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Revelation3

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Chapter 3

Vesta, 29 Kedaas, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 23 March 2023, Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 29 Kedaas, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Galaxy Express HQ, The Wheel, E Chaio

It had been quite a while since he'd been here.

Stepping out of the alcove holding his normal-sized bionoid (he kept both a normal and macro bionoid in the office), Jason put his hand on his elbow and clenched his other fist, settling into the merge even as he took a few steps towards the desk in his very small office, which was clear of anything but the computer terminal...though that was a bit hard to see since he was the size of a Benga child. Kraal ran Planet Express, so this office really existed only to give Jason a place to stow his bionoids. The secretary sitting outside his office door, Mez, was much more than a figurehead, however, she and the other four executive secretaries in the office into which his office opened were a part of Kraal's executive chain of command. She was actually one of Kraal's secretaries, and the orders he issued from the factory on E Chaio went through the workers in the office and down into the company. Much like Chirk was vital to his office, Mez and the others that staffed the office were a critical and integral part of Galaxy Express' operations. She and the other executive secretaries were both

Kraal's point of interface with the company and his eyes and ears keeping everything operating to his expectations. She looked towards him as he opened the hatch and stepped out into the office, standing up so she could more easily see him over her desk as she gave him very nearly a relieved smile. "Executive Jayce, it's good to see you again," she greeted as the other secretaries stopped what they were doing and looked towards him.

"Believe me, I'm glad I could finally get here."

"What happened that has kept you away for so long? Executive Kraal has been very evasive."

"He had good reason to be," he replied. "The short of it was that we had a virulent and dangerous disease sweep through our galaxy, and I've spent the better part of the last orbit dealing with the chaos it caused."

"By all profit, is your family well?"

"Yes, my family and friends are well, thank you for asking," he said with a nod, looking up at her. "And we've managed to contain the pandemic, so things are looking very good for the galaxy."

"So, today's meeting with the Board will inform them of this."

He nodded. "As well as working out a schedule to re-establish the trade schedules that got disrupted when the pandemic broke out. We couldn't afford to have the virus cross into Andromeda in a cargo container."

"I dare say not. General Gen is waiting for you in the main landing bay," she informed him.

"Thank you, Mez," he nodded.

It was a very happy and relieved Gen that leaned down took his hand between his fingers when he entered the landing bay, looming over him. “By the first coin, Jayce, it’s good to see you,” he said earnestly as Bei all but jumped out of her Marauder and started literally running towards him. “What happened? Your messages have been very short and very vague.”

“It’s been a mess,” he replied, pausing until Bei could reach them. “We had a fairly nasty virus infect nearly ten percent of our galaxy. It was being spread through cargo containers,” he said. “We had to all but completely shut down the entire galaxy to quarantine and keep the quarantine up for divisions in order to stop the spread. And while it wasn’t particularly deadly, it’s insanely contagious and it about knocks you on your ass for segments if you catch it. It took us divisions to get it under control, and we only just started slowly re-opening trade routes between empires. It’ll be next orbit before everything is fully back to normal.”

“Which explains why the cargo flowing in from your galaxy stopped,” Gen grunted.

“Yup, and now I have to explain all that to the Board,” he said wryly.

“I’m surprised you kept that a secret,” Bei said.

“We didn’t want the Board to think it was an opportune time to send a fleet to the Milky Way,” he said directly, looking up at her. “Thinking that by the time the fleet got there, the galaxy would be so weakened by the virus that we’d be easy to conquer.”

“That would be too far in the future for them to risk it,” Gen said. “It’s a five orbit trip to your galaxy.”

“When it comes to the Board, we take no chances, Gen,” he said bluntly.

“A wise course,” he nodded. “Executive Kraal’s transport is going to land any moment, so we can wait on the Starliner for them to board.”

“Sounds good. Pilot the transport, Gen, we have to talk, and I’d rather do it in person than over shortrange.”

“I was planning to. Bei will copilot.”

“Then let’s go,” he said. “I hope you put baby chairs in the Starliner.”

Gen chuckled as he pointed to the TP-36. “We’re using one of our general use Starliners, Jayce. It has seating for all races. Even the little ones.”

He looked up at Gen with a slightly annoyed face. “Don’t make me bring my macro bionoid down here,” he said tersely, which just made Gen smile.

“That must be Executive Kraal’s transport,” Bei injected, looking towards a small Benga dropship that came through the airskin shield. It landed beside the Starliner, and sure enough, Kraal and Kemaari exited it, the Gamekeeper dwarfing the young female. They were bionoids, the new model of bionoid that Rook had designed for Kimdori use. Rook and the Kindori engineering and medical Elders had devised a means for Kimdori to merge to bionoids using a new type of memory band that had vastly expanded processing power to handle a sensory stream, though the merge wasn’t 100%. It did, however, give them enough sensory immersion to operate them convincingly to make them seem to be living things. The new memory bands gave Kimdori the biggest thing they needed, the ability to

merge to external assets. They had also developed a new Kimdori merge pod that held enough hardware to give them a 100% merge, and most likely that was what Kraal and Kemaari were using.

“Gen, Bei, you know Executive Kraal. This is Executive Assistant Kemaari,” Jason introduced after they walked over, their bionoids perfectly mimicking their real bodies, even down to the thickness and consistency of their fur. That made Kraal loom over Jason with his slightly shaggy, black-furred size, and Kemaari’s bionoid had her adorable brown patch that covered her eye and went up into her hair, making her ears two different colors. Kemaari was carrying an attaché holding several data cards for their meeting with the Board. “She works in the office of my government that deals with Andromedan affairs, so she will act as an aide during our meeting with the Board.”

“It is an honor to meet you, General Ba Ru,” Kemaari said in Benga, looking up at the two Benga. “And you as well, Lieutenant Man Ver. Jason has high opinions of both of you.”

“That respect is mutual, Assistant Kemaari,” Gen told her strongly. “And your mode of address tells me he is more than your employer?”

“We have a close working relationship, Gen,” Jason supplied, which was a Benga way to say Kemaari was a friend...as much as friends existed in Benga society. “Assistant Kemaari is young, but she is gifted and is an invaluable asset to my office. I believe that her presence at the meeting will be a boon to both sides, due to her knowledge and expertise.”

Gen nodded. “If we are ready, Jayce, we can board and be under way.”

They boarded the Starliner, Gen and Bei in the cockpit with the three passengers in the front row, sitting in seats on a raised platform that put

their eyes more at a level with the two Benga. Gen lifted the ship off the deck and headed out into space, then turned towards the distant star and accelerated up to cruising speed for the three hour journey to the planet. Once the ship was on autopilot, both Gen and Bei turned their seats and listened as Jason explained what had been going on in more detail, explaining why they'd barely heard anything at all from him for nearly six months, and why Kraal hadn't said a word about it. Jason went into much more detail with them than he would most anyone else in Andromeda, but didn't reveal just what the virus did, only saying that the virus had permanent effects on the people that were infected. That was information that absolutely could not get to Andromeda, or it would be war with the Syndicate all over again as they tried to get their hands on the virus to power up their soldiers. "We're just now starting to get everything back to normal," he finished. "The virus completely disrupted our trade routes, especially since it was spreading to new planets in cargo containers. We don't have a vaccine yet, but we've managed to contain the outbreak to the point where it's not spreading anymore. Planets that are infected are permanently quarantined from the rest of the galaxy until we have a vaccine, but we've devised a way to prevent it from spreading off those planets, so we've restarted trade. We found a way to kill the virus in cargo to stop it from spreading, a process we can't use on living things."

"Does the future look profitable?" Bei asked.

He nodded. "The galaxy's best doctors and scientists are working together to develop a vaccine," he told her. "And they've already made some progress. We hope that within five orbits, we have a vaccine and can kill the virus for good. Until then, the entire Milky Way is on a partial quarantine protocol. People from infected planets can travel freely to other

infected planets and people on uninfected planets can travel to uninfected planets. So right now, there's like two different travel systems in the galaxy, with contact between the two sides isolated down to stations that scan all cargo moving between them and kill any virus they find."

"Is Karis infected?" Gen asked.

"It *started* on Karis," he growled. "So yeah, we're on the infected side. But luckily, we've been managing the symptoms of those infected and they're back to living normal lives. They'll be just fine until a vaccine is developed."

"Did you and your family escape infection?" Gen asked.

"My wife was infected, but it turns out I'm immune," he replied. "Generations are immune to the virus, so that's one tiny favor in all this."

"Ah, so your scientists are using your immunity as a starting point," Gen surmised, to which Jason and Kraal both nodded. "It sounds worse than it probably is. I'd wager that bionoids are an important asset right now."

"Oh yeah," he agreed. "Bionoids are the only way the two sides can interact on a personal level, and they're proving to be invaluable, given some of the scientists working on the cure are infected and some aren't. It's letting them work together in the same room. It's also pushed up some plans I'd made concerning the Academy. Terra's infected, and I'm not about to close the Academy, so I'm building a sister campus on Terra's moon that the uninfected can attend. That way the Academy stays open and keeps doing its job while we wait for them to develop a vaccine. But it's not like it's a total disaster, I was planning on building that campus anyway. The pandemic just moved up the plan a few orbits, that's all. Anyway, that's it."

