

SECESSION



SUBJUGATION 5
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Table of Contents

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10

Chapter 1

Raira, 10 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 27 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Raira, 10 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

There was quite a bit going on today.

Jason was up early and downstairs, nursing a cup of coffee as the reddish-tinged blue sun of Karis rose and streaked light across the kitchen table, the atmosphere's content and the angle of sunlight hitting it turning the sun red as it crept over the eastern horizon. Nobody else was up yet, and the quiet gave him time to organize the day in his mind. The most important thing, though not the first on his itinerary, was Miaari. Denmother would be arriving today to take her cubs back to Kimdori Prime, which Miaari assured him would be quite easy. Jason had seen a scan of the three tiny, *tiny* Kimdori within her, two males and a female, which to Jason's surprise were not very developed, didn't look like they could survive outside of Miaari's body. Their eyes looked to have no eyelids, which explained why their eyes wouldn't be able to cope with bright light for another couple of months, but aside from that, they looked disturbingly like puppies with their heads mounted on their necks to accommodate a vertical base. They would stay with the Denmother until Miaari had the time to care for them herself, which Jason fervently hoped would be very, very soon.

The second really big deal going on today was the arrival of the *Iyaneri*. The ship was complete and fully operational, and as soon as it arrived, Admiral Haema Karinne would be taking command of it after a brief commission ceremony. It was the sister ship of the *Aegis*, looked exactly identical now that the *Aegis* had a GRAF cannon installed, and that

behemoth was going to make an immediate impact. With two capitol ships, one could deploy to the PR sector while the other remained at home to play defense.

And up in Kosigi, the keel of the third capitol ship, given the interim designation *Indomitable*, was already laid. Now that Kosigi had doors big enough to let the big ships in and out, there was no reason to hog one of the major stardocks around Kimdori Prime. They had built a capitol dock, and now the *Indomitable* was under construction, projected to be completed in 7 months, 3 days.

On a related note, after a major setback in construction caused by an accident, the first carrier was *also* going to be commissioned today. That ship had been assigned to Jaiya, sort of moving sideways from the *Trelle's Gift* because she was considered by Navii to be best suited for command of a carrier, and thus far, she had kept her intended name of her new carrier a secret. She'd spent almost every waking hour on the ship since she was awarded command, studying every aspect of its operation, poring over blueprints and design holos, and assembling her crew. The command chairs had been shuffled a bit with the opening of a chair on a battleship. After nearly two days of deliberation, and something of a surprise to Jason, the generals decided to promote Jeya Karinne to the *Trelle's Gift*. Jeya had some of the shortest time in the chair of a big ship, but when Jason challenged their decision, they showed him her scores since taking command of the *Temeron*. They had improved *vastly* since she'd moved up from the cruisers, almost as if the bigger the ship, the better she commanded it. They admitted they were taking something of a chance putting such a young captain in the chair of a battleship, but the House Karinne promoted based on merit, not cronyism. Jeya's command scores beat out the other big ship captains that were under consideration, so Jeya got the chair. Her youth made them carefully consider that decision, but the numbers were the numbers. Other captains had better scores, but those captains were still settling into their own new commands, and Navii had instituted a minimum command time policy so as not to constantly upset the crews. Jason had the feeling, after his long talk with Myri, Juma, and Navii, that Jeya was going to be just fine. Every ship she'd commanded had had outstanding scores, and she was loved by her crews. That created a series of step-ups in the command structure. Koye Karinne had been promoted up from the cruiser

Imai to replace Jeya on the *Temeron*, and Miya Foralle from the destroyer *Cheyenne* had been promoted up to replace Koye. The destroyer's chair was being taken over by its Ex-O, a human telepath named Greg Masterson, who joined Pete Abrams as the second of the human male ship captains in the KMS. Much like Pete Abrams and Justin Taggart, Greg had been a Naval officer before the subjugation, having just graduated from the Naval Academy two years before the Faey arrived.

