and Siyhaa carefully managed their duties and responsibilities so none of them went over 20%, but also had plenty to do to keep their minds occupied.

Since they did some major upgrades to every CBIM's external stacks to dramatically expand their ability to tap their core capabilities, most of them ran around 12-14% of maximum, which was more or less right where Siyhaa liked it. Since Myleena and Siyhaa upgraded all the CBIM's systems, running a continent only used up about 3-6% of their capacity, so they had various other tertiary duties that filled the rest of their processing duty slots, from Cyrsi being the CBIM in service to the KES to Cybi being the main CBIM for the science department and 3D to Cyvanne running KERA and managing the external biogenic networks, the one at Draconis and the one that connected Accords nations' capitol planets. Even the CBMOMs had a few extra duties to help them keep busy, since running a ship was only about 17% of their capacity. But the things they did weren't critical, since there were times when they may be out of range of the biogenic transceivers. The things they did were on their ships, extra projects they could take with them and then download back to the network once they were back home...almost like homework. Myleena was the one that did that the most, giving them some god-level mathematical problems to solve that

would further her research, the kind of stuff that only a CB unit could really pull off in a reasonable amount of time.

But not all of their processing load was for official business. Cyvanne devoted about .1% of her processing at all times to Citadel Online, more or less keeping herself connected to every single server in the galaxy and watching them, as well as the players. That was a few hundred million players on thousands of servers spread halfway across the galaxy, and it was enough to put an actual fractional tick on her processing load status board. Cylan did the same with Vanguard, so he was either participating in or watching millions of battles every moment in real time, and he did that to study strategy and tactics. And in his case, it *worked*. He was quickly becoming a scary effective military tactician, to the point where Myri added him to the military command staff as an advisor.

Vanguard was still massively popular in the Confederation, since it appealed to a different kind of gamer than CO did. And tons of gamers played both...Jason among them.

It was just more proof that the CB units and Rook were living things, since they had different interests, different hobbies, different strengths and talents, and different tastes. Cybi was a kind yet stern matriarch with a wicked sense of humor, Cyra was an earnest, clever problem solver, Cyvanne was an artistic soul and a scamp, Cynna was a cosmopolitan organizer and smooth talker, Cyrsi was an innocent, curious dreamer, Cylan was a good-natured yet fiercely protective warrior, Cybri was a kind soul and a nurturer, Cyman was a rugged, earthy, self-reliant adventurer, Coma was a guardian angel, Cori was a disciplined perfectionist, Coran was incorrigible yet lovable, Coja was sweet yet salty, and Codi was precocious and sly. And last but certainly not least, Rook was a hard-working,

disciplined, reliable fellow. But, the one trait that all the CBMOMs shared was a fierceness when it came to defending the house, because they were built to protect Karis, integrated into ships built to make war on those that would threaten the house.

A new report hit his inbox from Chirk, who was already at work, and had forwarded a report on the preparations to reopen the planet. Everything was set up and ready, from Miaari's screeners to the transports that would be moving people back and forth from both Nexus stations to the Nexus stations themselves, who were ready with the latest upgrades and updates from Myleena and Emia, who were still working on the Nexus project. They had two major goals in their research, the first of which was to be able to permanently link two Nexus stations together without needing to cycle the connection, which had been successfully accomplished. The more challenging goal was to be able to build a Nexus station in a gravity well. As of about nine days ago, they'd solved the instability problem and created permanently stable Nexus gates when two Nexus stations were linked, which allowed them to keep the nexus up all the time. The other goal was still eluding them, but they'd managed to increase a Nexus wormhole's tolerance of gravity wells, which allowed them to move the Nexus station closer to Karis.

But they'd figure it out. Give Myleena enough time, and she could solve almost any problem.