Now, how did you guys find the new upgrades to your Marauders? I was a little worried that we may have actually made them worse.”

“It took some adjustment,” Bei said wryly. “They’re almost *too* fast now. Some of our newer recruits are having problems controlling them.”

“That was one of the things we were worrying about,” Jason frowned. “We may have to reduce the power output of the engines a little bit.”

“I’ve been having them train at a lower power level and slowly increasing it so they can adjust step by step,” Gen told him. “So far, it’s been working. We’ve been seeing consistent increases in performance marks as we step up.”

“Awesome,” Jason said. Kraal and Kemaari probably got a little bored as Jason, Gen, and Bei got into quite an involved discussion about the Marauders, from piloting to maintenance, discussing the new engine upgrades and the possible issues they may be causing both the pilots and the mecha. And that conversation ultimately came around to why they needed them, which brought Kraal into the discussion.

“The Syndicate Navy’s upgrades to their fleet are having an impact,” Kraal injected after Gen and Bei remarked that there were fewer pirates along the trade routes lately, which meant much safer runs for their freighters and personnel transports. “It took them a while to implement them, but now that upgraded ships are starting to show up at the more popular ambush points, there’s been a marked decrease in pirate activity. The main reason for the shift is that Naval vessels with reflex cannons are now present in numbers. The reflex cannons have given the Navy the upper hand.”

“Which isn’t a surprise, given most pirate ships have no defense against them,” Jason nodded. “How is our recruitment efforts going in that regard?” he asked Kraal.

“We’ve managed to lure quite a few skilled people away from the pirate groups,” he replied. “Most far prefer a job and a place in Syndicate society to being a nopped pirate. So, in a way, our own efforts are helping deal with the pirate problem, if only because we’re giving them a chance to do honest work.”

“They work hard once they’re through orientation and training,” Bei told them. “They don’t want to blow this chance. They know how lucky they are for a corp to pick up their contracts after being nopped.”

“Which is one reason why we’re doing it. It gives us a chance to pick up some real talent even as we reduce the number of pirates that may shoot at us,” Kraal said easily. “We’ve gotten quite a few highly skilled military personnel, pilots, maintenance techs, and even several excellent engineers and scientists.”

“I’m not going to ask how you’re identifying candidates,” Jason said, looking at his Kimdori friend.

“We have agents in several of the larger pirate outfits, hunting for talent,” he replied with a slight smile on his muzzle. “On top of keeping us apprised of what the outfits are up to. That’s just as important.”

“That’s so Kimdori,” Jason chuckled. “That does sound good, though. It’ll be good for the company and good for the Syndicate once they have the pirate problem under control. It’ll let them start focusing on their modernization plans.”

“I could get used to having boring escort sorties,” Bei said, which made Jason grin at her.

“When’s the next round of upgrades and refits coming?” Gen asked.

“Not for a while. The pandemic kinda murdered our research division, figuratively speaking, so everything’s all off schedule now. We haven’t had the time or resources to do proper research. But I’m sure that GE ships and mecha are gonna be stomping pirate ships quite easily until the next round gets here.”

“Of course, but you know warmech pilots, Jason. Better is better, and we always want better.”

“Oh yeah, speaking of better, Kyva plans on scheduling another training session with you and the Reavers, Bei,” he told her. “And naturally, she wants to fight you again, Gen.”

“I always look forward to a match with Kyva,” he chuckled.

“And while we don’t have any refits on the board in the near future, I guess I can let you in on something. My engineers are in the final stages of designing two brand new warmechs,” he told them. “The first is the successor to the Marauder, it’s a little bigger, but faster than a Marauder and much more resilient. We’ve developed a new actuator servo system that makes the limbs much less prone to stress damage,” he explained, since both of them were now *very* interested in what he was saying. The Reavers always got the new stuff first, which meant that they’d be the ones that would put the mecha through its paces in real world conditions. “The second mecha is something that’s a big deviation from the norm for warmech squadrons. It’s a quadrupedal mecha,” he said intently. “But it’s not a walker. It’s not meant to sit in the rear lines and fire at the enemy. It’s

fast, agile, and its low profile makes it surprisingly hard to shoot down in ground combat. You've seen the inspiration for them the last time you merged over for a wargame with the KBB, Gen. It's a Syndicate version of our new *Cheetah* mecha."

"You ported it over?"

He nodded. "My engineers did a great job adapting it to Syndicate technology. The *Jaguar* uses a combination of the new servo tech we developed for the *Dragoons* and augmented it with grav pods to reduce the number of moving parts, and that gives the legs a major amount of strength while also making them very rugged. The hybrid system has exceeded our expectations," he said a bit proudly. "The *Jaguars* are larger and bulkier than the *Cheetahs*, and not as fast, but they make up for that with stronger armor and some significant firepower. We're still a few divisions away from a prototype, so you may not see the first models get over here until next orbit. But I thought you might want to hear about what we've got planned."

"You think I might get a look at the specs?" Gen asked.

"Sure, we can show you some of that, as well as some of our sims," he replied. "Kemaari, mind popping over to MRDD and pulling some of the data? You can upload it to your bionoid."

"Easily, Jason," she nodded. "Excuse me a while." She leaned back and closed her eyes, and then delinked from the bionoid.

"The *Dragoons* will be replacing the Marauders in our inventory once they're in production," Jason told him. "The *Jaguars* will be more or less assigned only to our best warmech units, because they're more tricky to pilot than any other mecha our soldiers have used before. It'll take a while before we have enough trained pilots to use them in any numbers."

“How do these Dra-Dragoons compare to Marauders?”

“Superior in every way,” he replied. “Stronger, faster, tougher, more firepower, a kickass inertial dampening system that will let the pilot use more extreme maneuvers, and a complete redesign of the power system that allows it to power external weapons and pod systems.”

“You’ve introduced pod technology?”

He nodded. “No more clunky external systems that got in the way as much as they were an asset to the pilot. The new pods mount and incorporate into the mecha and work with it, including drawing their power from the mecha instead of internal plants. That allowed us to reduce the size of the systems and make them much more manageable.”

Gen laughed. “You’re going to completely upend the military technology curve in the Syndicate, Jason.”

“It needs it. I’ve said it before, and I mean it when I say that a healthy and prosperous Syndicate is in *our* best interest,” he said strongly.

Kraal nodded. “Since the Syndicate can’t easily get to our galaxy, we see nothing wrong with advancing your military and defensive capability. We want the Syndicate to be stable, and making sure they have the military might to protect themselves is very much in our own interest.”

“I think the Board may very well begin to believe that after you introduce these new systems over here,” Bei said.

Kemaari opened her eyes, then sat back up. “I have the data,” she said, raising her arm and causing her memory band to project out a hologram, showing the new Dagoon mecha. It was roughly based on the Warclaw frame—was more or less imported over from the Warclaw design template

—so it looked fairly familiar to Jason despite him not seeing that depiction of a Dragoon only a few times in his reports. “This is the Dragoon, General. Its design is roughly based on another mecha, but its systems were converted from Confederation technology to Syndicate technology, trying to keep as much of the functionality of the original mecha as possible.”

“That’s a very sleek design,” Bei murmured.

“Indeed, it looks quite agile and nimble,” Gen agreed with a nod.

“It’s even more agile than it looks, General,” Kemaari told him. “It uses the most recent advancements in Syndicate based technology to produce a superior mecha compared to the Marauder, including having remote merge capability and importing Confederation drone and external pod technology into a Syndicate unit. This unit can mount external pod systems, and carries four spinner-style sensor nodes and two drones to provide additional reconnaissance capability and extra firepower.”

“Spinners. Outstanding,” Gen nearly grinned.

“They’re very effective. The Syndicate has some pretty good sensor technology, and we were able to use that to produce some damn good spinners,” Jason said.

The holo changed to show the new Jaguar, which was larger and bulkier than the Cheetah. “This is the *Jaguar*. As you can see, it’s based on a quadrupedal orientation, like a walker, but it’s very much a front line combat mecha. It’s extremely fast and agile on the ground, and its low profile makes it a hard target to hit in a combat setting. It’s equipped with reflex cannons, missiles, and monomolecular blades that extend out from the sides of the unit for close quarters combat. In addition to the blades, it’s equipped with retractable claws on the paw assemblies, and that jaw does

work, so the mecha can deliver a supinely effective and damaging bite. It can also mount pods to increase its versatility and firepower to meet the needs of the mission.”

“This is nothing like I’ve ever seen before,” Bei said, nearly whispering. “Is it effective?”

“It’s harder to operate than a standard mecha, but for those pilots that can master it, it is *extremely* effective,” Kemaari answered.

“I can attest to that,” Jason said. “The *Cheetahs* we introduced into the KMS have all but rewritten the operations rulebook. They introduce an entirely new aspect of mecha combat because they’re just so damn fast, and they complement our other mecha perfectly. Just about every mecha company in the KMS has a mixture of standard mecha and *Cheetahs* now. Virtually no company deploys without at least two *Cheetahs* in the formation.”

“Can these operate in space?” Gen asked.

“Easily,” Jason answered. “Equip them with external flight pods and they’re just as effective as a Marauder in vector-based operations. And like the *Dragoon*, the *Jaguar* has drones and spinners and can utilize external pods.”

