

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

# **Revelation9**

**Fel**

## Chapter 9

*Kaira, 29 Suraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Friday, 13 November 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaira, 29 Suraa, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*“The Meadow,” Tir Tairngire*

This was Estrella’s last day here.

She’d been here for seven days, and those days had been not only highly productive, but game-changing when it came to the social fabric of the strip. Simply put, Estrella had found her place among his friends and family as one of them, as *belonging*. Jyslin, Symone, Dahnai, Myleena, his family, Mrar, Krirara, Kreel, the strip residents, everyone that had the chance to spend time with her just loved her. Even Miaari was very fond of her, and given Miaari had seen into the deepest parts of her, that meant a great deal. She was going home tomorrow, but she also was going to have the option to come visit thanks to the bionoid that Rook built her, a top of the line model with full biorhythmics, as well as three days of training by Rook himself on how to operate a bionoid via merge. That bionoid would give her the ability to visit the friends she’d made, as well as talk directly to Jason without them having to undertake elaborate preparations. The QE device the Republic had devised and they’d built was working like a champ, able to handle the simultaneous use of about 50 bionoids utilizing full

sensory streams, which also meant that the device was capable of a fairly decent data transfer speed of 2.6 gigastrings of data per second. That would allow them to transfer an average scientific file in about 17 minutes. So, they'd be able to transfer scientific research back and forth, but it wouldn't be fast. The key to increasing that transfer speed was bigger devices and multiple devices, and they were working on both. The objective was to create a series of connected QE devices that would increase bandwidth to the Republic that would allow for the simultaneous use of 5,000 bionoids, which would also increase data transfer to where entire research project file trees could be sent back and forth in a matter of minutes.

Her five days here since learning the secret of the Karinnes had been both productive and enjoyable. They'd split their time between official negotiations, trips out into Karinne holdings, letting her see the house, and many hours sitting around the campfire with the *shaman* as the Ulala learned more about her talents. That was the one thing that intrigued her the most, her connection to the trees, and behind it was a near infatuation with Jason's ability to talk to animals. That was what she wanted to learn how to do, to the point where she'd been all but grilling the *shaman* over how she could go about learning to do it herself. She'd confided in him that being able to talk to animals was a childhood dream of hers, and seeing him do it, finding out that it was actually possible, it was like she was suddenly within reach of attaining it.

On the business side of things, she was going home with everything on the Republic's list of needs. Between Jason and Dahnai, as well as the rest of the Confederation thanks to the trade network, they were able to mark every critical need item off the Republic's list, and while they may not get the amounts they hoped for, they were going to at least get some of it. In

return, the Republic was already preparing the first food and replicated heavy element shipments—Republic replicators could replicate matter all the way up to Kaiserium 323, which was *far* heavier than anything either Confederation or Karinne replicators could manage—to be sent back on the KT-2K freighters that were going to ferry the materials out to C6D, so every freighter would arrive full and leave full. The KES and KMS had already set up the Stargate chain out to C5H-A1-001, the closest terrestrial system in cluster C5 to Karis and the most distant from cluster C6, which was on the far side of cluster C5 from C6. That maximized the distance between the trade hub and C6A, the Bru’s home galaxy. That would give them the most time possible to see any Bru attack fleet coming, and would only add 7 hours to the trip for his freighters. Three major cargo terminals were en route there, terminals designed to be shipped in pieces and would be assembled on site, which was a process that was going to take about another takir before they had the pieces of the three terminals in orbit around planet D. And since they’d have a Stargate and some serious infrastructure there, that meant that a significant task force of KMS ships was going to be stationed there to defend their assets, as well as enough KMM assets to tow the Stargate out of the cluster in mode three if the Bru made an attempt at the trade hub. The terminals would be destroyed to deny them to the enemy, if it came down to it...and most likely destroyed when the Bru arrived to try to take some of them out with them.

She’d be going home with all the things she’d bought while here on her multiple forays into the Shopping District, three moleculartronic bionoids equipped with resonance nodes and with full biorhythmics built for her by Rook, several hard copy books written in Faey explaining the views and beliefs of the Parri, a whole lot of holopics of her new friends on Karis, audio recordings of Jason and the guards jamming in the music room

over a couple of nights, a leaf and a blossom from Jason's *oye* tree encased in transparent epoxy and mounted on a small stand, and four full cases of both *oye* juice and fruit, the juice and fruit from Jason's tree. Seriously, all her stuff was going to all but completely fill up a cargo bay of the frigate taking her home.

The tree was going to miss her. It flowered the day after Jason told her the truth, and she'd been nearly intoxicated by the smell of the blossoms for the last couple of days. The tree was sending her home with a farewell of its own. The flowers meant it was about to bear fruit again, but she wouldn't be here for that. But, Jason did promise to send her some of the fruit, which became part of the official trade deal between the House of Karinne and the Republic; Estrella Nine Rings would receive one twenty konn basket of *oye* fruit every Confederation standard week, for her personal consumption and to gift to friends back home.

He was not surprised at all that she'd all but rammed that bit of extra haggling into the official deal. If Estrella was typical for her people, then the Ulala were just as crazy over *oye* as the Faey, Dreamers, and Terrans. Now that she'd had a taste of *oye*, she wasn't about to leave without securing her own personal supply.

One thing was for sure, he'd need to all but put his cooks and Merra under guard to keep Estrella from stealing them. She was head over heels for their cooking, had relished every meal she'd had while here, proving that the Ulala had the same tastes as their cousins and the Shio. But then again, almost everyone liked Shio cuisine, because there were traditions in Shio cuisine that covered just about any palette.

The interesting part of this had been Kreel. Kreel had quickly pulled Estrella under his spell, showing her why he was Jason's best friend outside

of Myleena, and from his side of things, he'd been remarkably chill about the secrecy surrounding her presence on Karis. Jason had been deliberately vague about exactly who she was and where she was from, only saying that she was from a recently discovered cousin species to the Faey they'd met during their exogalactic explorations, and he didn't ask a single extra question. But that was what made the Grimja who they were. They were laid back, and one way that showed itself was in how Kreeel simply accepted Jason's explanation and rolled with it, not trying to dig any further.

But the most interesting friendship that bloomed while Estrella was here was the one she struck up with Krirara. She met her quite by chance while visiting Jason's office, and like Kreeel, she accepted Jason's evasive introduction at its face, and Estrella had taken an almost immediate interest in her. Jason could see why, the Kirri as a people were quite fascinating and Krirara was one of the best examples of her people.

Those were just examples of how Estrella had really dug into the culture of the house. She'd talked to hundreds of citizens during their tours and excursions, learning more about the house, its people, and experiencing the vast diversity of the population of Karis, home to some 174 distinct species that lived in virtually every ecosystem on the planet, from the icy waters of the poles to the barren deserts of Kirga and Virga to the lush, steamy jungles of Sarga to the stony peaks of the tallest mountains on Hirga. She got to see some of the 157 different groves of *oye* trees scattered across the five continents, each tended by a village of Parri, she got to see the unterraformed parts of the planet in addition to the terraformed sections. She also got to visit some of the holdings of the house, visiting the multiple inhabited moons of Janja and New Karga, Oasis and the double planet system Osai and Kiisai, the heavy gravity planet Shariki, and the planet just

next door, Alakis, touring the terraforming operation there while using bionoids, so they didn't have to wear life support equipment.

Though, what interested her most about Alakis were the five Syndicate super-ships that were in orbit serving as the moons that were stabilizing the planet's axis tilt. And as a bit of a trophy, the flagship of the invasion fleet that the Confederation had defeated was one of them, and would remain there in perpetuity to serve as a permanent moon to the planet to maintain the axis tilt once it was stabilized.

For her last day here, Jason decided to bring her to Tir Tairngire. They'd gone on an aerial tour of Alaria, which completely blew her mind, leading up to this moment, them landing on the pad near the vacation house with two dropships already there. The smaller of them had held Ayama and Surin, Seido an Merra, and five trusted temp worker servants whom Ayama called in when they needed more help, who were here to support the family as they spent the night, and the other was the usual guard detachment who arrived early to take up their usual positions around the compound. The arrival of those dropships had invariably attracted the attention of the pack, and Jason saw them loping out of the woods as he descended towards the pad, coming to greet them. The dropship was a military personnel transport, a KP-210, and he'd needed it because it was stuffed to the gills with friends and family and a lot of stuff. The entire population of the strip was aboard the dropship, here to enjoy Estrella's final day here in person, and giving Estrella the chance to meet the final close part of Jason's life, the pack. But it was also a chance to let her relax a little bit. They'd mixed their official negotiations in with trips and social gatherings, but today was all about just kicking back and celebrating the official signing of the trade deal.

