

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

Revelation8

Fel

Chapter 8

Raira, 22 Suraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 5 November 2023, Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 22 Suraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It had taken a little longer than he expected, but she was finally here.

Standing at the end of the waterborne dock on a warm, sunny morning with Jyslin, Miaari, his oldest children including Aria, Siyara, and Danelle, all of them dressed very casually, they watched as the *Javelin* slowly descended towards them. Behind them, his four usual guards stood in pairs at either end of them, a few steps back. It had returned to local space just an hour ago, coming in under sublight in order to give Estrella time to fully wake up. She'd spent the last eight days in stasis, sleeping a dreamless sleep that protected her from exposure to hyperspace. Estrella had admitted to him in a call the other day that the Republic's intergalactic engines didn't use hyperspace, it was a technology they'd more or less abandoned long ago, which explained why they'd never developed translight technology. She didn't tell him how they worked, but did tell him that they didn't have any problems with hyperspace because their engines didn't jump hyperspace.

It was just like the RK empires, when they encountered them years ago. They had developed applications using ion tech far beyond anything the Karinnes had ever seen, because the empires in the home sector cluster had abandoned ion tech for plasma once it was developed. They had never thought to continue researching it, and that was a mistake that the Karinnes had rectified quickly. He had entire divisions of his vast science department studying what others would consider to be obsolete technology, trying to advance it to its ultimate expression. Electricity, positron, free proton, photon pulse, ion, graviton ripple, they were studying all the older energy generation technologies and the applications that used them, seeing what they could do with them.

It wasn't just his immediately family. Danelle and Siyara were standing on the dock with him. Tim and Myleena were also there, coming from work or school to greet their very special guest. Aria looked honestly excited at the prospect of meeting Estrella again, twisting the tail of her tie as she stood in her school uniform. She and the older kids had left school to greet the Ulala, and Jason had had Siyara at the office, she'd been very curious about Estrella after seeing a memory of her in her father's thoughts, so she wanted to meet her. She stood demurely by Jason's leg, playing with a lock of her nearly white hair the same way Aria was playing with her tie. They watched as the frigate slowly descended, slowed, and then very carefully eased into the water so it didn't generate a splash over the dock. They walked towards the bow as the side hatch opened and landing ramp extended, reaching it just in time to meet Estrella and Captain Sevitan Esheruma, one of the few Prakarikai in the house, with two metal-skinned bionoids behind them carrying Estrella's luggage. She was wearing her favorite style of clothing, a bra-like bustier made of rich red cloth and her skirt of many scarves, with numerous gold chains and bangles hanging from

the bustier to wrap around and cross over her midriff. A pair of dainty red slippers covered her feet, protecting them from the metal ramp. The gold bracelets and anklets chimed as she walked, coming down the ramp, then she looked to him and gave a bright, earnest smile. She picked up her pace and reached out to him as she stepped onto the dock, and he took her hands as she reached them. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, then slid her hands up to put them on his shoulders. “Jason, it’s good to meet you face to face,” she said in a gentle voice.

“At last,” he replied lightly, patting her waist with his hands.
“Welcome to Karis, Estrella. Home planet of the House of Karinne.”

She looked past him and up, at his tree. “I can’t believe that a tree could be so big.”

“That’s an *oye* tree,” he told her. “And they take a little bit of explaining that we can go over later. Anyway, let me introduce you to some of my family, my friend. This is my wife Jyslin,” he introduced, letting go of her and motioning towards her.

“I’m delighted to finally meet you, Estrella,” she said as she took the Ulala’s hands.

“Jason talks much about you, Jyslin. You are a lucky woman.”

“I know,” she smiled.

“Aria you’ve met. This is Rann and Shya, my eldest son and his wife.”

“It’s good to meet you, Lady Estrella,” Rann said, trying to hide his nervousness.

“It’s an honor to meet you, my Lady,” Shya said, much more confidently.

“Married, eh? At such a young age?”

“It’s an Imperium thing, Estrella,” Jason told her. “Dahnai demanded the marriage as a political alliance to her House as part of the agreement that separated the house from the Imperium. She felt that if we were all family, then she had a hold on me.”

“It may have started as a political marriage, but it’s much more than that to us,” Shya said, almost defiantly. “I love Ranny and he loves me.”

“These are the rest of my older kids, Aran, Zach, Kyri, and Sora,” he introduced them as a group.

“My, what a lovely shade of green,” she said, touching Aran’s locks.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he replied with a smile.

“It’s not very common among my people.”

“It’s not really among Terrans either. I get it from my mother,” he replied. “She’s Faey.”

“Estrella, this is Miaari Thresxt, of a species known as the Kimdori. She is her people’s ambassador to us, and among my closest, deepest friends,” Jason introduced. “The Kimdori are so deeply connected to the House that we are the same as family.”

Estrella gave her a bit of a curious look when Miaari put her hand on her neck, but removed it almost as quickly. “We of the Kimdori welcome you to Karis, Estrella Nine Rings,” she said in her husky, smooth voice.

“While the Kimdori and the Karinnes are separate empires to those who look from outside, to those within, we are as one.”

“More or less,” Jason chuckled in agreement. “The Karinnes and the Kimdori are connected by bonds that I can’t easily describe. It’s why her people and ours refer to each other as cousin.” He stepped down with her a bit. “This is Myleena, the best friend I told you about, and her daughters Danelle and Siyara.”

“I’ve been eager to meet you, Estrella,” Myleena said with a bright smile as they took hands.

You feel familiar, Siyara sent, and that rocked Estrella back on her heels a bit, giving her a shocked look. *Like we’ve met before*.

“And, I shoulda warned you about that,” Jason said ruefully. “Speak, Siyara. You know it’s rude to leave Miaari out of the conversation.”

“My dear child, you are quite impressive,” Estrella said, kneeling down and putting her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “You would be greatly celebrated among my people.”

Daddy said not to let things like that go to my head, she returned.

“Siyara!” Jason warned.

“Sorry, Daddy,” she said, her speech a little slurred from lack of practice.

“It’s alright, kitling, I know that speaking is strange to you. I don’t mind being left out this one time,” Miaari told her with a smile on her muzzle.

“So she’s the daughter of you and your best friend?” Estrella asked.

“There’s a story behind that,” Myleena chuckled. “The short of it is, at that time, we thought Jason was the only one of his kind left. So, we, his closest friends, decided to ensure the continuation of his line by having children by him. Nine of his ten eldest children were by his friends to ensure that his line continued.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t told me about that,” she said, looking up at Jason.

“It was a bit hard to explain, because it’s tied up with the story behind our magic,” he said evenly. “This is Danelle, Myleena’s oldest. Not mine biologically, but she’s as good as my daughter in every other way possible.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Lady Estrella,” she said with a smile.

“Just Estrella, my darling young lady,” she smiled in return. “My people aren’t ones to use titles. We find them to be empty expressions of insincere platitude.”

“That sounds familiar, Dad,” she smiled, looking over at him.

“Now you understand why me and Estrella get along,” he said in a tone that made them laugh.

“Ten children?” Estrella asked, giving him a look that made Tim splutter.

“Actually, twenty-four, but who’s counting,” he said in a voice that made the Ulala give him a wild look.

“My, you’re far more vigorous than I expected, Jason,” she said slyly.

“Let’s move along,” he said in a tone that made Jyslin giggle like a little girl. “This is Tim. He’s my *amu dozei*, which is a term that’s a little

hard to explain.”

“You’ve used that term before, with Dahnai. But you called her *amu dorai*.”

“An *amu dozei* means that the *amu* exists between two married couples,” Jyslin explained. “Jason and Symone are *amu dozei*, and me and Tim is are also *amu dozei*. Because of that relationship, Jason and Tim are also considered *amu dozei*, even though they don’t have any romantic attraction to each other. Dahnai is Jason’s *amu dorai*, because there’s no *amu* between her husband and me.”

“Ah, I understand,” she said, taking Tim’s hands. “And will I meet Symone?”

“Later today, she’s on deployment with her company right now, and they’re due back this afternoon. She’s in the house military, and the way things work here is that her title doesn’t get her out of duty rotations,” Jason answered. “We don’t make exceptions, it keeps everything completely fair.”

“I’ll be most interested to meet her,” she said, smiling as Tim kissed the back of her hand roguishly.

“And these, Estrella, are members of the Imperial Guard,” he finished, motioning towards Shen and Dera. “Even though we’re separated from the Imperium, me and my family are considered part of the Imperial Family because my son is married to an Imperial Princess, on top of the fact that Dahnai is my *amu dorai*. They take their jobs very seriously, but despite that, I love them anyway. Oh, and to warn you, they can’t speak. Part of the oaths they took when they joined the Guard was that they had their vocal chords surgically removed. So they send only.”

Estrella, Dera sent with a simple nod. We will be responsible for your safety while you're here.

Shen and Suri will be assigned to you as your guards and attendants, she continued, which caused them to step up from the other side. They are not here to stop you or watch you. They will also serve as your personal attendants while you're here, as a lady of your station must be accustomed to being attended in her daily routines. I assure you, they are well trained to serve you in that capacity. They are here to protect you and assist you.

Protect me from what, madam?

Yourself, mainly, she answered. Nobody here will harm you, but Karis can be a slightly dangerous place for those not familiar with the way things work here. They'll be there to warn you if that's about to happen.

Then I will heed their warnings, she assured her.

“Now that the introductions are out of the way,” he said as Sevitan stood by the ramp. “Was the trip back smooth, Sev?”

“No problems at all, your Grace,” the male Prakarikai answered. “Need us to stay here?”

“No, we're good, we're not leaving the city today. Go ahead and head back to Kosigi and get your crew some shore leave. Well done.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” he smiled. He saluted and headed back up the ramp with the bionoids, which raised even as they walked up it.

“How was the trip, Estrella?” Tim asked.

“It was both interesting and short, at least from my point of view,” she replied as the side hatch closed. “I was most curious to see one of your

ships from the inside, and I must say that I was quite impressed by it. But barely an *epi* after the captain graced me with a tour of the ship, they put me in the stasis pod. Next thing I knew, the medic was waking me up and we were here.”

“It was that or arrive little more than a mindless husk,” Jason told her lightly as the frigate lifted off, then slowly turned its bow to the north and started moving away. “You’ll be staying at my house while you’re here, which is right over there. We have the pool house prepared for you, which is a two room suite across the pool deck from the house, which will give you a little privacy and peace and quiet. I think I’ve told you that my house can be very noisy and chaotic because of the kids, so we decided to put you in the quietest part of the house, where they shouldn’t bother you. As I warned you, it’s not large or gaudy or overly ostentatious.”

“That’s fine, Jason,” she told him. “You saw my quarters on the ship. I don’t need large, gaudy quarters to be comfortable.”

“We’ve set up the crypto link with the security protocols you sent us from the pool house back to the Republic, so you can communicate privately with your people,” he continued. “We also have the QE device certified for use with bionoids, so if your people have built you a bionoid back home, you’ll be capable of merging to it from here. We’ll give you a chance to settle in in your rooms and contact the Republic to let them know you’ve arrived, and we can meet back up.”

“Excellent, Jason,” she replied with a nod.

They walked down the dock with Shen and Suri carrying Estrella’s bags for her, and Jason motioned towards the houses arrayed along the beachfront. “This is the strip that I described. These houses belong to the

first families that joined me and reformed the house. We settled along this beach immediately after coming to live here, and we've never left. The final house belongs to Aura, who lives here because she's the mother of three of my children. The guards like to keep the kids in a central location, so she moved onto the strip not long after she became pregnant with the twins," he said, ignoring her curious look.

"Twenty four children, I should have realized that it couldn't have been by just two or three women," she hummed, which made Jyslin laugh. "Is this Aura also an *amu dozei*?"

"Our relationship is a little less formal than that," he said blandly. "I think I told you that Faey have very permissive attitudes, they don't equate love with sex. Aura is a good friend, but we happen to be attracted to each other from a purely physical point of view. In Faey society, such relationships aren't uncommon. She's married now and has a family of her own, so we don't really have an intimate relationship anymore. But we are still very dear, close friends."

"And as his wife, I fully approve," Jyslin said lightly. "Faey women like their husbands to be...naughty. We find it very appealing."

"As Myleena said, nine of my children are the product of my friends being intent on preserving my family line," he said. "While I have quite a few children, if you take the nine mothers that did it to protect my family line, the rest of my children are only by the women who are very dear to me. My wife, my *amu*, my best friend Myleena, and Aura. And the reason why there are so many is because twins are a fairly common occurrence among the Faey. A good ten of my children are sets of twins. But I'm certainly not complaining. My children are the light of my life, and if I had fifty, it wouldn't be enough."

Estrella gave him a gentle smile, but said nothing.

They came down the walkway that connected the house deck with the dock ramp, then back to the pool area behind the house, which sat more or less between his and Tim's back yards. Estrella gave the trunk of his *oye* tree a long look as he pointed out the pool house, then Shen and Suri escorted her to the pool house as they went into the main house, to give her a chance to contact the Republic and refresh herself. About twenty minutes later, Shen brought her to the living room, where everyone else was waiting for her. Ayama scurried out with a tray holding glasses of *oye* juice as the Ulala sat down on the couch beside Jason. "How did you find the suite?" he asked.

"It's quite satisfactory, Jason, thank you, and I love the furnishings and décor. You have made it feel like home to an Ulala. I'm going to enjoy my time here," she replied.

"Estrella, this is Ayama, one of my house servants, but far more than that, one of my friends," he said with a warm smile towards her. "She's one of three servants in the house, along with her husband Surin and our other servant, Seido. If you need anything, this is the woman to see. She runs this house. The rest of us just live in it."

"Oh come now, Jason, you're just saying that because I graciously allow you to stay, despite all your childish shenanigans," she said in a tone that made Estrella giggle like a little girl. She offered a cup to Estrella, who took it with a smile and a nod. She took a sip, and her eyes just lit up.

"What *is* this?" she nearly gasped. "It's incredible!"

Jason had to laugh. "She's Faey, alright," Tim declared impishly.

“It’s called *oye*, and it’s one of my reasons for living,” Myleena said with an eager laugh as she took a cup from the tray.

“You saw that moderately impressive tree behind the house, beside the pool deck?” Jason asked. “That’s an *oye* tree. It produces the fruit that that drink was made from. The trees only grow on three planets in our galaxy, and we’re graced beyond measure that Karis is one of them. So, we have a local supply. In fact, if I’m not mistaken, this was made from the fruits from my tree,” he said, swirling the pale pink juice in his glass.

“I can understand that sentiment,” she said, taking another long drink. “I take it our cousins like this as much as I do?”

“It seems to be a universally shared taste,” Jason chuckled. “Even us Terrans love *oye*. Anyway, what we do next is mainly up to you, Estrella. If you feel up to starting our negotiations, that’s fine. If you want to relax a little bit, that’s fine too.”