He wasn't the only one up early. He spent nearly an hour discussing the upcoming opening with Miaari over comm, mainly discussing her security, then went downstairs when he heard Seido communing. She was in the kitchen, getting ready to start making breakfast, and he surprised her by intercepting her on the way to the refrigerator and picking her up, his

hands under her arms, then swung her in a tight circle to avoid hitting her legs on the island. *[What are you doing?]* she demanded, looking down at him in confusion and annoyance.

*[Sending you back to your room, silly girl. No work for you today! No work for anyone today!]* he replied almost giddily. *[I'll make breakfast, and we'll be going out for dinner tonight. Wherever you and Merra want to go!]*

*[You're making breakfast?]* she communed challengingly, doubt and annoyance staining her thought.

*[I'll have you know that I'm more than capable of making something not toxic,]* he replied steadily. *[Now back to your bedroom, you naughty little kree, and check your messages.]*

*[Check my--]* she began, then her eyes widened and she gasped. Then she started to smile slowly. *[You mean--]*

*[I will say nothing, on account that it might get me slapped for being overly nosy,]* he replied as he set her down. *[But I will say that you have some very good news waiting for you.]*

She turned and rushed back towards her apartment, communing to Merra to wake her up. He watched her go with a smile, then opened the refrigerator and pulled out some Shio *aisu* eggs, some ham and cheese, and some pre-chopped vegetables, preparing to make some omelets. That was well within his culinary capabilities, as long as he used the gas burner stove and not the wood fired grill stove.

How Seido managed to cook so incredibly well while using a wood-burning stove was honestly beyond him.

He had the eggs scrambled and mixed with the usual spices by the time he heard both Seido and Merra scream in joy from their apartment down the hall from the kitchen, then Seido's powerful commune swept across the strip. *[Merra is pregnant! Twins! We're having twins!]* she broadcast to anyone even remotely within her range, which probably woke people up some 50 kathra away given Seido was one hell of powerful telepath. The congratulations started sweeping in as he poured the eggs into a pan, then let it set as he prepared to add the filling...at least until Surin came down the hallway and moved to supplant him. *[I said nobody works, back off,]* Jason threatened with a smile.

*[Leave the cooking to the people who know how to do it,]* he retorted, which made Jason laugh aloud.

*[Hey now, no open shade,]* he complained.

*[Truth isn't an insult. Go do something constructive and let me cook.]*

*[Now you're just being mean,]* Jason accused, to which Surin only smiled slightly. *[Jerk.]* He then reached further into the house. *[Seido, Merra, you're picking the restaurant tonight. And no picking your own! No work today for either of you!]*

*[There are a couple of restaurants we've been wanting to try over on Sarga,]* she replied, joy still reverberating through her thought. *[So be ready for a trip tonight.]*

*[Looking forward to it,]* he replied. *[Just tell Cybri which one and what time and she'll make the reservations.]*

Banished from the kitchen, he caught up on a couple of last-minute reports that Miaari sent him, delivered by Kemaari. He hadn't seen Kemaari

much in the last few months, she'd been doing a lot of traveling at Miaari's behest, but she was back in her proper position in Miaari's office, which meant that she interacted with him far more than most other people there. Usually, if it was important and Miaari couldn't or wouldn't bring it to him in person, she sent Kemaari. And that worked just fine for him, because he considered her one of his closer friends. Jason was very close to the Threxs sisters, including Kemaari. And she brought him some news that he'd been waiting to hear. "I talked to sister Kiaari yesterday, Jason, and she's finally decided on a sire."

"Finally, eh? I guess this means she's going to be foisting cubsitting duty on you in a few months," he chuckled, speaking Kimdori, as was his habit when he was talking to a Kimdori. If anything, it kept him fluent in the language. Kiaari had been almost silly in her pickiness in choosing a father for her cubs, spending way more time than was considered normal. And all her careful research got torpedoed when the pandemic hit, all but causing her to start over at square one. But now, with the chaos easing and things settling down, it did seem like a proper time to get back to normal life, and for Kiaari, that was having her cubs.