The only ones missing were Dahnai and Aura, but both would be arriving very soon. Dahnai had some official business to handle back on Draconis, then she'd be arriving with her family. She wanted Estrella to meet Kellin and her kids, and her coming was the main reason why Aya had brought so many guards. If it was just Jason and the strip girls, only maybe eight guards would be here. But with Dahnai coming, Aya had 32 guards, 24 Marines from the honor guard, and the current classes of the Dukal Guard Academy here to do some field training. Aura was due to arrive in about an hour, as soon as her carrier got back to Kosigi from deployment in cluster A2A. She'd come straight to the vacation house in her Wolf. It would be Aura's first chance to meet Estrella in person, though the two had already met via Aura's bionoid when she merged over to it during an R&R rotation. Military protocol was that nobody could merge to a home bionoid while on deployment and on standby, since being merged to the bionoid would keep them from responding quickly to a scramble call, so it had been three days before Aura got the chance to merge over.

Jason set the large ship on the pad and opened the hatch, and the wolves reached them just as the kids started boiling out. Estrella gave them quite the impressed look when she and Jason reached the hatch, and he didn't waste any time with the introductions. *Estrella, may I present the pack*, he introduced, then conveyed their scent-names to her via sending. *This is their claimed territory, and they've graciously allowed us to build the vacation house here in the meadow. Guys, this is Estrella Nine Rings, the dignitary I told you about. She's visiting from another galaxy.*

*Greetings, Estrella*, the alpha male declared, sitting down at the base of the stairs. *We welcome you to our territory.*



*I am honored to be here,* she replied as she came down the steps. *Jason speaks very highly of all of you.*

*He is a good friend and considered an honorary member of the pack,* the alpha female told her as she reached the bottom of the steps, going from looking down at the wolves to looking up at them. The alpha male lifted his paw towards her, and she smiled and took the massive paw between her hands. *Did you have to bring Songa?* she asked him plaintively.

*I heard that!* Songa warned, which made Jason laugh.

*Hey, if she gets to terrorize us, she gets to terrorize you,* he replied cheekily. *Besides, she doesn't stick needles in you like she does us. I think she's afraid to do it, you may bite her.* When Estrella gave him a quizzical glance, he elaborated. *The virus affected the pack, which is why they have talent. The alpha female is pregnant, so Songa is closely monitoring her pregnancy to make sure the virus doesn't cause her any complications.*

*Ah. Congratulations on your coming blessing,* Estrella told her, happiness rippling through her thought.

*Thank you. I think Songa is worrying far too much, but I do appreciate her concern,* the female answered.

*It's a doctor's job to worry, so you don't have to,* Songa told her shamelessly. *And I just need to do a simple exam today, my friend. I want to see how you're coming along.*

After introducing Estrella to the cubs, they moved into the main house. She had Jyslin and Symone take her on a full tour of the place as Jason caught up with the pack, then everyone settled in for their overnight stay, claiming bedrooms—people would be sharing them and sleeping in the

common rooms given there were so many of them here—then the adults convened out on the pool deck as the kids scattered across the entire compound to go have fun. Jason sat with the alpha male for a bit, catching up, but then hearing about the pack's recent encounters with the packs that abutted their territory. The packs had always had amicable relations, it had been that way for as long as the packs could remember, so those meetings weren't about battles over territory but the opportunity to exchange information. News did travel through the forest before the virus changed them, but now it moved much more swiftly since the sending range of many packs reached well into the territory of other packs.

Virtually all of the wolves were *very* strong telepaths, and the home pack were certainly no exception to that rule. The strongest of them, the higher ranked female cub, was easily in the top 10%.

Estrella joined them after the tour as the alpha male relayed the latest forest gossip to Jason, which was about what mattered to the wolves; weather conditions, the movement of the prey animals through the forest, births and deaths, and the potential formation of new packs when packs got too large and splintered to prevent over hunting a territory. But since the coming of the Dreamers and the virus, that gossip now included important news from the Dreamers and notable affairs anywhere on the planet, and even out in the rest of the galaxy. The wolves as a species were intelligent and curious, and now that they were aware that there was much more out there, they were always eager for more information about it. The packs weren't ignoring the outside world, and the outside world wasn't ignoring them.

And soon they'd have much more of a window into the outside world, since there was a plan in place to extend the biogenic network to cover the

entire forest, giving all of them access to Civnet. He hadn't done it until now because of the potential mischief the wolves could get into being given access to Civnet while having no idea how it worked. So, for the last few months or so, the packs had been educated about Civnet by the trainers that came in and helped them gain mastery over their Generation abilities. Now that all the packs knew what Civnet was and knew how to avoid doing things like accidentally ordering five hundred boxes of thumbtacks, they were ready for access. The home pack had access to Civnet via the meadow's biogenic node, and they'd proved that giving the wolves access to it wasn't going to cause any problems.

Estrella joined them after escaping from Symone, sitting in the chair on the other side of the wolf, who was laying sedately beside the deck chair Jason was using, then looked up at the tree in the center of the meadow. *That tree is much smaller than the others I've seen.*

*That's because it's still young, at least as oye trees go, Jason answered. It's only been there for around three years. It's the first tree planted here on Tir Tairngire.*

*There are others?*

*Not yet. When the tree matures and grows fruits, the birds will spread the seeds. We could have planted more trees ourselves, but the Parri told us to do it that way, so we do it that way. When it comes to the oye trees, we do what the Parri say. They're the experts.*

*Ah. I must say, I can't get Alaria out of my head.*

*I know, the alpha male agreed. The sight of it tickles at the back of my mind in a way I can't explain.*

*Exactly! she agreed eagerly. I'm so glad I'm not the only one that feels that way!*

*A lot of people have that reaction when they see it, Jason told her. The Dreamers designed Alaria in a way that reflects their cultural identity, which reveals just how enigmatic they are. Aria isn't like her people, even though she's an Oracle.*

*Edamur certainly was very different from her, she nodded.*

*Aria is a darling young female, the alpha male noted fondly. It's been a joy to watch her mature.*

*Amen. I'm very proud of her, Jason agreed, fatherly pride bursting through his thought.*

*You visit Karis often?*

*Often enough, he answered, raising his head and looking at Estrella. Jason and his friends are our friends, and we came to feel very at home on Karis when we were there learning how to use our abilities. We like to come over at least once a lunar cycle to see how everyone is doing.*

*I know exactly what you mean. I've made so many friends here, I'm going to miss them when I go home. That's why I'm so glad they built a bionoid for me so I can visit without having to come here in person.*

*We have bionoids there as well, but we prefer to come ourselves, the wolf told her. Rook still hasn't quite perfected giving the bionoids our sense of smell, and we find it very disturbing to have that sense restricted. We are heavily grounded in our sense of smell..*

*It's one of Rook's holy crusades, Jason noted with an audible chuckle. He's been at it off and on for over a year. It doesn't bother me nearly as much, since my normal sense of smell is so much less.*

*You have a wolf bionoid?*

*He nodded. It's over there, he added, waving towards the mecha garage. When I go out into the forest with them, I use a wolf bionoid. I also use it to participate in their hunts, since I can't do it like this.*

*You could always use a mecha.*

*That's cheating, and besides, my presence out there causes...problems, he told her dryly. Remember, I can talk to animals. I'm not all that big on hunting them because of it. Yes I eat meat, and yes I don't begrudge the pack for hunting, since it's what they do. It's the natural cycle. I just don't like to do it in person. But in a bionoid, when it's not me, that I can handle. As long as I can't talk to the animal I'm hunting, I don't have a problem with killing and eating it.*

*I understand what you're trying to convey, Estrella nodded. And that answered one of the questions I had about your ability.*

*Like most telepaths that can talk to animals, I have a strong aversion to hurting them. It's the same to me as hurting an Ulala would be to you. But where most animal telepaths won't eat meat, I will. I more or less have to, no Shio is a vegetarian and Seido is gonna cook what Seido wants. I'd better eat what she puts in front of me, or she'll beat me up..*

*Don't stir up trouble Jason, we haven't started cooking yet, Seido warned, which made Estrella laugh.*

*I think that was a threat, Estrella winked.*

*Of course it was, but like it's gonna stop me, he replied cheekily. But anyway, when it's not me, when it's a bionoid, the rules are different. And I gotta say, hunting as a wolf is far more challenging and dangerous than I thought it would be.*

*We warned you not to attack from behind, the alpha noted.*

*Yeah, I learned that the hard way, he said with a grimace.*

*What happened?*

*The ram damn near kicked my bionoid in half, he answered with a bit of a shiver. It managed to break two of its ribs, and those ribs are freakin' metal. On top of that, it did major damage to quite a few of the bionoid's systems, since most of the system components are contained inside the rib cage. You can't feel pain in a bionoid, but hell, that was as close to pain as I've ever gotten. It was so messed up, I had to call in a drone to come get the bionoid and carry it back to the compound. Rook almost punched me after he saw how much damage I did to it.*

*I hadn't considered merging to something so different from me, Estrella mused. Have you tried merging to a Faey or Terran bionoid? she asked the wolf.*