“I’ve spent the last eight days asleep, and I must say that I’m feeling alert and energetic,” she answered. “To the point where sitting in a chair and discussing details sounds more like torture than duty. So, if you don’t mind, how about we go do something? Go see what you’re willing to show me?”

“If you don’t mind waiting about an hour?” he asked. “By then Symone and the rest of the kids should be back home, so we can all go together. Until then, how about we go take a walk through the neighborhood? There’s quite a bit to see without having to get on a skimmer.”

“That sounds lovely,” she smiled.

So, with Shen and Suri escorting them, Jason took Estrella on a tour of the strip, showing her all the houses of his friends, then they left the fenced area and he took her on a walk through the neighborhood. With it just them, he reverted almost instinctively to sending, showing her the various houses and their architectural styles, and then they stopped briefly at Seido and Merra's café. She got the chance to meet them as they sat at one of the tables in the small, cozy dining room, the two of them coming out of the kitchen. Merra was just starting to show a little thickness around her waist from her pregnancy. "So you work in Jason's house in addition to owning this café?" Estrella asked.

"Seido does, but I'm happy to fill in from time to time when Seido, Ayama, and Surin are busy elsewhere," Merra replied. "Mainly by cooking."

"And if I may ask, what species are you ladies? I find your skin to be quite beautiful."

"We're Shio," Seido answered.

"Shio are one of the three most populous species in the House," Jason told her. "We call us the Big Three. Faey, Terrans, and Shio. The claim to fame of the Shio is that they are among the best chefs in the galaxy," he smiled towards the Shio couple. "It may not look it, but this is the best place to eat in Karsa. When it comes to the Shio, often their best food comes from these small family-owned diners and cafés."

"Food is deeply tied into Shio culture," Seido told her. "Among our people, being a chef is a noble tradition, seen as a means to spread joy and happiness among our people."

“And we’re quite happy to bring the joy of a fine meal to our friends and neighbors,” Merrra affirmed. “So, what would you like today, my Lady? We offer a wide selection of cuisine from multiple species and cultures. Jason can translate the menu for you, help you make a decision since you’re not familiar with our cuisine. It’s a long tradition that our menus are written by hand in the Shio language, and Jason is fluent.”

“We’re just stopping in for some tea, Merrra,” Jason told her. “Could we get some bark tea and fingersnaps?”

“Of course!” she said with a smile. “I have some fingersnaps in the oven right now, would you like to wait for them to be ready, or enjoy ones already made?”

“They’re best right out of the oven,” he said.

Ordering for me already, eh? she asked lightly, giving him a sly glance as the two Shio returned to the kitchen.

You’ll get your chance to explore some Karinne cuisine later, but this isn’t the place for someone unfamiliar with Shio food, he replied honestly. *There are some Shio dishes that can be toxic for someone that doesn’t know how to eat it, and diners like this expect you to know what you’re ordering. They don’t have kiddie menus here.*

Seriously?

Very, he nodded. *The last thing I need is for you to order simlai semu roch and bite down on an acid gland. It may trigger an intergalactic war.*

She gave him a look, then burst out laughing. *What is bark tea?*

Not long ago, Seido managed to pry the recipe for oye bark tea out of the Parri, he answered. It may sound a little creepy, but I can assure you, it is utterly delicious. This café is the only restaurant in Karsa that offers it, and needless to say, they make an absolute killing off of it. Seido prepares the bark used in the tea personally, and she does it better than the Parri.

And the bark comes from the tree in your yard?

He nodded. Part and parcel of getting the recipe was the Parri teaching her how to scrape the bark to get the shavings used for the tea, both in knowing which patches of bark to scrape to get the best flavor and how to do it without doing the tree any harm. She's very good at it.

And who are the Parri?

They're from the planet that the oye trees come from, he answered. They're a very enigmatic species, they consciously choose to live a stone age level lifestyle, and part of that culture is living among the groves of oye trees that grow elsewhere on the planet and tending them. The Parri care for the trees and allow us to harvest their fruits. Seido's the first outsider they've ever taught how to scrape bark for tea, because if it's done wrong, it can do damage to the tree. And they're very protective over the trees. The trees are sacred to the Parri, and we honor their beliefs when it comes to the trees by treating them with the care and respect the Parri demand. Here on Karis, the oye trees are nearly as sacred to the Karinnes as they are to the Parri. We understand how rare they are, how blessed we are that they'll grow here, so we treat them with the respect they deserve.

Ah, so it's quite an honor for Seido to be allowed to harvest the bark.

Oh yes, he affirmed.

I find it curious that a species would choose to live like that.

The Parri are the Parri, he replied in a dry mental tone. They're an entire species of mystics who effectively live in a different world than the rest of us. They reject technology because they see it as an impediment to understanding the truth of self, that technology is a distraction from what truly matters.

I've heard of that outlook before. The Afruba have a religious order that believes something very similar to that, she told him. Their monks live in simple huts they build themselves, with no modern conveniences, and spend most of their time in prayer and meditation. They survive purely by charity, on the gifts of food and basic supplies given to them by others, but lucky for them it's a long-standing Afruba belief that giving a monk charity grants the favor of the gods.

Good to see there are more similarities between our peoples than just the Ulala and their cousin races, he smiled.

Estrella was just as impressed with the tea as she had been by the juice, so she quite enjoyed sitting at the table drinking tea and trying out fingersnaps, which were a Shio confection that Seido had discovered complemented bark tea almost perfectly. After finishing up the snack, they continued on the walking tour, intentionally avoiding any official topics as they toured the residential area around the café. And it gave Estrella the opportunity to see part of the “magic” that he'd revealed to her, when a sukka squirrel seemingly attacked him, jumping out of an overhead tree branch and landing on his shoulder. Sukka squirrels were native to Shio Prime, and were similar to but considerably larger than Terran red squirrels. The move startled Estrella a tiny bit, then she laughed when she realized the squirrel wasn't aggressive. Of course it wasn't, he could tell from the sense

of the small animal that it wasn't what it appeared to be. It was a Kimdori, which meant that it was Miaari, using a small and fuzzy guise to get the opportunity to get into extended contact with Estrella. "How many times have I told you not to do that?" he demanded testily as the squirrel settled comfortably on his shoulder.

So this is one of the residents of that special little world you mentioned?

Yes. This annoying little pain in the butt lives in the neighborhood, he answered. *She thinks it's hilarious to ambush me whenever I walk under whatever tree she's in.* "This is Estrella, a visitor to the territory," he told the squirrel. "She'll be here for several days, and you will *not* drop on her," he said sternly.

"But I wouldn't mind meeting you," she said in a warm tone, holding her hand out to the squirrel.

"She wants to say hello," he told the animal, which then scampered down his arm and up hers. She gave a bit of a little gasp and laughed after it climbed up her arm, settled on her shoulder, and started licking the back of her ear.

"That tickles!" she complained.

"She's a bit of an incorrigible troublemaker," Jason nearly accused.

"Does she have a name?" she asked.

"No, at least no name that you can say. Most animals identify themselves and other by image and scent, which doesn't translate very well to a name. All the other squirrels obey the rules, but not her," he said disapprovingly. "I swear, I think she's a devolved Grimja sometimes."

“I have no idea what that is, but it doesn’t sound good,” she said lightly, reaching up and scratching the squirrel under his chin. “Who are the Grimja?”

“One of the members of the Confederation. They’re a rodent-origin species, so they’re very, very distantly related to the animal on your shoulder,” he replied. “Notorious for their partying, but you won’t find a more solid bunch when things get serious. One of my best friends is a Grimja. Believe me, they’re never boring,” he chuckled.

Miaari lingered on Estrella’s shoulder a moment longer, then jumped down and returned to the tree. He didn’t spare her a second glance, continuing with the tour.

They whiled away a little more time, talking about what she was seeing around the neighborhood, then they returned to the strip and embarked on a tour of the city. Estrella got to meet a significant number of his kids, who clamored around her excitedly—probably more so because Jason pulled them out of school for this—and then they all piled into a dropship and embarked on a tour. Jason flew the skimmer with Estrella in the copilot’s seat as he flew them around the city, pointing out all the best sights, including a very close circling of Cybi’s tree, then they landed and Jason introduced his Ulalan guest to the glorious mysteries of the Shopping District. She got to see a typical day in the life of Jason and Jyslin as they, Tim, and the guards herded the kids around the district as best they could. Jason and Estrella chatted as they walked, still only talking about pedestrian topics, as if to deliberately avoid talking about business, letting her learn more and more about Karis and the Karinnes in an indirect manner. Eventually, Estrella was pulled away from his company by Jyslin and Tim, letting him walk with Miaari while their parents shopped.

“You got a longer touch on her,” Jason said in Kimdori as they walked, Miaari with her hands behind her back. “What did you learn?”

“She’s here for the reasons she says, but also more,” she answered. “Her government desperately needs the raw materials we can provide for their upcoming operation. She wasn’t lying about their galaxy nearly being stripped bare of rare elements over the millennia they’d been huddled behind their walls. It’s not that hard to believe. When your empire spans an entire galaxy, and you’re building a military to fight another empire that spans an entire galaxy, that means your government consumes a massive amount of resources. But more than that, the Ulala want to secure a firm alliance with their cousin species, the Faey, Dreamers, and Terrans. I didn’t see entirely why, I need more time to dig up something that sensitive buried so deeply held within her mind. There’s something the Ulala want, something they need, that’s separate from the needs of the Republic. And they believe that only we can supply it. One thing was clear, though, Jason. The Ulala are genuine in their desire to ally with us, as both members of the Republic and as a segment that belongs to it.”

“Good,” he said. “Can we trust her?”

“Her, yes. But she shares a faint disquiet similar to yours, that the Supreme Council isn’t telling her everything,” she answered. “That there might be something more going on, and they’re keeping it from her so she can’t accidentally reveal it to us. If the Republic tries to exploit or betray us, Jason, it won’t come from her.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” Jason noted. “Do me a favor and take the form of a tabi and wait in the house. When we come back, cozy up to her. She finds tabis adorable, so she’ll be more than amenable to you wanting to sit in her lap. Use that extended contact to dig for anything you

think is important, but not anything that might compromise her privacy. At least to me. I'm sure you'll keep her secrets, the ones I have no business knowing."

"I was about to suggest that very thing, Jason," she nodded. "In fact, it might behoove us to send a Kimdori back with her in tabi form on a permanent basis, so we have someone within the circle of the Supreme Council. Someone to keep us apprised of their machinations."

"I'll discuss it with Zaa, but that would be one dangerous assignment," Jason grunted. "But, the idea of giving her a tabi, a *real* one, that might be smart. If Estrella is on our side, I want to keep her safe. And tabis are very good at keeping people safe."

"You can do me a favor and warn Amber I'm going to be there. You know how she gets."

He chuckled. "I will," he promised. *[Cybi, look around and see if anyone is looking to find tabi kittens a home. I think I'm going to give one to Estrella.]*

[There are 34 different postings within Karsa. I'll get images so we can arrange interviews, so the tabi mother can check Estrella out,] she answered.

[Thanks.] "You saw into her memories. What is the Republic's technology like compared to ours?"

"More advanced, but not by as much as they're leading us to believe," she answered. "Yes, they are significantly far ahead of us, maybe by a thousand years. They've moved beyond most of the common technologies we use, from energy generation to military applications to medicine to

common quality of life technologies. They don't use plasma as a power source, for example. But as our drives prove, they aren't more advanced *everywhere*. Their military technology is well beyond ours, as you might expect. Their medical technology is also much more advanced. I'll draw up a full report on what I saw and send it to 3D, so they might ponder what I saw and consider how to reproduce the effects with our own technology."

"So their tech is super-advanced, but it won't look like magic."

"Just so," she nodded. "There are a few technologies we might consider pursuing that Estrella might be willing to give us, primarily in medicine. Jason, I think the Republic's medical expertise can help us develop a vaccine to the Generation virus," she told him. "One that won't hurt us or the Generations. They've all but conquered all disease in their galaxy, and I don't think she'd object to helping us. She wouldn't see that as a military technology."

"That would help us out a hell of a lot," he said soberly. "It would let us remove the travel restrictions on top of ensuring that the virus doesn't mutate into a plague. Good thinking, Mee," he complemented. "Go ahead and upload anything you think important to Cybi and she'll analyze it."

"I've already done so," she answered.

He was quiet a moment. "Wait, if they don't use plasma, then what do they use?"

"They have two separate power systems, one for low power applications and one for high power. Things like lights and appliances are powered by a magnetic pulse technology that behaves similarly to alternating current electricity, but is much easier for them to generate and completely harmless to anyone that might be exposed to it directly."

“Seriously?”

She nodded. “They find it the most economical system to use, and they’re probably right. It’s much cheaper and easier to use than plasma for something like your lights and dishwasher and vidlink than low-power hyperphased or metaphased plasma. But that power system only really applies to simple residential infrastructure. Their other power system utilizes magnetic lines of force directly, a technology they call magnetic flux. They generate truly impressive amounts of energy by manipulating magnetic lines of force. Their system is much less dangerous than fusion or singularity and outputs just as much power. A breached flux plant won’t explode like a fusion bomb.”

“How in the hell can they generate as much power from some kind of magnetic manipulation as we can get out of a singularity plant?” he protested. “That makes no sense!”

“That’s why they’re more advanced than we are, Jason. It *does* make sense to them.”

He gave her a short look. “I take it you didn’t see the nuts and bolts of how it works?”

She shook her head. “She’s not an engineer, Jason. She has as much understanding of the technical aspects of her technology as any other common citizen. She just knows generally how things work, that’s all.”

“Damn, there goes you lifting some specs off her,” he grunted. “Alright, go get it done, Mee. I’m sure we’ll be here for a while longer, so that should give you time to get everything set up.”

“Alright. See you soon, friend,” she said, then turned and walked away, her tail swaying behind her.

They met back up nearly an hour later, Estrella carrying a bag holding some of her spoils from her shopping foray (using money no doubt lent to her by Jyslin and Tim), and they returned to his house. Jason took a quick moment to warn Amber that Miaari was going to be coming back in tabi form, then introduced her to Estrella as she sat on the kitchen table, watching intently as Ayama prepared lunch. “She’s a vulpar, Estrella,” he explained. “Much like the tabis, she’s *not* a pet, she lives here by her choice, and she’s free to leave any time she wants. You’ll find her nearly as intelligent as anyone you’ve ever met, more than smart enough to understand spoken Faey.”

“Well hello there, my beautiful little one,” she cooed in Faey, looking down at her. “May I pet you?”

Amber gave an agreeing little yip, and after looking to Jason, she reached down and stroked Amber’s head gently.

“She also rules this house,” Ayama mused from the counter.

Jason had to laugh. “In a way, she does,” he agreed. “And that brings me to a little warning. Amber has the ability to open any door in the house, and that includes the pool house. And she likes to patrol the house from time to time to make sure everything’s okay. So, there’s a chance she may come into your quarters,” he warned.