"Oh no, I'm not going to let her establish that pattern," Kemaari countered, which made him laugh. "I still get enough of that from sister Miaari."

"Still makes you cubsit, eh?"

"Almost daily," she growled, almost rolling her eyes. "It's hard to study the analyst research when I'm trying to keep her cubs out of mischief."

“They are a handful,” he agreed with a smile. Kimdori cubs were almost legendary in their ability to get into trouble, because they had that almost overpowering Kimdori curiosity. When a Kimdori cub’s interest was piqued, it was all but impossible for them to resist satisfying it. Kimdori cubs got into *everything*, and that behavior did not appreciably change as they got older...if anything, it got worse as they started to realize that objects may have doors or ways to open them, which allowed them to see what was inside.

For example, last takir, Maaeth and Yemaari had Miaari’s vidlink almost half disassembled in the ten minutes that they were left alone in the living room. They’d been burning with curiosity about what was inside a vidlink, and they undertook a plan to find out by having Haan distract their mother while the others got the toolkit she kept in the utility room, then kept her attention long enough for them to open the outer case and start dissecting the vidlink before Miaari realized that she was being decoyed. The cubs had worked together to engage in their mischief, and that was one aspect of Kimdori cubs that made them so exceedingly dangerous. To say that Kimdori cubs had to be watched closely *at all times* was not an aggrandizement.

“Sometimes I wondered how I survived my cubhood,” Kemaari mused, which made Jason burst out laughing.

“If your curiosity didn’t kill you, your parents might have,” he agreed, leaning back against his desk. “So, do you know the father she chose?”

She shook her head. “He is clan, but I don’t know his family. He’s not in the game. He’s an engineer.”



“Nothing wrong with that, it takes brains to do science,” Jason said. “And Kee said that she was most interested in a smart father. Did she say when she’s going through with it?”

“Next month,” she replied. “Are you going to attend?”

“If she asks,” he answered. “And she probably will, given I attended Miaari’s. She can’t let Mee have that up on her.”

Kemaari chuckled lightly. “Sometimes I think sister Miaari is contrary with sister Kiaari on purpose. She’s not quite so combative with our other brothers and sisters.”

“Oh, she is,” he agreed. “She loves Kee as much as she loves you, she just loves pulling Kee’s tail a little bit.”

“They’ve always been close,” Kemaari mused. “Despite them being so different in age. I think it’s because mother and father had her cubsit for them when Kiaari and Gaar were still in the nursery.”

“You know, I’ve never met Gaar,” Jason mused, looking over at her as he crossed his arms.

“He’s something of a black sheep in the family, to use the Terran term,” she replied. “Most of the clan goes into the game or sciences, but he decided to go into military service. But I suppose it paid off for him, because now he’s out there exploring the unexplored on one of our ships,” she mused. “He’s a lucky Kimdori.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s happy. From what I recall, Denmother transferred almost the entire fleet she had built to exploration once they were upgraded with drives.”

She nodded. “It was almost serendipity that you invented the drives just as we built so many ships, because it let us use them for more than war,” she agreed.

“Better than them sitting in mothballs at a yard,” he nodded.

“Are you planning on doing anything official for the re-opening of the planet?”

“And have to fight Aya over security? Nope. I’ll just watch holos from my office,” he chuckled in reply. “Besides, speaking of exploration, I’ll be spending most of my day over at KES HQ with the twins, going over the schedule for us returning to exploring. There’s gonna be a few changes.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Less focus on how far out we’re going and more focus on taking a closer look at the places we’ve already been,” he replied. “We’re going to slow down our outward spread, focus more on exploring closer to home and only have one or two extreme distance missions ongoing at a time. I let the twins kinda run away with the idea of us going as far out as we could, to where it took some of our ships a month to get back to Karis after the pandemic hit. That, and it forced us to move around way too many static assets when we had to pull back, pulling in hundreds of beacons, comm relays, outposts, and Stargates. That was a major operation that tied up way too many resources. I want them to dial back the reaching out and more thoroughly map out and conduct the initial explorations of the galaxies in the supercluster, and that includes paring back on the Stargates and biogenic comm relay arrays, stuff we have to actively guard. With one exception, and that’s the KES mission to the other string in the Evanis formation. The scientific data we were getting from that is too important for us to curtail it.