Gen looked speculative, but Bei was staring at the *Jaguar* as if she’d just fallen in love, which made Jason highly amused. He knew what Bei would be doing when the prototypes were sent over. “We have some training simulation software for the mecha prepared, based on the operational parameters during the design phase. I’ll send it to you so you can start introducing your pilots to the new mecha,” he said, looking at Bei.

“I’ll be eager to get it,” Gen said enthusiastically.

They got into an involved discussion about the specifics of the mecha, which whiled away the three hours that it took for them to cruise into the system on sublight. Bei flew the Starliner as they came down into the atmosphere, then Jason changed into his formal robes just before Bei landed on a pad on the 80th floor of the Syndicate’s capitol building. Jason nearly got a chill up his spine back on Karis when he stepped out of the ship and looked at the gaudy skyscraper, remembering what happened the last time he was here...and the memory of that still haunted him. That feeling intensified when he looked at the guards, the sight of their uniforms inciting memories of the ones he’d killed with the gestalt, and how it felt to be imprinted to a tactical gestalt that powerful...a feeling he never wanted to feel again.

“It won’t happen again, cousin,” Kraal said in a quiet, supportive voice from behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“God, I hope not,” he replied as he started looked towards the door, to see the Chamberlain was walking towards him with four guards escorting her. Jason nodded when the woman bowed with a flourish. “Lady Chamberlain, I come in response to the summons of the Board,” he said formally.

“They await you, your Grace. If you would follow me.”

They weren’t taken to the main board room, they were instead taken to a smaller office two floors below it, where the Chairman of the Board and four members sat at a table in a large, sterile room with a patterned carpet and fabric-backed walls, tiles on the ceiling with light panels in it. A platform had been set on their side of the table, holding chairs that would

put them at least at a level where they would be able to see over the table. It was a very plain and modest room, very much different from most of the rooms within the building. Dai Su was sitting on the other side of the table, immediately to the Chairman's left, and her presence here at this meeting was not lost on him. The three of them bowed once they were ushered through the door, and the Chairman, Au Su Ra Bo, nodded.

"Chairman Ra Bo," Jason called after they climbed the steps to the platform and sat down. "Might I present Kraal, Chief Executive of Galaxy Express and my business partner, and Executive Assistant Kemaari, who works in my office back on Karis."

"So this is the elusive Kraal," the Chairman said, looking at the hulking black-furred Kimdori...at least hulking to someone Jason's size.

"I keep myself out of the public eye to maintain the illusion that Galaxy Express is a Benga-owned venture, Chairman," Kraal said smoothly.

"You have quite a few admirers on the Board, Chief Executive," Dai Su told him with a slight smile. "Your business model is a sound one."

"I am humbled that the august members of the Board would find value in my system, Chief Executive," he said with a bow in his seat to her.

"Now, on to important matters," the Chairman said. "Why has the Confederation cut off communications? We only received a single strange message about an emergency, and then silence. Were it not for our contacts with Galaxy Express, we would have been quite concerned that the agreement had been broken. But even our communications with your company have been vague and unsatisfactory. We would have an accounting, your Grace."

“The situation is complicated,” Jason answered. “The small of it is that we had a pandemic sweep through the Confederation. It forced us to quarantine entire empires for divisions at a time and divert absolutely every tek of our attention to containing the outbreak and caring for the infected. It completely disrupted all trade and supply chain operations through the Confederation, including our trade agreements with the Syndicate. We couldn’t send out any cargo for fear that the virus would be in the shipping containers and find its way to Andromeda. We’ve honestly had not even a spare tick to deal with anything else.”

“It was that bad?”

Jason nodded. “The disease the virus caused wasn’t deadly, but in a way, that made it even more costly because of the effect it had on our workforce and medical infrastructure. It took us divisions to get the pandemic under control, then try to get our supply chains back in order. So, we apologize for any concern we may have caused you,” he said calmly.

“I’m surprised you couldn’t simply send that in a message. It was fairly short and simple.”

“While the Confederation and the Syndicate are at peace, there *is* a certain amount of suspicion on both sides of the galactic cluster,” he said artfully. “The Council voted to keep what was going on a secret so as not to invite any...speculations,” he said, exploiting the vagueness of the Benga language. “But now that things are under control, the Council has decided to be more forthright.”

“An understandable action,” the Chairman said evenly. “Has the virus been cured?”

“It’s been contained,” he replied. “We don’t have a vaccine yet, but those who have caught the virus are immune to further infection, so the pandemic has eased if only because most everyone on the quarantined planets has gone through the illness and recovered. They still carry the virus, however, so there are still quarantines in effect. We’ve found a way to kill the virus in cargo containers and on ships, so we’ve been able to re-establish some of our trade routes and supply lines, and our cargo shipments to our Syndicate business partners will resume shortly, at least after we discuss with you the idea of you funneling all cargo inbound from Galaxy B through a cargo station that can sweep the cargo with sensors to ensure that no viral agents survived the decontamination process. We can’t use those techniques on living things or organic matter, however, so while goods and supplies are moving again, people and food are not. The quarantines will have to remain in place until we develop a vaccine for the virus, to prevent more planets from being infected. Our production and industry is returning to normal as the infected planets recover, but they’ll have to remain quarantined until we can get rid of the virus.”

“A complex situation,” the Chairman noted.

“Quite,” Jason nodded in agreement. “It’s been a major logistical challenge for the Confederation to manage the outbreak and prevent a complete collapse of industrial output. But we’ve gotten things under control and have a plan to move forward, so we should be alright.”

“A brief overview. But I think it would be more useful for you to be a little more specific,” the Chairman replied.

Jason and Kraal spent nearly two hours answering a series of questions from the five of them about the pandemic, being vague where necessary, but also about how the pandemic might affect the relationship between the

two galaxies. Jason got them to agree to setting up a cargo intake station for the small amount of trade goods that moved from the Milky Way to Andromeda to scan the cargo containers to make sure no viral agents managed to slip through the sterilization process they were using before the cargo was shipped out. The only trade goods that moved between the two galaxies were raw materials like ores and textiles, part of the slow building of trust between the Confederation and the Syndicate, but the food shipments would be suspended because it couldn't be purged of viral agents without destroying it. They then discussed the relationship between the Syndicate and Galaxy Express. It had always been a complicated one, and it got only more complex and murky as the Chairman and Kraal verbally fenced over the company and its intelligence gathering operation, trying to get Kraal to pass more information on to the Black Sashes, the Syndicate's intelligence operation. Jason and Kemaari sat quietly but paid close attention as two masters of diplomatic maneuvering plied their trades, Kraal proving he was every bit a master of the complicated Benga language as the Chairman, the two of them putting on quite a show as both of them tried to dig for information and deflected the other at the same time.

By the end of the meeting, a few agreements had been made. Kraal agreed to pass on more information about the larger pirate operations that were lurking along the most important trade routes, mainly from the mining operations along the Sebru Rim back into the industrial planets of the Askar sector, where pirates tried to ambush ore freighters at the largest nebula in Andromeda, where the ships had to drop out of hyperspace and change course to circumnavigate the area. Jason made a couple of agreements himself, mainly agreeing to share some technical information with the Syndicate Navy over the shield upgrade he'd sold to Dynamax. They'd been having some problems adapting the shield upgrades to I-10 and I-11

heavy battleships, the largest ships the Syndicate had that could employ shields.

At the end of the meeting, the three of them stood and bowed to the five Benga. “You can have your office contact Galaxy Express to relay the coordinates of the entry station for incoming cargo, Chairman, and they will send those coordinates on to us. I’ll have the Confederation reinstate the cargo shipments, and all inbound cargo shipments will be directed there,” Jason told him. “The trade deals over food shipments will remain suspended until such time as we can find a way to decontaminate the cargo without damaging the food.”

“I’ll have the Syndicate Navy set up the intake station by the end of the segment,” the Chairman told them. “And this will be of much more immediate use,” he said, holding up a data card holding the technical specs of the shield modification.

“It should solve the unstable harmonic issue you encountered in SG-377 shield generators, Chairman,” Jason told him. The five members of the Board had got to watch Jason download the data into that data card using his bionoid, pulling the data for the fix off the MRDD mainframe on Karis and using his bionoid as a relay.

“If only we could employ bionoid technology,” Dai Su murmured.

“We’re working on that problem, Chief Executive Jam Ber,” Jason told her calmly. “I have a team of researchers working to adapt cyberjacks to Syndicate technology. If they succeed, it would give you the ability to connect to a bionoid.”

“Now that would be a very lucrative course,” the Chairman said brightly.

“It will be a while before the technology is viable for you, Chairman. You’ll need to complete your communications modernization plan before your system can handle the datastream between a bionoid and its operator. Right now, not even your shortrange dedicated data transfer systems have the throughput to handle it. But once your upgrades are complete, they should be able to do it. That gives my people time to research the matter and find a solution that we can market to you.”

“Does it look favorable?” Dai Su asked.

He nodded. “Your computer architecture is more than powerful enough to process the data, and it’s already miniaturized enough to be practical to implant. There are two snags barring them from becoming mainstream. First, your medical technology makes implanting the jack very tricky and potentially dangerous, and the other is the comm system through which that data has to flow. Those are the tarnished coins in the stack,” he added, using a Benga idiom. “My researchers believe they’ll have a working cyberjack prototype within one orbit, and you may be in commercial production of them in two orbits. But they won’t do the Syndicate any good until your data management system can handle the load it puts on the network, and implanting them is no longer a deeply invasive medical procedure with a sizable risk of failure or death of the recipient. The comm issue is a problem that only you can solve, but the medical implantation issue is something I have my people researching, to come up with a safe procedure using existing Syndicate medical technology that doesn’t have an extended recovery time and is cost effective to undertake.”