The third big thing going on was happening all the way over at PR-371. Things had more or less stalled over there as his girls got the system defended, digging in on the heavy gravity, heavy pressure planet and taking delivery of more and more stockpiles of 3D toys, building up until they had sufficient inventory to start operations. They were also waiting for the Kimdori to finish their surveillance as they used CMS equipped infiltrators and hyperspace probes. The Kimdori would tell them where to strike, once they fully understood exactly what the Consortium and their subject race there, called the Imxi, were building. It was a situation akin to the "Sitzkrieg" at the beginning of World War II, where neither side was willing to move, and the result was a lull in the fighting. That situation was the same in the home sector, since the Consortium had given up every system they had taken except for Trieste, mainly because the interdictors made attacking anything *dangerous*.

They learned that lesson nine days ago, when a trio of Consortium destroyers jumped into the Skaa Republic system of Trazik to most likely conduct a sensor sweep of the defenses for possible future action, relying on their ability to jump in, scan, then jump out before the Skaa could respond. The KMS and Kimdori had been monitoring, and as soon as they jumped, the KMS jumped an interdictor into the system with supporting Kimdori SCM ships within 90 seconds, and the Consortium ships found out the hard and brutal way that the KMS had come up with a counterstrategy to those probing actions meant to identify weaknesses in uninterdicted systems and follow up with an overwhelming attack fleet that would destroy all population. The KMS countered those by interdicting those systems *behind* the invading ships, trapping them in there with the swarming hordes of Skaa defense pickets, virtually uncountable numbers of fighters and corvettes. Those ships were old, virtually obsolete, but there were so many of them

that even highly advanced Consortium ships were overwhelmed by the raw firepower that some 15,000 defensive picket ships could unleash.

Numbers were the Skaa's advantage, and they knew how to use it.

The Consortium learned quickly that sending ships to any system meant that whatever ships they sent there were going to be lost, whether they accomplished their mission or not. And at this point, the Consortium *could not* afford to throw away ships.

Since the probing action at Trazik that cost the Consortium three destroyers, not a single ship had moved from Trieste.

Myri and the generals were preparing a contingency plan for Trieste in case the spiders failed. If they were going to just sit in Trieste, then Myri was going to pin them in there like collapsing the opening of the den of an angry bear. They needed 6 interdictors to completely surround and entrap the Trieste system, placing the interdictors at strategic points so their interdiction fields overlapped Trieste, creating a minimum of .3967 light year void through which the Consortium could not jump, and that was at the tangential border of where two interdiction fields intersected. The maximum was a 1.49999979917 light year journey across the diameter of the interdiction field, which was two light years across by diameter, one light year across by radius. Syncing 6 different interdictors so their fields could intersect in common space without interfering with each other was no easy feat, requiring Cybi herself to write the governing algorithm to pull it off.

However, they couldn't trap them in Trieste until they were sure that the Consortium couldn't eradicate the civilian population there. There were 127 Kimdori infiltrators in various positions in and around the planet killer that they were building, there to sabotage or prevent it from being activated, but what was far more important, there were now six different variants of Myleena's spiders completely infesting the entire Trieste system.

The plan to send a cruiser shell filled with spiders had been a complete success. They'd deployed that little trick 9 days ago, changing the plan slightly once Zaa made some suggestions. They'd sent in the cruiser shell filled with spiders and carrying an entire hold full of Skaa antimatter bombs, which three Kimdori infiltrator ships had towed in from hyperspace