*We've done it, but it's very creepy. Walking on two legs feels wrong, he answered. That's why Rook built us proper bionoids. I do have to say, Jason does much better in a bionoid of our kind than we do in a bionoid of his kind.*

*I have more practice, mainly from my Cheetah training, he replied. Believe me, it took me a while to get to where being a quadruped felt natural.*

*You think I might try using a wolf bionoid?*

*Sure, we have three of them here, Jason answered. You just can't use mine, it's hard-coded so only I can merge to it. But we've got two others for guests of the wolves, so they can take them out into the forest. And since you're not gonna do anything other than just walk around with it, it's safe to merge without using a merge pod. Lemme bring one of them out so you can see it, that way you don't have to try to search for it over the network. You haven't quite learned how that works yet.*

*Truth. I'm glad you're sending data on how the networks are set up for our tech people to use as a guide. And my experience here will give them a personal viewpoint of it.*

Jason activated both his own wolf bionoid and one of the guest bionoids and had them report to them on the pool deck. They loped up from the mecha hangar, and Estrella got a good look at them as they came to a stop and sat down. Jason's bionoid was tall and burly, with ruddy reddish-brown fur and a white stomach, but had a white patch on its face, over the top of its muzzle, eyes, and forehead that vaguely resembled the Legion Phoenix. The guest bionoid was smaller, the size of the cubs, and was a smoky gray. *The smaller one is the guest bionoid, the bigger one is my personal bionoid,* he informed her. *Go ahead and merge up to it.*

She nodded and leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes, and she took a deep breath. The wolf bionoid seemed to flinch a little, then it stood up a little uncertainly, looking around. If anything, that proved that she'd gotten the hang of merging fairly quickly, and that telepaths could effectively merge without external equipment using resonance technology. She could easily be knocked out of the merge by disturbing her body or by loud noises or other sensory overload, since she didn't have a jack or the implants that

Jason had, but she was capable of merging *This is so unusual!* she declared, using the resonance node in the bionoid rather than her own sending. That was no surprise, since she couldn't split. *My vision is different, and I can hear and smell things I've never experienced before.*

*The bionoid is set up to have the wolves' senses, and it's feeding you a sensory stream based on those enhanced senses that your brain can comprehend, Jason told her. You're not actually hearing frequencies or smelling scents beyond your brain's ability to process them, the bionoid is converting sensory information that your brain can't process into something that it can, while trying to keep the processed sensory information as faithful to the original as possible. But it's not perfect yet. Rook's still working on that. He's got the vision and hearing down, but he's still working on smell. Smell is particularly challenging because it has so many aspects that our brains can't process, forcing the bionoid to try to convert them into sensory data that we can understand, but still captures the texture of the scent it's trying to convert to keep it unique. A whole lot gets lost in that translation.*

*I see. That does make sense.*

*Come, Estrella, let me teach you how to walk on all fours,* the wolf offered, standing up.

*I welcome your insight,* she replied eagerly.

Jason merged to his bionoid and joined them, and they spent a very enjoyable hour teaching Estrella how to be a wolf. She was very clumsy at first, but her Ulalan grace and agility started to show as she quickly grasped the differences in walking on four legs, and even made a lot of progress in learning how to control her tail. Jason rather enjoyed messing around in his



wolf bionoid, it made him feel like an actual member of the pack rather than an honorary one. The bionoid had full biorhythmics, even the ability to eat, and its fur, while synthetic, had virtually the same consistency as the natural fur, making it nearly impossible to tell the synthetic bionoid fur from real wolf fur.

By the time Symone came looking for Estrella, no doubt to drag her off into another bawdy adventure, Estrella was managing a fairly decent loping run, running in very wide circles around the field between the pool deck and the base of the hill holding the tree. The alpha female had joined them, running alongside Estrella and giving her some tips as Jason and the male sat on their haunches nearby. Symone leaned over his chair and looked down at him as he watched himself and the wolves, then blew playfully in his ear.

*[Stop that,] he ordered, which made her laugh.*

*[That Estrella in the bionoid?]*

*[Yup. She's doing pretty good. I think it's because she's so naturally agile.]*

*[Think you're right,] she replied. [Trelle's garland, no way I was running like that an hour after my first merge using the Cheetah training software.]*

*[I think it took me two days to get to where she is now,] Jason admitted wryly. [I kept tripping over my own feet trying to work out how to run.]*

*[Jason,] Aura called. [I'm through the Stargate and in local space.]*

*[Very good, love. So in about twenty?]*

*[More or less. Room on the pad for me?]*

*[We saved you a spot,] he assured her.*

*[Is Dahnai there yet?]*

*[Not yet. You beat her here.]*

Dahnai arrived barely ten minutes after Aura landed her Wolf on the pad, joining them as Aura chatted eagerly with Estrella, holding her hands. Aura knew Estrella, but it was the first time they'd met in person since Aura had been on deployment. Jason watched as Dahnai all but pushed Aura aside and took Estrella's hands, a bright smile on her face, then she introduced her to Kellin, Raisha, and Miyai. *What lovely girls*, Estrella smiled as she took Miyai's hands. *I have a son that's about your age.*

*We were wondering if you had kids*, Miyai answered.

*I have four, two sons and two daughters*, she answered. *Maiza is my youngest son, who's about your age. My oldest son is in college, pursuing a degree in mathematics. My daughters are twins like you, and they're in prep school. They're eighteen.*

*Cool. Too bad we can't meet them*, Raisha noted when Estrella took her hands.

*Since we have the QE device working, someday you just might. They'll be in bionoids, but that's pretty much the same as meeting them in person. It's how I got to know Aura*, she said with a smile at her.

*This is my husband, Kellin*, Dahnai introduced. Kellin took her hands with a smile.

*You are a lucky man to marry such an exceptional woman, Kellin,* she told him.

*Believe me, I know,* he replied with a nod. *And not just because she's the Empress.*

Estrella smiled brightly when Saelle approached, carrying Kaen, the toddler fussing a bit in her arms. *This must be Saelle and your son Kaen,* Estrella noted. *Dahnai speaks very highly of you, as both a foster mother and as a friend, Saelle.* “And look at this impressive little man!” she said richly to Kaen. “It’s nice to meet you!”

“Hi,” he said, a bit shyly. “Are you Stella?”

“That’s close enough,” she smiled at him, then gasped and laughed when the alpha wolf pushed her out of the way with his muzzle and pressed his nose against Kaen’s face and chest.

“Daddy wolf!” Kaen bubbled, hugging his snout.

*It's good to see you again, my young pup,* the wolf answered, sending so Kaen could hear him. *How are you doing, Saelle?*

“I’m just fine, my friend,” she replied, scrubbing her fingers through the fur on the side of his head as Evin left the dropship with a quartet of white-armored guards, and to Jason’s surprise, the honey-furred Jinaami. Jason let her put her hand on his neck in greeting, then she laughed when he folded her in a rough hug, picked her up, and swung her back and forth a little bit.

“Are you also a Kimdori, madam?” Estrella asked curiously.

“Yes I am,” she replied from Jason’s clutches, then gasped and struggled a bit against him when he pinched her bottom. “Stop that!” she demanded.

“Estrella, it’s my honor to present to you Jinaami Kroxh, ambassador from the Kimdori to the Imperium and a very close, very dear friend to both me and my family,” Jason said. “Jee, this is Estrella Nine Rings, member of the Supreme Council of the Galactic Republic.”

Jinaami managed to wriggle free of him and stepped up to Estrella, then put her hand on her neck in greeting. Estrella had had Miaari do that to her enough times to understand it for what it was. “It’s an honor to finally meet you in person, my Lady,” Jinaami said. “Dahnai has said much about you.”

“The Kimdori know about you,” Jason reminded the Ulala. “So Dahnai doesn’t keep you a secret from Jinaami.”

With Dahnai and Aura’s arrival, they got down to some serious relaxation. It was crowded and a bit noisy with so many kids there, but in Jason’s opinion, there wasn’t anything better. Nothing compared to being close to his friends and family, to sit around a table or a pool and talk with the people important to him as he was surrounded by children of all ages, from the toddlers like Kaen to the near-adults like Yuri, Aria, and Sirri. This was what life was about, not to gain wealth or power, not to conquer and rule, but to just *be*, and *be* with the important people in one’s life. And to his eternal relief, the Ulala as a people shared his outlook. They were about family, clan, about *us* instead of *me*, and what mattered most to them was the prosperity and happiness of the family, not personal wealth or power. That was why he and Estrella got along so well, and why he had quickly come to consider her part of his innermost circle of friends and family,

occupying the same spot in his mind as Zaa and Grun, Kreel and Krirara, Mrri and Mrar, Kraal, Miaari and her sisters, and Jinaami.

Estrella had conquered the entire strip with her charm, and Jason was not immune to it.