“Then it’s a good thing that the modernization plan for our comm system has already begun,” the Chairman said eagerly. “I suppose we should have our technology companies start to focus on the science behind

building a bionoid. Our robotics technology should be advanced enough to manage it.”

“It is,” Jason assured him. “There will need to be some additional research into biorhythmic technology if you want them to appear lifelike, but you could easily build a viable bionoid using existing Syndicate technology.”

“That’s good to know,” the Chairman said with a smile. “I must say, I have been pleasantly surprised by how willing the Confederation has been to share its technological advances.”

“The Confederation has a vested interest in a profitable and stable Syndicate, Chairman,” Jason told him honestly. “And as I told you before, so long as you keep your Navy on this side of the galactic cluster, there’s no reason why the Syndicate and the Confederation cannot enjoy a mutually beneficial trade relationship.”

“A statement you validate with your actions,” the Chairman said, holding up the data card ostentatiously.

“By your leave, we will be on our way,” Jason prompted.

“You are dismissed. Profit be yours, your Grace.”

“Profit be yours, Chairman Ra Bo,” Jason returned, and the three of them bowed to him once again before turning to walk down the steps of the platform. The Chamberlain and four guards fell into step with them—just walking very slowly—to escort them out, but Jason was a bit surprised when Dai Su Jam Ber rushed over from the table and fell into step beside Jason, slowing her steps to match pace with them.

“I would escort you back to your shuttle, your Grace, so we might discuss a different matter,” she said.

“I welcome your company, Chief Executive Jam Ber,” he said, looking up at her. “What’s on your mind?”

“The Marauder upgrades you sold to Dynamax. There are a few technical points I’d like to go over with you.”

“I welcome your questions.”

The others got to listen to the two of them get very technical as they went over some of the upgrades, from changes to computer architecture and data routing through its systems to an expansion of usable sensor frequencies. They got so into it that Jason was honestly surprised to find himself back out on the landing pad, Kraal and Kemaari already in the Starliner waiting as Jason and Dai Su debated signal attenuation ratios in primary data switches along the main data transfer bus. The Chamberlain and guards looked completely lost, as if the two of them were speaking some alien language, and Dai Su’s debate made it pretty damn clear that she knew her shit when it came to Syndicate computer architecture. She kept him out on the landing pad for nearly half an hour as they went over things, and then stepped back and watched as he boarded the Starliner and Gen closed the hatch. Jason watched her as they took off, because she stayed on the pad until the Starliner was well off the pad and ascending towards space.

“I think she likes you, Jason,” Kraal noted dryly.

“I do get along with her, after a fashion,” he admitted. “She’s beyond doubt the smartest member of the Board, and she’s very well versed in

Syndicate tech. Our shared background in engineering gives us common ground.”

“Which is a good thing,” Kraal said. “Having a good relationship with a company as important as Dynamax only works in our favor.”

“Indeed it does,” Jason agreed. “Now then, Gen, Bei, get us the hell out of here.”

“We’re already on the way, Jayce,” Gen chuckled as he glanced back at them.

Vesta, 22 Kiraa , 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 12 April 2023, Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 22 Kiraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House, Karsa, Karis

So far, the system was working.

Sitting at his desk, one hand on Chichi’s belly giving her a belly rub as he read, Jason looked over the initial reports about the Ten Year Plan’s initial activation with the Rathii. Thus far, the system that they’d developed was working, which was the beginning of the first phase of selective transitioning of the instructors that Alros was going to use to train the rest of his population. A good number of them had completed transition at the special compound built just for that on Terra, on the island of Vancouver in

Canada, and both Karinne and Imperium instructors had begun training them in how to use their new abilities, training that was overseen by a division of Alros' government. They would watch everything to ensure that they knew everything that their instructors were taught, or at least as much as they could given that standard telepaths couldn't understand commune. The Rathii were all telepaths already, so they didn't need any training in telepathy. So, they were being trained mainly in the art of splitting and being taught the exercises that the Pai used to coax out telekinetic ability, given commune was not something that needed to be taught.

The plan that they'd hammered out when they created the Accords was working exactly as they envisioned, and Cynna was making sure it stayed that way. She was the CBIM overseeing this initial first test of the Ten Year Plan, given she had the most experience with creating these kinds of complex logistical schedules from her work in Kosigi and her working with the Imperium and Terra when the virus swept through the home sector. The main snag in the system was keeping the people moving through it, getting Rathii transitioned and into training courses, then getting them through those training courses and certified to teach the basics to their people back in Rathii space. The training course to certify them was two months long, longer than their quarantine, which the first group of Rathii instructors had finished earlier this morning...which had been late evening in western Egypt, close to the Libyan border. Now, those Rathii would be leaving the virtual city that the Makati had built out in the remote Sahara desert to keep those in quarantine isolated, a giant array of hastily built quarters, recreational halls, and training buildings so they could keep themselves busy and also continue their education in Generation abilities outside of their formal training if they so wished...and virtually all of them so wished it. They were studying and taking additional classes on their own, classes on

advanced commune applications, basic telekinesis taught by the Pai, and splitting taught by Karinnes, including two original Generations, Saia and Davian. They were there in person, but they were staying in armor to prevent being infected, which would force them to quarantine for 45 days.

They'd jokingly started calling themselves the OGs here lately, the Original Generations. And they considered Dahnai and her family and Jyslin to be part of the OG crew despite them not being born Generations. They were Generations before the virus, that made them OG.

But as of this morning, not all Rathii in the program were in the quarantine center. They'd moved from Egypt to the Academy in Norfolk, where they were no free of the virus and settling into their new quarters on the campus, and would be finishing their training in a facility built just outside of Williamsburg. Once that training was complete, in about 15 days, they would return to their homes in Rathii territory and wait for the second phase of the plan to kick in.

The compound where the Rathii were isolated during quarantine was all but a city. It was built to hold 140,000 people—though only 50,000 were in this beta-testing training program—with all the required infrastructure to keep them fed and sheltered and entertained, the entire thing enclosed in three separate hard shields to make absolutely certain that they remained medically isolated and located in the remote Sahara desert to keep any accidental release of the virus well away from any population centers. The complex had everything, even things like bowling alleys, and was within sight of six other complex facilities that were being built for other empires, separating each empire into its own complex to manage quarantine timers, accommodate any specific needs of the species that would occupy them, and also allow each empire to have control over the complex holding its

people. They were building similar complexes in various similarly extremely remote parts of Terra, such as Siberia, and would have 65 complexes ready for when the Ten Year Plan went into phase two. Each complex would host four different empires during the plan, chosen for anatomical and environmental similarities so they could easily convert the facility for the next empire.

So far, Jason was quite satisfied with what he was seeing. The system was working just the way they hoped it would, with the first group of Rathii leaving the quarantine center and successfully moved to Norfolk while the next group of Rathii took their place in the quarantine center and began transition. If things stayed on schedule, they'd have the entire 50,000 Rathii trainers transitioned, out of quarantine, and trained in about four months, with four major waves of 12,500 Rathii moving through the quarantine center and then on to the Academy, mainly as a test of their system of moving groups through the facilities seamlessly. And during those months, Terra was preparing similar "pop-up cities" like the Rathii Transitional Center to accommodate the other empires that had signed on, giving their people a comfortable place to wait out their quarantine and get their training done. It looked like they'd finish the entire transition schedule in the ten years allotted. If they could find a vaccine for the virus to kill it off, that would then allow the galaxy to establish a new normal, where about 77% of all spacefaring races were Generations.

A sizable majority of the entire galaxy, Generations. That still just boggled his mind, on top of filling him with a nameless dread. The responsibility he felt for that, for knowing that so many people would be Generations, and anything they might do to bring harm to others would be his responsibility, his failure.

That was why one of the things that Saia and Davian were teaching the Rathii was the *morality* of being a Generation. Not just how their powers worked, but the responsibility they had to use their abilities wisely, to *not* become the monsters that the Generations were capable of being. It was one of Jason's most hard-fought conditions in the Accords and the Ten Year Plan, that the OGs be allowed to teach what it meant to be a Generation, and that included the moral code of conduct by which they lived.

Insistent high-pitched squeaking got his attention. Jason leaned down and scooped up two tiny black kittens when they started crying, tired of exploring the office, depositing them in his lap with their mother. They were Chichi's, named Sasha and Raja, and this was the first day that he'd brought them to the office, to start letting Sasha get used to what would be her new home. Jason wasn't giving Sasha away, she was going to be a second tabi living in the building where Jason had his executive office. Jason had moved Chichi to the house so she could have her kittens in a safe, controlled environment, and now that the kittens were ambulatory and old enough to understand him, old enough to listen and learn the rules, he was starting the process of transitioning Sasha to the office. The kittens would stay with Chichi for about three more months, then she'd consider them old enough to live on their own. Sasha would stay in the building, but because Raja was male, Jason had to give him away. He'd already done so, promising the kitten to Enva for one of her youngest daughter, who still lived with her. Raja wasn't old enough yet to go to his new home, so Jason was more or less stuck with him until he was weaned.