“That’s fine, Jason. I think I’ll enjoy her visit,” she smiled, patting Amber on the head.

She gave a bright little yip.

“She said she’ll make you regret that decision,” Jason drawled, which made her laugh.

“So, you’re a little brute, are you?” Estrella asked teasingly, which made Amber growl squeakily.

“She takes particular offense to being called a brute,” Jason supplied lightly. “It’s true, but she doesn’t see it that way.”

Amber glared at him.

“I’m *so* scared,” he answered blandly.

After a light lunch, Jason and Estrella retired from the others to begin official negotiations, doing it outside, sitting at the deck table, rather than up in his office. She found it a little weird to talk business while kids moved back and forth across the deck, discussing what the Republic wanted and what they were willing to offer in return. True to Miaari and Miaari’s information, she was most keenly interested in armor-quality heavy metals, Terynium, and metallic gases mined from super gas giants, which were used in quite a few components in weapons built by the Karinnes, so they had to have equal military value to the Republic. They discussed what the Karinnes wanted in return, discussing various food stocks and possible technology swaps, but not making any definite offers quite yet. The two of them were just feeling out each other’s position, working in very broad generalities so they could narrow things down to hard numbers and solid commitments later on. Miaari made her arrival not long after they began, in the shape of a fairly large gray-furred tabi. She started by rubbing herself against Estrella’s feet, then goaded her into picking her up and putting her in her lap, where she petted the tabi continuously as they debated...which gave Miaari all but unlimited time to carefully walk through Estrella’s

memories. Miaari didn't hear their discussions since they were sending, but her contact with Estrella let her hear what was going on through her unwitting host.

He almost felt bad, what he was doing, but this was how the game was played at this level.

They discussed the basic framework of the trade deal well into the afternoon, which meant that Symone had time to arrive. She came onto the deck wearing her armor, and she detoured almost immediately towards him. *Hey lover. Is this her?* she asked.

Yes, this is her, he answered. *Estrella, this is Symone, Tim's wife and my amu dozei. Symone, Estrella Nine Rings, member of the Supreme Council of the Galactic Republic.*

You're cute, Symone sent, not being very diplomatic about her interest.

Symone, he warned. *I'm sorry, friend. Symone's not...tactful. It's part of her charm.*

I'm just me, and I don't pretend to be anything different, she grinned.

Jason said you're in the military?

Yup. I'm an exomech company commander, she answered. *I command a company of those,* she added, pointing. Between the houses, just barely visible around the guard barracks, Jason's Titan and Valkyrie stood on the landing pad.

I noticed those. We use something similar. Just not quite so small.

Stop flexing, sexy, she chided, which made Estrella laugh. *What do you think of Karis so far?*

I'm quite impressed, both by the city and by its people, she answered. So, which of the children I met are yours?

Lyra, Terry, and Jonny, she answered. Lyra and Jonny are my children with my husband, and Terry is my son with Jason.

Jon? But I thought Jon was Julia's brother.

We have two Jons. Actually, more a Jon and a Jonathon. Jonathon and Terry are identical twins, and Jon and Julia are fraternal twins, he explained. Symone's about the only one that calls him by his name. Most everyone else calls him JJ.

Ah, I remember JJ, she nodded. But why give them the same name?

Because Tim's a stubborn ass, Jason retorted, which made Symone laugh.

Tim and Jyslin both decided on Jon without conferring with each other, and neither was willing to back down and change it, Symone sent impishly. But the truth is, Jyslin wanted her son with Tim to have the same name as my son with Tim, to tie them, and us, together.

Oh, so your Jon isn't your biological son?

He shook his head. In Faey society, the husband of the mother is considered the father no matter who the biological sire is, he explained. And personally, I don't have a problem with that. Jon isn't the only child on the strip not a blood relative to me that I consider my child. Aria is adopted, obviously, and Danelle is my daughter. I don't give a damn that another man sired her, I love her just as much as I love my other children.

Has she ever met her biological father?

Goodness yes, he lives right over there, Symone answered, pointing towards Meya and Myra's house. Jenn. He's married to Meya.

But he used to be with Myleena?

Sort of, Jason replied. Remember when I told you that they thought I was the last of my kind? Estrella nodded. Myleena shares that distinction. We are among the last of the original Karinnes, we carry the bloodline of our ancestors that existed before the destruction of the house in the Third Civil War. That bloodline was why I could lay claim to the House and restore it, because I am of the direct line of the original rulers of the house. I told you that Terrans and Faey can have children. Well, at the time, I was thought to be the last surviving Terran descendent of the House of Karinne. My ancestors became my ancestors after the destruction of the house, when the surviving nobles of the house fled to Terra to hide after Karis was destroyed. I'm the descendent of one of those Karinnes, who was part of the ruling family's bloodline, one of the branch families not directly in line for the house throne but still considered members of the ruling family. So is Myleena, but she is the descendent of a Karinne that married into the House of Merrane before the war started. When we restored the House, the others decided that the fact that I was the last Terran Karinne meant that my branch of the family could go extinct if something happened to me, which is why I have so many kids. My friends decided to each have a child by me in order to protect the legacy of my family line. On Myleena's side of the family, there were only a handful of original Karinnes left, the descendents of Karinnes who married into other noble houses, so they decided that in order to protect the bloodline and enrich the gene pool, they would have three children by three different fathers or mothers. Danelle is the first of

Myli's three children, by Jenn. Siyara is her second, by me, and she's yet to have her third.

She's too busy to even think about it, Symone sent, almost accusingly. I mean, how can you be too busy to have sex? You're gonna get pregnant eventually. Sometimes I think that woman is too smart to be normal.

Excuse her, she only thinks with the little brain, Jason apologized, which made Symone laugh.

You said you thought you were the only Terran Karinne left? That wasn't true?

There's just one other, we found her not long after we moved to Karis, Jason answered. Me and Rahne were, at that time, the only two Terrans with Karinne blood. The Karinnes came to Terra about 800 Republic Standard Years ago and took Terrans for spouses, producing the Terran Karinnes. And over that time, our family line dwindled and dwindled, until there were only me and Rahne left.

There had to be a reason.

There is. My people are vulnerable to a fatal disease that Terran medicine couldn't cure, which slowly killed off the Terran Karinnes over time. I honestly think that if the Faey hadn't come to Terra some fifteen of our years ago, the Terran Karinnes would be extinct. Both me and Rahne would be dead by now, and neither of us had children at the time. So our line would have ended.

Ah, but Faey medicine can cure it.

He nodded.

Anyway, how much longer are all the boring talks gonna go on? We need to get Estrella here out of those clothes and onto the beach! she declared. *That way I can check her out when she's not paying much attention to me.*

Stop that, Jason chided, which made her laugh.

Don't let those other girls fool you, Estrella, I'm a real Faey, she grinned. *Faey think about three things; sex, fighting, and sex. In that order. And if you're even half as Faey as we are, two of those three items are on your list too. So, which is it?*

Girl, I'm gonna spank you, Jason told her in a surly mental tone.

That sounds way more fun than the way you mean it, she retorted with a wink at him.

The Ulala are true cousins of the Faey, was all Estrella sent in reply, a slight smile on her face.

You are such a tease! I like you already, Symone told her. *Later you'll have to tell me all the juicy details, after you get all this boring work out of the way. I'm gonna go get out of this armor and slip into something more naughty,* she grinned, then she sauntered over to her house and went in.

“Someday I'm gonna put a muzzle on that woman,” he growled aloud, which made Estrella laugh.

“She's certainly bold, I'll give her that. I'm not used to women propositioning me so openly.”

“Symone is Symone,” he said, almost despondently. “The perfect example of what happens when libido overcomes reason. I hope she didn't

offend you. She often doesn't even fathom that women may find her flirting to be awkward or uncomfortable."

"Well, I'm not offended. I'm not inclined towards other women, but it's fairly common among my people. As I suspect it is among the Faey."

"Common enough. I noticed you didn't bat an eye over Seido and Merra."

"I didn't find it overly unusual," she said simply. "The heart loves who the heart loves, and it's pure arrogance to believe that age, or gender, or even species can shackle the heart to the expectations of others," she said sagely.

"Well said," he replied. "Some cultures in our galaxy have a dim view of such pairings, and I'm sad to say that some of the cultures of Terra are among them, including the one in which I grew up. Shio society shares that disapproval, which is one reason why Seido and Merra live here," he explained. "They moved here to find a culture more accepting of...the calling of their hearts, as you put it. And for one, I'm glad they did. Seido and Merra are very close, dear friends, despite the fact that Seido works for me. Merra's pregnant, you know," he noted absently. "The Alliance has technology that allows two women to have a baby that's theirs biologically."

"Egg fusion," Estrella supplied.

He nodded. "They had that done, and Merra's carrying. And I can't wait. Another baby in the house, and since she'll have two mothers, that means I get no competition to be the best dad ever," he declared.

She put her chin in her hand, giving him an amused look. “You are a very interesting man, Jason,” she said with a slight smile.

“Why thank you,” he replied grandly. “Now let’s get this boring work out of the way so we can sit on the beach and you can torment Symone with your ambivalence.”

She laughed brightly. “I’ll make sure to lead her on to the point where she can’t sit still, then crush all her hopes with a single well placed dagger stroke to the heart,” she promised.

“You’re gonna do just fine around here, Estrella,” he told her seriously, which made her laugh again.

They went back to talking business, slowly starting to focus in on actual numbers and materials, weaving in those serious discussions with random casual conversation. Estrella met some of the other strip residents over that time, from Temika and Mike to Songa, to Aura’s husband Selenn—but wouldn’t meet Aura herself, she was on deployment—then got to see an afternoon on the strip after school let out and the rest of the kids got home. The beach quickly populated with the kids old enough to be allowed to swim unsupervised, both residents and their friends over to hang out with them, as well as a few of their parents. Their talks were often interrupted by the kids, who came up to greet Jason and meet his guest.

Estrella got a bit of a surprise exposure to just how diverse the House was when a Kizzik noble ambled up from the direction of the gate out to the neighborhood. Her eyes widened a bit and she nearly stood up, pausing halfway out of her chair, which caused Jason to look that way. “Grik,” he called as she clattered up to them. “What are you doing over here in person?”

“I was on the way to an appointment, and realized that I was going to pass directly over your house, revered Hive-leader,” she answered aloud, the interface resting atop her head, behind her antennae, intoned mechanically. *“I have the projections for the Alakis terraforming project ready for your perusal.”* She offered a handpanel to him.

“You coulda just waited until tomorrow. I’m gonna be in the office in the morning.”

“It is of no moment, revered Hive-leader,” she answered. *“This way saves time for both of us.”*

“Alright then. I’ll take a look at it tonight,” he said with a nod as he took it. “By the way, Grik, this is Estrella Nine Rings, member of the Supreme Council of the Galactic Republic. Estrella, may I introduce Grik’zzk, member of my cabinet and overseer of all farming and terraforming operations the House conducts.”

“Honor to you, revered Hive-leader,” Grik’zzk called, crossing her blade arms and bowing at the waist...as much as she had one.

“A pleasure to meet you, Grik,” she replied calmly. “I apologize for my sudden reaction. I must admit that I’ve never met a species quite like you before.”

“No offense taken, revered Hive-leader,” she replied aloud. *“We know that we look quite intimidating to other species.”*

“How are your species called?”

“We are known as Kizzik, revered Hive-leader,” she answered.

“We are graced to have several Kizzik Hives living on Karis, who predominantly live on the continent of Kirga. The Kizzik are logistics experts without peer, able to build and manage very large and highly complex logistical operations, and that is a great definition for an industrial-level farming operation. I told you that Karis is the bread basket of the galaxy, that we export vast amounts of food so nobody goes hungry, and Grik’zzk is one of the major reasons why. If you want a large-scale operation planned and executed with maximum efficiency and productivity, you go to the Kizzik.”

“Order brings prosperity,” Grik’zzk intoned soberly.

“The House wouldn’t be anywhere near as prosperous as it is if not for the Kizzik,” Jason said glowingly.

“You also perform terraforming?” Estrella asked.

“It is within our technological capability,” Grik’zzk answered.

“We’re terraforming another terrestrial planet in the Karis system,” Jason told her. “It began as a desert planet unable to support life, but in about five years, it’ll have a life-sustaining ecosphere. We intend to turn the entire planet into one giant farming operation, to increase our food output to meet projected future demand. Some of the crop seeds I hope to get from the Republic will be planted on Alakis,” he chuckled.

“I will take my leave, revered Hive-leader. As I said, I am on my way to an appointment.”

“Alright. We’ll talk about this tomorrow,” he said, holding up the handpanel.

She bowed again, then turned and clattered towards the gate.

I've never met an insectoid species that large, Estrella admitted to him. We have several in the Republic, but they're half her size.

The Kizzik are one of the more unique intelligent species in the galaxy, he told her. They can't speak, so they rely on that device that's on her head to do it for them. And I wasn't kidding when I said that they're the best there is when it comes to large scale logistics. No other species comes close to their skill when it comes to that kind of job. They don't just do that job within the House, either. The Kizzik manage the Confederation's trade network, and let me tell you, there's not a king, emperor, president, or council leader in the Confederation that wouldn't walk through fire to keep the Kizzik in that position. We all highly respect them for their expertise.

You truly are a cosmopolitan civilization. And as a citizen of the Republic, I find that quite comforting, because it's so similar to us. The Republic would not be what it is if not for the many different species that constitute it.

Why thank you, my friend, he smiled. I've always believed that diversity brings strength. It also allows species with natural strengths to excel in roles that play to them.

A very wise approach, she sent, her thought quite complementary. Are those blades on her arms just decorative?

No. They are very sharp, and as strong as titanium, he answered. Kizzik blade chitin is one of the strongest biologically-produced materials known to our science.

Interesting. Are the exoskeletons made of the same stuff?

No, just the blades. But their exoskeletons are pretty damn tough despite that, he answered. And the odd part is, while they're very well armed, physically powerful and agile, and would be exceptionally nasty opponents in a fight, they're one of the most peaceful species I know. They find war to be highly inefficient, he sent in a dry mental tone. So that means they see it as an utter waste of time.

That proves they're highly evolved.

Well sent.

They wrapped up their initial negotiations in time for dinner, which was enjoyed out on the deck in a warm, slightly windy afternoon. Seido cooked for them using the outside grill, and Jason found it a bit interesting that Estrella spent most of her time waiting for dinner to be served chatting with Merrra over her pregnancy. Jyslin and Symone joined them as Seido cooked, with Tim, Rann, Shya, Bethany, and Siyae coming to the table after Seido called them to dinner. Estrella spent a little time getting to know the girls, since she hadn't really talked to them since arriving, then enjoyed being all but mugged by Jon and Julia when they joined them as dinner was served.

He noticed that she was *very* good with children, and that children seemed drawn to her, the same way they were drawn to Maya.

