

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

# **revelation6**

**Fel**

## Chapter 6

*Kaira, 19 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Thursday, 3 September 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 19 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

*[Maintain your tempo, you're drifting,]* Jason warned from the living room as Rann got well into the last movement of Chopin's *Fantasia-Improptu Op 66* on the grand piano in the music room, which was just the next room over. It wasn't very often that it was quiet enough in the house for him to hear Rann playing from the living room, given Jon and Julia weren't very quiet kids and they usually had other kids in the house, but the twins were down for a nap, the girls were outside on the deck, sitting at the outside table waiting for the rain to stop so they could go back to what they were doing, and most of the other strip kids were busy with other things. The piece Rann was playing was considered to be for advanced piano players, who worked to become masters of the instrument. Rann was a very good piano player, and like his father, he wanted to get even better. He was never satisfied with what he'd learned, he always wanted to learn more, with the goal of being able to play anything his father could play...and his father could play just about *anything* when it came to a piano. So he had a ways to go yet before he reached that level. *[You can play it slow or fast, but pick one and stay with it.]*

*[This piece is harder than I thought. You never have problems with it.]*

*[I've been playing it for nearly thirty years,] he reminded his young son. [Fantasie-Impromptu is a gatekeeper piece, son. It separates intermediate piano players from advanced piano players.]*

*[It's certainly tricky. How does someone not a Generation do this?]*

*[Practice,] he replied, almost indignantly. [I was playing that piece long before I knew how to split, I'll have you know.]*

*[You were born a Generation, Dad,] Rann retorted. [So you don't count.]*

*[Well, your grandmother could play it, and she wasn't the Generation between my parents,] he returned. [In fact, your grandmother could play pieces I still have trouble with, and she did it all without being able to split.]*

*[Then she was way more godly than us,] Rann returned, which made Jason laugh aloud.*

*[It's just practice and muscle memory, son. That's something you don't need to split to learn.]*

*[Why I'm happy I decided to learn how to play a tamirin after I got decent on a piano,] Shya injected. [It's way easier than the piano.]*

*[You better hope Aya didn't hear that, or you'll find yourself sitting on a stool in front of her for the next six months,] Jason warned lightly. [If you think a tamirin is easier to play than the piano, then you're not really trying very hard.]*

*[I did indeed hear that,]* Aya's commune rippled through the room, both amused and a bit irritated. Aya was a complete master of the tamirin, on par with someone like Eddie Van Halen's guitar playing ability, so she probably found Shya's observation to be insulting. *[And if the tamirin is so easy for you, Shya, I think I'll start teaching you the advanced pieces.]*

Jason could hear Shya's mental fuming, communing her annoyance as an emotion rather than a thought.

*[Hey, you set that bear trap off all by yourself,]* Jason told her, a bit amused. *[Now stop distracting your husband and let him practice for the recital.]*

It would be Rann's first major recital, at least in the respect that it wasn't just a school function. Rann had entered a musical competition open to all teens in the city, and he'd advanced through the preliminaries and landed himself a spot in the finals, and he landed that spot all on his own merits. Him being the heir apparent had nothing to do with him making it to the finals, he got there because he was a very, very good musician. He'd be up against nine other grade 11 students playing a variety of instruments, from schools all over the city. He'd selected *Fantasia-Improptu* because he'd always loved it, and it was difficult enough to play to earn him some points for difficulty when it came to the judges' scoring.

This would be his last year in intermediary school. Next year, Rann, Shya, and most of their brothers and sisters would start their first year of middle school, which would mean they'd start walking to school since it was only six blocks from the strip's fence gate. Karsa Middle School #17 served their neighborhood, and on Karis, there was no such thing as private school until one reached primary school. Until then, all kids went to the same public school.

Private primary schools on Karis were specialty schools that catered to students who already knew what they wanted to do, or had special skills that a public primary school couldn't easily develop. The vast majority of young adults went to public primary school, but those pursuing a career in certain fields, or had natural gifts that made them exceptional athletes or scholars, would instead attend a private primary school that focused on their strengths, giving them the focused education they needed to help them pursue their dreams. Aran was the perfect example of someone that would attend a private primary school. He wanted to be a scientist, so instead of attending a public primary school, he would attend a private primary school whose curriculum was tailored for those who wanted to pursue science when they attended academy. There were private schools that focused on the sciences, engineering, athletic pursuits, military service, music and the arts, and telepathic and telekinetic applications. Ryn had attended a private primary school that only taught telepathic prodigies, and then she moved on to the Xerian Academy after finishing primary school.

Had Jyslin not been living on an arctic moon at the time, no doubt she too would have attended a private primary school focused on telepathy. But her home colony wasn't big enough for something like that. It wasn't even big enough to have had the resources and facilities to train her when she expressed so early. She'd been forced to take classes in middle school and primary school while she was in elementary school, because there wasn't anywhere else for her to go.

Aria attended a public primary school, and the mothers of Jason's children had no real plans to send any of his other kids to a private primary school, except for Aran. Kyri, Siyara, and Zachary may qualify for something like that due to their gifts, but their mothers had expressed a

desire to let them go to public school so they could stay with their friends and siblings. Then again, none of his other kids had decided on a career yet, not even Aria, so Aran was an outlier in that regard. Aran had wanted to be a scientist since the day he was old enough to understand what science was, but he hadn't yet chosen a field of study within science to pursue. He wanted to learn as much about the various scientific disciplines as he could before he decided on a focus.

Jason didn't put his kids on pedestals. He didn't allow them to think that just because they were his kids, they had special rights or privileges, or were better than everyone else. And one way he reinforced that was by having them go to school with everyone else, just like everyone else. And if Aria was any indication, his decision was the right one. Aria's friends knew who her father was, but they didn't let that get in the way of being her friend, or let it influence them. But, he could admit that it did affect them a little bit, and that was mainly because of Sirri. Sirri was Aria's best friend, and Sirri had started to hang out with Aria's and Yuri's friends from school, who were all around her age. It had reached the point where Aria's and Yuri's friends were now Sirri's friends, and the pack of them had started going out together and getting into only the kind of trouble that Sirri could cause.

It was good for Sirri. She'd made her first real friend in Aria, and another in Yuri, and now she had even more friends, learning that Aria and Yuri weren't unique, that there were other girls out there that were worthy of her friendship. And to their credit, Aria and Yuri's friends had accepted the absurdity of going clubbing with the daughter of the Grand Duke and the Crown Princess of the Imperium like champions. It was good for Sirri, but in a way, it was also good for their friends, because they got to see that

people that other people called important were still just people, with the same needs and desires and hopes and dreams as everyone else.

Jason Karinne was the Grand Duke. He ran this planet, in a way he *owned* this planet, but virtually everyone on this planet knew that Jason Karinne did not see himself as anything other than just another regular guy. He just had a very important job, that was all.

It was a rare afternoon at home for him, since the last few days had been pretty hectic. He'd had Myleena set up the quantum entanglement research team, and spent most of yesterday haggling the Syndicate's data on it out of Dai Su, just outright buying it using tekk, at least after she tried to tease why he wanted it out of him. He'd stayed over in Andromeda most of the night, catching up with Gen and Bei, and had a copy of the data jumped out to deliver to the Galactic Republic that morning. They still had the Stargate chain set up all the way out to C5A, so the information would be in Estrella's hands in about two days. Jason had opted to leave it up because he knew they'd have to courier the information out to C6D anyway, so there was no good reason to take it down until the ship returned from its delivery.

But something else related to the KES had his attention, and that was on the panel in his hands. The survey teams had sent in the second wave of star charting frigates into the clusters close to the home cluster, and they'd come across something quite intriguing in galaxy A2A. That was just the next cluster over in a cosmic sense, their nextdoor neighbor after a fashion, the largest galaxy in the cluster of 41 galactic formations that made up their nextdoor neighbor. They'd expanded the meticulous exploration of the adjacent clusters after Jason pulled back their far-flung operations after coming across the Galactic Republic, redeploying their assets to more thoroughly explore the galaxies closer to home. That more extensive

exploration operation had resulted in the picture on his panel, one that had incited his conspiracy brain cells.

It was an image of what Jason would swear up and down was a Faey... if Faey had pale skin, not too far off from the fair complexions of Terrans from the northern latitudes of Europe.

They were a pre-industrial species inhabiting A2A-3C163-3, a terrestrial planet close to the galactic rim of its galaxy, on the far side from the home cluster. The charting frigate had snapped some images of the indigenous population once they realized the planet was inhabited by a sentient species, and lo and behold, the image they captured was of this woman, someone who looked so much like a Faey that she could walk down the streets of Karsa and not get a single curious glance...if her skin were blue or Dreamer brown. The frigate hadn't approached the planet, because the KES had special rules when they came across a Faey-like race, as in one that so closely resembled the Faey that they were hard to tell apart. That triggered Protocol A, and that meant that a Vanguard class ship had been dispatched to conduct extensive surveys and recon in preparation for potential contact. Jason would usually leave a pre-industrial species alone, but not *this* one. They had to find out if this was yet another splinter branch of the Faey species, and that would require them to get a DNA sample.