That was one way the tabis proved they were animals, at least to Jason. Sometimes it was easy to forget that, since he could talk to them. Tabi mothers drove male kittens away to prevent possible inbreeding, where they

would accept a female kitten staying close to them. Tabis weren't territorial in the wild, but they did tend to stay in a general area if it had enough food for them. So they were territorial in that they would establish a den, but not territorial in that they would keep other tabis out of it. They were very social animals, where the only real instances of hostility tabis showed was mothers to male kittens old enough to strike out on their own...and that was a necessary instinct to prevent inbreeding.

Chichi jumped up onto his desk to let the kittens have his lap, sitting down and yawning as Sasha laid down and Raja tried to climb up his stomach, his tiny little claws stinging a bit. "Stop that, you silly thing," he chided as he took gentle hold of the daring feline and carefully pulled him away from his torso, then set him back in his lap. "I told you, no climbing on me. That hurts."

Chichi gave a little chirp.

"I blame you, you know," Jason told her, which made her roll her eyes a little bit. "Yeah, you do that," he added absently with sufficient snark, his fingers pinning Raja down to distract him from trying again "And here I thought you'd be a good mother. I'm terribly disappointed in you."

Chichi gave a sarcastic little *mrow*, giving him a cool look.

"I'll just let Amber raise the kittens," he replied with a sly look at her. "She all but thinks they're hers as it is anyway."

Chichi gave a little growl, which made Jason laugh. "I warned you," he said impishly. "And I'm surprised Amber didn't demand to come with us so she could keep an eye on them."

Raja gave a high pitched squeak, and Jason picked him up and lifted him so he could see the top of the desk. “See, there’s not really anything up here. Just my panel, where I read the boring reports that Chirk sends me as part of her evil plot to drive me insane in revenge for all those times I blew off work and messed up her schedule.”

Raja gave a little tinny squeaking chirp, which made Jason chuckle. “I’m not being serious. I guess you’re not quite old enough yet to tell when I’m joking, little one. I should be more careful with my words,” he said, rubbing his thumb between Raja’s front paws and up his neck, which made him start to purr. “God forbid Chirk comes in some day and finds you wrapped around one of her legs, trying to bite through her exoskeleton. She may not appreciate that, and it may break your teeth.” He bounced the tiny kitten a little in his hand as Sasha settled a little more on his lap, content to nap while he kept her brother distracted.

A flat hologram popped up just past the end of the desk, and Myra’s face appeared in it. From the look of it, she was in the main control room at KES headquarters, where they coordinated KES activity. “What’s up, Myra?”

“Jason, the *Astra* just reached C6D,” she told him. “And the comm array at C5 is in place. We’re ready.”

“Do it,” he replied.

“Alright then, I’ll order Saruki to broadcast the hail,” she reported. “Are you merging to your bionoid now, or when we get an answer?”

“Saruki would flay me if I lurk on his bridge that long,” he replied, which made her chuckle. “Call me when they answer. I’ll stay close to the office.”

“Will do. I see you brought the kittens to work. How’d you get them away from Amber?”

“Bethany distracted her before she went to school. I’m sure I’ll pay when we get home,” he said dryly, which made her laugh.

“She runs that house,” Myra smirked.

“With an iron paw,” he drawled, which made her laugh again.

“Call you back when I have something,” she said. He nodded, and her hologram winked out.

“Well, now we wait,” he told the tabis.

It turned out, he didn’t have to wait long. Barely half an hour later, Myra called back and told him that the hail was answered, and he moved himself and the kittens to the small bedroom off the office, where he kept his merge pod, and merged to a bionoid he’d had built specifically for this mission. It was a moleculartronic bionoid using his biometrics that held only Confederation standard technology, no biogenics, which meant that they weren’t risking any sensitive technology in case things went south. He climbed out of the carry case that was holding the bionoid, in a storeroom just down the hall from and fussed with his formal robes a bit to get them back in order, then went to the bridge. Captain Saruki and Cyrsi’s bionoid looked in his direction as he came through the door. Saruki was Crai, so he loomed over Cyrsi’s bionoid a little bit, and looked a tiny bit intimidating with his toothy maw and the formidable claws on his hands and feet. The Crai had evolved from a velociraptor-like animal, so they looked very much like the predators from which they came. “Captain,” he said as he moved towards him. “Myra said they answered?”

“They’re sending a ship to rendezvous with us,” he replied. Jason glanced at the viewscreen, and saw that they were sitting a distance away from the minefield that protected the edge of their galaxy.

“You ready, Cyrsi?” he asked, looking at her, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his robes, as he tended to do.

She nodded. “I have the case, as well as everything loaded into the memory of the bionoid, just in case,” she replied, hefting the satchel in her hands a little bit.

“Alright then,” he said, taking a cleansing breath...even though the bionoid didn’t need to breathe. “Here’s hoping this goes well.”

The Alliance ship arrived about fifteen minutes later, a large warship that was about twice the size of the Vanguard, a very narrow and long ship that was much more vertical than it was horizontal, which was a very unusual design choice. Wide ships had larger decks, with more on each deck, and thus were easier to navigate for the crew. It was made of the same metal as the mines, which meant that they wouldn’t be able to scan through it. Saruki’s eyes widened a bit as he put a clawed hand to his temple. “They’re sending,” he reported. “I’ll tell them that it’s up to them if they want to come to the *Astra* or if they want you to go there.”

Jason nodded, staying quiet and letting him deal with it. He looked to Cyrsi, who would be his assistant for this meeting. “They offer to bring you aboard their ship,” Saruki relayed.

“Very good. Tell them we’ll be sending out a dropship, and warn them that they can’t use telepathy, that we’ll be using bionoids. They know what bionoids are.”

Jason and Cyrsi walked with Saruki down to the landing bay, and they boarded one of the small dropships in the landing bay. Jason allowed Cyrsi to pilot it, lifting it off the deck and out into space, where a small ship exited their ship's landing bay and came out to meet them. They followed it back to the landing bay, where a couple of dozen people wearing matching uniforms, but were nearly as disparate as a sidewalk in Karis, awaited them. They had a very wide variety of species, as he expected, with mammalian, reptilian, humanoid, and even an avian species much shorter and stouter than the Shurai. But there was one face in that assemblage that caught Jason's attention as they landed, and that was what looked to him like a Dreamer, a tall, willowy male with brown skin, platinum blond hair, pointed ears, and very fair features.

That was an Ulala, and as Jason expected, he looked *exactly* like a Faey. Put blue skin on that man, and he'd pass as Faey on any street in any city in the Imperium. And he'd pass easily as a Dreamer if he were on Tir Tairngire. He was a bit darker shade of brown than a Dreamer, but that could be explained away as a deep tan.

"An Ulala. They do look like Faey. Gora's Law proven once again," Cyrsi said aloud as she picked up a small case they were going to need, mirroring his thoughts.

"He could pass as a Dreamer easy," he said, to which she nodded as the dropship landed on the deck. Jason then reoriented his thoughts to speak the language they'd learned from their first encounter, which was known as Galactic Common, and he stood up as the hatch opened and came down the steps. What looked like the captain of the ship advanced, a very tall humanoid but with very short, thick gray fur and a face with more of a snout and muzzle than a nose and jaw, but still more simian than anything

else. He held something of a resemblance to a Bari-Bari. “Master Diplomat,” he said, saluting. “I am Aruk Ma, Captain of the *Horuth*,” he introduced.

“Captain,” he nodded. “My name is Jason Karinne. I am the Grand Duke of the House of Karinne. My companion is named Cyrsi. As I’m sure you were informed, this is not the real me,” he said, touching his chest with his fingers. “This is called a bionoid, it’s a robot carrying a special telepathic interface that allows us to see and hear through them. This device allows me to meet with others without leaving my home planet.”

“A most creative use of cybernetics,” the captain said with an approving nod. “We have nothing similar, but I’m sure that our scientists have been exploring the idea since our first meeting. If you would, might we retire to a conference room so we might discuss your reason for being here?”

“Of course. Please lead on,” he said, tucking his hands in his sleeves.

Their ship was very clean, but oddly sterile. The walls were made of black metal, or were painted black, with silver-white support spars and bulkheads at regular intervals. There were very few panels, almost no writing or labels or signs on the walls, which gave him a very strong feeling he was walking down the passage of a Star Destroyer from the *Star Wars* movies. The Captain led them to a small, very spartan room holding a rectangular table with ten seats, five to a side. The Captain went around and sat down on the far side, and Jason and Cyrsi sat down on the near side as two guards quietly took up posts at the entrance. Cyrsi put the small case on the tabletop and opened it. “Let us begin by admitting to you that we were quite surprised that you have returned,” the Captain said. “The Supreme Council has briefed me on our first encounter with your ship, and we were

of the impression that you were going to steer very well clear of us in the future.”

“That was our original intent,” he said calmly. “We didn’t want the hostile race in the neighboring galaxy to take notice of our ship and try to track it back to our homeworld. We’ve marked this entire galactic cluster as off limits because of them. But, recent events in our home galaxy have altered our original plans,” he told them. “We have suddenly found ourselves in great need of one of the technologies you revealed to us at our first meeting, and are here to discuss a possible trade of technology with your Supreme Council. What we need is telepathic resonance technology,” he said. “But we can offer very little in return. You are clearly a much more advanced society than us, and I doubt there’s anything we can offer you. My companion Cyrsi is carrying a list of technologies we would be willing to trade to you for resonance technology.”