and then released to allow it to drop into normal space on its own, also so as not to put engines on the ship that the Consortium could get their hands on if something went wrong. The ship had dispersed its nanites *well* before approaching the planet, dropping out of hyperspace some 320,000 *kathra* from Trieste II, then a CMS ship already there picked it up and towed it enough to give it enough momentum to close that distance within 1.2 hours. The ship had SCM on it to prevent the Consortium from scanning it and seeing the bombs, but they'd intentionally left enough holes in how it worked to make them suspicious...after all, the ship was just the decoy, and it had to do its job to hold their attention. Much as they expected, the Consortium destroyed the ship after penetrating the SCM with a destroyer equipped with sensor pods, hitting it with gravometric missiles and making the thing go up like a supernova, thanks to all those antimatter bombs. The Consortium knew then that their energy being had failed and that the Karinnes had tried to sneak a Trojan horse in on them, but they *didn't* know that all that was just subterfuge. About two days later, the spiders that the ship had released drifted into the Trieste system, and they did *exactly* what they were programmed to do. They infiltrated 2,393 Consortium ships in orbit around the planet, they infiltrated 580 of the 1,317 Imperium weapon platforms the Consortium had taken from the Shio, and some spiders even managed to get down onto the planet via shuttles and dropships, and were slowly spreading out on the planet, seeking out the planet killer and the planetary operations center. The plan for those spiders was for them to *do nothing*, at least for now. They were going to be given time to get into position, spread to more ships, more weapon platforms, and when the time came to either attack Trieste or seal it off behind interdictors, the spiders were there to help protect the Alliance population at the mercy of the Consortium, who *had* no mercy.

Of only slightly less importance was that Rann's birthday was coming up soon, and even more importance, *Jyslin's* birthday was in five days. In the Faey calendar, Rann would be turning six...well, actually, he'd be turning five if he wanted to be technical about it. The Faey didn't actually work on that system, however. They added one year to the birthday because they believed that life started at *conception*, and *that* was the day that the Faey truly celebrated. They also saw age not as a hard number, but as "the current year of your life." A newborn was one year old because of the fact they were conceived some 9 months prior, and they were in *the first year of*

life, therefore they were *one year old*. Faey gestation was very nearly a standard year, so they just rounded off for the sake of convenience. A newborn was considered to be one year old, because they'd been *alive* before birth. It really wasn't exactly correct to call it a *birthday*, though that was the literal translation from Faey to English. It was more correct to call it *the anniversary of life*. It was a quirky thing they did that Jason did himself, since he was living in a Faey system and that was how the government did it...but God, to think of Rann—or any of his children—as a five year old was almost *insulting* to him. He was so mature, so intelligent, so *educated*. The Faey started teaching their kids literally in the cradle, so while Rann was almost five—six by Faey reckoning—chronologically, it was so easy to think of him more as a seven or eight-year-old. When Rann turned six, many Faey would consider him to be starting his *seventh year of life*, and many of the ultra-orthodox old school Faey, like the Exiled, would actually consider him to be *seven*.

Not officially, though. By official birth records, Rann would be turning 6 on 1 Kedaa, so they had some 16 days to prepare a party and buy presents. Jyslin's birthday was on 15 Demaa, and that was a bit more immediate, especially since he wasn't entirely sure what to get her for her birthday quite yet.

She wouldn't care that much. Faey did celebrate birthdays, but they weren't as *important* in Faey culture as they were in Terran culture. A few congratulations, maybe a present from her parents, and that was it. But Jason was Terran, and birthdays were serious business on Terra. He'd gotten her nice gifts and thrown her a party every birthday, almost embarrassing her a couple of times, but this year, with the war and all, he just wasn't sure what to get her this year.

Well, one thing he could do was get her family here. Her parents had never visited Karis before, the visits always Jyslin going to see them, and she hadn't seen them for over a year. Jyslin was both always so busy and behind the secrecy firewall of Karis that she didn't talk to her family as much as she probably should. But with them being outed, the secrets of the Karinnes exposed by the Consortium, there wasn't any real reason for her parents to stay on the other side of the line. Jason had offered to bring them to Karis several times over the years, but for some strange reason, they hadn't accepted, and back then *nobody* visited Karis that wasn't a resident,

and there were *no exceptions* outside the Kimdori. Jyslin's father was a factory manager and her mother was a primary school teacher, the reason Jyslin had one of the broadest vocabularies Jason had ever seen in a Faey, and Jason figured that they were too entrenched in their lives and responsibilities to pull up their roots and move to Karis.