This particular race was the closest incarnation of the Faey to the elves of fantasy stories they resembled that they could get. The planet was covered entirely by forest, on every continent, with only the kinds of trees growing differentiating one area from another. Hearty evergreens grew in the subarctic regions, and jungle trees grew in the tropical belt, with hardwoods and evergreens occupying the temperate and subtropical zones. The only clear areas on the planet were made by the inhabiting race,



clearing land to make room for farms or towns. The planet's four continents were one gigantic forest, from shore to shore and pole to pole, and this race of fair-skinned Faey lived within those forests, with their villages all but hidden by the trees and only their major cities and larger farm tracts visible from space due to the forest being cleared out to make room. The planet's conditions were very close to Terra, with .83 gravity (Terra's gravity was .88), 1.03 pressure (Terra's pressure was .97), and a 24.5 hour day on a 22 degree axis, which was almost identical to Terra's and thus would have similar seasonal variances. The heavy forests made it hard to discern how many of them there were, they could only get a very rough estimate by looking at how many cities and cleared farmland areas they could see from space. Cyrsi's roughest estimate was that there were maybe 14 million of them, and they inhabited all four continents on the planet's surface. The planet's environment had produced a race with Terran-like melanin, making them closer to the Dreamers and Ulala than the Faey, and the forests covering the entire planet made it a shaded environment, which made the inhabitants fair-skinned. The image was of a slender woman wearing leathers and carrying a bow, whose physical stats were embedded in the image. She was short compared to a Faey, was the same height as Dellin, with pattern Faey beauty and pointed ears, which were a little larger than what Jason would consider normal. She was riding an animal that most closely resembled a mule, with a rounded snout, brown fur...and six legs instead of four. The saddle was outfitted with saddlebags, and the bedroll tied behind her made it clear that this woman was a traveler, and looked to be quite used to the traveling lifestyle. The image was taken of her leaving the largest city on a continent in the northern hemisphere, the city situated on its southern coast and with an obvious harbor holding old-fashioned sailing vessels.

The image of it stimulated Jason's imagination. Was she an adventurer who just got off one of those ships and was off to explore a new continent? Was she a mercenary, who made her living by the bow and was off to find an employer? Was she some kind of noble or political envoy, off to deliver a missive to a rival kingdom? Or was she simply on her way home after a long journey? The only thing he could make out from the image was that she clearly was used to living off the back of a mount, and that she had to be competent if she was traveling alone.

He wanted to find this woman. He wanted to meet her. He wanted to find out who she was and what she was doing. And he'd ordered the charting frigate to keep track of her so he knew where she was, because he had a bionoid aboard the Vanguard and fully intended to take it down there and talk to that woman. And since a Faey might stand out a little bit too much, he called on a Dreamer with sufficient skill in picking up languages and diplomatic skills to handle the initial contact, a younger Elder named Sidwa. A Dreamer would just look like a very tall, very well tanned member of that race, so she wouldn't arouse nearly as much suspicion as a Faey or a different species like a Terran or Shio would. He would have preferred Kaimo Stormblossom for this operation, since Kaimo was a listener, but Kaimo would stand out way too much given she was Shio and they were dealing with a pre-industrial species. It was best if the person who made first contact looked as much like one of them as possible. The Vanguard would arrive at the planet in about two hours, and he was going to have himself and Sidwa go down and meet that traveling woman.

Sidwa didn't have a jack, so she was currently using one of the most recent additions to the Karinne's technical inventory, a hyperspace stasis pod. They'd taken Syndicate pods they'd found on the ships they captured

and reverse engineered them, creating something that worked using biogenic tech and could be used by virtually any species. Sidwa was currently in a dreamless sleep, her senses completely shut down, which protected her from hyperspace exposure, and she'd be awakened once they arrived at A2A-3C163. They'd already certified stasis pods for use in both mode two and mode three, so she wasn't beta testing the unit, but she was probably the first person who had ever used one for an extended trip in mode three.

Thanks to the pods, unjacked members of the house or invited passengers could ride along on ships using hyperspace, which would give them a way to get Ulala to the home galaxy if, or when, they decided to take that step.

So, he was basically keeping himself busy until the *Surrero* arrived at the planet, then he would merge over and escort Sidwa down so she could complete her task. He decided to do his waiting at home, if only because he'd worked late the last takir or so and hadn't had much chance to just hang out at the house and be involved in its daily activities. Which, in his house, weren't very tame, nor predictable. There was almost always something going on, and it was rarely within the rules. All of his kids were mischief makers, and some, like Kyri and Sora, were *way* more impish than others. They were almost always looking for ways to get around their parents and the other adults, but their problem was, they were dealing mostly with Ayama, Surin, Seido, and the Imperial Guard. His house servants, Aya, and her girls were *way* too observant and worldly to fall for most of their deceptions, but the problem there was, it just gave his kids more practice, making them better at being troublemakers when not dealing with them. Jason usually played a passive hand when it came to their

shenanigans, allowing them a little leash but pulling on it when they got out of hand, if only because their skulking about never failed to be amusing. That was why, when Sora and Danelle did their best to slip out of the kitchen through the room and dart upstairs without him noticing, he pretended not to see them.

The other major thing going on interrupted him while he read through the charting frigate's report again. Yeri sent him a report on the upcoming galactic summit, where building a pan-galactic resonance comm system and the expansion of the Academy data network to make it an independent network, to alleviate the load it would put on Civnet if the resonance system was adopted, would be discussed. Her department had finished up the last of their preparations, and they were ready. Myleena's team was still tweaking the presentation they were going to give explaining the system and what it would take to build it, and he'd already secured the assistance of the Moridon. Brayrak was on board with the idea, and had already signed the initial contracts to have Moridon companies build the mainframe servers the resonance system would use to establish Academy storage and communication facilities at every planet, moon, and settlement that used the Academy's services. Mesaiima had begun preparations to host the summit, which would take place in 34 days. The summit was on, virtually all the spacefaring civilizations of the galaxy had agreed to attend, so now the logistics of getting them or their bionoids to Imbiri and hosting them while they were there had taken over.

Jason had high hopes for the summit. He couldn't see why anyone would say no to the idea, if how the Confederation had gone nuts over him revealing resonance tech was any indication. Every one of them, as well as just about every major empire with connections to the Academy, were

furiously studying the specs behind resonance tech, and a good dozen or so of them were already producing either prototype or the first line production resonance units. The Imperium, Moridon, Verutans, Subrians, Crai, both Skaa governments, Grimja, and the Jirunji were just a few of the empires now producing resonance units, those who had powerful industrial capacity or highly effective technical and scientific skill, or both in the case of the Subrians, Grimja, Skaa, and the Imperium. The house was also mass producing resonance nodes, stockpiling them for use at the Academy, and producing them at a much faster rate than the others. That was because they had a head start due to resonance crystals being similar to biogenic crystals, able to quickly convert their biogenic production systems to resonance. They'd focused their manufacture of resonance crystals over on Kirga, since they didn't have to treat resonance as a top secret technology, mainly having the Kizzik Hives handle production down in their subterranean cities. When it came to the Kizzik, all he really had to do was explain what he needed and show them what to do, and it got done. *Nobody* was more efficient or faster when it came to production than the Kizzik, so they were the perfect overseers for resonance production given they needed so many of them produced as fast as possible.

He had every confidence in the Hives. He told them what he needed and when he needed it, and they would get it done. They always did.

Amber padded into the room and quickly asserted her dominance by settling herself in his lap, curling up into a little ball of fluff and purring in contentment when he stroked her sinfully soft fur, sparing a moment to enjoy one of the little simple pleasures in life.

But reality reasserted itself when another report uploaded to his interface, from the Academy. They'd officially deemed the test run of the

Ten Year Plan a success, as the last class of the Rathii Generations had finished their initial training, and that meant that they were ready to begin teaching. They weren't leaving yet, however, staying on Terra to continue taking courses in more advanced applications so they'd have Generation abilities mastered when the time came to start teaching them to others. But as of now, they were ready to start teaching, and that meant that the test of their system had been successful. It meant that they were ready for their part of the plan, and that was bringing in, transitioning, and then training the people that would be teaching the other members of their home empires.

He smiled when a small figure ambled into the room, and reached down and hooked Terry and pulled him up onto the couch. His son with Symone spent almost all his time with Jon and Julia, since they were the same age, so it was a little unusual for him to be by himself. Terry was very social, he didn't like being alone, which probably explained why he'd come into the living room. He must have wandered away from the twins, then sought out Jason because he didn't want to be alone.

Terry was very much unlike his parents, both biological and adopted. He was a mellow and laid back, very articulate for a toddler, which hinted that he was much more intelligent than Jon and Julia...and both of them were demonstrating some impressive intelligence. Where Tim and Symone were gregarious, he was quiet and observant, which made him very much unlike his older sister Lyra, who was just as outgoing as her mother. He didn't talk very much, was passive in some ways, just liked to *be*, but he liked doing his being in the company of someone else. "Hey there, little man," he said with gentle love, settling him beside him on the couch. "What you wandering around by yourself for?"

“Jonny and Julie are fighting over the toys in the sandbox. I don’t like it when they fight,” he replied.

“I know, but it’s best to just let them sort it out. Nobody can really stop them anyway,” he said, smiling down at his son. “Anyway, you’re more than welcome to hang out here while I go through these reports. Want a game panel?”

“Okay. I love playing the shapes game.”

*[Can someone fetch one of the twins’ game panels and bring it to the living room?. Afraid I can’t get up right now,]* he called.

*[I’m up here, I’ll find one,]* Ayama answered.

*[Thanks,]* he replied. “Ayama will bring you one in a moment,” he told him.

“What’s the reports? Can I help?”

He chuckled and put his arm around his son. “You’re a little young to be working in my office, pippy,” he told him. “But it’s not just the usual boring stuff. A few things are going on, and I just got some reports on about all of them at the same time. That’s always the way it seems to go. I want to get through them before I go to a meeting to talk to someone on another planet.”

“Oh, the sleep thing where you move around the robot you?”

“Merge,” he corrected. “And the meeting’s not here, so I won’t be using the robot me today. I’m using a different robot me that was taken on a ship to where the person I’m going to meet is.”