But their meeting wasn't entirely social, when the Denmother surprised all of them with an unannounced visit about two hours after Dahnai arrived, and she had Grun, her cubs, and Kraal with her. Estrella was suitably impressed by the aura of competence and gravity that surrounded Zaa as she was introduced to her, was equally impressed with Grun's eloquence, then she looked up quite a bit at Kraal when he was introduced, his huge hand all but swallowing up her entire neck and head. "What are you doing over here, Kraal?" Jason asked curiously after Zaa introduced him.

"I had a report to deliver to Denmother, and as you know, those are always done in person," he answered. "But I am equally glad to get the opportunity to meet you, Lady Estrella. Denmother has spoken highly of you."

"Highly enough to come meet you before you return home," Zaa agreed.

"Plus, there are a few things we must discuss, cousin," Kraal added, looking down at Jason. "The Board has requested you to speak to them again."

"Over what?"

"They want to contract us to help iron out a design issue with their system to system comm nodes," he answered. "Their production models are

running into an unforeseen issue with data corruption whenever the nodes exceed 70% capacity.”

“Oh? Well, that’s no biggie. I’ll contact Dai Su and have her send us the specs, and put MRDD on it,” he said dismissively. “That way I can walk in with a fix when I go speak to the Board.”

“There’s more to it than that. They also want to increase our trade relationship,” he added. “They feel it will speed up their modernization plans to buy refined metals from us rather than do it themselves.”

“I take it you’re speaking of the empire in the other galaxy?” Estrella asked.

Jason nodded. “We interact with them mainly to keep their civilization stable, which reduces the threat that they try another invasion. Right now, they’re focusing on the infrastructure they’ve neglected for some two thousand years or so, so they’re in the first stages of a major modernization plan. I think I told you that so long as they greater profit in a peaceful relationship with us rather than trying to conquer us, then they won’t declare war again. This is one way we keep them on the path we want them to be on. They’ve learned that being our friends is much more lucrative than trying to conquer us.”

“I thought he was nuts to engage the Syndicate like that, but he’s been right about it,” Dahnai admitted. “They’ve actually been helpful to us since the end of the war.”

“It’s in our best interest for the Syndicate to be stable and prosperous,” Jason stated, to which Kraal nodded.

“I’m impressed that you don’t hold a grudge about it,” Estrella noted.

“Oh, I hold a grudge, but that’s more against the overall culture of the Syndicate than the people that make it up,” he replied. “There are some good people within the Syndicate, and I’ve gone out of my way to find them and cultivate good relations with them. There are several of them that I consider to be close friends.”

“So, you’re trying to effect change from within, one small step at a time,” she surmised.

“You are as clever as Jason said you were, Estrella,” Zaa said with an impressed nod. “I will enjoy coming to know you.”

The conversation turned much more political with the inclusion of Zaa, as she subtly started probing Estrella’s political views as they sat around an outdoor table on the pool deck, kids running back and forth while both white and black armored guards watched for any potential accidents or issues. But those talks were interrupted fairly regularly by kids demanding Zaa’s attention, showing Estrella that Zaa and Grun were a deep and intimate part of Jason’s personal life. Nothing exemplified that more than Gwendi, who planted herself in Jason’s lap and constantly tried to lure him off to go play, at least until Gary, Bethany, and Siyae dragged her and Zemaal off to engage in shenanigans.

After a wonderful early afternoon of conversation, Jason found himself piggybacking Estrella on his merge to a Titan, one of the mecha in the hangar there at the compound. They were in merge pods in the mecha hangar—he couldn’t piggyback someone unless he was in a merge pod—managing the merge settings and sensory stream to her pod, which was being fed to it from his. He did block some of the top secret stuff from her pod, like telemetry and weapon systems, mainly just letting her get an idea of what it felt like to merge to a full size mecha. He walked the mecha

around the paved parts of the compound, mainly so he didn't leave giant footprints in the meadow, then mounted flight pods and took off, taking the mecha up into orbit. She got a fantastic view of the Milky Way once he cleared the moon and gas giant, the entire galaxy visible from horizon to horizon. *[Karis is about right there, at least from a two dimensional perspective,]* he relayed, pointing and highlighting a section of the galaxy on the visual display being fed to her from a camera in a spinner. *[It's a bit too deep into the galaxy to get a view of the star from here. Draconis is about there, and Grimja Prime is right around there. Kirri'arr, Krirara's home planet, is visible from here. Their star system is almost right on the rim and on this side of the galaxy from Tir Tairngire, so there's nothing blocking line of sight from here.. There,]* he called, zooming in the display to highlight a white star. *[The sectors on this side of the galaxy facing Tir Tairngire are heavily populated. Well over half of the stars you see close to us have inhabited systems, except for this area right here. It's called the Kypan Void, a very large area of the galaxy spanning across four sectors that lacks inhabitable terrestrial planets. As you may have noticed, Kirri'arr is within the Kypan void. My home planet, Terra, is also within the Kypan Void, almost dead in the middle of it. Right...there,]* he said, zooming in, then zooming in again, then zooming in one final time. *[The star has current line of sight to us here, but won't for long.]*

*[Terra. Where the Academy is?]*

*[Yup. It's a neutral planet, every spacefaring civilization in the galaxy signed a treaty to make it so. Terra hosts the Academy, and the Academy is neutral ground for everyone.]*

*[That's the last bit of business I mean to discuss with you, Jason, the next time we meet. The Republic wants access to your Academy, to study*



*how you've developed your technology.]*

*[We can arrange that, but it'll require you to sign onto the same treaty everyone else has,] he told her. [I'll send a copy of it back with you so the Supreme Council can look it over. If you sign on, I can conceal your activity by routing all Republic traffic with the Academy through Karis, making it look like we're the ones doing it. That will hide you from everyone else.]*

*[What's involved in the treaty?]*

*[Not a whole lot. You recognize Terra as a neutral planet, promise to never send military assets to Terra without prior approval, sign a treaty with the Academy that states that no hostilities of any kind ever happen anywhere within the Terra star system, and agree to the same data transfer and file access rules that everyone else follows. You'll be treated no differently from anyone else,] he warned. [What those rules basically mean is that Terra is neutral territory, and if you're in a war with someone, you don't attack each other within the Terran system or on Academy grounds or within an Academy asset, like a deep space research station. The entire Terran system is a non-aggression area. You're allowed to bring military assets into the system with prior approval, but you don't use them.]*

*[An odd position.]*

*[Not really. Many empires and mega-corporations use Terra as a drydock for refits, upgrades, and repairs. The Academy does it,] he answered. [Mainly it's civilian ships that use those, but members of the Confederation bring their military ships there for maintenance, because of the treaties involved. Members of the Confederation will work on each other's ships, at least up to a point, and there's a military drydock facility there at Terra. Empires don't reveal their top-secret tech to others, but if*

*they need work done on low-security systems, they can always bring their ships to Terra to get it done. The most common thing the drydocks do is hull cleaning and painting.]*

*[That's a true measure of trust, that they allow other militaries to work on their ships, even the lower security sections of them. You can learn a lot about a ship from those.]*

*[It took a while to get to there, but we did,] he replied with some amusement. [Think we're the reason for it, truth be told. We helped them build a lot of their ships, and they saw that our people that were involved in their ship construction kept their secrets. Our ships are usually the flag in a combined task force, so we also allow Confederation military officers from other empires to operate on our ships. The largest military shipyard facility in the galaxy is at Karis, and sections of it are used by our allies in the Confederation so they can build their own ships. They can do it there much more easily and more cheaply than they can in their home territory.]*

*[We use Dyson Spheres with atmospheres inside them for that, it's easier to build ships in a pressurized environment.]*

*[Holy—you built a Dyson Sphere?]*

*[We have ten, each of them built around a red dwarf, and there's a lot of room in them,] she affirmed. [We use them to build all of our ships, platforms, terminals, orbital stations, deep space stations, and other space-based projects.]*

*[Huh. Guess I shouldn't be surprised, given you built a defensive barrier system around your entire galaxy,] he mused. [Building a Dyson Sphere isn't beyond our technological ability, but it's simply not feasible for us from a resources point of view. It would cost way, way too much, far*

*more than would make it worth it to do it. Plus it would take us like a thousand years to do it.]*

*[I think it took us about two hundred years to build ours, they were all built at the same time,] she told him. [Those kinds of projects are inter-generational, at least for some of us. We have a few species in the Republic that have life spans far longer than that.]*

*[Well, we're not anywhere near that long-lived,] Jason noted wryly.*

*[Neither are we. The longest-lived race among us does most of the long-term planning, since they'll be alive to see the results.]*

*[Smart use of manpower,] he communed approvingly as he reset his optical zoom to normal, then turned the unit back towards the moon so Estrella could get a great view of the surface. [So, what do you think of being a Titan?]*

*[It feels like this to you?]*

*[Yup. You're literally experiencing my sensory stream. You're experiencing what I am. You just have control of one of the cameras so you can look where you want.]*