He had to work on that, he supposed. Her parents currently lived on Jerama III, which was a farming planet and the planet that produced the Faey with that sapphire-colored skin thanks to Jerama's white star, having moved from that arctic moon when Jyslin's father got his job managing a hovercar factory owned by House Duralle, one of the smaller minor houses. Duralle didn't own Jerama, they just had a factory there due to a trade agreement with House Shovalle, who did own the system. Duralle supplied hovercars to the Jerama system at a reduced cost, and in return, got a discount on food produced on Jerama for Duralle consumption.

After just three years, Jyslin's parents were very dark, a sea blue. They'd tan nearly to the same color as the native Faey population, and if they stayed there and had more kids, most likely their grandkids would have the same pigmentation mutation as the other Faey natives by the third generation. Humans, on the other hand, would sunburn within minutes of being on Jerama if they didn't have sunblock. Jerama's atmosphere blocked the harmful UV rays that caused skin cancer, but barely blocked the UV spectrum that caused tanning at all.

That was a curious aspect of the Faey. They genetically adapted to different environments very quickly and would even demonstrate abnormal traits compared to other Faey after being there long enough. Hara was the perfect example of that. Her eyes were so adjusted to a nocturnal lifestyle that Karis' sunlight effectively blinded her, forcing her to wear protective sunshades during the daylight hours. Jerama's sapphire-skinned Fay, the Faey like Hara, they were genetic variants of the standard Faey race, produced by adapting to different environments.

It just showed everyone that while Faey were virtually identical to Terrans, there *were* some pretty significant differences.

Ayama set a plate of waffles in front of him silently as he pondered, then set down nectar-honey produced by those Kizzik beetle livestock bugs

and mixed with maple syrup, which was actually pretty damn good. *So quiet this morning*, Ayama noted lightly. *What's the matter?*

Pondering what to get Jys for her birthday, he replied privately, so as not to tip off his wife that he was scheming.

And here I thought you were angry with me over the calendar, she sent playfully. Ayama had bought a day on the calendar, and in typical Ayama fashion, he had *no idea* if she was serious about it or if it was some kind of joke. He'd worked his ass off on Aya's day, doing some of the hardest menial chores that that vicious bitch could think up. Ayama's day comes up, and when he went to finally find out what was on her mind about it, she handed him a keycard to a hotel room and shooed him off. In the hotel room was a fully animatronic female sex doll, one of the robot sex toys the Faey sex industry manufactured, a bowl of oye fruit, a bottle of *All Nighter!* male enhancement formula, and a full sized poster picture of Shey on the wall wearing nothing but a smile, finally paying him back for all those times he'd talked to her without putting on clothes. Shey had already paid for her part in that little joke, spending an entire shift at her console wearing a nothing but a sign on her back that read *I will not tease my Grand Duke*, but he'd let Ayama slide...because it was funny.

Revenge is a dish best served cold, and from complete surprise, he warned with a light smile. *Just ask the twins what happens when you get on the list.*

It sounds like someone wants to have a month-long culinary adventure, she threatened, smacking him playfully on the wrist with a wooden spoon.

I'll just make you eat everything first, he countered. *I do think it's about time I had a food taster around to protect me from poisoning.*

She gave him a lilting smile. *Yes, let me cook the food I'm tasting, so I can prepare myself beforehand*, she teased, which made him laugh.

Bitch.

Her Majesty isn't the only one that loves it when you call her names, your Grace, she sent cheekily as she poured more batter in the waffle iron. *Rann, Danelle your breakfast is ready*, she sent, adding power to get his attention. *Yours will be ready in just a couple of minutes, my Lady.*

Okay, Ayama. I'm almost ready, Rann answered.

Whatcha cookin'? Jyslin asked.

Waffles.

Ooh! Be right down!

So, no ideas for Lady Jyslin? Ayama asked.

Nothing good yet, he answered with an audible grunt. *I am going to bring her family here for the party and make it a surprise, her parents, Lorna, and her uncle and cousins.*

She'll love that, she does love her family, Ayama nodded.

[Jason,] Cybi called.