“Oh. Is it fun to be a robot?”

“It’s not that much different than this,” he said, patting his own chest. “But that’s because we made the robots to feel like the real us when we’re using them. I suppose if we didn’t do it that way, it would feel very strange.”

“Mom said I can do that when I’m older.”

“Yup,” he affirmed. “Do you like that idea?”

“It looks fun,” he replied.

“It can be,” he smiled. Twilight padded into the room, then jumped up onto the couch to join them. Terry giggled when she jumped onto his lap and licked his nose, then patted her gently. Like all the strip kids, he’d already learned that he had to be gentle with the animals that roamed around, both the pets and the wild animals that set down roots either in or near the strip, like the family of Menodan water dogs. All the strip’s tabis had a particular affinity for Terry, so it was no surprise Twilight was giving him so much attention. Terry’s gentle, mellow, easy-going demeanor appealed to tabis, attracted them. Whenever he went out, he never failed to draw some of the tabis that lived on the strip to him, either the pets of the strip girls or the tabis owned by the guards. In that respect, Terry was much like his father. Ayama came down the stairs, then set the panel on the couch beside Terry, given Twilight was currently occupying both his lap and his attention. Ayama ruffled his platinum blond hair, making him smile up at her, then she went back upstairs to finish whatever she was doing. *[Thanks.]*

*[Any time.]*

He hung out with his son in quiet, contented silence, Terry playing with Twilight and then moving on to the panel while Jason continued to go through his daily reports, which to Jason was a fine, fine way to spend his



afternoon. There was a lot to be said for just hanging out with his kids, no activities, no shenanigans, just sitting on a couch together and enjoying each other's company.

But the peace and quiet didn't last...in his life, it never really did. Cyrsi warned him that the *Surrero* was about to drop into normal space, so he made sure Terry found his way to his brother and sister and went down to his lab. His bionoid came out of standby mode and sat at the console when he climbed into the pod, the mechanical him keeping watch on his vitals while he was merged. The bionoid did that on its own, and Jason was both used to that and just fine with it. This was his original bionoid, and it had had a very long time for its crystal to develop. By this point, it was far more than just a machine, but it wasn't truly alive, either. When Jason was down in his lab, the bionoid acted as a lab assistant...and was getting quite an education about being an engineer. *[Any special orders?]* the bionoid inquired.

*[Not really, just monitor my vitals. I'll be merging to a prototype field bionoid and joining a KES first contact mission. So there's a very small chance that things may get...chaotic.]*

*[Understood.]*

*[Reminds me, if this mission goes well, you'll be going in for a refit,]* he told the bionoid. *[I'll be testing out a new piece of equipment. If it pans out, you'll get your own. There's a file about it in the lab mainframe, project file RB17-12. Read up on it.]*

*[Sounds interesting. I will do so while you're out,]* the mechanical him replied.

The ID code of the prototype was already in the system, so the merge pod located it, and then he merged up into it . He endured a moment of sensory chaos as the simsense systems came online and stabilized, then he opened the transit case holding the bionoid and stepped out. The bionoid was built to resemble him, was biogenic, and this unit was equipped with a prototype resonance unit that Siyhaa had developed for bionoids. It was a unit that was designed to work with biogenics, which would allow the bionoid to use both commune and standard telepathy...at least within limits. Where he could use advanced telepathic tricks through a bionoid's biogenic crystal, he couldn't do that with a resonance unit. They were very basic devices, only really able to send, because that was all they were designed to do. It was one way biogenics were superior to resonance, since the biogenic crystal was an integral part of the telepathic system and its programming gave it far more advanced capabilities. A resonance unit was nothing but a radio antenna, to use a metaphor, where a biogenic crystal was the whole radio. For this mission, the resonance unit would serve him well, because the Faey-like race on A2A-3C163-3 had telepaths. They didn't know if all of them were telepathic, but their initial surveys picked up quite a bit of sending when they did a low altitude sweep. That told them that they had a lot of them.

*[Sidwa, are you awake yet?]* he called.

*[I just woke up, noble Phoenix,]* she answered. *[I'll meet you in the landing bay. The captain told me we'll arrive at the planet in just a few moments.]*

*[Six minutes,]* the captain injected, an Emizu named Koka Sen. And like how the Japanese did it, in Emizu society, the family name was given first. In Faey society, it would be Sen Koka. Emizu were one of the races of

the Crai Empire and were very Terran-like in appearance, with the same general body shape. They were a good shakra taller than Terrans on the average, had wide but attractive features, prominent tusks that jutted out from their lower jaws that made them vaguely orc-like, and like the Makati and Moridon, they had horns. Their horns weren't standard like in the other two races, each Emizu had more or less unique horns in shape, size, and length, the only commonality was that they all grew out of the same place in the head, on the same line as the ears along the curved sides of the skull. Captain Koka's horns were like a ram's horns, they were fairly thick and curled back and down from the skull, nearly circling back on themselves to end in points just forward of his ears. He was in the landing bay with Sidwa when Jason got down there, standing beside her with his arms crossed as she fidgeted a bit with the society-appropriate clothes they'd made for her so she wouldn't stand out on the planet. She wore a rather roughly woven undyed wool smock that went down to her knees, almost like a dress, belted at the waist. She wore tight fitting undyed woolen leggings known as hose under the smock—though nothing like what a Terran would consider hose—and very plain wooden clogs, which were quite common for farmers on the planet. The wood from which they made her clogs had the flexibility of leather, so at least she wouldn't get blisters wearing them. Jason was wearing a leather doublet—no way in hell was he wearing a smock, too much like a dress—and stout, slightly baggy leather leggings and knee-high boots, with a very large, voluminous cloak over it. The slightly ill-fitting leggings made him glad it was a bionoid, since they'd probably chafe something awful if he was wearing them on his real body.

*[You ready for this, Sidwa? This'll be your first and only first contact mission,]* Jason asked as he walked up to them.

*[I'm very well versed in knowledge implantation, noble Phoenix,] she replied. [It was one of my roles in the village before we came to Tir Tairngire. I should have no problems lifting these Dreamer-like people's language, then uploading it to the ship's computer.]*

*[Good deal,] he nodded. [I'd do it myself, but the resonance unit I'm testing in this bionoid doesn't let me use techniques like that. I can only really send using it.]*

*[Strange. It should let you use your skills through it,] Koka mused, rubbing his strong, prominent jaw.*

*[I thought so too, but sadly, that's the way it works,] he replied. [The resonance crystal's little more than a transceiver, just for telepathy rather than gravband. It doesn't have the complexity to handle me using advanced techniques.] He reoriented himself. *Is it working?**

*Loud and clear, Koka answered. Sounds entirely natural. No way would I suspect it's not a living mind sending.*

*Well it is, but the resonance crystal does a pretty good job transmitting the flavor of my thought, Jason nodded. Means it has pretty good throughput and bandwidth, but I still can't use advanced techniques using it. So, you two think I won't arouse any suspicion if I send?*

*None, Koka affirmed. I know you're using a resonance crystal, and I can't tell the difference. You sound completely organic. Normal.*

*I agree, noble Phoenix. Your thought seems completely normal to me.*

*Well, that means this resonance unit passes the first test, he smiled. Now then, let's get ready to go, Sidwa.*

The two of them boarded a dropship known as a Shadow Bat in the KES, which was a small four-seat dropship outfitted with CMS so a KES team could make night landings on planets undetected by the indigenous population. It flew like any dropship, so Jason had no problems accessing it using the biogenics on his bionoid and controlling it. Once they had clearing to depart, he lifted this ship off the deck and engaged the CMS, then put them in a nice vector that would bring them down to the planet not far from that lone traveler that Jason wanted to meet. They discussed their plan as he brought them down into the atmosphere with practiced ease, which would be fairly simple. They'd land, meet the woman at her campsite, and then Sidwa would negotiate with her to lift her language. Sidwa was a highly skilled telepath, one of the best among the Dreamers, so she'd have little trouble with it. Once they did that, they'd talk to her a little bit, even though Sidwa could get all of it using her talent. Jason wanted to talk to the woman, not use her to get what she knew.

The Shadow Bat came down in a relatively uninhabited area on the northern continent of the planet. The closest settlement was about 70 kathra to the northwest, along the road that the woman was traveling. It was a rather desolate road, with nobody within 30 kathra in either direction, which further piqued his curiosity as to what the woman was doing out here. There was nowhere for the Shadow Bat to easily land, so they got down using hoverdiscs, the small flying platforms they used in fighters to allow the pilot or mechanics to get up into the cockpit without a grav harness or armor. He then had the dropship move out away from the road and remain in standby, where it would remain in a hover about 1000 shakra above the treetops, high enough so the nocturnal flyers within the forest wouldn't accidentally fly into it.

“Ready?” he asked softly, pulling the hood of his cloak up over his head. The woman was about half a kathra ahead, along the side of the road, and was camped for the night.

“I’m ready, noble Phoenix.”

“Just Jason when we’re out here,” he corrected her. “We may have a little trouble explaining why you call me that.”

She looked over and up at him, then smiled slightly. “As you wish, noble Phoenix.”

“Stop that,” he chided, elbowing her gently

She chuckled. “Has she moved from her campsite?”

“Nope, so let’s go hunt down our prey,” he replied.

That went fairly well, because while the woman was highly alert, she wasn’t hostile. She spoke when they approached her camp, and when Sidwa answered in the language of the Dreamers, it made the woman curious rather than suspicious. She then sent, unframed, which told him that she wasn’t too surprised to meet someone that didn’t speak her language. *It’s rare to meet other travelers all the way out here, and such strange ones at that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man quite so tall,* she noted, looking Jason up and down. *Who are you?*

*Travelers a very long way from home,* Sidwa answered. *I am Sidwa, Elder among my people. My companion, Jason Karinne.*

*I am Kio,* she returned..