*[It's quite intriguing. Bionoids don't feel like this.]*

*[They're designed to feel organic, natural. This is a military unit, so it'd designed around the mission. Blow stuff up as efficiently as possible,] he explained. [I assume that since you don't have simsense, your mech pilots use telepathic interface technology? Telepathic control of the unit?]*

*[Precisely,] she answered. [The pilot is fed information both mentally and onto displays in the cockpit, but has mental control of all systems. But*

*they can't feel the way this mecha can. I can feel the radiation of the star against my skin.]*

*[The hull. The hull has a sensor mesh installed that gives it a sense of touch. You wouldn't believe how much of a difference that makes, since I can feel the things I'm holding, or feel the ground under my feet. On top of that, we've learned that riggers and pilots who are merged to their mecha perform at a much higher level when using sensor mesh equipped mecha than those who aren't. The simsense increases awareness and response time by fully grounding us in our mecha. I'm not moving some machine through telepathic interface, I'm moving me. So long as I'm merged to this Titan, it is my body, and I have as much control over it as I do my own body. The training I went through was how to control its systems as if it was part of my body. So I can manage all its systems with the same ease that I can wiggle my fingers, which is a result of all that training.]*

*[I can understand it now that I've experienced it from the inside,] she told him. [Telepathic interface gives a similar advantage, but it seems that your simsense system is even better, else you'd be using interface systems with your biogenics.]*

*[We had a biogenic interface control system, it was replaced by this after we saw that it was better for our pilots. You can develop your own version of it if you want. You have access to moleculartronic sensor mesh tech from the stuff we sent you, but it's specific to that architecture. It won't work outside of it, so you'll have to develop your own sensor mesh system from scratch.]*

*[We've already done that for our version of bionoids, I'm sure we can easily come up with a means to adapt it to military technology,] she assured him.*

*[It's what we did, so no doubt,]* he affirmed.

He brought the mecha back to the compound, and he delinked them. He helped her out of the merge pod, and was a bit surprised to see Aria hurry into the room holding the compound's merge pod cluster. She looked decidedly out of sorts. He politely excused himself from Estrella, who hurried to return to the pool deck to hang out with her new friends, then took Aria's hand and put his other hand on her cheek. *[What's wrong, my little treasure? You look a little spooked.]*

*[I was taking a nap. I had the dream again, Dad. This time, I saw more,]* she answered.

*[The dream? You haven't had that in months.]*

*[I know. I was thinking that maybe whatever it was about was over, but it's not.]*

*[What changed?]*

She glanced at the door where Estrella had just left. *[Estrella was in it,]* she answered. *[Before, the dream ended after the dragon knocked you and Aunt Dahnai out of the air. This time, the dream didn't end there. Dad, I saw you and Dahnai crash into the village, and Estrella was there,]* she communed intensely. *[I saw faces in the village, it was full of Dreamers, but I didn't recognize anyone else. I don't know what happens to you and Dahnai, I didn't see you again in the dream. Just the two of you crashing into the roof of a house and going through, and then I saw Estrella. She was riding a horse that had wings made of silvery metal and was carrying a bow, and she flies in and shoots an arrow at the dragon, which then turns and starts chasing her. But then the dream ended before I could see anything else,]* she communed fearfully. *[I didn't see what happened to you*

*and Dahnai, or if Estrella got away from the dragon. Dad...the Ulala are about to go to war, with those Bru people. I remember you talking about it. I think that maybe somehow you and Aunt Dahnai get dragged into it, and that it goes badly.]*

*[There's no way to really tell, not from what you saw. Besides, from what you've seen, it would be the other way around,] he soothed. [In your dream, we're the ones attacked first, then Estrella comes into the picture. We need to consult the Elders. They told us to inform them immediately if the dream changed. Well, the dream changed. So go get some proper clothes on for a trip to Alaria, and I'll contact the Elders and warn them we're coming.]*

*[Okay.]*

He went back to the main house and put on something more appropriate for a trip to Alaria, using comm to ask to meet the Elders as he did so, then met Aria at the skimmer they kept at the compound for local excursions around the moon. She was silent a little unsettled as they flew to Alaria, to the point where he reached over and took her hand to calm her down. Fortunately, it didn't take long at all to get to Alaria, so he was landing on the executive pad next to the Hall of Reflection, which served as the capitol for the Dreamers' society. Elder Marat met them at the skimmer, taking Aria's hands with a smile. *[Jason said that your dream has changed, Aria?]*

*[Yes, Elder,] she replied.*

*[You told us to inform you immediately if it happened. It's happened,] Jason supplied.*

*[I've assembled the Elders that are aware of Aria's dream, please come with me,]* he called, motioning towards the building.

They returned to the same room where they'd consulted with the Elders the first time, sitting at the table with most of the same Elders that were there that day. They wasted no time asking Aria about the change in her dream, and they spent nearly two hours all but interrogating her over it. They asked for every detail she could remember, even the tiniest one like what color Estrella's boots were in the dream. *[You said that Aria's dream ended the way it did because of a choice that wasn't yet made,]* Jason noted after they finished. *[Why did it change?]*

*[There was a choice made,]* Elder Kalu countered. *[This woman, Estrella. Was there an option not to open relations with her people?]*

Jason blinked.

*[That was the choice that advanced the dream,]* she continued. *[Had you not done that, then the dream would have advanced in a different manner.]*

*[But why does it end again so suddenly? Another choice that's yet to be made?]*

*[Possible,]* Elder Rovak nodded. *[But there's more going on here. We were but hours from sending you a message, noble Phoenix.]*

*[Over what?]*

*[Another Dreamer has shared Aria's dream,]* he declared. *[Though the imagery is different, it is clearly linked to Aria's dream in that its content is similar. The different imagery is normal when Dreamers share dreams,*

*since each of us interprets the dream in a slightly different way based on our personalities.]*

*[A second dream? Doesn't that mean that what the dream predicts is getting close?]*

*[Closer, not necessarily close,] Elder Kalu told him. [But what it does mean is that what Aria first predicted is important, and will affect more than just her personal life. Dreams that predict an important event are often shared by multiple dreamers, and the closer the event comes to fruition, the more dreamers share the dream predicting it. This means that we'll be devoting more resources to studying the dream, and keeping an active eye out to see if any others share the dream. Aria, child, we're going to need you to jack into a special simsense recorder while you sleep we're calling a dream catcher, until you have the dream again,] she told her. [This special simsense recorder can record your dreams, in exacting detail. It will allow us to record your dream as you experience it, so we can experience it for ourselves and study it. It will let us see even the tiniest detail, which may be important when we compare it to the dream you're now sharing with others.]*

*[Now that's a damn clever use of a jack and simsense,] Jason noted approvingly.*

*[We've begun using dream recording on a wider scale,] Elder Marat told him. [Most of us who most actively have dreams have taken to recording our dreams any time we sleep. We've been adding them to the archives here in the Hall of Reflection. And if you're looking to applaud the inventor, you'll need to laud the Haumda, not us. They came up with the idea, and altered a simsense recorder to be able to record dreams,] he admitted with a smile. [Their priests have started recording their sensory*



*stream when they meditate, so they might catch any prophecies that come to them and have a recording of it they can review and share with other priests. That device works the same for us when it comes to dreams.]*

*[I'm sending Gau a major thank-you gift,] Jason smiled. [So, we're still in wait and see mode?]*

*[I fear so, noble Phoenix,] Elder Rovak nodded. [But it will help us to get a recording of Aria's dream. We'll get you a dream catcher, young one, and show you how to use it so you can delete your personal dreams. Those, you do not need to share. You're an experienced enough Oracle to know an omen dream from a common dream, and we trust your judgment in the matter.]*

*[Alright, Elder,] she nodded. [I'll record from now on until I have the dream again.]*

*[Actually, you should record all the time, dear. Just delete anything not an omen dream,] Elder Kalu told her. [There's no telling when you'll have another omen dream, or what it will be about. It's prudent to record all your dreams, just in case.]*

*[I can do that,] she affirmed.*

Jason got himself one of the dream catchers, if only so he could see how the Haumda modified it to record imaginative imagery instead of sensory information. Recording a mental image would be more in the realm of a resonance unit, not a simsense unit, since it wasn't sensory data... though he dimly recalled somewhere that some species had their dreams process through the parts of the brain that handled sensory stimulus. If the Dreamers did that, if what they "saw" in a dream excited the part of their

brain that processed visual stimulus from the optic nerve, then a simsense device very well might do it, with a few modifications.

He watched on and listened as the Elders taught Aria how it worked, and given there was little more they could do, they sent Jason and Aria on their way with a promise to inform them immediately if any new information came to light. When they got back, Jason took the unit they gave him and took it apart while sitting at a table on the pool deck, so overwhelmingly curious about how the Haumda did it that he couldn't wait to find out. He had it in about 30 pieces when Estrella, Dahnai, and Jyslin wandered up to him, as he referred to a holo of the device's operation in a flowchart form with another holding its schematics hovering just over it. As he suspected, it utilized a resonance node to detect dream imagery, one specifically attuned and programmed to detect and record it, which was required since resonance nodes usually didn't actively scan people. It was a safety feature to prevent nodes from inadvertently hurting anyone or recording unshielded thoughts, but the Haumda had disabled that feature and narrowed the device so it only recorded dream states. The trick of its programming was that they'd taught the node what a dream was, and how it differed from conscious thought, and that was *fucking impressive*.