For one, I'd never have believed that universal constants aren't actually universal until we found that out by sending a ship to the other side of the cosmic string. Our scientists need more data before they can come up with accurate models on how the constants change and by how much depending on where you are in the universe, so we absolutely have to send ships back to the other side of the cosmic string. The other extreme operation is going to be getting the comm arrays back in place between here and galactic cluster C6, because I want to make contact with the Galactic Alliance."

"Who is the Galactic Alliance?"

"I'm surprised you didn't read the report on them," he said. "They're the ones that built that barrier system around an entire galaxy."

"Ohhhh, yes, I read that report. I didn't know they were named."

"Yeri kinda coined the term. It does fit, it's a galaxy-spanning government. With the Ten Year Plan on the board, I think this would be a good time if we could trade for their telepathic resonance tech. Something that will be super-useful and not require us to release biogenics. I'm just not sure if it's gonna work. As advanced as they are, the only thing we may have to offer them is translight drive tech, and I'm not giving that up. That tech is way too easy to abuse for us to ever hand it over to *anyone*."

"You helped the Ruu develop their own translight drives."

"No, we helped them with some math, more or less just telling them if they were right or wrong in their conclusions. They developed their version of the drive all on their own," he replied. "And besides, the Ruu are trustworthy with that kind of tech, so there wasn't any real worry over it. If they would have asked for our help to develop their drive, I'd have probably said yes," he admitted. "But I'm not about to hand over tech that will let the

Galactic Alliance get *here*, not when I don't know them and don't know if I can trust them," he told her adamantly. "Besides, I'm having enough issues with galactic foreigners right now."

"How so?"

"The Board has asked to talk to me," he told her. "I've missed a few meetings with a few of their corps individually, and now they want an official meeting between the Board and me as the Grand Duke Karinne, an *official* meeting. The fact that we went quiet over here got their attention, and now they want some answers."

"I hadn't heard."

"Miaari doesn't share that kind of info with the rest of her office," he told her. "The secret unspoken remains a secret, but the daughters of Threxst are as good as family to me, so I'll let you in on some of it. She won't pitch a fit if *I* tell you," he smiled slightly. "How much do you know about Galaxy Express?"

"I'd say about as much as anyone in the office. That the Board knows it's a front for an intelligence operation, and that they tolerate it because it gives them contact with and access to the Karinnes and the Confederation."

"It's a bit more involved than that, but that's essentially correct," he nodded. "In some ways we're rivals with the Board, in some ways we're the enemy, and in some ways we're allies. As with anything concerning the Benga, it's convoluted and murky."

She chuckled. "They are a most curious species."

"They certainly never let life stay dull," he said darkly. "They're a complete paradox, even for me. I absolutely detest the Syndicate and

everything it stands for, but I'm far more involved with them than I ever believed I would be and consider several Benga to be close, personal friends. The Benga are the most vile, despicable civilization to ever exist, yet I would trust Gen and Bei with my life. They are both dear, dear friends."

"Sister once told me you engage with the Benga to try to change them."

He glanced at her and nodded. "I won't be able to change the Syndicate, but if I can show at least a few of them that there's a better way, then maybe, in a few thousand years, things may be different. A lot of what I do with Galaxy Express is showing them that other path, teaching them how to be basically decent people and that it's not a weakness or a sin to show a tiny bit of kindness. I promised E Chaio I'd try, and I'm making good on that promise."

"Who?"