*We come to you seeking a boon.*

*What is that?*

*We wish to learn the language of your people, who are unknown to us.*

*How could you come this far down the Frost Road and not speak to anyone?*

*It would be...difficult to explain, Sidwa answered. I can assure you, I am proficient enough in the telepathic arts to learn languages. I would wish to learn yours, and in return, if you so wish, will teach you ours.*

*I would be quite content to accept your offer.*

*Excellent. May we approach and sit?*

*Please do.*

Sidwa seated herself demurely beside the woman, who was sitting with her saddle behind her, and had been leaning back against it when they approached. She offered her hand, and Jason seated himself as he felt the edges of what they were doing, which demonstrated the limitations of the resonance crystal. It took them about twenty minutes, and when Sidwa let go of the woman's hand, she looked to him. "I have taught her Faey, Jason, and learned her language in return," she replied. "I have explained to her that special circumstances prevent us from implanting you with her language, so she has agreed to speak to us in Faey. Jason, this is Kio, of the people known as the Iri."

"Pleased to meet you, Kio," Jason said eloquently.

"You as well. Elder Sidwa says you are a noble?" Kio inquired.

"Of a fashion, though I don't take my title seriously," he replied calmly, picking up a small twig laying on the ground and playing with it a little. The wood was surprisingly tough and flexible, despite the wood long

being dead. “Mostly it’s just a convenient way to win arguments against irritating guards.”

She gave a short, soft chuckle. “Spoken like an experienced traveler,” she noted lightly.

“I don’t get to travel nearly as often as I’d like. My duties keep me close to home most of the time,” he answered. “But I just had to come for this.”

“And what is this?”

“My people...come from a very distant land, aboard a ship that set out on a journey of exploration and discovery,” he replied. “Our people only just discovered this land, and I couldn’t resist the idea of coming to see what to us is a very exotic place. We’ve never met your people before, having landed well away from the coastal city and traveled inland to explore a little bit.”

“That sounds a bit suspicious. Almost like you’re scouting.”

“Exploring, not scouting,” he countered mildly. “The main reason we’ve moved with caution is because we weren’t sure how your people might react to someone like me.”

“What do you mean, like you?”

In response, he pulled down the hood, revealing that he didn’t have Faey pointed ears, and his features were more rugged than the Faey. That made the woman’s eyebrow raise in what looked like mild surprise. “In our land, there are two races of people,” he told her. “Sidwa’s people, and mine. That’s why I look much unlike your people and I’m much taller than the



average man. Among my people, I am only slightly taller than average for a man. But I see that among your people, I'm considered quite tall."

"Very tall," she affirmed. "And while you do look different, those differences are not displeasing. I find you a handsome man. Who are your people? What are they called?"

"Terrans," he replied. "I assume you've never met one of us before?"

"Never even seen you," she replied.

"I'm not surprised. Given how long it took for our ship to get here, I think our ship may have been the very first to visit this land. And since we don't have very many ships that can travel this far, I'm not surprised at all that my people have never met yours."

"But our people have traveled to your land," she said, looking at Sidwa.

"I am not of the Iri, Kio. My people are known as the Dreamers, and live in the same land as Jason. But we are related, given our similar appearance, so perhaps our people traveled to Jason's homeland long ago, so long that both your people and mine have forgotten about it, and so long for us to change slightly from what we used to be. The noble—noble Jason's people are friends of ours. We live in different lands, but our two peoples are close, dear friends and work together in many ways."

"Interesting," she said, looking critically at Jason. "I had no idea there were other peoples in the world. I thought the world had been explored."

"Our land is very small, barely more than an island, with few people," Jason told her mildly. "So it's little surprise that your people never found us,

while it was much easier for us to find you,” he added with a chuckle. “Are you, perchance, an explorer too, Mistress Kio?”

“I’m a hunter by trade, so I suppose that means I’ve done my share of exploration,” she replied. “I visited Sairosi to see my brother and celebrate his nameday, and return home to the village of Kirosi.”

“Ah. Are you married, by chance?”

“Married? I don’t understand that term,” she said in confusion.

“Entered into a permanent, formal relationship with a man.”

“Oh, you ask if I am sealed? No, I’ve not yet had the fortune to find my soulmate,” she replied with a slight smile. “Among my people, such an arrangement is for life, so we are very careful about who we choose. Is it similar among your people? I would think so, since you too are gifted.”

He nodded. “I am sealed to a woman named Jyslin, and have been long enough to have children nearing adulthood,” he replied. “Lady Sidwa, not yet. Despite my attempts to nag her into finding a suitable man,” he added lightly.

“I will find a husband in my own time and on my own terms, noble Jason,” she replied curtly, which made Kio smile a little.

Kio seemed to relax a little, and that allowed Jason to dig for the information that had been driving him crazy with curiosity since he saw her. She was a professional hunter, she sold the game she hunted on top of subsisting off the meat herself, and she also trained animals for others for a fee for extra income, from mounts to guard animals. She was unmarried and lived in the village Kirosi, which was nearly two days’ travel from the port city from which she began, a village nestled in the foothills of the

mountains to the northwest. She was young among her people, but not so young that she was seen as inexperienced or naïve, which would put her at around 40 as Faey reckoned things. She was fairly successful in her profession, made enough money to have a comfortable cabin in the woods not far from the village, to have her riding animal, and to have fairly expensive weapons. Hunting was a dangerous profession for the Iri, mainly because the game Kio hunted was bigger than she was.

And that led to the first of the ways that the Iri were different from the Faey, because Kio had the ability to communicate with animals, much like Rita Escobar...though he knew her as Emelda far more than as Rita. What made her a bit different was that most such telepaths were vegetarians, considered eating things they could talk to to be weird, but Kio was not one such telepath, she in fact used her ability to hunt by finding animals using her talent, stalking them, but couldn't use her talent to take them down. That fell in line with what Jason knew of those who had that ability, and that was that telepaths couldn't really attack animals mind to mind, even if they could communicate with them. The reason for that was the same reason the Kizzik were immune to telepathic attack from other species, the minds of animals were unevolved and alien even to telepaths that could send to them, unevolved to the point where telepathic attacks didn't work on them. She wasn't unique among her people, she was a class of telepath her people called *beast masters*, and she used her power with a pair of large hunting cats she called *sura* to form a hunting unit. She left her two hunting cats at home because big hunting animals weren't allowed in large towns and cities. She and her two animal companions were highly efficient and effective hunters, letting her bring in enough meat and animal hides to make a comfortable living. She sold the meat to butchers and the hides to leatherworkers, at least that which she didn't keep for herself. She told them

that beast masters were somewhat uncommon among her people, but not so uncommon that they attracted undue attention. So, Jason estimated that maybe 10%-20% of their population had the ability.

And as Jason suspected, she told them that all Iri had talent. That was another solid piece of evidence that they'd stumbled across another Faey-related race out in the universe, but the ultimate evidence would be a DNA sample.

They talked more about the Iri in general, and they found out that they were a people more akin to humanity in the middle ages. They were still in their Iron Age, had not discovered gunpowder or steam engine technology, and their political organization was a series of monarchies that dominated the three populated continents on the planet. The sword and bow Kio carried were the pinnacle of Iri personal weapon technology. Jason asked if the kingdoms fought wars against one another, and he was pleased to find out that there hadn't been a war for nearly a hundred years. The various kingdoms were relatively stable, and while they competed with one another, it seemed that the Iri weren't nearly as aggressive as the Faey were.

Kio also surprised them quite a bit in ways that he didn't expect. After they talked a while, sitting at her fire, her mule-like animal had come over to Jason and was snuffling at him curiously. He paid it a little attention, patting it on the nose, and it moved off. After it did, Kio looked at him hawkishly. "It seems that Zun agrees with me," she announced. "Exactly what *are* you, Jason?"

"Huh?" he asked.

"You're not truly alive," she declared. "I can sense your mind, a very alien mind to me, but it's like your mind was placed in the body of some

kind of magical creation, some magical golem. Do your people possess a magic that allows you to shed your mortal body and take up residence inside these magical constructions?”

He gave her a surprised look, then laughed ruefully. “Your people are far more observant and formidable than I thought, Mistress Kio,” he told her respectfully. “I won’t deny that what you see isn’t the real me. The real me is back at home, and I am connected to this construct so I can see what it sees, hear what it hears, and move it as if it were my own body. It’s a very convenient way to sail the seas, after all. The golem doesn’t eat, doesn’t drink, so we don’t have to carry the supplies to keep it alive. And if we meet a people that attack us rather than talk to us, well, it’s not the real me that’s put in any danger.”

“But yet Lady Sidwa is really here. She’s a living being.”

He nodded. “The reason why I can’t insert your language is why she’s here in person and I’m not. While I can use my talent through this golem, I can’t use advanced telepathic techniques, it’s not capable of it. I can only send. Using such techniques requires us to be here in person. Lady Sidwa is the only member of our crew that is here in person, so she can perform that task for those we meet.”

“Very odd. And clever,” she said, looking to Sidwa. “You are a woman of great courage, Lady Sidwa.”

She smiled and nodded. “Your complement humbles me, Mistress Kio,” she said mildly.

“I’m curious what gave me away,” Jason said. “We build these artificial bodies with the intent that they look completely lifelike, so we don’t frighten those we may meet.”

“You don’t smell like a living thing, and while I can sense your mind, it is very strange, alien.”