A lot of people slept on the Haumda, but this proved that they were every bit as clever and savvy as the Verutans or the Jirunji.

*What are you doing, love?* Jyslin asked.

*Checking out this new toy the Haumda invented,* he answered. *It's a dream recorder, so Aria can record her dreams. She had the dream again, Jys.*

*She did?*

*Yeah. Now, with this, she can record it so the Elders can see what she sees.*

*Aria had a prophecy dream? Estrella asked.*

*She's been having one for a while, but nobody understands what it means, he told her. She hasn't had the dream for a few months, so we thought that whatever it was about either came and went or the future changed in a way that made the dream moot. Now, with this clever little gadget, the Elders can experience the dream the same way she does, and they might be able to get more out of it. Aria's an Oracle, but she's young. The Elders have a lot more experience extracting useful information out of their omen dreams. Now, thanks to this thing, they'll be able to see it.*

*Interesting. How does it record a dream?*

*It's damn clever. They modified a resonance node to be able to detect a dream state in a sleeping subject, and it records it using simsense. That they taught the node the difference between a dream state and a conscious state, that's damn impressive, he sent, respect shivering through his thought. That had to take some serious programming skill.*

*The Haumda have always been good with computers, Jyslin noted.*

*Yeah, and they're a hell of a lot smarter than most people think they are, he agreed.*

*Those are the big shaggy ones whose religion is centered on prophecy?*

*Just so, Estrella, Jason affirmed. The Haumda and the Dreamers are very, very close because of their shared cultural focus on prophecy. There are a lot of Haumda that live here on Tir Tairngire, they and the Dreamers have been researching each other's prophecies since the Dreamers came*

*here, looking for common predictions. He glanced at her. I guess you deserve to know that now the omen dream Aria's been having now involves you, he told her. That's how it changed. You're now a part of it.*

*How so?*

*We don't entirely understand yet, he told her. We don't understand what any of it means, we only know that now it involves you. We don't know if it's you as in you, or you as a representative of the Ulala, or you as a part of the Republic. We just know that somehow, you're now involved in the prophecy Aria is seeing. All I can really say is that we'll let you know if we learn anything about it. Aria doesn't know if she's seeing a prediction or an omen.*

*What's the difference?*

*None, really, except in how the Dreamers respond to them. If the prophecy is about something they want to happen, they call it a prediction. If it's a prediction about something they want to avoid, they call it an omen. Right now, Aria doesn't know what the dream is about, so she doesn't know if it's something we want to happen, or want to prevent. The trick there is that they refer to all predictions as omen dreams as a catch-all term for a prophetic dream, whether it's good or bad..*

*Ah, okay. Hopefully she's seeing something good.*

*We don't know yet. All I can really say is we'll keep you informed.*

*I appreciate that. So, this is moleculartronic architecture, or biogenic?* she asked, picking up a small transition module board that governed the behavior of the resonance node.

*Moleculartronic, he said, holding up the board he was studying. It's named thus because it utilizes the board's molecular structure itself as part of the computer's architecture, both in data processing and data storage, but mainly as data storage. Sections of the board are dedicated to computing, mainly the areas around the external components mounted onto the board, while the other areas are devoted to data storage, both temporary and permanent. This entire board is utilized as part of the computer architecture, even the mounting clips. Every single molecule on that board you're holding is utilized by the unit.*

*Not a bad technology. We used something similar at one time, which is why we had little trouble working with the computers you sent us, she nodded. It's a powerful and very versatile technology, and demonstrates the technological advancement of your civilization.*

*Yes it is, Jason agreed. In some ways, moleculartronic is better than biogenic tech, but what biogenics can do makes us stay with it over moleculartronic. Myli's been working off and on over the last ten years trying to merge the two technologies, but she's only made a few modest advances in that direction. They're incompatible on a basic level that not even Myli can easily overcome, because biogenic is based on an organic architecture and moleculartronic is not. Merging two platforms so different from each other has been quite the challenge, even for our best and brightest.*

*Well, that's something new I've learned, Dahnai noted cheekily.*

*I've never hidden that from you, woman. You tune me out when I start talking tech, so that's your fault.*

Dahnai laughed. *I'm no engineer like you and Jys. That stuff puts me to sleep.*

*And yet someone talking about places and dates doesn't.*

*History is way more interesting,* she confirmed shamelessly.

*I didn't know you were an engineer,* Jys, Estrella noted to her.

*I still dabble, but managing the Paladins more or less takes all my time now,* she admitted with an audible chuckle. *Jason's first priority is running the house, but as you can see, he still dabbles too.*

*I'd much rather do this than read reports,* he declared, motioning at the guts of the dream catcher arrayed over the table. *And don't let Jyslin's modesty fool you. She is a damn good engineer,* he added proudly. *The house still uses several of her inventions and discoveries, despite her not doing any real technical work for several years.*

Jyslin beamed at him.

Ayama came over holding a large box, then gave the table a look and set it down on the deck beside it. Inside were six tabi kittens and their mother, who all looked up curiously when Estrella knelt down to coo at them. *Tabis!* Estrella gushed mentally. *They are so adorable!*

*One of them is yours,* Jason told her. *At least, if the kittens and their mother like you, anyway.*

*Mine?*

He nodded. *But they're not pets, friend. Yes they're adorable, but remember that tabis are empathic. They can sense hostility and malicious intent, and what they construe as malicious intent is very different than*

*what you do. You're a dear friend of mine, and I'd feel much better if you had a tabi or two with you to protect you. So, these are service animals who just also happen to be criminally adorable. Since the tabi has to choose you as much as you choose the tabi, I asked Ayama to find a mother with several potential candidates*

*Will it be okay on the trip back?*

*We've put tabis in stasis pods before with no trouble. They'll be just fine, he assured her. Now, why don't you see if any of them will accept you? You can take home any of them that will. The rest I'll find homes for around the neighborhood.*

It turned out, all six of them were taken with Estrella. They all but jostled each other for her attention as she ran her hands over them in the box, then she sat down and took them out, having them nearly fight to get to sit in her lap. She looked almost overjoyed with their attention, taking turns nuzzling them. *I can't decide which one to pick, she complained with a smile as she cuddled a soft gray-furred tabi. I don't think I can take them all, since they're part of the same litter. Unless they won't inbreed.*

*We took that into consideration. That's why every one of those kittens is a girl, he assured her. That way you don't have to worry about potential inbreeding. And believe me, it took us a while to find a litter of all one sex old enough for a new home. This may be the only mother tabi at the base in Prakka with a litter of six females. So, since mommy tabi approves and all the kittens like you, you want them all?*

*YES!* she sent forcefully, which made him and Jyslin laugh.

“She'll take them all,” he informed the mother tabi. “That okay with you?”

The tabi mother chirped in approval.

“Alright then. As part of the deal, that means you can live here at the vacation house if you like,” he told her. “You’ll be the house’s guard tabi. We have two Dreamers that live here and act as caretakers when we’re not here, so you’ll have people to take care of you. Sound good?”

The female chirped again, quite eagerly.

“Alright then. Welcome to your new home,” he declared. “I’ll teach you how things work around here later. Feel free to explore, just be very careful out on the back deck, since it’s built over the ocean. So don’t fall off.”

*You’re keeping that one?*

*We don’t have a permanent tabi that lives here, so mommy tabi is filling that role. Aya wanted one here, he answered. As I think you noticed, the Imperial Guard employs tabis as service animals, both as partner animals to the guards and as site protection. Mommy here will be the resident tabi at the vacation house, charged with helping guard it both when we’re here and when we’re not.*

*Won’t she be lonely?*

*Nah, we have two members of the Karinne Marines Honor Guard stationed here permanently to act as both caretakers and guards, he answered. Their families live here as well, so the tabi will have someone to take care of her, as well as provide her with company.*

*Ah, I didn’t know that.*



*There they are right there,* he noted, pointing to two blue-armored guards standing on the far side of the pool deck. One was a Faey woman, but the other was a Keelo man, who was noticeably taller than the Faey. *They're both married, each of them have three kids, and their families live here. So that's plenty of kids for the tabi to play with.*

*I haven't seen them around.*

*That's because of you, mainly. You are more or less very high security, so their families are staying over in Alaria until you leave,* he answered honestly. *If you weren't here, they'd be here mixing it up with the strip kids. They're all friends.*

*I'm not surprised at all,* she smiled.