"Nevermind, you wouldn't believe me," he said, making a motion with his hand.

"To the contrary, cousin, if this is something the Parri have taught you, I would certainly believe it possible."

"Alright then. When I was on E Chaio, I made contact with the planet itself," he told her. "It asked me to try to help turn the Syndicate away from their self-destructive path, to save the Benga from themselves. I promised it that I'd try."

"The soul of the planet?"

He nodded. "I've heard two of them in my lifetime. Tir Tairngire's and E Chaio's. According to the *shaman*, every inhabited world has an awareness, a soul, and that even extends to artificially created habitats, if they're big enough. So, those giant habitat stations the Skaa use develop their own soul over time, if enough Skaa live on them and stay there for long enough for it to happen."

"That's an intriguing concept," she mused, tapping her muzzle as she thought. "That we are naught but cells in the body of an even greater being."

"That's about the gist of it," he told her. "That's something I wouldn't have believed possible just a few years ago. The Parri sure as hell have altered my fundamental world view," he chuckled ruefully. "Hmm. How would you like to come with me when I talk to the Board?"

"I would very much like that, cousin, though it would be more prudent to have Kraal with you," she replied. "Sister doesn't let me do such things often."

"She'll give over if I ask for you personally, and Kraal's already gonna be there, so you'll be joining us," he told her. "You trained on operating a bionoid through a memory band?"

"I'm not the best in the world, but I know how it's done."

"Brush up on it, we'll be doing that tomorrow," he told her. "You'll get the chance to meet Gen and Bei. I think you'll like them."

She chuckled. "It does me much good to have you for a friend, cousin," she smiled.

“We have to get you to where you annoy Miaari with your competence,” he winked.

She laughed. “You want to set her against me the way she does sister Kiaari? You’re awful, cousin,” she accused.

“Mee loves to pull on Kee’s tail. Well, I love pulling on Mee’s tail,” he grinned impishly. “It keeps the High and Mighty Handmaiden properly grounded.”

“You are such a scoundrel, cousin,” she accused.

“I get that from my Kimdori DNA, Kem.” His comm beeped, and his gestalt supplied that it was Zaa. He turned his head and accepted it, bringing up a holo of her sitting in a seat on a transport. “Hey Denmother. You’re a little early, our meeting isn’t for a few hours.”

“There are a few matters I wish to attend in Jaxtra before our meeting. I just wanted to let you know I’m on planet, in case you want to change the time to suit your schedule.”

“No, I’m still good for ten,” he assured her. “Did you bring Denfather and the cubs?”

“I did,” she replied, which made Kemaari’s tail wag a little. “The cubs are going to spend the day with Handmaiden’s cubs, then come over to see their friends on the strip once they’re out of school.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said. “Oh, by the way, speaking of cubs, the fertility treatment was a success. Merra is pregnant. She’s having two, fraternal twin girls.”

“That is good news,” she said brightly. Zaa was very fond of Seido and Merra. “I’ll bring them a celebration gift.”

“Why don’t you stay for the day? We’re going to a restaurant tonight to celebrate her blessing, I’m sure she’d be overjoyed if you and Denfather and the cubs joined us. And I think it would be educational for you to sit in with me while I’m over at the KES HQ. You need to get back up to speed with what we’re up to after being sent out on travel duty. Besides, we haven’t had a real chance to catch up, Kem. I miss you,” he smiled.

“I missed you too, cousin,” she returned with a warm look.

“Now, let me go get a leash and a collar, and we’ll take you out for your walkies,” he said liltily, then laughed when she smacked him.