She chatted with everyone at the table, using the same tactic she did at the banquet on her ship, subtly pumping everyone around her for information, and she wasn't below trying to draw things out of the kids that an adult may be experienced enough not to reveal. He didn't blame her for it, she was just doing the smart thing, and besides, he still kinda felt a little cheap for unleashing Miaari on her.

Jason finished eating and let his family keep Estrella entertained, going into the house. Miaari was waiting for him in the living room, sitting on the couch sipping on a cup of bark tea. “Cousin,” he said in Kimdori, sitting in the chair opposite her. “You had a long time to dig. What did you find out?”

“Not much more than I knew already,” she answered. “I learned most of her personal history and her career in politics. She’s actually a very honest and forthright woman who cares about her people and is a patriot to the Republic. Despite her patriotism, she’ll keep certain things quiet if she feels that the Republic knowing about them jeopardizes the trade agreements she’s here to negotiate. So in the short term, we can trust her with some of our secrets. But those secrets may not stay secret in the long term. Once the Republic has the supplies it needs, Estrella’s position may change. Especially if the war with the Bru turns against them. If she feels that dragging us into it is necessary to turn the tide if the war goes badly, she’ll do it. She’ll feel awful about it, but she *will* do it.”

“So, we need to keep things quiet,” he surmised, to which she nodded. “So, your opinion is that our good relations with the Republic are going to hinge on their success against the Bru?”

“I’d say yes, cousin,” she answered. “Like I said earlier, though, she’ll negotiate in good faith and ensure that any deal she makes is honored. So in that respect, you can trust her. In my professional opinion, if we want stable and peaceful long-term ties to the Republic, our strategy should be to try to give them what they need to eliminate the Bru. Whatever they need, we do our best to supply. Once they’ve freed themselves of that threat, they’ll most likely be much more open and amenable to giving us what we want, since we supported them in their time of need. The Republic that Estrella

believes in is honorable and fair and just, and since she's on the Supreme Council, she will fight to keep it so."

"Alright. Did you dig up why the Ulala want ties to their cousin races?"

She nodded. "And this is where it gets interesting, cousin. The Ulala are a single race, but they originated from *two* planets within their galaxy, and those planets were on opposite sides of the galaxy. They know that one of those branches was transplanted to the other planet, but it was so long ago that they don't know who did it, they don't know which planet was the origin planet, and they don't know why it was done. Much as we have our own suspicions and theory about why there are Faey in multiple galaxies, the Ulala now have the same suspicions, fueled by the discovery that Ualanan and Faey DNA is identical, and they want to solve the mystery. That's why Estrella was so intent to get her hands on the history of the Faey and the Dreamers, her people are digging through those records to see if there's a correlation to Ulalan history, and maybe answer questions about why the Ulala were moved to a second planet in their distant history. They think like we do, that it is far more than a coincidence that they are genetically related to the Faey. They have found a mystery, and basic Ulalan psychology makes them want to solve that mystery. In that respect, they are very similar to the Faey, they share that same highly curious and inquisitive nature. A trait we Kimdori find quite acceptable," she said commendingly.

"Why didn't she just say that up front?"

"Because she thought you'd find the idea outlandish, and maybe even a little bit crazy," she answered. "And guess when they've pinpointed that the transplant of a segment of the Ulalan population from one planet to the other took place?"

“Forty thousand years ago,” he said, to which she nodded. “Which lines up with the genetic deviation as the Dreamers and the Iri. I’ll bet that if we analyze Ulalan DNA, we’ll find the exact same time of deviation. And that proves it, cousin. Some ancient spacefaring race *did* pick up the Faey and spread them across multiple galaxies. The Ulala are the first we’ve come across that have memory of it.”

“Yes,” she nodded in agreement. “So the question, the mystery, cousin, is why it was done. And which galaxy among the four known branches of the Faey is their original home galaxy.”

“I would have said Draconis, at up until ten seconds ago,” he grunted. “The Ulala are the most advanced of us all, that lends to the theory that they are the original civilization. They’ve had the most time to develop without being uprooted. It’s most logical to assume that whoever moved them picked them up from one of the Ulalan origin planets and seeded them through the galaxies as they moved through the clusters, but also planted a second Ulalan population on another planet within their home galaxy.”

“Or there might be an even older, even more advanced Faey branch in another galaxy that we haven’t encountered yet,” Miaari intoned. “But given the information we have now, cousin, your theory does have the greatest weight.”

“Huh.” He grunted, then turned his head and had a hologram activate. Myra’s face was within that flat hologram. “Myra.”

“Hey babes, what’s up?”

“We’ve just come across some information that’s going to change things. What I want you to do is create a new division within the KES dedicated to a new scientific mission, and I want you to assign two research

groups to it. Those groups should be comprised primarily of scout ships and charting frigates, with eight Vanguards acting as theater command and information collection and analysis.”

“Can do. What’s the mission of this new division?”

“They’re going to focus on exploring every galaxy within the supercluster in search of more species that resemble the Faey,” he answered. “That is their *only* mission, Myra. They pass any information of note that they gather back to HQ so you can assign research or exploration missions to other units. If there’s no Faey-like species on a planet they discover, they just transmit their sensor logs back to the Vanguard and move on. They only stop and do more comprehensive scans and charting if they find a Faey-like species on the planet, with the primary mission to determine if that species is genetically related to the Faey or merely cosmetically resembles the Faey.”

“Not a problem, babe. You can come over to HQ tomorrow and we’ll talk about it. But Cyrsi can start drawing up a rough draft asset realignment plan.”

“Good deal. I’m going to assign some KMS assets to this group too, so take that into account when you draw up the plan,” he told her.

“Will do. Come over tomorrow morning and we’ll talk it over.”

The hologram winked out, and he looked back to Miaari. “You think there are more.”

“Many more,” he agreed. “Think about it. Two planets seeded with Ulala. Two here, the Faey and us Terrans, though we’re not entirely in the Faey genetic line. But our DNA is similar enough to make the fact that we

exist part of the discussion. I'd bet that the species that seeded the Faey put them on multiple planets within the galaxies they chose for their...project."

"The Dreamers are the only ones from Andromeda, but the war between the Syndicate and the Consortium could have destroyed the other seeded population," Miaari mused, tapping her muzzle.

"And I'll bet that if we take a much closer look at galaxy A2A, we'll find another Faey-seeded species to go along with the Iri. At least if they're still there," he noted absently. "That may be why they seeded multiple planets within a galaxy, to ensure that at least one of them would survive long enough to become established. After all, just dropping a tribe of stone-age Faey in an alien environment meant that they'd have a very high mortality rate. They'd have no idea what was poisonous, what animals were dangerous, and so on."

"The Faey would be the perfect species for such an experiment," Miaari reasoned. "They have the ability to genetically adapt to their environment very quickly, at least in the scope of biology. They would be fully adapted to the environment within two or three generations, which would drastically increase their survivability."

"That is a *damn* good observation, cousin," Jason said emphatically. "Their telepathy would give them an edge in survival, the ability to communicate silently and across long distances, and the Faey ability to genetically adapt would allow them to become part of their new ecosystem very, very fast. I can't think of any species that would have a higher chance of surviving something like that than the Faey. Not even hardy species like the Verutans or the Aggjat could do it, because they'd still consider the environment to be alien, hostile, at least from the point of view of biology. But the Faey wouldn't. The grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the

initial seed population would be fully adapted to the planetary conditions. They'd just have to survive long enough for that ability to kick in. It would be like dropping a population of polar bears in a tropical jungle," he mused. "They'd really struggle at first, quite a few of them would die, but their cubs would be better suited to the tropical environment. And by the time those cubs had cubs of their own, that third generation would be fully adapted to a tropical habitat, would become part of it instead of an invasive species."

"That is the true strength of the Faey as a species, and why they thrive on so many planets, with so many different environments," Miaari agreed. "Most other empires use terraforming or environmental units to make their colonies feel more like home, but the Faey do not. They adapt to their planets, they don't try to adapt their planets to them."

"Cyrsi, Cybi, you hear all that?" he asked, looking up.

"Of course we did, Jason. And that is an intriguing theory for us to explore," Cybi answered.

"It will give me something to focus on when I study KES sensor data," Cyrsi added.

"Cybi, look over the KMS and select some frigates to add to the research group, then talk to Juma about it. Cyrsi, draw up the realignment plan."

"We'll take care of it, Jason," Cyrsi assured him.

"Anything else you feel you need to pass along right now, cousin?"

She shook her head. "I'll send you a report on everything I learned, but that's what is most important."

“Good deal. That means I can bargain with her knowing that she’ll do so in good faith, and that’s what I needed to know the most,” he said, then he slapped his hands on his knees and stood up. “Alright, let me go back outside. I doubt we’ll do any more official negotiating today, but I don’t want her to think I’m ignoring her. Besides, I do like her, very much so,” he chuckled. “She’s quite a woman.”

“She is at that,” Miaari agreed. “I’ll join you in a while. I want to report my findings to Denmother while they’re still fresh in my mind.”

“Okay then, see you when you get back.”

He wandered back out onto the deck, only to find that they’d moved down to the beach. Somehow, Jyslin had talked Estrella out of her clothes, the two of them sitting on a blanket under one of the umbrellas just down from the house with their clothes folded neatly on the edge of the blanket, the two of them almost shoulder to shoulder as they chatted via sending. Jyslin really seemed to be warming up to Estrella, he noticed. Symone was sitting with her boys, Jon, and Julia, all of them playing in the sand...and that made him a bit relieved. The last thing he needed was Symone getting handsy with Estrella. *So, the human telepaths are all descendents of the Karinnes?* Estrella asked as they watched Latoiya and Sami play wikli.

Mostly. Jason and Rahne are the only ones descended from the nobility. The other Terrans are all descended from the crew of the ship that brought them here, she answered. Since telepathy breeds true in Terrans if one parent has it, all of their descendents are telepaths.

But they’re not susceptible to that disease that decimated Jason’s family line.

No, it must be specific to Jason's family, Jyslin answered. You know how nobles only tend to marry among themselves. There must have been a genetic weakness in the Karinne nobility that made them highly susceptible to cancer, far more than the commoners that were on the ship.

Ah. Well, I'm glad to hear that he's not in danger anymore, she called, looking over at him as he stepped up to the blanket.

So am I, for obvious reasons, he drawled mentally. Sorry, I had a bit of house business to deal with.

That's alright, I've been quite entertained while you've been gone, she told him lightly, reaching over and pushing Jyslin's shoulder gently. You married up, Jason.

Oh, he knows he did, Jyslin grinned at her, which made the two women laugh.

Good to see you're making friends, Jason told her with a smile.

I feel quite at home here among your people, she replied. The Faey are a people I find I can easily talk to. Have much in common with, she added with a smile towards Jyslin. So, what is Temika like? She's a Terran, so she must have a very different culture.

Oh yeah, Terrans are complete prudes, Symone told her. And Mika is the ultimate Terran. Not even fifteen years living here has taken the stick out of her butt.

I heard that! Temika warned from further down the strip, which made Symone laugh.

Like I haven't told you that to your face, you silly girl, she retorted playfully. You'd be a whole lot more fun if you'd just loosen up a little bit!

My idea of fun isn't chasing men I don't know around a bedroom, she stated bluntly. I'm a married woman, you tart!

See, just no fun at all, Symone sent to Estrella, giving her a naughty grin.

So Terrans believe in monogamy within the marriage, Estrella surmised.

Some do. The first thing you need to learn about Terrans is that we don't have a homogenous, contiguous culture. Terra has hundreds of different cultures, thousands, making it one of the most diverse planets in the galaxy from a cultural point of view. Nearly every nation or geographic region on Terra has its own culture, and those cultures can be very different from one another. What one Terran believes isn't what all Terrans believe.

Thank Trelle for that, it's why Tim and Jason are way more fun than Temika, Symone grinned.

So, when it comes to Terrans, Estrella, you take each one for who he or she is, and you don't assume that every Terran acts the same way.

Different views, yet you live in harmony with each other, Estrella mused mentally. A sign of a healthy and enlightened culture.

Why thank you, Jason smiled down at her. Is there anything else you wanted to do today, or just wanna hang out on the beach and relax?

Relax, she answered. Can we go on a tour of your planet tomorrow? I'd like to see some of your other cities, see those groves of the giant oye

trees you mentioned.

Sure, we can do that, he answered. How'd you like to go to Kirga and see one of the Kizzik hives? They're amazing examples of subterranean three dimensional architecture.

That sounds lovely, she smiled.

If you're gonna stay on the beach, get rid of the clothes, love, Jyslin ordered. They have no business being on this side of the deck railing.

You're just trying to get me naked so Estrella can ogle me, he accused.

Hey, I gotta show my man off to my friends, it's what Faey women do, she grinned, which made Estrella laugh.

Well, it's gonna have to wait. If Estrella's done for the day, I'm gonna take this opportunity to do some paperwork, before it has a chance to pile up on me. That way I'm not cutting into her time, he answered. Besides, now that I have a list of the things the Republic needs, I need to make a few calls and talk to a few people, see how much we have and how much we can get quickly. I'll be back in a while, hopefully before sunset. I would like to hang out with you a bit, he smiled.

And check you out your rack, Symone added with a naughty tilt to her thought.

That ship already sailed, love, Jason noted lightly. I'll be up in my home office, so I'll be in sending range if you need me.

It certainly didn't take Estrella long to conquer the strip.

By the next morning, Estrella was both Jyslin's and Symone's long-lost best friend ever. The three of them had hung out all afternoon and evening, sitting on the beach and talking about nothing in particular, proving that Estrella was just as socially gracious, and dangerous, as Jason expected her to be. She had natural charisma, poise, grace, elegance, even when sitting bare-ass naked on a beach blanket, but it was her earthy, relaxed personality that had hooked his wife and *amu*. Estrella was just naughty enough to be great company for a Faey woman—females were the dominant gender among the Ulala as well—and she didn't act like a ruler or a politician. She was earnest, kind, and witty, had a great sense of humor, and didn't take herself very seriously at all...in many ways, she had many of the same qualities that made Kreel so likable, just nowhere near as loud and gregarious.

By breakfast, she almost seemed like a part of the strip. She sat with his family at the big table out on the deck, enjoying a gloriously beautiful morning as she sampled Seido's breakfast cuisine, maybe showing off a tiny bit by managing to eat virtually everything not liquid with nothing but a pair of Ulalan chopsticks Jason had made for her visit and a knife.

After breakfast, the day got started for everyone, which included Estrella and Jason. He first took her to the Paladins complex, letting her see the IBL bachi team that Jyslin owned and operated, since Estrella was curious about the leisure activities and sports the Faey enjoyed. They spent nearly an hour there, then moved on to a flying tour of the major cities on every continent, letting her see the different architectural styles that the Karinnes employed, making the cities part of the land instead of trying to bend the land to their will. After that tour, he took her to the Parri village on Karga to show her the *oye* trees, but got more than he bargained for when

he landed. He had no idea that Mrar was there, so he was honestly surprised to see her riding on the *shaman*'s back when she padded up to the skimmer on all fours. Mrar and the *shaman* had quite a strong friendship, bonding when they were training Jason for his meeting with the Board.