Cyrsi pulled a standard Confederation technology panel out of the case and set it on the table, but didn’t turn it on.

“Excuse my curiosity, but you already have resonance technology,” he countered. “I can hear it, but I can’t understand it.”

“The problem, Captain, is that our version of resonance technology is something we can’t share with other civilizations in our galaxy, because our society has a very strict moral code that prevents us from allowing others to use our technology for war. Our oaths forbid us from sharing any technology with our neighbors that may have military value. But, recent events in our home galaxy has predicated the need for us to establish a real-time pan-galactic communication system, something that we can’t do with our own resonance technology.

“Recently, every spacefaring civilization in our home galaxy met in a summit and established basic rules of courtesy and interaction among us,” he continued. “With this dramatic increase in interaction, we’ve found that we are in serious need of a stable, reliable, real-time means of communication through our galaxy. Our oaths won’t allow us to use our own technology, because there’s the chance that the comm beacons may be stolen and their technology copied. Your resonance technology is the only viable alternative we’ve come up with. The main reason being, since it wasn’t created by us, it doesn’t fall under the strict moral code we must obey. This is technology we can share with the other civilizations in our home galaxy, and fulfill our need to establish pan-galactic real time communications.” Cyrsi turned on the panel, which projected a hologram in Galactic Common, which read [List of Available Confederation Standard Technologies and Resources]. “This computer holds both a list of available technologies that we can trade without violating our oaths and a list of available resources, such as heavy metals and other hard to acquire materials, that we would be willing to trade for what we need. We would ask that you take this back to your diplomatic office and have them review it, to see if there’s anything here that might interest you enough to make a trade. We’re not able to leave behind a communication array, so what we will do instead is have the ship return in six *jat* to see if your Supreme Council has reached a decision. Would that be acceptable to you?”

“It would be acceptable,” he replied as he looked at the hologram. “If I might ask, what is this Confederation?”

“It’s a coalition of a number of governments in our home galaxy that cooperate in several areas, including scientific research and advancement,” he answered. “Confederation Standard is a baseline of technological ability

shared with all interested parties in our galaxy, even those who don't belong to the Confederation. Since these technologies don't fall under the strict oaths observed by the House of Karinne, we are offering them as part of our deal."

"And your House participates in this Confederation?"

"Where we can," he replied. "We share technology we've developed with the Confederation that can't be used for war, and our scientists are part of the communal effort where possible."

"And does this Confederation have trans-galactic capability?"

"No," he replied. "We consider engine technology to have military value, so we don't trade it. And it's not part of the technologies we're willing to trade for resonance technology," he said calmly but strongly. "A description of the oaths by which our House operates is on that computer, so your Supreme Council may fully appreciate our position when it comes to what we're willing to share. In the most simple terms, Captain, our oaths forbid us from exerting our will against another, or allow another to exert his will against another using our technology or assets. That even extends to a scenario where a government finds an inhabited planet populated by a primitive species and conquers it. That is how seriously we take our oaths, Captain, that we won't allow our technology to be used even when it would be for the greater good, because of the risk that it might be used in a way that violates our oaths. The House of Karinne does not violate the freedoms of others, does not force its will on others, nor do we allow those who use our technology or our assets to do so. But those rules, those oaths, only apply to what is *ours*. Our oaths don't apply to technologies developed by others, which is why we're here now seeking resonance technology. That does not fall under our oaths. You'll find some military technologies on that

list, but those are Confederation Standard technologies, and most likely are far below your current technological level. We included them because you might find them interesting for research purposes,” he said mildly.

“I can pass that along. But what I can tell you here and now is that our scientists are *very* interested in these robots you use,” he said earnestly.

“The way they move, it makes it clear the technology in them may be beyond ours when it comes to robotics.”

“That’s not on the list because...it gets a little legally complicated,” he said wryly. “The technology these use isn’t considered standard technology, which is considered open for use by anyone. If you want the technology behind the bionoids, we’ll have to arrange it with the patent holder...which I think we can do. I think I can impress upon her the importance of telepathic resonance technology to the future peaceful relations of our galaxy and secure her cooperation, which would get you access to the production templates that you can use in your factories to build them almost immediately, with just a few changes to the design to adapt them to your technology. If you want the ability to produce bionoids yourself using their current technology, you’ll have to buy access to the technical data behind them from a woman named Yila Trefani. Fortunately for you, I have some amount of sway with her, and I can get her to the bargaining table. After that, it’ll be up to you to negotiate a deal with her.”

“The robots have a sense of touch?” he asked in surprise.

“They have all the senses of an organic creature, Captain. Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, balance, and spatial awareness. The units can even drink liquids, though they’re currently not capable of eating food...but they’re working on that. The technology in them gives them all the sensory capabilities of an organic being. We have an entire technology based on the

transmission of sensory data, both natural and artificially created, called *simsense*,” he said, using the Faey word. There was no corresponding word in their trade language. “That word means simulated senses, a catch-all term for the technology that shares sensory information with other people, the technology used in the bionoids, and also creates artificially generated sensory experiences using computers that can play that sensory information back with perfect duplication. We have an entire recreational industry based on *simsense*, where people use it for entertainment purposes. It is not considered a military technology.”

“Intriguing,” the Captain said. “We have nothing like that. And the way you use it, pairing it with your resonance technology to create artificial bodies that allow you to simply send the robots in your place to act as surrogate bodies...that is a technology that my people would very much be interested in procuring. Though I can make no decisions for my people,” he said quickly.

“It’s not an official part of the technology offer on that list, but as I said, if you can negotiate access to the technology so you can produce your own version of bionoids from the patent holders, you very well may be able to get it,” he said. “We can make that part of an overall deal that trades your resonance technology to the Academy for use by all spacefaring races in our galaxy.”

“The Academy? I thought you meant this to be for what you mentioned was the Confederation.”

“Not this,” he said, shaking his head. “As I said, this technology is going to be used to allow every spacefaring civilization in our galaxy to communicate with each other in real time, regardless of distance, which means that it goes to the Academy, not the Confederation. The

Confederation is but *one* of those civilizations,” he explained, “and is representing the Academy in this matter because the Academy itself can’t get out here to conduct the negotiations. The Academy is a different entity. It is an institution that all spacefaring races in our galaxy can access. It’s a neutral site of higher learning that serves all civilizations in our galaxy equally, with no regard for borders or political alliances. In return, all spacefaring civilizations in our galaxy respect the Academy’s neutrality and have access to what we call Galactic Standard Technology, a baseline of technology that any and all spacefaring civilizations may access freely.”

“Really? Open to all? As in *us*?”

“Well, that would require you to sign onto the treaty that recognizes the Academy’s neutrality and abide by the rules by which the Academy operates. If you did, the Academy would welcome you, and provide you access to its store of knowledge. Its neutrality does not stop at the edge of our home galaxy. It is open to *everyone*. But, the snag there is that you’d have to be able to physically reach the Academy to access its data.”

“Unfortunately, the option to bring the Academy to you is currently unworkable,” Cyrsi continued for Jason, finally injecting herself. “While we have our own version of resonance technology that allows intergalactic communications, we can’t leave the relay beacons that would allow us to communicate out this far out in unguarded space, the oaths of the House of Karinne wouldn’t allow it.”

“But you’re here now, so those beacons must be in place.”

“And they’ll be removed as soon as we conclude our negotiations,” Jason answered. “We have to actively defend the beacons while they’re

deployed, and that's too much of a strain on my House's military resources for them to be operating out this far from our home galaxy."

"If you were willing to build communication relays using your resonance technology and string them from here to our home galaxy, that might be workable," Cyrsi said, slightly enticingly. "It could even be a project we could undertake together, the beginning of cooperation between our galaxy and yours."

"That would be quite impossible with the *Bru* threat," he said firmly.

"The hostile civilization in the galaxy at the center of this cluster?" Jason asked.

He nodded. "If we tried to establish a beacon outside of our defensive network, they'd destroy it. Our technology doesn't have the range to set the beacon outside the cluster."

"Neither does ours. Hmm," Jason said, leaning back. He glanced at Cyrsi. "Cyrsi, ask Cybi if, based on what we currently know about resonance technology, it might be possible for a biogenic unit to communicate with a resonance unit. Then ask her if it would be theoretically possible to build a biogenic comm array that would reach this far from a position we can reasonably defend."

"Not with current technology, but we might be able to come up with something," she replied. "Some kind of hybrid technology where we send biogenic comm through a stable wormhole or something. We could put 3D on it. If anyone could figure it out, it's them. It would depend on if we can adapt resonance technology to biogenic bandwidth."

"You mean marry the two technologies?" the Captain asked.

“It might be possible,” Jason speculated. “The way biogenic comm works means that it would be very hard to allow a biogenic unit and a resonance unit to talk to each other. If resonance can be heard by a normal telepath, that means it doesn’t have the bandwidth to understand commune. But, resonance tech is based on a *computer*, and we might be able to teach your resonance computers how to understand commune. Most organic minds can’t understand commune because they’re not capable of multiple simultaneous actions at once. Computers are more than capable.”