He enjoyed a wonderful breakfast with family and servants—friends—celebrating Merra’s pregnancy, then he dragged Kemaari along with him as he started his day. The day started at Nexus Four, taking a tour of the station before it was linked back to Terra and opened for traffic, then he returned to the White House and invaded KES headquarters, where things were jumping as the KES returned to active exploration. Ships were getting ready to head out, some waiting for guest scientists from other empires to arrive via the nexus station after it opened, and the logistic ships had jumped out the second the quarantine was officially lifted to get comm arrays back in place to establish their biogenic comm network in the local galactic clusters, as well as getting several Stargates back in place in the important places where they were doing the most research. That was in the five local galactic clusters more or less bordering the home cluster, A2, A3, B2, C2, and C3, with the three scout ships carrying the arrays that would re-establish contact with cluster C6 already on the way. That would take about ten days to



finish, since C6 was *way* out there. Like it would take a ship jumping standard hyperspace 19,500 years to get there out there.

Meya and Myra weren't entirely happy about his decision to change their exploration strategy, but they were keeping that to themselves as they stood in the main command center, the nerve center of the KES where ships were sent their orders and important data was sent in for immediate evaluation. They were standing around a holo showing the 38 galactic clusters in what they were calling the Evanis Core, like a series of pearls in a necklace consisting of clusters that were in a rough line that stretched across the universe. They called that formation a *cosmic string*, and there were two of them in the Greater Evanis Formation, the two cosmic strings twisted around each other like some herculean strand of DNA. Jason's attention was on a cluster of sixteen galaxies five clusters away from them, cluster C6, the cluster holding the Galactic Alliance. That was identified on the holo as C6D, to what would be called the east of the home cluster as represented on the holo, at least with its current orientation. The C clusters extended to the "east," the A clusters to the "west," and the B clusters to the "south." The fourth side was the open void between their string and String B, and there were no clusters directly between them and the other string. The home cluster sat on the edge of their cosmic string. The closest cluster in that direction, D1, was over a month away in mode 3, in the other string of the formation.

And the mission to return to D1 would be leaving in just a couple of hours, as soon as they got all the scientists from other empires aboard the ships in the seven ship task force going out there. That task force would consist of two Vanguard class scouts, three conventional scout ships, and two military KMS frigates for the ability to use CMS...just in case. The

expedition was scheduled to last three months; one month there, one month to conduct research, surveys, and experiments, and one month back.

If the mission was deemed a success, and they felt it was safe enough, a KES super-ship would be dispatched to D1 to serve as a station for more extensive research. There was no way in hell Jason was going to send one of those to D1 until he was sure it was safe to do so, they were way too damn expensive to risk, on top of holding so many crewmen that he wanted kept as safe as possible.

“I’m surprised you’re intent on trying to open relations with C6D,” Meya said as they looked at the holo. “Let me guess...telepathic resonance?”

He nodded. “I have the feeling that it’s going to be almost mandatory tech with everyone becoming Generations, but more importantly, with the entire galaxy starting to talk to each other. We need to get galaxy-wide real time comm up and running to make it easier to communicate. I don’t want to be putting biogenic nodes everywhere to establish a pan-galactic real time system, so resonance tech would be the perfect workaround for it. It’s way too much of a risk to have that many biogenic nodes out there. If we can get our hands on their resonance tech and adapt it to Confederation standard technology, it solves that problem. I’m just not too optimistic about pulling this off. From what we saw, the Galactic Alliance is way, *way* ahead of us, and the only thing we may have to offer is the one thing I’ll never give them, translight drives. I get the feeling that they don’t have intergalactic capability at the same speed as ours. I think they have it, but it’s much slower, like Ruu translight drive level. The impression I got from our encounter with them was that they’ve never left cluster C6. But we don’t know unless we try, so we’re gonna try.”

“You talked to Yeri about it?”

He nodded. “She’s already preparing to establish formal relations, at least as much as possible given the distance. It’s, what, eight days to C6D from here without Stargates?”

“About that,” Myra nodded. “I’m a little torqued at you that you’re not letting us put up the Stargates back at C5.”

“Too far out,” he said. “The pandemic exposed our vulnerability putting such valuable assets out there with no easy way to get them back here. Putting gates up at A3, B2, and C2 are as far as I’m gonna go.”