Symone and Dahnai hijacked Estrella after that, leaving Jason to show the tabi around and explain the rules. That included introducing her to the wolves, and explaining that while *these* large predators were friendly, she should be careful of any other animals that might be on the grounds. He finished up the tour and went back to the pool deck, taking a moment to ponder what they'd learned over in Alaria. He had a feeling that his nearly impulsive decision to bring Estrella into the fold when it came to the truth had something to do with the change in the dream. She was his friend, but the dream as Aria described it also said that she was an ally, someone that they could trust, someone that would be there for them in an hour of need. He wasn't sure if that meant that the Galactic Republic was on their side, or if it was just Estrella and the Ulala. He didn't know if it meant that the Republic would come to their aid in a future crisis, or if there was something else going on. But one thing he did know was that it comforted him in a way he didn't expect.

It was almost shocking and a little disturbing, how quickly he had brought Estrella into his inner circle. She was truly a friend, a surprisingly close friend given how long they'd known each other. It wasn't just him, though. Watching her with Symone, Jyslin, and Dahnai showed that he wasn't the only one that felt that way. She had truly wormed her way into his life, and part of that was how she was accepted by his wife, amu, and friends. She was part of their lives, she was *one of them*, accepted by him, accepted by them. And the idea that those bonds were going to bring Estrella to help them in the future was...comforting. It proved that he was right about his decision, and it justified the feeling of trust he had in her, almost from their first face to face meeting.

But one thing was for sure. Estrella was now a part of his life, and his life was richer for it.

*Chiira, 30 Suraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 14 November 2023, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 30 Suraa, year 1333 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*3D Main Research Facility "The Block.," Skeyai Island, Karis*

However, that didn't stop him from other actions...after all, friendship was important, but business was *business*.

After seeing Estrella, her six kittens, and nearly a cargo hold full of gifts and shopping off in the morning. off, he got back to the actual business

of running the house...and the house was about science, so that was why he was walking into the main research room at the Block, which was the brand new facility built for 3D. The building that housed Project F had been torn down and replaced with the ultimate headquarters for the most important government agency in the house, the place where the magic happened that gave the house its reputation. The new building was a mixture of old and new, old in how it was designed to accommodate the way 3D did things and new in the facilities that those pursuits required. The new building had everything they needed, from a hardcore mainframe that connected *only* to Cybi through a direct line, given them access to the house's networks while putting the mainframe behind the most powerful firewall they could have ever devised. Everyone had their own office now, but everyone did most of their work either out in the main room or in the labs built for them, which were both in the building and peppered in external buildings around the island, if their projects needed isolation or were exceedingly dangerous. All the buildings on the island were designed to accommodate every species in the house, with thing equally accessible for the tiny Talty and the gigantic Kekik and everyone in between. Everything had been cutting edge in the old warehouse, but what they'd lacked was space. Now, they had both the cutting edge *and* plenty of space, but they didn't let that space change the basic culture of 3D. That was why everyone did most of their work out in the main area instead of in an office, because they did their best work in a collaborative work environment. Teams worked in units near other teams, because often it was off-the-wall suggestions made by people outside the team that got them moving in the right direction.

It certainly didn't take them long to move in, because the place was already cluttered. Desks had stuff all over them, printed schematics and diagrams were hanging from hoverclips, and holos of parts or diagrams

were projecting both from emitters in the ceiling and on the desks. They'd been there for nearly two takirs, and the place was already fully broken in. "Everyone gather up!" he shouted, then followed it up with a commune. *[Everyone in the main room!]* He waited for them to gather as he chatted with Eraen and Zidros, then moved to address the members of 3D once they were all assembled. "Alright, people, we have some serious work ahead of us," he began as Myleena stepped up beside him. "As most of you probably heard, the envoy from C6D went home earlier today. And now that she's not distracting us, we can get down to the business of working on their tech."

"We managed to gather some info from her visit," Myleena continued. "Very basic information about their technology, but that should be enough for us to start working on cracking it. We'll get more info from our freighters when they start supply runs and upload their logs, but that'll just augment what we already have. The biggest thing we learned is the basis of their power generation. They don't use plasma like everyone else. They use magnetism."

"Wait, what? Magnetism? And they can get enough out of it to power jump engines?" Leamon asked.

"They can get way more power out of it than that," Jason told him. "We learned that they have two power systems, low power and high power, and both are based on magnetism. Their low power system uses some kind of magnetic pulse technology that mimics old alternating current electricity, but their high power system manipulates magnetic lines of force to generate even more power than our singularity plants. So, that's where we're going to start. Leamon, I want you to head the lower power team with Bo and Maggie, since you have the most exposure to Terran electricity. If it

operates similarly to AC, then best to put an electronics tech from before the subjugation in charge of the team researching it. Sakkret, Eraen, you're gonna be leading the high power team. Both of you have the right background for magnetic research. Your job is to figure out how manipulating magnetic lines of force can generate more power than a singularity plant. Sakkret, your background in stellar magneto-dynamics makes you the best choice. You know more about magnetic fields than anyone else in 3D."

"It sounds quite intriguing," the Verutan female said in her typical dry voice.

"We're upgrading these to full projects," Myleena continued. "And this is one reason why I'm glad we're here on the island, that way we can do project-level research without leaving the island. Leamon, you take Building D. It should have all the resources you need for a project-level operation. Sakkret, you'll be occupying Building B. It has a hardened lab, given you'll be working with some high power systems. Both buildings have mainframes for project data, Siyhaa and her team will have them set up for you by tomorrow. If you bring in outside consultants, they'll be working by bionoid only and Rook will hardcode the guest bionoids so they can't leave the work areas, so remember to maintain operational security for anything not related to the project in your work areas. We're not expecting miracles from these projects, guys. Start with the basics, try to work out the theory behind how the Republic's power systems work, and try to come up with some consistent sims or working models. And mind that it'll be completely incompatible with all of our tech. If we start down this road, it'll require us to basically invent new versions of everything, from computer architecture to ship systems to household appliances, that run on these new

power systems. Even the most basic things like components are going to be different. After all, we can't use basic things like plasma relays or power sinks or charge capacitors or charge resistors or flow diodes in this new tech, we'll have to invent basic components that manipulate the energy to make it do the things we need it to do. So this is a long haul project," she said firmly. "We start with the basics and build on that foundation, and you guys are establishing the foundation. We'll be building on your results."

"Understood, Myli," Sakkret nodded.

"We'll figure it out, Myli, don't worry," Leamon added.

"We'll get as much info about it as we can when we start trading with the Republic," Jason told them. "I'm hoping that not everything they have will be impervious to our sensors, so if we're lucky, our freighters will pick up some useful data from their passive sensors when they offload and onload cargo. If we're really lucky, we'll pick up info on their other tech that we can start researching. So everyone keep that in mind. There are going to be other projects starting up based on what we learn," he called.

"Yup, so everyone try to finish up your current projects so you can move to the new ones," Myleena added. "Anyone not currently on a project, you'll be assisting on other active projects so we can free up people for the work that's coming. When we start getting in logs from the freighters, everyone not on a project is going to be studying them. *Everyone*," she stressed. "The more eyes we have analyzing those logs, the better chance we get something useful out of them. The Republic is a thousand years ahead of us in technology, and you know that we Faey can't stand being in second place. So we're gonna fix that," she declared cheekily, which sent some chuckles around the vast room.

“Not to mention the pride of the house is on the line,” Jason added. “We are the technology leaders, and we can’t let the Republic show us up. So, we’re gonna show them and everyone else just how smart we really are,” he declared, almost defiantly. “Siyhaa, Cybi, get the buildings ready for their projects. Luke, they’re gonna need our best builders assisting them, so assign them crack machinist teams. Leamon, Sakkret, pick your core teams. Alphabet, they’ll be bringing in outside consultants, and you’re our outside personnel expert. Go through the Academy’s files and find the best outside consultants to add to their teams. I’ll have Miaari vet them before you send on the names to Leamon and Sakkret.”

“It will be done, Jason,” the Ruu nodded. “Do you want me to start mirror projects in the Academy to conceal their work?”

“I was just about to tell you that,” he smiled. “Plus, they’ll be valuable resources for our teams. They can farm out the smaller sub-projects to the Academy while they focus on the big stuff.”

“I’ll get it organized.”

“Cybi, I want you to go through everything we have on magnetic research and organize it for Leamon and Sakkret,” Myleena told her 3D bionoid, which never left the island. “And if that means you have to pull data from your eyes-only encrypted core files, then do it. You have my authorization.”

“And mine,” Jason added.

“I have some, but not much,” she told them. “I’ll pull it and everything else and get it ready for them.”

“Good. Alright, that’s basically it,” Jason announced. “Get it done, guys, and get ready to shift to working on cracking any advanced technology we see the Republic using when we start the cargo runs.”

“New assignments are gonna be going out by the end of the day,” Myleena added. “If you’re not on a current project, you’ll be added to one to help them either wrap it up or get it to a point where it can be suspended in favor of the new ones coming, so be ready for it.”