“Ah. Suppose I didn’t think about that,” he said thoughtfully, pinching the end of his jaw between two fingers. “Seems that your people have a far superior sense of smell compared to ours, Mistress Kio, because I can’t smell this device as something not natural. And the device we use to allow me to use my talent through this body isn’t the same as a living mind. I should have realized that the same reason why I can’t use advanced techniques through it would make it unusual to those who have talent. But I’m so...used to the device, I never thought to probe it like it was a living thing, so I never noticed the difference. It seems the device stands up to passive detection, passing as a living mind, but doesn’t stand up to focused scrutiny.”

“What kind of magic is it that allows you to use your talent like that?” she asked.

“It’s not actually magic, but it’s so hard to explain, it’s easier to just pretend that it is,” he said absently. “And it pleases me that you didn’t hold that against me.”

“I was curious to find out more about you,” she replied.

“It says much of you and your people that you would find yourself confronting something so very different from you, but not react out of violence or fear,” he told her. “That’s always our greatest fear in our explorations, that someone may discover the truth that the people they see aren’t what they appear to be and attack us, thinking that we’re evil, or witches, or some other nonsense like that.”

“You have approached in peace, you deserved to be treated in kind,” she said simply.

“I’m glad to hear that.” *[Mission status?]*

*[Sample acquired,]* came the response from the dropship. To avoid having to answer uncomfortable questions, the KES had come up with the bright idea of using a tiny robot to get a DNA sample from the woman, in the form of a nearly microscopic flying unit built to resemble an insect. While they were speaking, the robot had left Jason, flown to her, acquired a DNA sample from the epidermis of her skin so she felt no pain, and that response meant the unit had returned to Jason’s clothing.

*[Then we are done here, Jason,]* Sidwa noted to him, communing directly with the biogenic crystal in the bionoid.

Jason stood up, as did Sidwa. “I think you’ve answered our questions, Lady Kio” he said. “And we will take our leave now, so you may get some rest. We will return to our ship now.”

“You will not stay the night? There is much I’d like to ask of you.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t, at least not right now,” he said in a regretful voice, shaking his head. “But might we return later, to speak to your sages and historians to learn more about the history of your people? When we return, we’ll be able to speak your language, so hopefully we’ll be able to speak with others.”

“Lady Sidwa will not be returning?”

“Not in person, no,” Jason said honestly. “The only reason she came in person was so she could learn your language and teach you ours. But if you would like her to come back, she can bring her golem next time.”

“I would like that,” she nodded.

“Then we’ll see to it,” he told her. “We will return, and come to you at your home village in sixty days. That will give us time to journey back to our homeland, inform them of our visit, return Lady Sidwa to her home and allow her to board her golem on the ship, and then sail back. That will also give you time to alert your village leaders about our impending visit and make any preparations you deem necessary. Is that acceptable?”

“Quite,” Kio answered.

“I would like that as well, Lady Kio,” Sidwa said with a smile. “I am quite curious about your people, and would like to learn more of you. We are related, after all, and it’s only seemly that relatives know one another.”

“Then in sixty days, Lady Kio, we will return,” Jason said with a nod, then he put his hood back up. “There will be three of us next time. Myself, Lady Sidwa, and a member of the crew highly educated in the scholarly arts, so we may trade lore with your sages about our two peoples. I look forward to meeting you again.”

“Safe journey, Jason,” she said, standing up herself, then giving them a bow. Jason and Sidwa returned it, then they turned and walked away from her fire, moving into the shadows.

They moved away far enough for Kio to not see the dropship, then boarded it using a flying disc, which meant it didn’t have to land. They discussed the meeting on the way up, and Jason went straight to the Vanguard’s lab once they were on board. He waited as two KES doctors conducted an initial test on the DNA sample the drone had acquired, lurking nearby along with Sidwa and a hologram of Cyrsi. They didn’t have to wait long, however. A very tall, willowy Faey woman with soft brown hair



turned towards them from her stool after getting the initial readout. “Cursory scan complete, your Grace, and the DNA sample is a 99.93% match with the Faey,” she announced.

“As I suspected,” Jason said, leaning against a counter behind him. “They’re shorter than Faey, but their appearance is a dead lock.”

“That’s three different galaxies in three different galactic clusters holding Faey,” Cyrsi said thoughtfully. “This is no longer a mere coincidence.”

“No it is not,” he grunted in agreement. “If it was 98% that would be one thing, since the Faey are 98% matches with several other species, like the Strath and the Sha’i-ree. But 99.9%, that’s directly related. So, Cyrsi, we’re back to the question I posed to you last month. If the Faey, Dreamers, Ulala, and now the Iri are all related, how did they get where they are now?”

“The obvious if absurd answer is that they traveled there,” she answered. “We’ll have more information once the doctors run a more detailed analysis to determine exactly when Iri DNA branched off from Faey DNA. In both the Dreamers and the Ulala, it’s the same date, about 40,000 years ago. If the Iri have a similar deviation date, then we’re looking at the migration scenario. Either our distant ancestors were actually highly technologically advanced and spread across the galactic clusters, or they were found by another species and transplanted, either willingly or forcefully.”

“We’ll have that answer for you in about half an hour, your Grace,” the doctor told them.

“If they were transplanted, it shows that not every branch family of the Faey had the same progression,” Sidwa noted. “The Iri are still in their Iron Age, where the other branches are much more advanced. If they started at the same time we did, then they must have had a very rough time of it, preventing them from progressing at the same rate as the rest of us.”

“That’s a useful observation, Sidwa,” Cyrsi told her. “We’ll have to do some fieldwork to study the planet’s geological and meteorological history, see if environmental conditions stunted Iri development.”

“It could be any number of factors, Cyrsi,” the doctor told her. “Not just environmental. Chronic illnesses stunting population growth, wars, competition with wildlife, sociological factors that discouraged advancement or exploration, any number of factors could have contributed to it.”

“Good point,” she agreed. “Now that we have their language, and we know that resonance systems can pass cursory inspection from a telepath, we can send in bionoids to start studying Iri society. That, and all scientific research teams will be using Iri bionoids, just in case they happen to cross paths with the Iri.”

“Rook’s getting them built now, so they’ll be on the way soon,” Jason injected. “I’m gonna have Siyhaa see if she can’t tweak the resonance system in the bionoids to make them less conspicuous to the Iri. They’ll never fool them if they’re giving them a hard look, but making them seem less of an alien presence will go a long way to helping them blend in.”

“She didn’t design resonance nodes with the idea that they needed to blend in,” Cyrsi mused.

“Exactly. But I think she can come up with something,” he nodded. “If we want infiltration bionoids to work against telepathic species, the resonance systems need to feel much more organic. I’m fairly sure she can come up with something, by mimicking the presence of a biogenic crystal if nothing else.

“Biogenic chips are based on a DNA helix and are designed to mimic organic brain architecture through their lattice pathway system, that’s why they have a much more natural presence,” the doctor said.

“Yeah, so maybe introducing some elements of biogenic systems into resonance might be the way to go. Give them lattice pathways that don’t evolve the way biogenic crystals do, just something there to imitate the thought process of an organic being. That might make them feel more natural to telepaths.”

“And you’ve lost me, noble Phoenix,” Sidwa said.

He chuckled. “Sorry, Sidwa, just us tech geeks talking shop,” he smiled over at her. “I’m sure we’ll come up with something. They don’t have to be perfect, they just need to look natural enough that they don’t arouse any suspicion.”

“Don’t get too involved in this, Jason. You have the summit coming up. If you don’t properly prepare for it, both Ayuma and Zaa will box your ears,” Cyrsi warned.

He had to laugh. “Don’t remind me,” he complained.

“What is this summit about, noble Phoenix? I haven’t heard of it.”

“It’s to propose to the galaxy to build a resonance comm system that connects all empires in the galaxy together, as well as expanding the

Academy so every empire has its own Academy satellite campuses locally. We also want to build a comprehensive computer system for those campuses, which will all be connected together through the main Academy computer hub on Terra. It's a bit complicated to explain, but building the system like that will take the strain off the main hub computers on Terra. We'll be installing resources locally for each empire's satellite campuses to access, but those local resources will be connected to the main Academy system."

"I understand the concept of it, noble Phoenix. You don't need to be a computer expert to see it," she smiled. "If each empire has its own local Academy system that serves its needs, it will let both it and Terra's mainframes run more smoothly."

He nodded. "And each local system will be connected back to Terra so we can keep proper records and archive everything," he added. "That reminds me, I have a meeting with the Overseer in a couple of hours, he's going to show me the initial plans for the system. The Moridon will be helping us build a good deal of it."

"They are the galaxy's experts on computers," the doctor chimed in.

"Yeah, this would be a pain in the ass if we didn't have the Moridon and the Ruu on board," he said.

"The Ruu? I thought they didn't get involved in external affairs," the doctor said in surprise.

"They are on this, because it's the Academy," he told her. "They're working with the Moridon on the campus expansion on Terra, joining with the Moridon to design and build the new campus mainframes, so they're keeping it local in that respect. They're also helping with the initial design

plans for the computer mainframe hubs we'll be installing in other empires, but they won't be involved in the actual construction. They're just involved in the design."

"Even the Ruu defer to the Moridon when it comes to computers," Cyrsi noted slyly.

"I think that annoys them to no end, that a civilization they see as less advanced than them are better than them at something," Jason agreed blandly, which made Cyrsi chuckle. "But, I will say that it's been bringing the Ruu closer to the Moridon, so I see it as a good thing." He sighed. "Well, guess I'd better stow this bionoid and delink. I have a ton of work to do, and probably will for the next fifty years," he drawled.

"It was good to work with you, noble Phoenix," Sidwa told him.

"You too, Sidwa," he told her. "Talk to you later."