“What’s the difference between telepathy and commune?”

“Telepathy is on one frequency, to use a term. Commune utilizes multiple telepathic frequencies used simultaneously in order to send much more information in the same amount of time. The problem is, biogenic units, the ones that utilize commune, can’t understand regular telepathy. It’s very hard to explain why, but the easiest way to do it is that biogenic units can’t understand a message sent on just that one frequency, it’s like someone trying to whisper to them across a room filled with people shouting at each other. It’s just not enough to catch the unit’s attention. We’ve been trying for years to break that barrier, to allow biogenic units to understand regular telepathy, but we’ve had no luck.”

The Captain leaned back in his chair, his hand to his very simian jaw, a gesture that Jason saw in many humanoid species. “I’m no scientist, but maybe our specialists in resonance may advance that research,” he said. “But we’re delving into matters I have no authorization to pursue,” he added wryly. “What I can do is impress upon my superiors that a much more indepth meeting, with both members of the Supreme Council and some of our leading scientific minds, would be highly advisable.”

“We could do that, Captain. We would be amenable to a meeting over comm rather than an in-person meeting, given the difficulty that setting up an in-person meeting would entail. We can set up a comm relay capable of transmitting in gravband frequencies near the meeting site so we can conduct those negotiations in a convenient manner. We already know you’re capable of emulating our gravband communication technology, so that gives us a way to establish a connection between the two parties.”

“We use gravimetric manipulation for communication ourselves for local communication, so we’ll have no problem receiving your transmissions. It’s a very efficient technology,” the Captain nodded. “So that shouldn’t be an issue. And the idea of setting up the meeting site on the far side of the galaxy from the Bru would be a wise move. If they try to attack your beacon, it will take them several days to circumnavigate our galaxy, as well as let us see them coming.”

“Do they often attack your galaxy?” Cyrsi asked.

He shook his head. “They haven’t tried to attack us since we built the defensive network around the rim, which decimated their armada,” he replied. “But anything that *leaves* our galaxy will be attacked. And make no mistake, friends, they see your ship, and they will try to track it when it leaves. I highly suggest you get at least three thousand light years away from their galaxy before you set course back to your home galaxy. That’s the limit of their sensor range.”

“We more or less expected that, and our ship will be doing what you suggest,” Jason told him.

“Then, I would say that this conference has reached a satisfactory conclusion,” Jason surmised. “Our ship will return at the designated time in

order to receive your answer, and possibly set up a more formal meeting between us.”

“Agreed. I will take this device back to those who may make decisions, and will pass along your offer. May I escort you back to your ship?”

“I’d be honored, Captain.”

Jason and Cyrsi walked with the simian officer back the way they came, the same route, and Jason used that opportunity to breach another subject of interest when a female Ulala passed them in the hall. She gave Cyrsi a very surprised, very long look, the two of them staring at each other until she walked by them, then she turned and looked over her shoulder at them as she walked away. “That race is known as the Ulala, correct?” Jason asked. “We’ve noticed that they bear an uncanny resemblance to my Faey companion.”

“Yes, it’s quite unusual, isn’t it?” he nodded. “Lady Cyrsi, you would pass as an Ulala on any street in any city in this galaxy if you had brown skin.”

“We were told at our first contact that the Faey and the Ulala also share the distinction of being telepathic as a species,” Jason continued. “Every single Faey is a telepath.”

“As are the Ulala, the only fully telepathic species in the galaxy,” the Captain said. “That is almost far too much to be a coincidence.”

“We’ve thought the same thing. Most likely, I’ll be asking about that at our formal meeting with the Supreme Council, offer to share data about Faey DNA in exchange for data on Ulala DNA, to see just how similar they are.”

“That would be quite intriguing to quite a few geneticists and biologists,” the Captain murmured.

“We have a theory about that, which we call Gora’s Law,” Cyrsi said. “That species that develop in similar environmental conditions develop similar traits, to the point where they even look alike. We’ve seen quite a few examples of it during our exploration outside of our home galaxy. And even within it,” she mused. “The Grand Duke’s species, Terran, and we Faey, are very similar. To the point where we are genetically compatible and can produce children. However, our two species look nearly identical to several other species in our galaxy, spread from one side to the other. We have different skin tones, cosmetic differences, a few of the species have tails or extra eyes or different numbers of digits on their hands, but we share a similar physical build and general appearance.”

“I’ve seen many examples of that concept here in the Alliance,” the Captain agreed. “There are quite a few species that look very similar to each other.”

“You yourself are somewhat similar to a race we call the Bari-Bari, though they’re much taller than you,” Jason told him. “They’re a bit leaner and have much longer limbs, but your physiology and some of your facial features are very similar.”

“Now I’d be curious to meet one,” he chuckled.

“I can show you one, these bionoids have the ability to project holograms,” Cyrsi said, then she put a finger to her temple. Her left eye altered, began to glow with the radiance of a holo emitter, and a semi-transparent hologram of a Ba’mra’ei M’ber appeared in front of them, staying at a set distance away as they walked. “This is a Bari-Bari.”

“They do look like us, but yes, those long arms and legs are quite different,” he chuckled, looking at the hologram. “And that is a clever addition to your robot.”

“They *are* machines, Captain, so we added a few features to them that take advantage of that,” Cyrsi said with a slight smile.

“Are they armed?”

“These models? No, as I’m fairly sure your scanners have told you before we so much as got off our dropship,” Jason answered. “But we do have armed versions that we use non-diplomatic missions, just in case we run into something hostile during our travels. While we strive to make them as realistic as possible when it comes to resembling living things, they *are* machines, and we take advantage of that with what we put in them.”

“Very clever,” he said with an approving nod.

They reached the landing bay, and Captain Aruk Ma saw them all the way to the stairs to the hatch, then gave them a fond farewell. He stepped back and stayed there, intent to see their ship off, as Jason and Cyrsi sat down in the cockpit. Cyrsi connected to the dropship’s systems and started it up, closing the hatch and retracting the stairs. *[I think that went very well,]* she noted to Jason as she buckled her seat belt, though the commune was directly from her core crystal to Jason’s physical body on Karis, which meant that it in no way touched the two bionoids they were operating.

[Yes it did. I get the feeling that we’ll be making a deal trading resonance tech for bionoid tech,] he agreed as the dropship slowly lifted off the deck and began to turn. *[That means we have to talk to Yila about licensing out the technology to the Galactic Alliance. She can’t sell directly to them, she’ll have to give them the specs and let them produce it locally.]*

[I'm sure she'll go for it if she's paid,] she replied, a bit cheekily.

[I think it's about time I pull that girl's leash,] he grunted mentally, which made Cyrsi return pure amusement.

[You've been saying that for years.]

[Doesn't make it any less true. It just means I've been lazy.]

[I'll call her and arrange it so she's able to make an appearance at the next meeting,] Cyrsi offered.

[Go ahead. When we go back next takir, we'll be able to supply her a date and time.] He shifted to the bionoid, contacting the *Astra*. “*Astra control, dropship K1,*” he called.

“Dropship K1, go ahead.”

“En route back to the ship.”

“Understood. Return to your original parking spot, the lane is loose. Captain Saruki will meet you there.”

“Understood. K1 out.” *[Guys, let's meet in my office once I delink from this bionoid and discuss the meeting,]* Jason broadcast to the CB units and Rook in that special part of the network reserved only for them, Jason, and Jyslin...and Jyslin was part of it only by virtue of the fact that he couldn't possibly hide anything from her. All the CB units had had a tap on both Jason and Cyrsi's sensory streams, so they heard everything.

[Me too, love?] Jyslin asked.

[Not really, love, I was talking to the others.]

[I thought so,] she replied winsomely.

[I was about to suggest that very thing, Jason,] Cybi answered.

[I wasn't connected to the feed. Jason, so I'll bow out,] Rook answered.

[I want you there anyway, Rook. Review the meeting, and you'll see why we may need your expertise.]

[Alright. I'll head towards your office. I'm over at 3D at the moment.]

[I have a few things to do before I delink, so it may be an hour or so before I'm able to get there. I'll have Chirk let you in.]

[It'll give me time to review the sensory stream logs.]

[Do me a favor and keep the kittens out of mischief. No telling what they've destroyed while I've been linked. Chichi, that traitor, won't stop them either. I think she's doing it just to spite me.]

That made Rook return amusement. *[I'll take care of it.]*

[Pushed about by his tabi. Why do we allow you to stay in charge?] Cyvanne teased.

[Because the alternative is anarchy, and that means that people will break into your facility and steal your stuff.]

[Not my facility, It's on a remote island.]

[And with nearly two hundred KERA workers in the disaster recovery facility two floors above you,] he pointed out lightly. [And I'll make sure they can get past your security door.]

Cyvanne didn't have an answer for that, so she opted for flipping him off, at least in the way it was done over commune.

[We should have some suggestions for you by the time you get here, Jason,] Cybi told him. [And it may behoove us to bring Yila into the conversation.]

[Yeah, much as I hate to admit it. See if you can track her down and get her to the office. I don't want to discuss this any way but face to face.]

[She's on Draconis at the moment, Jayce, I'll call her,] Cyra called.. [I doubt she'll have any problem coming, she's playing golf with Dahnai, Emae, and Carissa at the moment.]