“What about the idea of putting gates out in the flat space between here and the other string?”

“I haven’t decided about that,” he replied. “Not that anyone could really get at them, but more along the lines of we haven’t studied the effect of having to put the Stargate in a bubble of artificial gravity to prevent time dilation. I have DSA studying that, and they’ll be giving me a report soon. If they say it’s safe to do it, that it won’t jack with the Stargate or the crew manning it, then we’ll do it.” He looked at Myra. “You guys have your exploration missions sorted out?”

“Yeah, everything’s on the board, just waiting for the go signal. We’ll be resuming the explorations and research missions in A2, B2, B3, C2, C3, and C4. The Kimdori are gonna range out ahead of us and conduct initial surveys of C7, C8, B5, A8, and A9.”

“Good, just about everyone over in the Academy is ecstatic that we’ll be sending in more data,” Jason mused.

“Ayuma called us three times,” Meya said lightly. “Finding out which missions were back on and which were scrubbed. She asked most about the expedition to D1.”

“No way was I pulling that, we need more data on the change in constants in the other string,” Jason said, which made the twins nod in agreement. “We need that data for our own research more than the Academy does. DSA and DPR both have major projects going studying it.”

“Glad to hear that you haven’t forgotten that the House is primarily about science,” Meya grinned.

“The fact that you’re saying that makes it irony, Meya,” he teased, which made her laugh.

“Well, you did kinda go nuts with the military stuff, Jayce, we were wondering if you were going savage on us,” Myra winked.

“I’ll show you savage when you get home tonight,” he threatened, which made her grin widely.

“That sounds like a date, Jayce.”

“I’m so glad you think so,” he retorted flippantly.

“If I’m not bruised and bleeding when it’s over, we didn’t have any fun at all,” she pressed, which made Kemaari snort a little bit. She gave him an amused look when he spared a short glare at her.

“I think we’re about done here,” Jason said brusquely, leaning back up.

“That’s right, run, Jayce,” Meya dug. “Before you get another Zoyanne Sisters Special.”

He didn't dignify that with a response, and wrapped things up so he could move on to his next appointment. The two of them rode on his personal skimmer as he headed northeast, discussing the return to exploration missions outside the cluster, then he landed just outside the Parri village to have his daily lesson with the *shaman*. Kemaari observed quietly as the two of them sat outside her hut and discussed a variety of topics that had nothing to do with science, as Jason learned more and more about Parri mysticism. But, as usual, their discussions ranged to more mundane topics, even into a little gossip. The *shaman* loved to keep abreast of all the silly drama going on over on the strip, as well as everything Jason could tell her about what the kids were up to. It wasn't long before the lesson was all but forgotten as Jason described the men that the strip girls were dating, which relationships were getting serious, and which ones Jason felt would end up in marriage. Six of the girls were married now, Meya, Aura, Yana, Min, and the twins Lyn and Bryn—though they were both married to the same man, the only instance where polygamy was allowed in Faey society—and the rest of the girls except for Myri were in relationships with varying degrees of seriousness. This was the dirt that the *shaman* adored the most, and sometimes he felt that she'd become addicted to cheesy soap operas from Terra's past if he ever showed them to her. Affairs of the heart were very, very important to the Parri, for obvious reasons if one understood even the basics about their culture. Parri culture taught that love was the most powerful force in the universe, so she was *always* interested in who was growing love in his or her heart, and for whom.

She also wasn't above a bit of shameless matchmaking from time to time, mainly concerning Myri. Myri was the most adamant of the bachelorettes on the strip, who proclaimed she wasn't going to get married, but she had a determined huntress stalking her in the form of the *shaman*.

She was determined to get Myri married off, and often, her visits to the strip were more about going out into the surrounding neighborhood and scoping out prospective men than it was teaching Jason about Parri mysticism.