[Mrar, be very careful what you say,] he warned as he powered down the skimmer, before opening the hatch. *[There's an outside diplomatic visitor with me, and she knows nothing about the virus or the Generations.]*

[Got it,] she replied.

He opened the hatch and escorted Estrella down, and Mrar jumped down just before the *shaman* rose up on her hind legs, going from chest height to towering over them. "Estrella, may I introduce the *shaman*, leader of the Parri who live in this village. She's one of my most trusted advisors. *Shaman*, this is Estrella Nine Rings, a diplomatic envoy," he said aloud.

Estrella gawked a bit when the *shaman* stepped up to her, almost uncomfortably close, then had little choice but to tilt her head when the Parri put one of her thick fingers under her chin. "Can you hear it?" she asked without preamble.

"Hear...what?"

"If you listen, you will know," she replied.

The Parri are mystics, Estrella, and it seems she's taken an interest in you, Jason warned. She doesn't ask oddball questions like that out of the blue unless she sees something in you that intrigues her.

Alright. "Um, I'd be delighted to learn more about what I'm supposed to be able to hear, *shaman*," she replied diplomatically.

“What do you see, *shaman*?” Jason asked.

“A strong heart, Jason Karinne,” she answered without looking at him. “A strong, gentle heart, well illumined in the light of love.”

“Well then,” he said, giving Estrella an appraising look. She was sensitive, like Rann, Kevin Ball, and Kyva? That was good news, at least in his opinion. But that was something to ponder later. “Estrella, this is Mrar Rahl. She’s of a species known as the Pai, and she’s one of my teachers and mentors.”

Estrella stepped away from the Parri enough to kneel down, taking the paw that Mrar offered her with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrar. What is it that you teach?”

[Can I tell her?]

[Sure, she knows I’m a TK.]

“I’m Jason’s telekinesis instructor,” she answered.

“Mrar is one of the most skilled telekinetics in the galaxy, Estrella,” Jason told her. “I can’t even begin to explain what I’ve learned from her.”

“My people have very few telekinetics,” Estrella said.

“Really? I know quite a few Dreamers with the gift.”

“She’s not a Dreamer, Mrar,” Jason said soberly. “Her people are known as the Ulala. She’s not from this galaxy. She’s here to discuss opening official diplomatic relations with the House.”

“Oh? Oh!” she said suddenly. “So, you met our ship when the KES explored your home galaxy?”

“Something like that,” Estrella answered.

“You look like a Dreamer! I thought you were one!”

“Believe me, we were just as surprised at the resemblance,” Estrella smiled. “That’s half the reason we opened relations with the Karinnes, because of the uncanny resemblance with the Faey and Dreamers.”

“Estrella asked to visit the grove and see the trees, *shaman*,” Jason announced. “Do you think the trees will object? I know they’re somewhat particular about who they allow close to them.”

“It will be no bother, Jason Karinne,” she smiled. “I believe they will enjoy her company.”

“I’d be honored if you’d show me what you know of them,” Estrella said as Jason rather boldly reached down and picked up Mrar, then set her on his shoulder.

“I would be happy to do so.”

The four of them walked out of the village, along the flat area between the stream and the hill that formed the back edge of the village, which gave time for Estrella to address Jason’s statement. *Why did you say that the trees may not like me?*

Because they’re sentient, he answered. Oye trees aren’t like any other tree you’ve ever heard of, Estrella. Even I don’t completely understand them. I just know that they have an intelligence that goes way beyond just being a plant. These trees can talk, if you have the ability to hear what they say. Very few people do.

You do.

Yes, he agreed. It's tied up with my ability to communicate with animals. The tree behind my house isn't just a really big decoration. It's a friend, and the two of us have some pretty long conversations.

So, what does a tree say?

A whole lot of things I can't understand. They have an entirely different intelligence from us. Their minds are utterly alien compared to us meat people. It took a long time for me to come to understand that intelligence and start to understand what the tree was saying. At least as much as I have. Like I said, I still don't completely understand the trees, so I don't understand everything it says. In effect, I've spent the last several years trying to learn their language.

Believe me, it makes him look a little crazy, sitting there talking to a tree, Mrar injected, which made Estrella give her a surprised look. She then laughed in delight.

I had no idea you had talent!

I'm tiny compared to you. You giants always underestimate us tiny people, she replied with a roguish grin on her muzzle.

Mrar is full of surprises. The biggest being that she's from an extreme heavy gravity planet, so do not let her hit you. She can break your bones with a flick of her finger.

Don't warn them, you big meanie! Mrar protested lightly.

That explains your size, Mrar. I've never met a heavy gravity species that wasn't small.

There are a few here in this galaxy. The Haumda, the Ogravians, and the Faey are all considered heavy gravity species, but they're either tall, or freakin' huge in the case of the Ogravians.

The Faey are right on the lower edge of what our people classify as heavy gravity, Jason explained. Us Terrans are just under that line, at the high end of what's considered normal gravity. Republic standard gravity is just a tiny bit stronger than Terran gravity, so you're right there with us. The Faey are from a world with 1.3 gravity by your measurements, the Ogravians are from a planet with 2.3 gravity, and the Pai are from a world with 17.6 gravity. The Pai have the distinction of being from the heaviest gravity planet known to our science and yet still have a scientifically advanced society. Hell, they even managed to achieve space travel using chemical rocket engines.

How in the seven forms of Maisa did you get a ship off a planet with gravity that heavy?

Ingenuity, Mrar grinned.

They may be small, but the Pai are some of the smartest people you're ever gonna meet, Estrella, Jason sent, admiration rippling through his thought.

To pull that off? I will not dispute that declaration in any way, Jason, she replied emphatically.

They spent quite a nice hour or so out in the grove, Estrella listening with honest interest as the *shaman* told her about the trees and her people's all but symbiotic relationship with them. Estrella constantly tried to guide the conversation towards learning more about the intelligence of the trees, but the answers the *shaman* gave her were typical Parri, they were cryptic

and indirect, and the more Estrella tried to get her to clarify, the more confused she got. It only got worse when the *shaman* answered her questions about their mysticism, telling her about how the harmony of the mind, body, and soul could allow a being to transcend the restrictions of the physical world.

After that discussion, as Jason and Estrella walked along the edge of the village, she gave him a look of nearly helpless confusion. *Now I see why you call what they can do magic, she told him. Can you do any of it?*

Just what you've seen, though I have managed one of the first steps down what the shaman calls the path of truth, he answered, detouring her towards the small meadow holding the pond. And I can show it to you, it's something that you can see.

Really?

Yep. Here, look into the pond, he said when they reached the edge, Jason pointing down into the water. Tell me what you see.

She looked down, and saw nothing for a second. But then it started to click in her mind, and she looked over at him to see if he was leaning over the water as well. When she saw that he was, her eyes widened and she snapped her gaze back and forth between the reflection and him. *How?* was all she asked.

I solved the riddle of the mirror, so I no longer cast a reflection, he sent in answer. It drives Myli absolutely insane, she's been on the warpath for months trying to understand the science behind it. But this proves beyond any doubt that what the Parri believe is very real, he surmised, motioning towards the water.

What is the riddle of the mirror?

It's kinda difficult to explain, but the best way to explain it is that a mirror isn't a tool to see yourself, it's a tool to allow you to see your own thoughts and memories, he answered, kneeling down and looking down into the still water. She followed suit. But you can't use it to do that until you understand the truth of who you really are. When you don't know that, all you see is your reflection. But if you do, you can use a mirror to look into your own thoughts and memories, to see the memories of the soul instead of the memories of the mind. The soul remembers everything, every second of every minute of every day of your entire life, so you can use it to see things that you've forgotten. While I've learned the truth of myself, I haven't yet learned how to see the memories of my soul. I'm still working on that, he admitted. When you look at your reflection and can see who you really are, not the image, the construct of yourself that your mind and the outside world imposes upon you, you solve the riddle of the mirror and you no longer cast a reflection. But I advise you not to play with this, he warned soberly. This isn't a risk-free thing. If you're an evil person, if you're greedy or cruel or uncaring, then seeing that truth without your ego and your self-delusion watering it down enough to make it palatable to you can drive you to suicide. So I'll tell you what I've told everyone else, my friend. Do not try it. Besides, you have no idea how surprisingly annoying it is not to cast a reflection, especially for someone who shaves, he grunted mentally, rubbing his jaw. While I don't cast a reflection anymore, I can be seen on a camera, so I have to use a camera and a holo display to see my own face so I can shave.

“Huh,” she breathed, reaching down and tracing her fingers through the water. *So did Myleena ever figure it out?*

Nope, he answered. But given what we know of science, it's not scientifically impossible.

How so?

Our science has a bit of a wild quantum theory we call the Determinism Theory. Basically, it states that certain behaviors of light and subatomic particles can be influenced by the presence of an observer, and that the observer's expectations can influence those behaviors. Even the Terrans had something of a similar theory based on an old experiment a scientist did concerning the movement of electrons in a closed system experiment. The experiment had two pathways for the electrons to take, but when nobody was observing the experiment, the electrons would go down both pathways, which should be physically impossible. The theory goes that without the presence of someone who has an expectation of how light or particles behave, the particles are not constrained by the expectations of those observers. The Determinism Theory is based on that experiment, trying to explain how it could be possible. It's only a guess, but something about me causes light that reflects off of me to not reflect off a mirror or reflective surface. That would allow people and cameras to see me, but not allow me to cast a reflection.

I'm not a scientist, Jason, please don't tell me things like that. I'm already getting a headache.

He laughed brightly. *Welcome to the last year of my life*, he told her with a grin.

So, this is part of your magic.

My magic. Not everyone else's, he affirmed. *As far as I know, I'm the only person on the planet outside of the Parri that's done something like*

this, that's managed to learn how to perform any of the Parri's magic. So yes, Estrella, in a way, this is part of my magic, he told her, pointing at his lack of reflection in the pond. And it's a very visible testament that the mysticism the Parri practice is very, very real. I've seen the things they can do. I can't explain it as anything but magic. And so, that means that magic is a very real thing, he surmised seriously. And in a strange way, I'm glad it's real. The world would seem...less if there was no magic in it. After all, magic is, in its own way, the promise, the hope, that we can exceed our limits, our wildest expectations. This tells me that so long as we believe with all our hearts that we can achieve the impossible, then we can, he finished, touching the water himself. That's what the Parri's magic represents to me. Hope.

She gave him a long look, then a slow smile spread across her face. You know something? That makes me feel...better, she told him. It does make the universe feel not quite so huge and intimidating, if only a tiny bit.

The Parri say that the universe is a large, dark place, and that the light of love that shines from our hearts are like stars in the sky, calling out to each other to help assuage our loneliness. The Parri believe that love is the most powerful force in the universe, because it is the force that binds us all together and banishes the darkness that seeks to swallow our light.

My, that's a moving belief, she told him, her thought shimmering with reverence. It sounds almost religious.

I know, but oddly enough, the Parri aren't religious in the way most people think of it. They don't worship any god, or gods, though they don't deny the possibility that gods exist. They believe in the purity of love. In a way, love itself is their religion.

Now that's just beautiful, she crooned mentally.

I know. If you feel like we're done here, there's a lot more of Karis to see.

I'm looking forward to it.

They said their goodbyes to the Parri, and Jason showed her the other continents and their capitol cities, spent a good couple of hours at a Kizzik hive, then they returned to his house to eat a late lunch and talk official business. He let her speak to the Supreme Council from the comm unit in the pool house, and once she was ready, they went up to his home office, where Cybi was waiting for them in her bionoid. Estrella gave her a long, curious look when they walked in, then took Cybi's hands when she offered them. "Estrella," she said in a rich voice.

"Cybi?" she asked. "This is your bionoid?"

"Yes," she smiled. "You said you wanted to see it, and I had it nearby. What do you think?"

"I think our prototypes are nowhere near your production models," she said, daring to touch Cybi's face. "Your skin is even warm."

"These bionoids are built with what we call biorhythmics, which means that they're built to resemble a living thing as closely as possible," she explained. "The bionoids you've dealt with that come to your home galaxy don't have *everything* in them, because we don't use our best technology in something that we might theoretically lose."

"That's...a wise precaution," she admitted. "But this is quite remarkable. Are all your top-line bionoid models this realistic?"

“Yes. We even have one prototype that has living tissue grown over the endoframe, but that experiment hasn’t gone as well as Rook hoped,” Jason answered. “It causes far more problems that it solves.”

“So you do have that kind of technology.”

“It’s right here,” he admitted, holding up his right arm, and putting his left fingers on his arm just above the elbow. “Everything from here down is a cybernetic prosthetic, with my own tissue grown over it. That makes it look entirely natural, which is extremely important to the Faey culturally. The Faey revere what they see as natural beauty, so they see something like an obviously artificial limb to be ugly. That’s why I’m sure you’ve noticed that the Faey don’t wear much makeup or alter their bodies with things like multiple piercings or tattoos. They see such things as making one *less* attractive.”

“I’ve held your hands, and I never noticed!” she blurted, looking at him. “If I may ask, how did you lose your arm?”

“That...the short of it is that I had them amputate my arms so I could smuggle a weapon into a meeting between me and the Syndicate’s governing authority, the Board. It was the only way we could get it in past their security sensors. They replaced my arms at the elbow with endolimbs, which are cybernetic prosthetics with my own flesh grown over them. After the mission was over, I just kept the endolimbs rather than go through the laborious process of them regrowing my arms or replacing them with cloned transplants. Either option would have laid me up for a while, and I had too much stuff to do. Besides, I’m used to them now,” he said, grabbing hold of his wrist and rubbing it. “They’re quite handy when I need a really strong grip. No jar in the refrigerator is safe from the Claw,” he said, presenting his hand as a stiffened claw.

She laughed lightly. “So they have artificial muscles?”

He nodded. “With limiters in them so they don’t exceed my natural strength. But I can disable the limiters when I need to, the cybernetics are connected to my nerves, and I’ve learned how to control their extra features. It’s not that hard for me to do, since I’m skilled in merging. Merging can teach you how to move and control things that aren’t a part of your body as effortlessly as you can move your body.”

“Really?”

“It’s how we control our mecha, by merging to them,” Cybi told her. “The pilot literally becomes the machine, it becomes the pilot’s body. And the pilots learn how to control the mecha as if they’re controlling their bodies, including the artificial systems, to the point where it becomes second nature to them.”

“And now maybe you see why we have merge pods.”

“I do. So they do have military value,” she said.

He nodded. “But we don’t consider it so critical that we don’t share it with others. We’ve released merge pod technology to the galaxy at large, so it was no big deal to give it to you.”

“You have shown us quite a few new tricks when it comes to how to use resonance,” she chuckled ruefully. “We had never even considered some of the things you’ve developed. Which is one reason why we’re quite glad you decided to open relations with us,” she smiled.