He walked the bionoid towards the storage bay, quite satisfied with the meeting. The Iri were yet another long-lost branch of the Faey race, in yet another galactic cluster, which just made the questions over how they got there and why they got there more and more important. Perhaps it was time to set up a dedicated research team at the Karsa campus of the Academy whose sole mission was to research this mystery and try to find answers. It would be composed primarily of historians, archaeologists, and astrocartographers, who would comb through the historical archives of their Academy partners who had histories longer than the Faey's and look for any hint or indication of what might have happened. Because this had reached the point where it wasn't just some interesting little piece of trivia. How the Iri, Ulala, and Dreamrers got out there, or how the Faey got here if it turned

out they weren't native to the home galaxy, may give them critical information about the history of the entire cosmic string.

He'd have to have Ayuma look into it.

He pondered that as he got out of the merge pod down in his lab, seeing that he had a good hour or so before he had to get dressed to go into the office. That gave him a little time to attend to something he'd put off for a while, and that was troubleshooting a problem in his armor. The power servos in the knee of the left greave were losing power intermittently, so he needed to troubleshoot the problem. It gave him something to do with his hands while he thought about what he'd learned, about the Iri, about Kio, and about the mystery of the Faey in general.

*[Something's wrong,] his bionoid warned. [Errant power fluctuations.]*

*[Well, it is broken,] he answered, sitting up from where he was using a probe to look for microfractures in the conduit powering the servo.*

*[The power fluctuations are in the power plant, not the servos. I suggest—]*

Just as he was turning to look at the mechanical him, there was a searing flash of light and he felt intense pain all through his chest, neck, arms, and face, then he felt himself impacting against the far wall even as his ears rang and his mind swam. He swam in a moment of dazed confusion, but then came to the dim awareness that he couldn't see anything, as if he was merged to a bionoid with its optical systems offline.

*[Medical emergency! Medical assistance to the lab immediately!] his bionoid communed powerfully as he felt hands on his shoulders. [Explosion in the lab! Jason is injured!!]*

*[Jason!] Aya communed. [Jason!]*

He couldn't quite remember exactly how to respond to that, swimming in a haze of confusion.

*[I'm on my way! Bionoid JK-1, report on his condition!] Jaia's commune swept over him. some part of his mind recalled that Jaia was one of the guards, the primary medic for dayshift.*

*[Multiple plasma burns across the face, neck, chest, and arms. Shrapnel wounds in the burn wounds from servo explosion. Possible concussion, lacerations to the back of the head, active bleeding from impact with wall after explosive force displacement. Heart rate and breathing stable, other vital signs indicate he's entering first stages of shock. He is conscious but disoriented, unable to commune or reply vocally.]*

*[Apply pressure to the bleeding wounds immediately to slow blood loss, but do not move him any more than necessary! He may have a neck injury! Do not touch the burns, and do not try to remove the shrapnel! Captain, we'll need the medical gurney! We have to get him to the annex as quickly as possible!]*

*[Dera, bring the gurney! Kita, get a skimmer on the pad!]*

*[Cybi told me!] Songa's commune touched him as he started becoming aware of the fact that he was in some serious pain. [Jason! Jason!]*

*[I'm...I'm here. I can't seem to move. I can't see.]*

*[Neural disruption from contact with high energy plasma, don't even try!] she replied forcefully. [Don't try to move, and don't try to merge to your bionoid!] she ordered. [You just lay there and let Jaia take care of you until they can get you here!]*

*[I don't think I can do anything but,]* he replied with pain-tinged lightness of thought.

He felt the bionoid apply careful pressure to the back of his head, then another set of hands were there. He felt them touch his face, then his neck, then his chest, which felt like the hands were coated in broken glass grating savagely across his skin. *[What happened?]*

*[The armor unit he was repairing suffered a severe power plant malfunction that sent a power surge through the system.]* the bionoid answered *[It caused the servo unit he was troubleshooting to overload and explode, causing these injuries.]*

*[How does it look, Jaia?]* Jason asked, his mental state clear he was experiencing severe pain from the stress shivering under his thought.

*[Not good. I'll have to put you under, Jason. You're in the first stages of shock, so we have to get you under a sleep inducer to prevent full onset.]*

*[I won't say no,]* he told her.

*[I'll activate the sleep inducer as soon as the gurney gets here and we get you on it, so just hang on another moment,]* she assured him, patting his stomach gently.

He laid there feeling very much injured as more guards arrived, then he felt himself being lifted onto something soft. *[Alright, Jason, I'm turning on the inducer. We'll wake you up when you're not in danger of going into shock.]*

*[Fire when ready,]* he answered, and then he spiraled down into welcome, blissful blackness.



Well, his pride was certainly damaged. Not to mention the rest of him.

Standing over his own body in his primary bionoid, Jason looked down on himself in a hospital bed in the ICU of the annex, an IV attached to his arm pumping him full of pain killers and his face wrapped in bandages infused with bio-accelerant, covering up extensive plasma burns to his face. He'd been all but bathed in power plasma that erupted from the servo when it failed and then exploded, showering him with both small pieces of metal shrapnel and double-metaphased plasma. He'd been pretty well cooked by it, leaving him with second and third degree burns on his face, chest, neck, shoulders, and arms, and the force of the explosion sent him flying across the lab and fractured his skull when he hit the far wall. The pain inhibitor in the bed wasn't enough to cancel out the pain, so he was on a painkiller drip to reduce the pain to the point where he could focus enough to merge. But even that wasn't enough for him to completely shunt off the pain, he could feel it on the edges of the merge, and that made the merge unstable, forcing him to fight every second to maintain his connection to the bionoid, having to fight through the effect of the pain inhibitor and the drugs and the pain to keep his focus enough to hold the merge. So, he wouldn't be merged for very long, just long enough to make some decisions.

He wasn't alone in the room. Songa was leaning over him with Jyslin sitting beside him on one side and Dahnai on the other, Symone standing by the head of the bed with Aura on the other side, and Miaari and Myleena were standing to each side of the foot of the bed. All the CB units had holograms in the room, very small ones hovering high over the bed looking down. These were the most intimate people in his life, his wife, lovers, the computers that effectively ran everything, and two of his deepest, best

friends, the only ones that Songa was allowing into the room right now. That was mainly because he'd only just gotten out of surgery to remove the shrapnel and repair some of the damage of the explosion, and the biggest and most traumatic of that damage was to his eyes.

Simply put, his eyes were a complete loss. Songa had had to completely remove both of them, so those bandages were covering empty sockets. The plasma had burned his eyelids beyond functional capability, so they were gone too, the orbital sockets covered by a synthetic skin polymer to keep them protected and preventing the bandages from sagging down into them. Songa had just revealed that rather unpleasant news, and he was silent as he digested it. "In the short term, dear, you have two options," she told him, looking up at him. "If you want cloned replacements, I'd suggest that we leave things as they are and you wear a protective visor that has minicams in it that you can merge to and use as your eyes. We could implant cyber eyes temporarily, but that means it's a more involved process with longer recovery time when we replace them with the cloned eyes. Because of that, I'd recommend you simply go without and rely on merging to a camera to give you vision. If you opt for cybernetic replacement, we can have them ready for you in about five days."

"No. I already have enough machinery inside me," he replied, grabbing hold of the wrist of his bionoid. In his real body, there would be a cybernetic endolimb in there. "I don't want artificial eyes. I'll wait for cloned replacements to be ready."

"Alright, dear, I'll start the process," she replied as she stood back up and faced him. "You'll be looking at a minimum of five days on the IV, to give the bio-accelerant time to do its work. Until then, you'll be unable to eat," she warned.

“Why?”

“The shrapnel damaged the muscles in your jaw,” she answered. “Right now, dear, you can’t chew. So you’re not going to be able to eat anything solid until those muscles recover.”

“Whoa,” he murmured. “I didn’t think the explosion did that much damage.”

“Dear, it could very well have killed you if you’d been any closer to it when it happened,” she said. “The video log in the lab shows that you raised up and looked at your bionoid a split second before the servo exploded. Had you not done that, the explosion could have killed you. You would have had the servo literally blow up in your face.”

He gave her a surprised look.

“So yes, dear, this wasn’t just one of your usual lab accidents,” she said soberly. “But there’s something else we have to discuss.”

“What?”

“The concussion damaged the implants that allow you to jump hyperspace,” she told him. “You have to decide if you want to replace them, or opt for a jack.”

He gave her a surprised look. “A jack? I don’t need a jack.”

“So long as you have the implants, dear, no, you don’t. But it is an option, and you have the right to consider it. If you’ve been considering getting a jack, dear, this is the perfect time. We’ll have to go in and remove the implants as it is, so we can either replace them with new ones or implant a jack. That’s your choice.”

“I...I’ve always been a little leery of jacks,” he admitted. “I just find the idea of it creepy.”

“Oh really?” Dahnai asked archly. “And what do you find creepy about them?”

“It’s...the idea of sticking something inside my head,” he told them. “The idea of it, of taking a jack and shoving it inside my skull. It just gives me the creeps,” he said with a visible shiver. “It’s not a rational fear, I know, and it doesn’t bother me to see other people doing it, but the idea of me doing it, no way.”

“So it’s more of a phobia,” Songa said.

“Kinda, yeah. I mean, I know there’s nothing wrong with them, and I know that it wouldn’t hurt me to get one. It doesn’t bother me to see other people plug in a jack, but the idea of *me* doing it, sticking something in my head like I’m shoving an ice pick in my brain, no thank you,” he said vehemently

Dahnai gave him a surprised look. “Babes, I had no idea that you could have a fear like that.”

“Blame *The Matrix*,” he grunted.

“The what?”