[If she's on the course, she may make us wait til she finishes her round,] Jason grunted sourly. [Sometimes I think it was a huge mistake to let the Siann get into golf. We shoulda kept it off Draconis.]

[It is popular with most of the nobility,] Cybi communed, her thought amused.

[To avoid rousing Dahnai's curiosity, wait til she finishes before calling her, Cyra,] Jason decided. We can use that extra time to hash things out so we're ready to hustle her in and out of the office once we need her.]

[Will do.]

[And there's something else I wanted to discuss with you guys,] he added. [Rann is fifteen, and he's about to enter the next phase of his preparation to take over for me. I think it's time we started bringing him into the inner circle, much the way Sirri is privy to the inner workings to how Dahnai does business. I think we should start that process by adding him to this little circle. He needs to start getting exposure to the parts of this job I don't really show most of the others. I think he's mature enough to handle the responsibility.]

[It would be a good idea. Rann needs more exposure to the role he's going to take over from you, love,] Jyslin called. [And he is ready for this.]

[I agree,] Cybi answered. [But that decision should be unanimous among us. That way we all agree that he's ready to be inducted into our little group, and what it represents.]

{Part and parcel of that will be Shya becoming privy to it as well,} Cyman warned. [So we'd better make that decision knowing that those two have absolutely no secrets from each other. We may even consider just adding her to the network as we did Jyslin, if only to prevent her from hearing about this second hand]

[That's a good point,] Jason agreed. [I think she has the maturity to handle this, since she's kept all of Rann's other secrets. You guys think about that while I handle the debrief with Captain Saruki, and we'll discuss it after we discuss this tech swap with the Galactic Alliance. Besides, Jys didn't turn out to be a complete disaster in here, so I guess we can roll the dice on Shya.]

[Someone is going to be repenting when I get home,] Jyslin warned cheekily.

Once the bionoids were back on the *Astra* and safely stowed away, Jason met the CB units and Rook in his office, either as holograms or in bionoids, and they discussed the meeting with the Galactic Alliance. It was just an initial meeting, the real meeting would be later when they met with members of the Supreme Council. To get a head start on what they all felt would be the focus of the trade discussions, bionoids, Jason and Rook had a long and detailed discussion about moleculartronic bionoids, generating some technical specs and blueprints they could give to the Galactic Alliance

that removed the communications equipment they usually used to let the bionoid communicate with its driver, leaving those parts open for adapting resonance technology. But they'd also be sending the normal templates, since the Galactic Alliance had gravband tech developed enough to handle the throughput of a sensory stream, something that the Galactic Alliance could use immediately while they worked to adapt resonance technology to bionoids.

They were about halfway done with it when Yila came into the office, wearing what was usual for her...something skimpy on top and shoes, and nothing in between. "Now explain what's so important that you'd call me out of an important meeting, Jason," she said aloud, since holograms were present in the room.

"I doubt golf is an important meeting, Yila. Besides, it is something very important, Yila," he replied. "But it's something top secret. So I'll have your word right here, right now, that you won't speak a word of this to anyone after this meeting. Not even to those who were *at* this meeting," he said firmly.

She raised a delicate eyebrow, obviously intrigued. "This must be important."

"It is. Now say the words."

"Alright. I promise to keep this meeting quiet," she said, stepping into the room and looking at the holographic schematic of a bionoid floating over Jason's desk. "This must have something to do with bionoids."

"It does. How would you like to expand bionoids to two new galaxies?"

“What?”

“The Syndicate has expressed interest in importing bionoid technology, since we’ll be helping them develop cyberjack technology,” Jason told her. “As for the other, they’re far more important. I’m working on trading technology with one of the civilizations we met while exploring other galaxies, and they’ve expressed an interest in bionoids. This is the *far* more important one, Yila. What we’re trying to get from them is something that we think the galaxy as a whole desperately needs.”

“What is that?”

“This civilization has developed their own form of biogenics, called telepathic resonance,” he told her, which made her eyes widen. “But it doesn’t augment someone’s psionic abilities. It’s the breakthrough the House has been trying to make for the last three thousand years or so. We need it so we can establish galaxy-wide real time comm with every spacefaring planet in the Milky Way, something I can’t really do because I can’t put that many biogenic comm nodes out there for people to steal. If we could get our hands on this resonance tech, it would solve the problem and do it with a technology we *can* share. And since so many civilizations opted in to the Ten Year Plan, resonance tech will let them mimic a lot of what biogenics can do without us having to give it to them. It solves a whole lot of our problems all at once. So, Yila, I’m asking *very nicely* if you’ll allow us to give them bionoid production templates and the technical specs behind them. We can’t just hand it over because you hold the patents for a great many parts of it. I’m already willing to give them access to sensor mesh technology, something they can produce without needing biogenics, but we need the other piece of the puzzle before we can field a serious offer.”

“You know I never *give* anything away, Jason,” she nearly purred. “I’m willing to *sell* them the technology. I’d have to discuss it with them.”

“You’re not going to discuss it with them,” Jason said bluntly. “The only ones that are going to deal with the interested party are the Karinnes, to maintain secrecy. Keeping all of this a complete and absolute secret is absolutely critical for us, Yila. I can’t stress that enough. The Confederation doesn’t know about this civilization, and they’re not *going* to know.”

“Why keep them such a secret?”

“To save the Confederation from *them*, and also to save the Confederation from itself,” he answered strongly. “This civilization is *far* beyond us, Yila. I mean they’re as far above us as the Faey were above the Terrans when they conquered the planet. While they’re a peaceful civilization, that doesn’t mean that in fifty years, they suddenly decide that conquering the much technologically inferior Confederation is in their best interest. I don’t want them to know where we are, and I don’t want anyone else to know where they are to prevent anyone from getting the bright idea of trying to steal some of their advanced technology and set off a war that *we will lose*. The only thing that protects us is that they have no idea where we are, and they see the Karinne scout ships that have visited them so far to be non-threatening, holding nothing that interests them enough to attack us. That prevents temptation on *both* sides. Bionoids are the only thing we have that even mildly interests them, because it’s a technology they never really bothered to develop on their own, but they’re impressed with what we can do with them. So, it’s the only thing we have to offer them, and what they have is something we desperately need. Now, are you going to be gracious and cooperate, acting in the best interest of the Imperium, the Confederation, and the galaxy as a whole, or are you gonna let your greed

get the best of you and piss me off like you've never pissed me off before?" he asked in a powerful voice.

She gave him a startled look, but her expression made it clear that she wasn't about to back down. "I don't care who or what it is, Jason. I don't give *anything* away for free. I'll give them the templates in return for a percentage on this new technology."

"That's going to be sent to the Academy for open use, so nobody's going to profit from it. Not even us," he told her. "The best I can offer you is you'll get a chance to see some of the specs before I release it to see if you can't do something with it. If there's a commercial use for it, I'll give you the chance to get into the market first."

"Done," she said immediately. "Because I already see a use for it. Adapting this resonance tech into bionoids to give them the same functionality as biogenic bionoids. That's something we can work up together, Rook," she said, looking over at him.

"Well, that was easier than I expected. I was ready for a fight," Jason said wryly.

"I'm not about to piss you off *that* much, Jason. But I do enjoy tweaking your nose a bit from time to time," she smiled.

"I was going to do that as soon as I got access to the specs for resonance technology," Rook affirmed. "It'll be easier with your bionoid team working with me."

"Alright then. Sorry, Yila, but you're done here. I have more to go over with the others about the upcoming meeting."

“That’s fine, I need to go back to Tamiri and arrange things with my researchers. But I’ll keep exactly what and why secret until you get done,” she assured him. “Just want them to prepare for a new research project.”

“Good enough,” he nodded. “Come to dinner tonight.”

“Surely. I want to visit Dara,” she smiled.

Yila sauntered out, leaving them free to pull up all the specs and technical information about the bionoids and package them into a presentation where Jason would explain what they were and how they worked, but not in such detail that it would let them reverse engineer them just from the information he revealed. He was honestly surprised that Yila had given over so quickly, but then again, he had the feeling that she got a little spooked at how hostile Jason got at the bare mention that she was going to be stubborn...which was most of the reason he did it in the first place. With her cooperation secured, Jason had very high hopes about this, that he’d be able to negotiate trading bionoid tech to the Galactic Alliance for resonance technology. And it was something they needed, they really needed. It would give the other Generation civilizations a version of biogenics that would serve their needs, give them most of the same capabilities that biogenics gave the Karinnes, virtually everything it could do other than amplify their psionic abilities. Interfaces, remote merge capability, real-time comm between any point in their empires, at least inside the galaxy, it would open up all kinds of options for the other Accords nations and the soon to be Generation civilizations once the Ten Year Plan moved into operational phase. It would let the entire galaxy talk to each other in real time, no matter who or where, and if they could build powerful enough comm arrays, they could even establish real time comm between the home galaxy and the Magnum Dwarf formation, where a few

dozen Confederation empires had colonies, without having to use the Stargate to do it.

There were any number of fascinating possibilities that would open up for the Generations if they could get access to resonance technology, even a few promising applications that the Karinnes could use themselves. And now, thanks to Yila, he had a very good feeling about getting his hands on it.

Things were starting to look up.