The door opened, and Cyrsi’s bionoid strode in. “Sorry I’m late, Rook was being annoying,” she said.

“So the new resonance node upgrade’s installed?” Jason asked.

Fully operational, she replied via sending. Does it seem organic? I’m afraid I have no experience in what conventional sending is supposed to feel like, so I have no point of reference.

Entirely, Estrella answered. In fact, it sounds much more organic than our own resonance nodes.

We tweaked your design with that organic computer architecture I mentioned, Jason told her honestly. That makes the resonance node send in a much more natural way.

I know I may sound offensive to you two ladies, but Jason, be careful with that kind of tech, she warned seriously. We experimented with both AI and organics computer technology, and both of them turned out to be disasters. I’m not saying you can’t do better than we did, but I am saying that you should approach both with abundant caution.

The House has used biogenic computer architecture since before its destruction in the Third Civil War, so I’m not worried at all in that regard. It’s an old and established technology for us. As far as AI goes, that technology is just as old. Besides that, there are only fourteen self-aware computers in the House, and we don’t plan on building any more. We don’t use them as mainstream tech, they do very specific jobs because I don’t want them to be seen as nothing more than machines. The CB units are people, and we treat them that way. Non-CB biogenic tech mimics some aspects of how an organic brain works, but it’s not complex enough to be self-aware. In the entire three thousand year history that the House has used biogenic technology, we’ve only had one case of a non-CB biogenic unit gaining self awareness. And if you want, you can meet him. He works

in the House's top research division, the same division where Myleena works. His name is Rook.

Rook? The one Cyrsi mentioned?

Yep. Rook is our lead researcher on bionoid technology, which he helped develop mainly as a means to build a body for himself that more closely resembled a living thing. And then he went and ruined the whole thing by covering it in a reflective metal skin, he noted blandly, the flavor of his thought making Estrella laugh..

It sounds like you have that well in hand, then, so I'll say not one more word about it, Estrella nodded. Shall we get down to business?

And they did. With Estrella and Cyrsi sitting on the other side of the desk and Cybi in her favorite spot sitting on the corner of it, Jason and Estrella started discussing hard numbers, what the Republic needed, and when they'd get it there. They discussed that side of it exclusively for over an hour, Cybi making a list of materials, many of which weren't easy to get but were stockpiled by the House's resource harvesting operation, the main one the Republic needing being Terynium. The House had *tons* of Terynium stored, mainly because they'd found that ships moving in mode three could collect it from hyperspace much faster than standard jump scoop harvesting methods. So, the House could amass large quantities of Terynium fairly quickly.

It's not refined, Jason warned as they discussed hard figures. We keep it in its raw state to reduce the decay rate.

That's fine, we have a very efficient refining system. We can have it refined and ready for use within six days of receiving it. We'll take every

apla of Zudurium you can spare, Jason. That's the most important thing on our list.

We have 430,000 Republic sakapla of raw Terynium—Zudurium in warehouses that we can ship tomorrow. Because it's so hard to get, we gather it constantly and stockpile it for future use as best we can, given how it behaves in normal space.

Can you get it to our galaxy quickly? We need it as soon as possible.

I have heavy freighters with intergalactic engines in them. They're not as fast as a frigate, but they're fast enough to prevent the Bru from following them, he replied. Besides, those freighters never move outside of controlled territory without military escort, so they should be well protected. I can get the first of them out there in about ten standard days. I can set up a supply chain by chaining some Stargates out to where it's a two day journey from cluster C5, but that means we have to deploy military resources to protect them while they're out there. Once we get that all set up, the supply cycle will run about every four days. Two days to return to pick up another shipment and two days back. We can't link directly there, our Stargates have a range that restricts them to linking between clusters. Our Stargate technology has a range restriction, we haven't managed to overcome the way constants changing over extreme distances messes with our gates.

That's still a highly advanced application of Stargate technology, she told him approvingly. The Bru's Stargate technology can't link them outside their home galaxy, because they lack the ability to have them communicate in real time. What we'll need to do, Jason, is limit the number of ships the Bru see coming and going. If they realize that you're supplying us, it will incite them to blockade our galaxy to stop it. We intend to use this against

them when we start our offensive, but for the short term, we don't want to alert them. We need that Zudurium, and we don't want to put your ships in danger to get it.

Given what you know of the Bru, how long would it take them to deploy a task force to C5, just in case they detect the Stargate or manage to track my freighters?

About fifteen to twenty days, depending on where in the cluster you set up your Stargate, she answered.

That will give us enough time to see them coming, he mused, leaning back in his chair and tapping his cheek in thought. I'll need to speak to the Denmother about borrowing some of their long range sensor platforms. When it comes to sensors, the Kimdori are the best in the business, at least over here. Their sensor tech is even better than ours, he admitted..

We'll be keeping an eye on things from our side. We can warn you if we see them send out a task force. Do you foresee any problems arranging things with the Kimdori?

Nah, the Karinnes and the Kimdori have been intertwined since the formation of the House, Estrella. They're the only outside civilization for which the oaths we Karinnes live by don't apply, because of that very long and very deep relationship. That means we'll share military technology with them, and they'll lend us some of their own tech. What else is at the top of your needs list?

Metallic argon, she replied. We've mined out every gas giant in our galaxy.

We don't have a whole lot stockpiled. But we do have some, and I can ship it out to you, he replied. We don't use it for industrial applications, so we've never really focused on mining it on a large scale. We use metallic hydrogen and helium in an industrial capacity, but not the heavier metal nobles.

We can supply you with some technology to increase your metallic argon production capability, she told him. Since we need it, it's only fair we help you get it.

I'll take you up on that, he nodded. The next time you talk to the Supreme Council, you can arrange them to send us some specs so we can go about building the harvesting units.

Speaking of what you get for it, I talked to the council, and they've agreed with my proposal. They have science divisions studying the technology you sent us, and we'll do what we can to improve it for you.

There's one specific thing I want your help with, Jason told her. We need as much medical research as you can spare to help combat a viral infection.

She gave him a long look. *You mean the virus?* she asked pointedly.

Yes, that virus, he answered honestly. So I'm sure you'll not be shocked when I tell you that we're not supplying you with any samples. But we need to find a vaccine against it, because it's deadly. While the effect it had on us turned out to be an unexpected boon, the virus itself is potentially lethal, and we want to eradicate it. Our entire galaxy is quarantined right now, with infected planets sealed off from uninfected planets. We need this virus wiped out so the galaxy can return to normal, and it's quite simply beyond our own medical technology to develop a vaccine against it.

We can help you, she replied immediately. I'll have our medical division compile some data for you, some of our research on retroviruses. Maybe our research will help your scientists find the vaccine you need.

We appreciate the Republic's assistance, he replied sincerely. The door opened, and both Cyrsi and Estrella looked back. It was Amber, padding into the room and pestering Estrella to pick her up. She did so and settled her into her lap, stroking her soft fur with a gentle smile. "I didn't know she could get in here," she said aloud, mainly for Amber's benefit.

"She can open any door in the house, even my top security office door, at least when I don't lock it so she can't open it. And I didn't do that. It's a vulpar thing. They can't stand a closed door, it prevents them from patrolling their territory to make sure everything's in proper order. Vulpars don't like chaos, which means that this house can be a bit stressful for her," he chuckled. "My older kids are an unruly lot, so sometimes I'm shocked Amber hasn't had her fur fall out from the stress."

Amber gave a little yip, which made Jason laugh. "What did she say?" Estrella asked.

"That she likes them like that because they cause me far more trouble than they cause her. Meanie," he accused, looking at her.

Amber gave another yip, more serious, and Jason leaned down on his elbow. "Seriously? I told her to stay home," he growled.

"What?"

"Dahnai is here," he grunted. "She's at least generally aware of you, Estrella, and I think she's here to try to crash our negotiations."

"How do you mean?"

“She knows that we’re in contact with an exogalactic civilization, but I keep exactly who and what you are a secret. That’s mainly to protect Dahnai and the rest of the galaxy from itself. There are some civilizations in our galaxy that would do anything they could to get their hands on your technology if they knew about you,” he said honestly. “I told you before, the balance of power in our galaxy is very delicate, and we have a large number of aggressive empires here. The only reason we don’t descend into total war is that everyone is armed with weapons that scares them enough not to try. And I work very hard to keep it like that.” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “If you promise to be evasive about the specifics, I wouldn’t mind letting you meet her,” he mused, looking at her. “Dahnai, at least, I can trust not to bandy this meeting about to the rest of the Confederation. She knows I’ll absolutely *murder* her if she does.”

[Jason,] Dahnai called over communc, almost as if on queue.

[Why are you here, woman? I told you stay off Karis until I told you it was alright.]

[The summer palace is sovereign territory, buster, I can visit it whenever I want,] she retorted pugnaciously.

[So why are you here instead of there?] he pressed.

[Sirri is loose somewhere on Karis and I need her home,] she replied, a bit lamely. *[She’s avoiding me, so she’s up to something. Usually the first place to look for her is here.]*

[Uh huh,] he communed, his thought all but bursting with dubious sarcasm.

She didn't answer, mainly because she had no real defense and she knew it.

"I don't have a problem with that, Jason. Besides, I'd love to meet the ruler of my cousin race," Estrella said. "From what Jyslin and Symone said of her, she's quite an interesting woman."

"She is at that," he agreed. *[Come up to my office, and I'm warning you right now. If a single word of what you're about to see leaves this office, you'll be permanently banished from Karis, summer palace or no summer palace,]* he warned.

She didn't answer, but barely five seconds later, the door chimed. He had it open, and Dahnai strode into the room, still in her court robes. She must have come straight there from Draconis. She gave Estrella a shocked look as the Ulala stood and turned towards her. "Dahnai, I'd like you to meet Estrella Nine Rings, leader of the Ulala and member of the Supreme Council of the Galactic Republic. Estrella, this is Empress Dahnai Merrane, ruler of the Faey Imperium," he introduced. "The Ulala are like the Dreamers, Dahnai. They're genetically identical to the Faey, which is the main reason why we opened relations with the Republic. They are our cousins."

"It's an honor to meet you, Empress," Estrella said in her silky voice, speaking perfect Faey.

"To say I'm surprised to see such a familiar face is an understatement, Estrella," she replied, stepping up and taking the Ulala's hands when she offered them. "We thought the Dreamers were the only ones."

"It was quite a shock to us, too," she smiled. "But we have been quite delighted to come to learn more of our cousins from another galaxy. I'm

here to secure more permanent relations, including the exchange of historical records so we might learn more of one another.”

“And you just made a best friend for life,” Jason quipped as Dahnai’s eyes just lit up. “Dahnai is a massive history buff.”

“Oh yes I am!” she said animatedly. “I’d love to read about the history of the Ulala, Estrella! I’ll contact my people and have our historical files prepared for you to take home!”

“Jason has already supplied that, but with his permission, I would be happy to make our historical records available to you.”

“I can have a copy of them sent to the summer palace’s mainframe,” Jason said. “As long as Dahnai makes it clear that what she learns is *top secret*.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” she answered, looking past Estrella towards him.

Jason was about to say something, but he had...a strange feeling. Seeing Estrella and Dahnai standing side by side, holding each other’s hands in the Ulalan greeting, something struck him. He was seeing something...*important*. He didn’t understand what, or why, but he knew that he did. He knew that it was the right choice to allow Dahnai to meet Estrella. He knew then that he needed to be much more open with Dahnai about who Estrella was and why she was here. He knew it not in his mind, but in his heart. It was the same kind of feeling he’d had when he first visited Tir Tairngire, when he was hearing the song of E Chaio. This was something that moved him on a deeper level, the level of the heart and soul, not the mind.

This was something he needed to discuss with the *shaman*. He rarely had feelings like this, but they *always* meant something. There was something very, very important tied up in Dahnai meeting Estrella, and perhaps she could help him learn more about it.

He blinked and sat back down, a little scattered. Amber jumped up onto the desk and sat down in front of him, giving him a serious, almost stoic look. “I’m alright,” he told her as Dahnai and Estrella started chatting eagerly.

[You look a little off kilter, Jason. What happened?] Cybi asked privately.

[I’m...not sure,] he replied. *[It was a Parri thing, Cybi. When Dahnai took Estrella’s hands, it was like something lurched in my soul. They needed to meet. But I don’t know why, or what it means.]*

[You need to talk to the shaman. She might be able to help you figure it out.]

He nodded at her without replying as Cyrsi stood up and moved to the side of his desk.

“Cybi,” he said aloud, reaching down and picking up Amber. “Prepare a file about the current Republic situation for Dahnai. I believe we need to bring the Imperium in.”

“I’ll handle it, Jason,” she replied as Dahnai gave him a surprised look.

“What do you mean, love?”

“I mean, I can trust you to be in the loop,” he said. “And the Imperium can help the Ulala. Estrella’s here to secure supplies to help her government

against an external threat,” he told her. “The House has agreed to supply the Republic with what we can spare to help them, in exchange for foodstocks and their assistance with some of our scientific research. The Imperium has access to some of the things they need, and if you know what’s going on, you won’t bitch about me trying to get it from you.”

“Your people are in trouble, Estrella?” Dahnai asked.

“It’s a complex situation, Dahnai,” she replied. “We’re not in any immediate danger, but the threat Jason described has effectively trapped us behind our defenses, like an ancient siege. They can’t get in, but we can’t get out. But that situation is no longer tenable. We’re running out of critical supplies and materials, so we’ve decided to take action against our foe, to break the siege and remove the threat they pose to us. The Karinnes have agreed to help supply us the raw materials we need for that operation.”

“And so will we,” Dahnai declared. “The Imperium takes care of its own, and if Jason says you’re Faey, then you’re *one of us*. If you’re in trouble, the Imperium will help you. Now, fill me on what I need to know, and tell me what the Imperium has that our cousins need, so we can discuss trade terms,” she announced, taking Cyrsi’s seat imperiously.

“You’ll have to follow the same rules we are, Dahnai. They won’t trade military technology, but they’re willing to trade food and assistance improving our own technology,” Jason warned. “They need everything else for their operation, and I don’t want a war in the home galaxy over getting access to Republic tech. Not even *we* are asking for it,” he stressed.

“Fair enough,” she said, tousling her lovely bronze hair.

“And I don’t think I need to say this, but I will. We keep the Republic and our involvement with them a complete secret from everyone but the

Kimdori and the Dreamers. This stays inside the family, Dahnai.”

“I understand, love.”

Why the sudden change of heart? Estrella asked privately.

The answer might scare you, he answered. But the short of it is, I believe that it's in both of our best interests to bring the Imperium into this. Call it a gut feeling, but those feelings are usually right.

You feel you can trust her not to upset the balance of power you mentioned?

Yes. You can be honest with her, Estrella. She already knows about our engines, and knows at least a little about you because that sneaky bitch likes to try to wander through my memories when I'm sleeping, when we're in the same bed. She's a very powerful and highly skilled telepath, and not even I can completely keep her out when she's making skin contact. So she knows bits and pieces about our relationship with the Republic.