“It’s an old Terran movie from before the Faey came, where people who have jacks are fighting against a race of sentient machines, and they do it from inside their computer systems. But the thing is, in the movie, what they used for a male jack connector was this big scary-ass looking metal spike like this long,” he said, holding his hands apart. “And they show it being shoved into the head of the protagonist when he’s jacked into their

system for the first time. That scene *majorly* creeped me out the first time I saw it, and I guess that's where I get it from. The idea of something like that being done to me, it freaks me out."

"You got it from a *movie*?" Dahnai challenged, then she laughed.

"We all have our fears, Dahnai. And many of them are irrational, or downright silly," he said evenly. "I've never needed a jack, so I've never had to worry about the idea that I'm afraid of the idea of plugging anything into it. So we can take that off the table, Songa. Just replace my implants so I can jump hyperspace again, and I'll be happy."

"Of course, dear," she said soothingly, putting a warning hand on Dahnai's wrist to keep her from saying anything else. "It will have to wait until you're in better physical condition, though. But we'll make sure to get it done before you're discharged."

"Thank you," he told her.

"In the meantime, dear, you have to make some decisions," Songa said. "I can see from the board that you're struggling to hold that merge."

"Yeah, I'm not going to try to just live in a bionoid like Dahnai did when she had the liver transplant," he said. "I'm only gonna be awake long enough to set things up so the house can run without me for a few days. I think I'd rather just stay asleep until the bio-accelerant and the spiders repair enough damage so I don't have to be completely doped up to reduce the pain enough to hold a merge."

"We can arrange that, dear," Songa told him.

"Cybi, guess you're gonna be regent again for a few days," he said, looking up at her hologram. "But I want you to run every decision you

make by Rann first and see what he'd do. It'll be a good experience for him, and the fact that he's being asked those questions when I'm not able to answer them myself will make him appreciate the gravity of the job," he said firmly.

*"I think that's a good idea," Jason," she agreed. "But you need to make it an official declaration."*

"I am right now. Due to my medical condition rendering me unfit to carry out my duties as Grand Duke, I hereby cede authority to you, Cybi, until such time as the Medical Service certifies that I'm recovered enough to return to my duties," he said formally. "Cyra, do you witness that my declaration was made willingly and without coercion or duress?"

*"I do," she replied with a sober nod. "I recognize the declaration as being lawful. Do all CB units concur that the declaration is valid and lawful, and recognize that Cybi has been appointed regent?"*

One by one, they answered in assent.

*"Very well, by unanimous consent of all CB units, the declaration is recognized as valid and accepted as legal. By Proclamation 4405-173, entered into law on 14 Keda 4405, Cybi is hereby appointed regent of the House of Karinne. The reason for this abdication is due to the current Grand Duke being medically unfit to serve. Cybi has operational control of the Dukal government until such time as the head of the Karinne Medical Service submits official certification that the Grand Duke is medically fit to resume his duties. Songa, as current head of the Medical Service, do you acknowledge this requirement?"*

"I do," she replied formally.

*“Then the Grand Duke’s temporary abdication of his duties and the conditions for his return to duty is hereby accepted into law. Cybi is recognized as regent, responsible for all duties usually performed by the Grand Duke Karinne.”*

*“I acknowledge this declaration, and hereby accept the responsibilities of the Dukal throne as regent,”* Cybi intoned gravely. *“Official notification of the appointment of a regent will be announced to the House within the hour, as per the law.”*

“Alright, now that that’s taken care of, I guess I can go back to sleep,” Jason said calmly, crossing his arms. “How long until I can hold a stable merge without being doped to hell and back, Songa?”

“Perhaps five days, dear,” she replied. “Given the severity of the burns and the amount of pain those kinds of injuries cause, it will take at least five days for you to heal enough to manage a stable merge. “Then let’s call it six days before Cybi officially inquires about my medical fitness, to give me an extra day to rest and recover,” he said, looking over at Songa. “Remember, you’re legally required to release official updates on my condition every three hours,” he said.

“I already have that system set up, dear,” she replied. “I’ll write up the initial report and have it ready when Cybi makes the official announcement.”

“Wait, you make it public when you’re unfit to serve?” Dahnai asked.

“We don’t keep secrets like that from the house, Dahnai,” he answered. “I trust my people, and they deserve to know what’s going on. Cybi, pull Rann from school and let him know what happened. He’ll be in the office while you’re sitting in my chair.”

*“I’ll tell him.”*

“The kids are going to murder us for not telling them what happened, or when it happened,” Jyslin grunted.

“I didn’t want this getting out until we had the regency arranged, and if we pulled them out of school, or even told them, it wouldn’t have stayed under the radar long,” he said. “They’ll understand once you explain it to them. Now then, ladies, gentlemen, if you don’t mind, I’m both drugged halfway out of my mind and in serious pain, and it’s everything I can manage to hold this merge. So I’d like to go back to sleep now,” he said dryly.

“Of course, dear,” Songa said. “Go ahead and delink, and I’ll turn on the sleep inducer.”

“Thank you dear. I’ll see all of you when I’m better,” he said.

“Don’t worry, love, we’ll hold down the fort while you’re resting,” Jyslin told him. “We’re just glad you’re alright,” she added with a relieved smile.

“You know me, love, tough as old leather,” he said easily. “Delinking now. See everyone in a few days.”

*Chiira, 20 Toraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 4 October 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 20 Toraa, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*



*Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis*

This...was going to take some getting used to.

Standing in his hospital room still wearing the medical gown in which he'd been dressed, he stood with his arms crossed in front of a flat holo projected in front of him, showing himself. The image showed him, Jyslin, Symone, Dahnai, and Songa, his wife and *amu* still by the bed and Songa standing just behind him as he regarded the results of the operation to replace his destroyed eyes with cloned replacements. Since he couldn't see himself in a mirror, this was how he did things now, using a camera and a hologram to see himself. And his attention was fixed firmly on his eyes.

*[How on Earth did this happen?]* he asked Songa, who was standing beside him. He looked straight into his eyes, which were not the eyes that he remembered the last time he could look in a mirror, at least halfway. His right eye was exactly what he remembered, but his left eye was not. It was the wrong color, a quite pleasing shade of blue, and it very much stood out.

*[Cloning isn't a guarantee that you get a perfect copy every time, dear. Within your DNA are recessive genes holding different cosmetic information, and they can express during the cloning procedure,]* she explained. *[One of your ancestors had blue eyes, and those recessed genes became dominant during the cloning procedure. I didn't tell you about it because we can fix that with a simple post-op procedure. But we can't do it until about a takir after the implantation, so you'll be spending ten days with heterochromic eyes.]*

*[Well, that's not awful, at least. But it's seriously freakin' creepy,]* he grumbled, looking at his off-color eye. *[Why do I have to wait?]*

*[Medical reasons,] she replied lightly, then laughed when he made a rude gesture at her. [The implantation procedure hasn't fully settled in, dear, and the color alteration procedure is surgical. So we don't want to risk any complications during or after.]*

*[You mean you have to go in through the cornea and do something to the iris?]*

*[Exactly, dear. It's minimally invasive, but it is invasive. And that means we don't do it if there's a risk of complications.]*

*[Huh. Well, that answers that question,] he noted, touching the bottom of his eyelid with a finger. [Gotta say, dear, great job. Not a single scar, and I don't feel any different. You'd never know my eyes were blown out and half my face was burned off just a month ago.]*

*[If she didn't put everything back the way it was supposed to, we'd have ripped out her pubes,] Symone threatened lightly. [And at least all the injuries were to the top half. The best part of you was protected by the work bench.]*

*[Good grief woman, do you ever think with the big brain?] he accused, which made her laugh.*

*[That's the boring brain, baby,] she replied shamelessly.*

*[Well, looks like I'm back to work in my real body,] he noted, looking away from the holo. [No more merge commutes in a bionoid. I am discharged now, right Songa?]*

*[Yes, dear, you're free to go,] she nodded.*

*[Good, because I have a lot to do today. I have a meeting with Brayrak and Observer A about the resonance network proposal we're giving to the summit next takir, and I need to talk with Mesaiima about the schedule. Now that we finally have a firm date, she's getting everything ready.]*

*[It won't take very much explaining,] Dahnai mused. [I can't think of anyone that would say no to being connected to the network. It would be financial suicide for an empire to say no. And if they want examples of how game changing it is, they just have to look at the Confederation and the Coalition.]*

*[Here's hoping. A pan-galactic comm network will be good for everyone, from governments down to the common woman,] Jason injected. [But the part I'm pushing the most is the Academy expansion building mainframe nodes at every major planet in the galaxy and extending the Academy network to the rest from those hubs. I want to extend our reach to every corner of the galaxy, at least those that want us there.]*

*[Trying to take over the universe, babes?] Dahnai asked lightly.*

*[Far from it. I'm trying to help everyone become the best they can be, and the first step to that is to have a good education. There's no greater gift anyone can be given,] he declared seriously. [That's why the Academy was built, and the Academy is the responsibility of the House.]*

*[Sometimes you are almost naïve in your optimism, Jayce,] Dahnai chided him.*

*[I'm just the galaxy's dad, Dahnai, and dads want their kids to have a better life than they did,] he replied shamelessly. [Besides, in a weird way, I kinda am half the galaxy's dad...or I will ultimately will be. And you'll be the galaxy's mom. The retrovirus is based on elements of our DNA, after all,*

*so anyone infected by it becomes part of our genetic line. And I don't mind the idea of having a few quintillion new kids to take care of,]*

*[Well that's a creepy thought,]* she returned, which made Jyslin grin a bit at her.

*[Be glad they don't sue you for support,]* Symone teased.