The meeting broke up, and everyone immediately either went to their main area desks or their private offices, to start getting ready. Jason and Myleena lingered in the main room to answer a few questions, then he and Cybi’s bionoid followed her as she headed to her office. *[The success of both projects is gonna hinge on us getting some usable data from the freighters,]* Myleena noted as they walked. *[I don’t think anyone has ever even considered using magnetism has a high-powered energy source before, so we have like no research on it. Most magnetic research is mainly in support of other fields, defining how it interacts with plasma generation or gravimetric forces.]*

*[Yeah, I was certainly bowled over when Miaari told me about it,]* Jason agreed. *[I still can’t fathom how they do it, how something like magnetism can generate as much power as a singularity plant. It just boggles my mind.]*

*[Mine too, and that annoys the fuck outta me,]* Myleena agreed. *[I’ll be adding myself to Sakkret’s team, if only because I want to know. I want to understand how they do it.]*

*[I fully understand that feeling. I think I’m gonna be keeping tabs on both teams, just not being actively involved,]* Jason nodded. *[And it makes*



*me happy knowing you're gonna get directly involved, as much as it terrifies me that you're gonna bitch over how it's slowing down all the other stuff you've got your hands in at the moment.]*

*She laughed. [Yeah, this is way more important than translight research,] she announced. [Our teams don't really need me, they've managed to grasp the science and only need me to wander over there from time to time to keep them from drifting too far off course. I'll still be involved in it, but my main focus is gonna be this magnetic power system.]*

*[There is one project I want you to stay involved in, cousin, and that's the light scrambler interdicator,] he informed her. [I know the Kimdori have more or less taken it over, but you're a big help to them. It's very important that we design an interdicator capable of disrupting translight FTL, given it's a technology available from the Academy.]*

*[No sweat babes, they only ask for my advice from time to time, so I can easily give them attention.]*

*[Cybi, you've had some time to consider it. Can you see how they do it?]*

*[Not entirely, but there is potential there,] she replied through her bionoid. [Magnetic force is capable of some very impressive things, especially when you look at stars. That's what Sakkret specialized in before coming to 3D, after all. I can see how it can generate immense energy, but I don't understand how.]*

*[Figuring out how is what this is all about,] Jason answered. [We won't be turning it into a viable technology for decades, maybe even hundreds of years, but damn it all, we're gonna learn how it works.]*

*[Amen.] Myleena agreed. [And who knows, maybe we can take what we learn and apply it to what we already have, make our own power generation stronger, miniaturize the systems even more if we can augment them with this magnetic tech somehow.]*

*[You're not the only one that's wildly curious, Myli,] Cybi assured her. [And it will give us a direction to go as we take our next steps up the technology ladder. The Republic proves that our tech isn't the top rung, that we're not the most advanced civilization out there.]*

*[We will be,] Myleena communed intensely, to which Jason nodded in agreement. [The main reason the house even exists is for science. We're gonna learn everything.]*

*[That's the answer I'd expect out of you, cousin. And you're damn right,] Jason agreed. [Science and technology is what we do. It's who we are. And we're not gonna be sitting in a kiddie chair looking up at anyone,] he declared vehemently.*

After finishing up at 3D, Jason flew his skimmer back to the White House and met Miaari in his office. She sat in the chair across from his desk. "Alright, cousin, now that she's gone, you can be honest," he said as soon as Dera closed the door and activated the office's security feature, which meant he had to speak Kimdori. "How many of those kittens are Kimdori?"

"None, we're not familiar with their technology, so we didn't want to risk inserting a Kimdori into Estrella's inner circle. However, we have two Kimdori concealed within her effects, and they will serve as our infiltrators once she returns to her ship. I've shared what Estrella knows of the security features of her ship so they can avoid detection and get onto the ship safely.

The only real question will be, can they evade Republic sensors. That, we do not know, so this will be an experiment as much as an attempt.”

“I just hope those two will be alright,” he grunted.

“There is risk, but it’s a risk any infiltrator is willing to accept,” Miaari told him. “This is what we do, Jason, and in a way, the danger of it makes it even more appealing.”

“You guys are so weird,” he teased half-heartedly, which made her smile. “They can’t really pass any information onto us, though.”

“Not in real time, but Denmother has a plan in place for our infiltrators to return in the cargo shipments from the Republic,” she replied. “If we can arrange it, anyway. Half of what our first two infiltrators are there to do is assess their security and see if such an operation would be feasible. Both of them are going to spend six months on Estrella’s ship, learning as much as they can, and then attempt to stow away in the cargo that the Republic is sending to us in payment for what they need. If they return successfully, they’ll have the information we need to set up a more comprehensive operation.”

“I made sure Estrella would have no way of finding out that you’re shapeshifters,” he said absently. “Cybi was even keeping that out of any Civnet information she could access. So hopefully they won’t even consider the possibility. I’m sure the tabis are gonna be put under a freakin’ microscope, though.”

“Which is why we didn’t risk sending an infiltrator in among them,” Miaari nodded. “We knew they’d receive enhanced scrutiny because they’re an alien species to the Republic. I’m sure they’ll be thoroughly examined, and we deemed it too great a risk that their medical technology would

detect the infiltrators as not being what they appear. We can mimic the DNA and cellular structure of the shape we take, but there *are* tiny variances that we suspect a civilization with their technology would be able to detect.”

“Yeah,” he agreed absently, leaning back in his chair and pondering the matter. “I don’t think I told you, Aria’s dream is back, and now it’s changed. And Estrella is in it,” he told her.

“How so?”

He explained what Aria told him of her dream. “Something about it’s been picking at me,” he told her. “From the sound of it, Estrella’s going to come to our aid in a moment of need, which makes me glad I brought her into the loop. But I can’t help but wonder if my impulsive decision to do that has something to do with this.”

“You’ve made such decisions before, cousin, and they are almost always the right one. You aren’t an Oracle like the Dreamers, but your connection to the Parri and the world as they see it gives you a greater understanding of things than most everyone else. You should continue listening to that intuition, in my opinion.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” he said honestly. “If only because it gives me a rational reason to continue being irrational.”

She gave a throaty chuckle. “We Kimdori trust our intuition, cousin. You should do the same.”

“If it makes me feel better,” he said. There was a chime at the door, and Dera turned her head towards it.

*[It’s Rann and Shya, Jason.]*

*[Dad, why is the door locked?]* Rann asked.

*[I'm in a meeting with Miaari,]* he replied. *[You guys shouldn't be here, school isn't out yet.]*

*[It was a half-day,]* he countered.

*[Well, go amuse yourself for a little bit and I'll fill you in on the meeting later.]*

*[Okay. We'll be back in a couple of hours, then, there's a new restaurant in the Shopping District we wanna try.]*

*[Go for it, son. Have fun.]* “Rann,” he told Miaari. “Turns out they had a half day at school.”

“We’re most likely almost done here, unless there’s something else you want to discuss,” Miaari noted.

“A few things,” he replied. “Security for the cargo transfers with the Republic mainly. I’m sure they’re gonna be trying to get stuff in on us the same as they’ll expect us to try it against them.”

“I’ve had several discussions with Denmother over the matter,” she replied. “And I do in fact have a security plan for it.”

As they discussed things, Jason considered the near future. The trade shipments to the Republic were slated to start in just a couple of takirs, as soon as Estrella got back and had a chance to organize things on her end, and each shipment was hopefully going to cement the relationship between them. There was the matter of giving the Republic access to the Academy, which he had to discuss in exhaustive detail with Ayuma and Kiaari, and there was also the fact that the first stages of the Ten Year Plan were about

to go live. The beta test with the Rathii had gone without a hitch, and that meant that they were ready for the real deal, which would begin with ten empires sending their trainers to Terra to begin transition, among them being the Subrians, Verutans, Crai, and Kesadi, which was one of the largest empires in the R quadrant, with four of the largest empires from each of the four quadrants represented in the initial implementation of the Ten Year Plan. Jason was confident that that was going to go smoothly, given that they'd tested their system with the Rathii and had found all the bugs and hitches and corrected them.

Things were going to be very busy for the House and for Terra in the near future, but he was confident that they would be up to the task. They'd prepared well for the things they knew about, and the trade agreement with the Republic wasn't anything that his people couldn't manage. Things were going to work out, but it would still take a lot of his time and attention to make sure nothing went wrong.

Then there was the dream. He wasn't sure what the change in it meant, and there really wasn't any way to find out other than to wait and see how things developed. The Elders were on the case, and with the use of these clever new dream catcher units, they'd be able to experience the omen dreams just as the Oracles that had them did. That very well may be the difference to figure out what it meant and what event the dream was predicting. But in the short term, for now, he could do nothing but let the people he trusted do what they did best. They'd discover the truth of it, and when they did, they'd tell him.

He just had to be patient. That was all. Time would bring him the answers, and if there was one thing the Parri and the *shaman* had taught him over the last few years, it was patience.

Patience.