She sounds like my kind of woman, Estrella noted impishly.

I told you that I thought you two would get along.

[I take it she doesn't know about the Generations and the Ten Year Plan?] Dahnai asked privately.

[Correct. That and what biogenics do for a Generation are the only things you need to keep secret from her, she already knows most everything else,] Jason affirmed. *[She knows that we're different, her people's medical tech detected the fact that we have elements of viral biology, but she doesn't know what it means. I don't want the Republic to decide that what they need*

for their offensive against the Bru is a fleet of disposable ships manned by Generations and equipped with gestalts.]

[*Got it.*] “Alright, someone show me a list of what’s on the table, or get me up to speed on where we are here,” she declared aloud.

Jason and the CBIMs filled Dahnai in on why Estrella was there and what the Republic needed, going over a list on a hologram projected onto the surface of his desk, which didn’t take all that long. Dahnai managed to insert herself into the discussions with ease, devoting some of the Imperium’s stockpiles of things the Republic needed, then bargaining quite sharply with Estrella over what the Republic would trade in return. Jason watched as Dahnai and Estrella seemed to relax with each other, then start chatting about other things between official discussions, then they were joking with each other as they enjoyed a quick break down in the kitchen, drinking *oye* bark tea. Dahnai got Estrella to talk about her personal life, very quickly starting to dig for insight into Ulalan culture and society, and once their negotiations were complete for the day, she all but dragged Estrella out onto the beach. Jason stayed in his office to make a few final notes and talk to his cabinet officials about securing the materials they were going to trade, then came down to the beach. He was honestly surprised to see Aria and Sirri there, standing in front of the loungers where Dahnai and Estrella were sitting, all four of them properly attired for the beach...that being nude.

“Hey Dad,” Aria said with a smile.

“What are you doing here, Sirri?”

“Mom told me to come,” she answered, throwing her towel over her shoulder. “I was up at Joint Base Alpha training with the KBB, so I wasn’t

far away.”

“Well, if she didn’t tell you, Estrella being here, and who she is, is a secret,” he said firmly.

“Mom explained it,” she nodded. “And I think it’s cool, and really weird, that we have another branch of the Faey in another galaxy. That’s *three*, and that’s something we should look into more.”

“We find it just as fascinating, Sirri,” Estrella told her. “And we’re looking through our histories to see if there’s some kind of connection beyond our shared DNA.”

Jason was about to say something, but again, he was struck by the image before him. Seeing Dahnai, Aria, and Estrella together jarred him in a way he couldn’t explain. But it wasn’t them that seemed to matter to him, it was what they represented. A Faey, a Dreamer, and an Ulala, together. That was *important*. But he’d seen the three races together before, at the banquet, and it hadn’t—no, they hadn’t been together in person. That was what mattered here. The three races meeting in person, that was *important*.

Why? What did it mean? And why did it trigger him on such a deep level?

He really needed to speak to the *shaman*. She could help him figure it out, if she didn’t know already.

“Dad?” Aria asked.

He blinked and put a hand over his *jaingi*, almost reflexively. “Sorry, was thinking about something,” he told her, then looked to the side when Jyslin’s skimmer came in over the strip and descended behind the house. “Looks like your mom’s home,” he noted. “And Symone is with her.”

“Aunt Jyslin must have picked her up from Joint Base Alpha, she and her Renegades were our opposition in the training sortie,” Sirri noted.

A moment later, they came down to the beach, Jyslin in a Faey shirt and shorts and Symone in her armor. *Hey love. I'm surprised to see you here, Dahnai,* Jyslin noted.

Jason brought me in, the Imperium has some of the resources Estrella's people need, she answered. *Besides, the Ulala and the Faey are family. We deserved to know about them.*

I take it you've wrapped up the boring talks for today? Symone asked.

Yes, we're done talking, Jason answered.

Then take off those silly clothes and join us on the beach! Symone ordered, already working to take off her gauntlet. *Be right back, girls, I gotta get this armor off!*

This time, he decided to submit to his *amu's* pushiness. He and Jyslin removed their clothes and left them folded up on the deck, then they joined Dahnai and Estrella. The Ulala gave him an appraising look when he joined them, but then gasped and leaned back when she got a fleeting glimpse of his back. *What? This?* he asked, turning his back to her to show him her *jaingi*.

I thought you said Faey don't tattoo.

This isn't a tattoo. It's a jaingi, he answered. *Remember the designs on the Parri shaman, that were on her skin where her fur had been removed? These are those same symbols, but in a different shape. This is my personal jaingi, it tells any Parri who sees it exactly who I am and how far I've walked down the Path of Truth. The bird is made up of a series of smaller*

symbols, if you look closely, and each one has a meaning. In effect, this image is a documented history of my accomplishments studying with the Parri. Some of them say that I've learned the ten lessons of the shaman, and that I've learned to listen. The rest say that I've gone beyond the ten lessons and have started to learn the advanced lessons that the Parri call the Path of Truth.. All of them together make up this design, which is the unofficial symbol of the House of Karinne. Most people identify the house by the Legion Phoenix, this image, rather than the house's official crest. Most everyone in the house knows I have this on my back, and it flatters me that quite a few people have copied it. You'll see people from time to time with this design on their backs, or a smaller version on their shoulders or whatnot, which they see as a public declaration of their love for the House of Karinne. They wear its symbol on their bodies like a badge of honor, or a display of allegiance.

Well, I think it looks quite smashing, Estrella said, then she blinked. Don't the Dreamers call you the Noble Phoenix?

Yes, but I was using this symbol long before I knew about that name, he told her. This was the crest of the Legion, the guerilla organization that opposed the Trillanes when the Faey first conquered Terra. When I reformed the House, I added the Legion Phoenix to the House crest to honor our origins. But now, most everyone doesn't recognize the official crest of the House, but they do recognize this, he surmised, pointing at the jaingi with a thumb over his shoulder. So in that regard, it proves that the Dreamers are precogs. They knew about me, and this crest, long before I was even born. When we came to liberate them on Atrovet, it was this symbol that told them who we were, and that caused them to cooperate with

us. They knew we were there to help, because their prophecies predicted it like a thousand years ago.

There's no doubt that the Dreamers' ability is the real deal, Dahnai agreed.

Symone returned, throwing herself against Jason and kissing him. Mmm, hey lover, wanna party? she asked impishly.

The big brain, girl, the big brain, he demanded, which made her laugh. I swear, I think you do that on purpose.

Of course I do, it's fun to watch you squirm. It turns me on, she grinned. I never knew modesty could be so hot until I became his amu, Estrella. He's such a fucking tease, it drives me absolutely crazy.

Men act much the same in Ulalan society, Estrella smiled. Women chase, men pretend to run away. But they love being caught, she added with a naughty tilt to her thought. It's one way a man tests a woman's determination. His first act is to incite her into buying him. And once she owns him, he leads her on for quite a while, making a grand game out of making a woman prove herself to him before he'll marry her. And we don't mind at all. Ulalan women love the chase nearly as much as the conquest, we find it very romantic.

And that's why we Faey get along so well with you Estrella, Jyslin declared grandly.

Trelle's garland, it's no fair that I can't buy men. I'd have such a harem, Symone complained with a smirk at Jason. Take me back with you, Estrella. I was born into the wrong branch of the Faey race.

Jason enjoyed a late afternoon just sitting on the beach chatting with Estrella and the women important in his life, as fellow residents of the strip came and went to chat with them, getting to know Estrella better. Much as yesterday, the Ulalan proved that she was a master of the social game, getting about everyone to talk to her, chatting them up, Jason spent some of that time trying to understand why he'd reacted the way he did when he saw Aria, Dahnai, and Estrella together, why it mattered so much to him, why he felt that it meant something very important. But no answers came. It was just a feeling, a deep feeling, something that stirred him at a primal level.

He pondered the matter for over an hour, moving from the beach blankets to the wet sand that was smoothed and packed from the receding tide. The occasional large wave reached him, washing over his legs and hands as he leaned back on them as he gazed out towards the horizon, but it happened less and less often as time went by. The tides here on Karis weren't that large, and that was further smoothed out since Karsa was relatively close to the equator, so the water never receded all that far. The Menodan water dog skipped out of the waves and bounded over to him, sitting down beside him and starting to groom himself, and he spared a moment to pat him on the head fondly. Not long after that, Estrella wandered over to him and sat down on the other side of the water dog, who immediately jumped over Jason's legs and settled back down on the other side of him. "I'm sorry, little one," she crooned.

"He's wild, Estrella, not a pet," Jason said absently, not looking at her, staring off into the distance. "So he doesn't much like other people being close to him."

"Ah. I see. Sorry again, little one, I didn't know," she told the water dog in a gentle voice.

“She apologizes. She didn’t know you don’t like being crowded,” Jason translated, which got them a chitter of understanding. “He accepts your apology,” Jason relayed.

Estrella gave the water dog a little wave, then leaned on a hand and looked at him. “What are you doing?” she asked. “I may not have been here more than a couple of days, but I know that it’s not like you to sit by yourself.”

He was quiet a long moment. “Don’t tell Dahnai this, it really burns her up when I talk about things she refuses to understand,” he said.

“Alright.”

“You coming here is important. But I don’t know why,” he said. “When I saw you with Dahnai and Aria, seeing three of the four known Faey branch races together, it jarred something deep inside me.”

“There’s another?”

He nodded. “They’re a pre-industrial feudal society in a galactic cluster over that way,” he said, pointing. “They call themselves the Iri. We came across them a couple of months ago, and we’re scheduled to go back and engage them in formal talks soon.”

“Interesting. So that’s four different splinter species of our people,” she noted. “That cannot be a mere coincidence.”

“No. It’s not. But it’s a mystery how your people got scattered across four different galaxies, and two of them are in entirely different galactic clusters. The only clue we have about it is that the DNA of all four species all began to diverge at the same time, about 37,000 years ago by the Republic calendar. The Faey, Ulala, Dreamers, and Iri all diverge at the

same time. So you were one people, and then someone or something scooped you up and scattered you across the entire supercluster. And they very well may have done that to *us* too, since we're so related to you genetically that we're effectively a branch species ourselves."

"But that's not what has you pensive."

He shook his head. "This has to do with my magic," he said. "Seeing the three of you standing together, it hit me that it was *important*. That it needed to happen. I had a similar feeling when you met Dahnai face to face, when she took your hands. It struck me in that instant that what I was seeing was *right*. It was why I decided to bring Dahnai in on your secret. I knew in that instant that she needed to know, and she needed to be involved."

Estrella was quiet a long moment, leaning back on her hands. "And you don't often allow your magic to make decisions for you, so you're doubting your impulse."

"A little bit," he agreed. "But as far as Dahnai goes, I think I made the right decision."

"Me too. I really like her."

"I told you that you would," he reminded her. "But now I'm starting to wonder something else."

"What?"

"If Dahnai needed to know about you...perhaps you need to know about us," he answered evenly. "The part of me that gives me my Parri magic is telling me that you need to know the truth, but the rest of me isn't convinced that I can entirely trust you," he said honestly. "You are a patriot

to the Republic, and there's always a chance that what you learn will cause you to put your patriotism over family."

"You mean the magic your people wield? The magic that's not your Parri magic?"

He nodded, raising a hand. "I want to, but I'm not joking about the fact that it may destroy the Republic if they found out," he said, focusing his telekinetic power. Estrella gasped when a sudden gout of flame appeared over his hand, as he ignited the air using his power and contained the fire, a basic trick about anyone who trained under the Pai could pull off. He made several swishing motions with his hand, increasing the size of the flames, then snuffed them out when he closed his fist over them. "I worry what they may do, what lengths they may go to in order to gain the power to do what you just saw," he said grimly.

"What was that?"

"My magic, Estrella, at least one of the ways I can use it," he said. "What I just did, anyone you have seen on this beach, virtually anyone on this *planet*, can do. Even the children."

She gave him a shocked look, then snapped her head back towards where Dahnai and Jyslin were sitting.

"They have very strict orders not to do anything while you're here," he told her evenly. "Every person you've met was told well before you got here that they do *nothing* that you might find unusual. But given that I'm the one that gave that order, I can break it if I feel like it."

She gave him a look, but didn't laugh.

“So, I’m in a position where my heart tells me to be honest with you, tell you the truth, but the rest of me is screaming that that would be the worst mistake I’ve ever made,” he said woodenly. “If the Supreme Council had any idea what we can do, what we can *really* do, they would do everything in their power to force us to join your war against the Bru. They may very well completely ignore the Bru and send their entire fleet here to conquer us, so they can take our magic for themselves and force us to teach them how to use it.”

The water dog chattered at him sternly.

“I know, but this is a little too important to be impulsive,” he answered him, looking down at the small otter-like animal. “It’s not just *us* that’s at risk here, friend. If the Republic comes, they’ll come *here*. Do you really want bombs falling on your beach?”

The water dog gave him a strong look.

“No, I’m not,” he retorted. “And this is a little beyond your pay grade, isn’t it? I don’t think you’re qualified to give that kind of advice.”

He chattered harshly.

“She spends all day in my office! She knows a lot more of what’s really going on than you, you know. And if Chichi heard you say that, she’d bite off your ears.”

Estrella gave a rich chuckle. “You really do live in an entirely different world than the rest of us,” she said with a gentle smile. “I envy you, my friend, that you have such interesting friends to confide in when you’re troubled..”

The water dog jumped up on his thigh and reared up, chittering pleasantly at Estrella.

“He says you may pet him, but just this once,” Jason relayed in a dry voice.

Estrella laughed, smiled down at the water dog, and gently patted him on the head. “Thank you, my small friend,” she crooned to him.

Watching her, he remembered what the *shaman* said, that she was sensitive...that with time, patience, and training, she might earn *jaingi* of her own. The *shaman* had asked her what she heard when they first met, much like she had asked Kevin Ball what he had smelled, who was another sensitive. Maybe...maybe that was what was driving this strange feeling. Maybe he felt he could trust her with the secret because she was open to the power of the heart, the light of love. He set the water dog down on the beach and stood up, then offered his hand down to her. “There’s something we need to do,” he told her.

She took his hand and let her help him up, then walked with him as he left the beach, went across the deck connecting his and Tim’s houses, then walked her to the base of the his tree. He sat her down in the grass right beside it, within reach of it. “Jason, what—“

“Don’t talk. Don’t send,” he ordered, taking her hand, which was still in his own, and gently pushing it over to put her palm against the trunk of the tree. “Close your eyes.” She did so. “Now listen.”

“Listen to what?”

“Just listen,” he said, letting go of her hand and putting his palm against the trunk himself. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, bowed

his head, and opened himself to his tree. He could hear it whispering to him, a murmur of colors of emotion and sensations and feelings, from the point of view of a life form that had no eyes or ears or skin that someone made of flesh would understand. The tree understood the pull of the wind, the warmth of the sun, the touch of those on its bark or leaves, the comfort of the earth embracing its roots, and the gentle light of love that radiated from the people of Karsa that nurtured its soul as the planet and star nurtured its wooden body. “Louder, my friend. She’s not practiced,” he urged the tree.