*[Are my new implants good for jumps, dear?]*

*[Yes, dear, you're signed off on jumps,]* she replied. *[Are you planning on one?]*

*[No, but you never know what might pop up,]* he answered. *[Speaking of that, I need to talk to Mesaiima and see if she'll let me ship my diplomatic bionoid over a couple of days early. I want to have a couple of face to face talks with her before the summit starts.]*

*[I need to start prepraring myself,]* Dahnai nodded. *[There's a prime opportunity to make some new trade deals during and after the summit.]*

*[Holikk said the same thing. I think he's taking half his trade department leadership to Imbiri,]* he chuckled.

*[So am I,]* Dahnai affirmed.

*[It's only a smart idea, go for it, love,]* he nodded towards her, then he turned around as the hologram winked off. *[Anyway, let's get things rolling. I have some work to do. Aya, I'm being released,]* he called.

*[Your skimmer is already on the pad, Jason. You're good to go.]*

*[Thanks.]* He opened his commune and accessed the network, then released a House-wide announcement on the official channel. *[Hey everyone, Jason here. I've been discharged from the annex, so I'm back at*

*full health and will be returning to my usual duties in the flesh. No more commuting by bionoid,] he announced. [But to warn everyone, the cloning procedure to replace my eyes went a little wonky and one of my cloned eyes grew with a different color, so I'm gonna be rocking asymmetrical eyes for the next ten days or so. The Medical Service can fix that, but the doctors told me that they can't do the cosmetic procedure for a while after the implantation surgery for safety reasons. I'll release a picture of me like this if you're curious to see it, but no laughing!] he warned playfully. That made all the ladies in the room burst into laughter despite his warning. [So, that's it. We're back to good old boring normal again, which to me is a good thing. Everyone have a good day, and talk to you later.]*

*[Your first stop needs to be the First Bank of Moridon, love, they need to do a new retinal scan of your eyes now that you have new ones,] Jyslin reminded him.*

*[Oh yeah, thanks love,] he nodded towards her. [I'll stop by the main branch on the way to the office.]*

It felt good to be out of the hospital and back to doing things himself rather than in a bionoid. Not that he minded being merged, but he felt a great deal more freedom not being restricted to the annex. Those were Aya's orders, as she felt that him being blind and dependent on an external camera for vision to be too great of a security risk, fearful that an attacker could take out his camera and render him blind. He couldn't wear armor either, because both of his suits of armor were part of the production run of the armor that had the power plant fail, which produced the explosion. The entire production run was "grounded," decertified, not allowed to be used until MRDD determined if the failure was isolated to his armor unit or if it was a design flaw or production flaw created in a production run of power

plants. That put 4% of their Crusader systems out of action until the investigation was complete, and those people using that armor were restricted to merge operations only until they were recertified.

That was how the system was designed, and Jason wouldn't have it any other way. The lives inside of those armor systems mattered far more than the money it was costing to decertify the run and conduct an extensive investigation into why his power plant failed the way it did. If the plant had failed and the servo exploded while he was wearing the armor, it would have all but reduced his entire left leg to boiling liquid meat and he would have bled to death before they so much as got the armor off of him. The explosive force would have been contained within the armor, reflected back into his flesh, like setting off a firecracker inside a can. In all, he got *lucky* the explosion happened while he was troubleshooting it rather than wearing it.

The biggest problem he'd had over all of this had been Aria. Aria had had no omen dreams about the explosion, a fact that had made her very upset. She felt like she failed him for not foreseeing the accident, and it hadn't been easy to assure her that he didn't see it that way at all. The power of the Dreamers wasn't consistent. They didn't see *everything*, and the fact that he'd never been in any real danger at all, from the point of view of looking back after the fact, was most likely the reason why she hadn't dreamed about it. His injuries were fairly serious, but they weren't life-threatening, so there was no reason for a Dreamer to have an omen dream over it. He'd had to deal with a very depressed and nearly inconsolable daughter for the last couple of takirs, almost tormented with guilt over not being there for him when she had no control over it in the first place.

After stopping at the bank to update his retinal patterns for identification purposes, he went to the office and did a lot of hand-shaking and cheek-kissing as his staff and others working in the complex came to his office and welcomed him back. He'd been coming to work in a bionoid since Cybi returned his duties to him, and he was a bit surprised to see Rann sitting at his desk, wearing his school uniform and holding a panel and reading something. Rann had been taking his education much more seriously since the accident, as if being suddenly thrust into the role for which he was training had made him understand the gravity of it much more clearly. *[Aren't you supposed to be in school?]* Jason asked as he came into the office, carrying Sasha and with Chichi bounding around his heels. He reached down and picked her up too.

*[I wanted to finish this, so I arranged a half day off,]* he answered seriously. *[Good to see you out of the hospital, Dad.]*

*[Believe me, I'm glad to be out, if only to get away from Songa,]* he replied lightly. *[She had an entire cabinet full of needles with my name on it. What are you working on?]*

*[The summit reports,]* he replied, looking up, then giving him a long look. *[Wow, that looks weird.]*

Jason laughed and winked his blue eye. *[Well, I can't see it, so it's not quite as weird for me,]* he answered.

*[Anyway, I'm just making sure that everything's all set up for the summit the way you wanted it,]* he said. *[I guess I could read these at school, but it makes me pay more attention to them when I'm doing it from here.]*

*[And now you know why I come to work instead of just working out of my home office,] he communed approvingly. [I've been keeping up with the status reports, and it looks like Ayuma and Yeri have everything ready. Ayuma's submitted her final presentation for the summit, and Yeri's getting the last pieces in place for the diplomatic side. A summit like this doesn't happen often, so it's prime opportunity to do a little wheeling and dealing on the side. Yeri's all but drooling over the opportunity.]*

*[Yeah, she talked to me about that,] Rann nodded, his eyes on the report. [Kreel called the office yesterday while you were over at KES HQ and we talked a bit, and he's doing the same thing.]*

*[Everyone is, that's why the summit's scheduled for eight days, to give everyone time to do a little extracurricular negotiation. And I'm glad Kreel's talking shop with you, it's good for you to get exposure to the other rulers outside of your personal life. He's not just Uncle Kreel, son, he's the leader of the Grimja Union, and he's one of the smartest, most formidable politicians in this entire galaxy. I love him as a brother, but I also massively respect him for his ability. And you should respect that too. He can teach you just as much as I can, if you just listen.]*

*[I asked him about it, and he was happy to answer,] Rann told him. [And I do respect, him, Dad. I've listened to him talk about work with you and Aunt Dahnai, and he's just what you say he is. I have a lot to learn, and I can learn some of it from him, and Aunt Dahnai, and the other rulers in the Accords and the Confederation.]*

Jason nodded in agreement as he sat down in the chair facing his desk, a chair he rarely if ever used. He settled Chichi on his lap as he kept hold of Sasha, scratching her behind the ears. *[That's a good attitude, as long as you never forget what your primary responsibility is.]*



*[The House.]*

*[The House,]* he nodded again. *[The other rulers have their own motivations and interests, and many of them don't align with the goals of the House. But you can learn a lot from them, so always keep your ears open.]* “Oh, settle down, you silly thing,” he chided Chichi aloud as she reared up and put her front paws on his chest. “I’m glad to see you too. Show a little decorum.”

In response to that, she bit him on the side of his hand, which made him laugh. He scrubbed the fur on her back and shoulders as he smiled down at her. “Yes, I know it looks weird. The doctors are going to fix it in a few days,” he told her. “No, I don’t know why they have to wait either. Songa gave me the impression that I’m not smart enough to hear the reason,” he said dryly, which made Rann laugh.

“She may be doing it on purpose to make you walk around like that,” Rann said.

“No doubt, she has her wicked side,” Jason grunted. “Most of the girls don’t appreciate that she has a rather mean sense of humor.”

A hologram winked on over his desk, holding the face of Meya. “Rann! What are you doing in Jason’s seat?”

“He stole it from me,” Jason called, and he activated the other camera so she could see him. “What’s up?”

“The *Astra* just sent back that the Republic has something on the QE comm project,” she said. “They sent us some blueprints and research data on a prototype, and they want us to build it as fast as we can. We’ll have to figure out how to adapt it to biogenic and Confederation standard

architecture, but they've sent us everything we need to do it, like they did with the resonance data."

"Awesome! Did you send it to the project team?"

"Already did, just letting you know," she replied. "And that doesn't look that bad at all, baby."

He laughed and touched his cheek. "You're the first one to say that. Just shows you're weird, Meya," he grinned.

"Hey now, nothing wrong with standing out a little bit," she grinned in reply. "You should think about leaving it like that."

"Hell no."

"You're no fun," she accused. "You want a copy of the data so you can look it over?"

"You even bother to ask?" he countered, which made her chuckle.

"Uploading it to your office panel," she relayed. "I'll let you go, baby, I know you have no interest in talking to me now that you have a new toy," she grinned.

"Damn right, woman, get off my comm," he retorted, which made her laugh. She then cut it from her end, which made the hologram wink off. Jason set Chichi and Sasha on the desk and picked up the chair, then carried it around to the other side and set it beside Rann. "Alright, son, bring up the file, let's take a look."

"Sure thing, Dad," he said with a growing smile, rolling the chair over a tiny bit to make room for him. "I'm sure you'll explain all the parts I don't understand."

“Sure thing, son,” he said with a smile, then he laughed. “Guess this means Estrella won the race.”

“I’m sure she won’t hold it over you, Dad.”

“She’s a Faey in everything but skin color, son, you have no idea how wrong you are,” he replied in a voice that made Rann burst into laughter. “Now let’s see what the Republic’s best scientists came up with.”