Kemaari noted as much after they left, heading back to the White House for his meeting with Zaa, and afterward to tackle his inbox a little bit before heading home. “I haven’t really talked much to the Parri, but the *shaman* seems...not what I expected,” she said artfully.

“If you’re talking about her mission to get Myri married off, yeah, that’s a little odd,” he agreed, which made her nod. “I find it even more odd given the *shaman* herself doesn’t have a mate. Or at least I don’t think she does, I’ve never really asked her. You’d think someone so intent on pairing off everyone around her wouldn’t be single herself.”

“She seems to be the kind who is married to the job, as the Terrans say. Perhaps being who she is doesn’t give her the time to pursue a personal relationship. You said she is often meditating, maybe she doesn’t feel she has the time to devote to a mate.”

“That’s a possibility,” he agreed as the skimmer reached cruising speed, then he leaned back in the chair and put his feet up on the dash, letting the autopilot do the work. Kreel’s face popped up on a holo on the console between the cockpit seats, oriented towards him. “It took you this long to call?” he asked lightly.

Kreel laughed. “I’m almost as busy as you. And besides, it’s morning here, I just got up,” he replied. “But you think we could both be not busy enough to catch a baseball game?”

“I think we could swing it,” he replied. “I could use a little break after today.”

“Something happen?”

“No, but I’m on the way to the office to meet with the Denmother, then afterward I have to read the fifty million reports about the lifting of the quarantine and the Ten Year Plan,” he replied. “I figure in about ten hours, I’ll be desperate for a break.”

“Sounds good, it’ll be late enough to get drunk by then,” he said lightly.

“There’s no such thing as too early to drink for a Grimja.”

“I’m talking about you, not me,” he replied with a toothy grin.

“Hopeless,” Jason sighed, which made Kreel chuckle.

“What’s hopeless is that we’re not drunk yet,” he replied shamelessly. “So, how long til Dahnai moves in?”

Jason had to laugh. “She’s scheduled to take up residence in the summer palace tomorrow,” he replied. “She’s gonna stay for twelve days.”

“Awesome, that means we can manage a game and a few tankards before she shows up and ruins everything,” he replied cheekily.

“I’m not going crazy, it’s my time with Raisha and Miyai. I don’t want a hangover with them visiting.”

“They’re definitely high maintenance,” Kreel agreed. “So, we’ll just get drunk during the game, get thrown out for being too rowdy, and one of the guards can fly us home while we hit on her.”

“*You* hit on her?”

“Hey, after about five tankards of Makati ale, even hairless, whiskerless blue women with bad attitudes and utterly creepy bulging mounds on their chests start to look attractive,” he said in a voice that made Jason burst out laughing.

“You better thank god there aren’t any guards in the skimmer to hear that,” Jason told him.

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll find out. I’ll bet ten credits Aya has your comm bugged.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” he agreed with a chuckle.

“Lemme get the paperwork done so my staff won’t throw things at me when I get back. Call ya in a while,” Kreel said.

“Sure thing,” he replied, then Kreel’s image vanished from the console.

“And there goes any chance of a productive day,” Kemaari murmured, which made him laugh. “After the last few months, I think I’m allowed a baseball game, a hotdog, and a few beers more than are good for me,” he replied challengingly. “And just for that, I should make you come with us. You don’t know Kreel very well, so we need to fix that. We gotta get you in proper trouble now that I’ve wrested you away from your controlling, overbearing older sister.”

She gave him a look, then laughed in sincere delight. “She’s not that bad.”

“Oh yes she is,” he retorted immediately. “And it’s time for you to foment a little rebellion against her authority. Mee deserves it for making you cubsit her cubs all the time.”



“Don’t get me in trouble, cousin.”

“Dear cousin, I have not yet begun to get you in trouble,” he said ominously as he looked over at her, and she couldn’t help but laugh and swipe at his shoulder half-heartedly.