The gentle whispering in his mind swelled, became stronger, more forceful, almost as if it were shouting, and that caused Estrella to gasp loudly.

“I...I hear something!” she blurted. “I don’t understand it, but I can—I can feel it!”

“When you first met her, the *shaman* asked you what you were hearing. This is what she was talking about,” Jason said in a gentle, serene voice. “This is how the tree talks, Estrella. And it seems that you’re sensitive in ways that most other people are not. You can hear it too. With training, you could learn to understand the trees, speak to them in return, which means that you could become a *shaman*.” He slid his hand along the trunk. “There are only three people I know of on Karis that have the potential do this. Me, my son Rann, and a woman named Kyva. Rann and Kyva aren’t trained, so they can’t hear the trees. But it seems that you’re particularly sensitive to them, which lets you hear them with no training.”

“It’s...I can’t describe it! Like colors and emotions swirling through my soul!”

“The trees speak a very different language than we do,” he told her. “It takes time and patience to learn how to talk to them, to learn their language. But the fact that you can hear them means that you’re already well down the path. It took me *years* to learn how to listen,” he confided, then he turned his head and addressed the tree directly. “And now, the important question. My friend, I need the wisdom of the trees, and seek your advice. What do the trees say? Should I tell her the truth? Can she be trusted with that secret?” he asked his tree, his voice soft but formal.

The answer came immediately, an answer without guile or the usual subtle deception the trees often employed when answering what they deemed to be a silly or selfish question. He had sought their advice in sincere need, and they responded to that need. And the answer was what he expected to hear.

“I understand,” he said. “Thank you.”

“What did it say? I heard...something, but I couldn’t understand it.”

He took gentle hold of her hand and pulled it away from the tree, but kept hold of it. He reached out his other hand, and she took that one, lacing her fingers with his. “Three thousand years ago by the Republic’s calendar, the House of Karinne began a project to break the machine telepathic barrier. They began researching resonance technology,” he began, his voice calm but sober, as if it carried great weight, and that tone made her pay immediate attention. “It took them nearly a century, but they eventually succeeded, creating what we call biogenic technology. That’s the organic computer technology I mentioned. But they ran into a problem. They couldn’t understand the computers they created. They used telepathy, and could communicate with each other without trouble, but an organic mind was incapable of understanding the telepathy that the machines used. They

tried for another couple of centuries to solve that problem, but they never could. No matter what they tried, they couldn't build a biogenic unit capable of understanding them, or them understanding it.

“So, the Karinnes, being the practical people that they were, decided to attack the problem from the other direction. If they couldn't create a biogenic system that could understand them, they would create a *Karinne* that could understand *it*. They developed a gene therapy treatment that would alter their telepathy to give them the ability to communicate with their biogenic systems, to in effect introduce elements of the organic structure of a biogenic unit into the Karinnes themselves to make them more similar, and thus able to understand each other. They had the members of the house undertake the therapy, and it worked, at least mostly. Some of them had their bodies reject the treatment and were unaltered, some were immune to the treatment and couldn't be altered, and some died from the therapy. The way they did this was with a retrovirus, and why that matters will be clear in a moment.

“After the successful gene therapy, the Karinnes discovered that there were two side effects, neither of which they expected but they also didn't find negative. The first was that it gave us aspects of viral biology that your sensors detected, which makes us extremely resistant to viral infections and also causes our DNA to self-repair, which gives us powerful resistance to the DNA-damaging aspect of radiation. I can safely tolerate extended exposure to radiation levels that would kill you in minutes,” he told her plainly. “Second, and far more important, is that was that altered Karinnes who merged to a biogenic unit had their psionic powers boosted, made stronger. When an altered Karinne and a biogenic unit worked together, the biogenic system amplified the Karinne's psychic abilities. This was in no

way an intended effect of the project, it was something of a lucky bit of serendipity, but it was definitely there and it was significant enough for the Karinnes to further study the phenomenon.

“The story could end there, but their success wasn’t good enough for my ancestors,” he continued. “They decided to further improve both biogenics and the Faey that could understand them, trying to both create something like your resonance technology and also to make biogenic commune stronger, have greater range, and enhance its ability to augment the psionic power of an altered Karinne that was using it. They sought to create the perfect biogenic technology, but also have the perfect Faey to pair with it,” he said soberly. “This was the beginning of what was known as the Program, and the Karinnes that were the product of it are called Generations. The House began a selective breeding program to strengthen the telepathy of the altered Karinnes. This program didn’t just do that, however. They decided to bring telekinesis into the formula, carefully managing parents so children were born with stronger and stronger talent, and more and more of them with telekinesis, until TK became standard for every Generation. This program went on for 97 generations of Karinnes, my friend, and ended when the House Merrane destroyed Karis at the beginning of the Third Civil War. So, Estrella, I am the product of a nearly two thousand year long selective breeding program, all designed to make my psionic abilities as powerful as possible,” he told her almost grimly. “That is why my telepathy is so strong, why I have TK, and why my telepathy is different from yours. I have the ability to commune, to communicate with biogenic systems, which is a form of telepathy so different from the norm that regular telepaths can’t understand it. Needless to say, I consider this part of the history of my House to be somewhat monstrous,” he stated

strongly. “And I’ve ordered that the Program is dead and buried, and will never be restarted.

“And now that you understand the background, let me explain why this matters,” he continued. “As I told you, the first Karinnes were altered to become Generations by using a retrovirus. The retrovirus altered their DNA to grant them the unique telepathy that biogenic systems use, but since it *was* a retrovirus, that means that it wrote its entire RNA sequence into our DNA when it was done. If you’re not familiar with viral biology, that means that the retrovirus is *still there*, contained within our DNA, and it can be extracted by skilled geneticists. To make a long story short, that’s what happened. The rest of the galaxy saw what we can do during the wars with the Consortium and the Syndicate, because we were forced to use our power in combat in order to drive them out of our galaxy. They saw it, they were impressed by it, then they tried to take that power for themselves by securing a sample of DNA from a Generation. And I’m sad to say, eventually they succeeded. A rogue organization managed to get their hands on a Generation’s DNA, they reverse engineered the retrovirus from it, then that retrovirus escaped containment and managed to infect multiple civilizations in our galaxy by being carried in cargo containers before quarantine got it under control.. It turned everyone infected by it into a Generation,” he said strongly. “But being a Generation is only one half of the equation. Without biogenics, our abilities are only moderately stronger than the average telepath or telekinetic in our galaxy. The spread of the retrovirus forced us to make a hard choice, to more or less let it out and allow people to be infected before the retrovirus mutated into something that would kill instead of change. The retrovirus the rogue element produce is highly volatile, and it mutated multiple times while we were trying to contain it. I made the decision to release he virus because without

biogenics, a Generation isn't quite as dangerous, and also because the technology level of our galaxy allows us to turn Karis and our colony planets into absolutely unassailable fortresses for the rest of the galaxy. So long as I can keep biogenics out of the hands of the others, I'm content to allow them to become Generations, because it *is* very useful. It allowed them to become telepaths, to become telekinetics, to gain the ability to commune, and I don't object to helping others better themselves.

“*That* is our magic, Estrella. Virtually every soul on this planet is a Generation, is both a telepath and a telekinetic, and there are entire planets of Generations in several other civilizations in our galaxy because of the pandemic. And in time, that will expand across the galaxy, since I've authorized the release of the virus to the other civilizations to use as they see fit, and most of them can see the value in their populations being psionic. *That* is how our magic can be spread to others And *that* is why I'm exceptionally wary of how the Republic may respond. Because your people *can* break our defenses and take biogenics, at least if I allowed it, which would allow you to turn biogenics into a weapon of war to use against the Bru, and most likely force my people to use those biogenic systems, since we know how to do it. Since your people can take biogenics, that means that I won't give them virus to become Generations, to keep *both* pieces of the puzzle away from them. That means that you will be the only living citizen of the Galactic Republic that will ever set foot in our galaxy, and by extension, the only one that will know our secret.

“But I warn you now, my friend, and you can tell the Supreme Council this. If it ever comes to where I feel that biogenics are about to fall into the wrong hands, I will order every planet held by the Karinnes destroyed,” he told her in a powerful voice “Every planet and station we have is powered

by a singularity reactor, and the last act of the Karinnes about to be captured is to cause it to self destruct. And if you've never seen a singularity reactor explode, let me just say that there won't even be space dust left," he said grimly. "The reactor here on Karis has the power to completely destroy this entire star system, *including* the star. In addition to that, every piece of equipment that has a biogenic system in it also has a self destruct that will destroy the biogenic unit, and I can press a button here on Karis and destroy every single biogenic unit that exists. *That* is how seriously we take keeping biogenics out of the wrong hands," he declared. "To where I will destroy the entire house, kill every single House member, and annihilate the entire star system hosting any Karinne holding in order to keep biogenics away from everyone else. That is the final oath of the Karinnes, to die before we allow our technology to be used to conquer and destroy."

Estrella was silent for a long while, looking down at her hands as she absently slid her fingers over the bracelets on her wrist. "Thank you for being honest, Jason," she finally said. "That is quite a story. And now that I've heard it, I fully understand why you wanted to keep it a secret. I...I don't know what the Supreme Council would do if they found out," she said honestly. "As you may expect, not many of the others have a very high opinion of you because your technology is well below ours. They see you as useful servants, able to fetch and carry for us while we tend to more important affairs. Some even want to capture one of your ships to learn how your engines work, it infuriates them that a technologically inferior civilization has engine technology more advanced than ours. But the fact that we need your help, we need the goods and materials you can supply us for our upcoming offensive against the Bru, keeps those more militant members of the council in check. What I can say, my friend, is that those opinions may change if the council learns what I know. I...what I can say is

that I will keep your secret,” she told him. “Not only do we need your help, but you and the Faey and the Dreamers are related to us. You are cousins, *family*, and I will not endanger my kin. Ulala do not fight Ulala. Ulala do not harm Ulala. And your DNA tells me that while your skin may be a different color, and you may have differently shaped ears, you *are* Ulala,” she declared. “I will impress upon the council that the Ulala see the Terrans, Faey, and Dreamers of the House of Karinne as our own, and we will take grave offense if you are treated harshly. In fact, I will insist that all matters dealing with the House of Karinne be handled *only* by us, to allow us to manage Republic affairs with our kin. The council is more than aware of how the Ulala regard our own, and I think they will respect that warning for what it is.”

Jason took her hand, raised it up, and kissed the back of it gently. “I think you were right, my friend,” he said, looking to the trunk of the tree. “I knew I was doing the right thing asking for your advice.”

Estrella put her other hand on the tree trunk, her eyes a mystery as she listened for any possible reply, then she looked back to him. “So, does this mean that you will show me your *real* magic?” she asked with a gentle smile.

“If you want to see it, yes. I’ll show you,” he replied. “But in reality, it’s just advanced applications of telekinesis. When I’m paired to a biogenic amplifier, what we call a gestalt, it allows me to pull off some impressive stunts using TK,” he said honestly. “I can do things like generate hot plasma, warp space, form shields of pure telekinetic force, manipulate kinetic energy, directly affect light, affect the molecular structure of objects to do things like heat them up or make them brittle, even make things explode. The most impressive thing I’ve ever done is use TK to alter my

quantum phase, which allowed me to walk through solid objects,” he told her, which made her eyes widen. “But the honest truth is, I learned most of those tricks from *Mrar*. The Pai are far more skilled in TK than we are, and I can’t do most of that stuff without a gestalt to boost my power. Without a gestalt, my TK is only moderately stronger than the average, and nowhere near strong enough to perform the advanced techniques. Gestalts bring us up to the level of the Pai, and let us use the techniques they’ve mastered over thousands of years. So while our gestalts do make us formidable, we aren’t at the top of the telekinetic food chain here in the galaxy. The Pai are,” he chuckled. “*Mrar* can tie me in a knot with barely any effort, gestalt or no gestalt, and the entire galaxy is in utter awe of what they can do with it. That’s why she’s my teacher. I may spend the rest of my life trying to learn even half of what *Mrar* can do with TK. She’s one of the Pai’s most experienced Masters, and it was the coup of all coups to convince her to come here to teach us.”

“Well, I think she’s a lovely person, and that has nothing to do with her ability,” Estrella said.

“Then you see what I see. *Mrar* isn’t just my teacher, she’s one of my close friends,” he nodded.

“I could tell. I had the feeling that she wouldn’t let just anyone pick her up like that,” Estrella chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s a mistake you don’t even want to make once,” he said wryly, which made her laugh. He laced his fingers between hers and lifted their hands a little. “Well, that’s it, Estrella. Now you know the secret of our magic. Let me officially welcome you to my world,” he said formally. “But it’s a world that you’re a part of, because you can hear the trees. If you

want, I can ask the *shaman* if she wouldn't mind teaching you more about it. Personally, I'd suggest that you do, it's really interesting," he urged.

"Do you think I might someday learn how to talk to the animals the way you can?"

"I am in no way qualified to answer that question," he told her. "But I will say that the *shaman* can do it too, so it's not like it's unique to me. It's just what I'm best at, my natural talent when it comes to Parri magic. Who knows, maybe you can learn to do it too."

"I'd like that."

"Just be prepared to be frustrated as hell for about six years before you get there," he warned, which made her laugh again.

Where are you, Estrella? Symone's sending bounced across the strip. *I wanna show you something!*

I'm with Jason at the tree, wrapping up a few diplomatic loose ends, she answered. *We decided to save you from the boring work talk and do it somewhere more private. But I think we're done here.*

We are, he affirmed, standing up and then helping Estrella to her feet. *And I want to remind you, girl, that Estrella is a married woman, so you'd better not have anything inappropriate hiding under a blanket.*

You are so not fun! Symone accused, which made Estrella laugh brightly.

"God, she has such a one track mind," he sighed.

"Hush, I think she's perfect just the way she is. We all need someone like Symone in our lives, to keep us from ever taking ourselves too

seriously,” Estrella grinned in reply.

“Between her and Kreel, sometimes I think I need someone in my life to make me take myself seriously,” he countered as he led her back towards the beach.

“Again you mention this Kreel. Who is he?”

“Leader of the Grimja Union, another civilization,” he answered as they walked down the pathway connecting his tree to the deck. “And now that you know what you know, there’s nothing stopping you from meeting him. I’ll ask him to come over tomorrow, and you’ll understand why he’s my best friend outside of Myleena.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Just one word of warning. Do *not* let him get you drunk,” he said seriously. “Else you’ll wake up the next morning naked and in a jail cell, and have no idea how you got there. Trust me, I speak from personal experience.”

She gave him a surprised look, then burst out in uncontrollable laughter. “Now *that* is a true best friend,” she winked.