[What is it, Cybi?]

She manifested her hologram, that nude silhouette without detail wearing the original Sora Karinne's face, the hologram fading into nothingness just below the knees. She put her hand on his shoulder and leaned over to look down at him. *[I need you at the 3D dock up in Kosigi after breakfast, my friend.]*

[The string jammer?] he asked hopefully.

[Yes, they're installing the last lattice arrays now,] she answered, then motioned towards the other end of the table. Another hologram formed, showing the interior of the 3D drydock up in Kosigi where they were building the string jammer, which looked like an egg with a bunch of TV antennas stuck in both ends. Much like the carrier, the string jammer had run into a snag that extended the build time, caused by the Shimmer Dome accidentally sending parts that were made wrong. The lattice arrays, which were the "antennas" that produced the jamming effect, had been grown using the wrong lattice matrix that put so much feedback into the system that it caused an emergency shutdown. It had taken them nearly six hours of troubleshooting to figure it out when they gave it its initial start-up test, and they'd had to wait three days for the Shimmer Dome to fix the problem and get time on the assembly line to produce the parts.

That was becoming a problem that Jason had ordered them to rectify. The Shimmer Dome was running at 138% capacity, and Bunvar already had

orders to go in there and expand the complex to give it more production capability. The Shimmer Dome was now the biggest bottleneck in Karinne production, because all biogenic units and components were *only* built in that complex, for both the Karinnes and the Kimdori, and virtually all modern Karinne technology contained biogenics in one form or another. Computers, interface control nodes, biogenic relays, translation nodes, sensors, it was all biogenic, and that meant that anything that was interface controlled had, at the minimum, a biogenic interface control circuit in it. *[I know it's going to make the day even busier, but you did want to be here when we got it finished.]*

[Well, I can at least come up and hang around until Denmother arrives, and I'll be close by when she does,] he reasoned, checking the time using his gestalt, then accessing Zaa's last report of the *Iyaneri*'s expected arrival time. Zaa was arriving aboard the *Iyaneri*, just hitching a ride on it actually.

Amber jumped up onto the table and immediately sat down in front of her dish, yipping commandingly. Jason had to pause and watch in amusement as Ayama carried over a small pan holding the vulpar's breakfast, *gana* sausage, Terran eggs, and diced *oye* fruit all scrambled together, and scraped it into Amber's bowl. She patted the little vulpar on the head fondly and went back to tending the waffle iron, and Jason had to chuckle a little. There was no doubt who ran *this* household.

[Yes, she's quite the demanding one, is she not?] Cybi asked lightly, no doubt watching through one of the cameras.

"You know, Amber, you could say thank you," Jason said dryly. Amber flicked both of her tails in his general direction without taking her muzzle out of her dish. "You little terror," Jason added, reaching over and pinching one of those tail tips. Amber gave a squeaky little growl, which made him laugh. *[When is the Iyaneri scheduled to arrive?]*

[It is still at Kimdori Prime. If there are no changes, it is scheduled to arrive at 12:25 local time.]

Accessing his gestalt, he saw that it was 07:48, so he had a little under four hours. It was very nearly the solstice, which would be the longest day and shortest night of the year on Karis, the official start of what passed for autumn in the tropical belt. In Karsa, the change of seasons affected weather

patterns and precipitation far more than temperature. As fall progressed, the weather systems would shift to come more out of the north, and since that meant that they had to cross the continent, it was the start of the dry season...though when they first got here, that also meant occasional dust storms as winds picked up the bare earth in the untterraformed northern tracts of Karga. The entire continent was now at least partially terraformed to the point where *dun* grass carpeted the ground to prevent erosion, the Draconis-origin grass actually was a very tough plant that could grow in very hostile conditions. There were some bare stretches too on the west side of the continent north of Karsa, where prevailing winds and the Karalla Mountains formed a desert environment. Naturally, the Kizzik had colonized that area, for they preferred hot, arid conditions like the desert planet of their origin, and quite a few Makati had settled in towns on the edges of the desert, where the dry grassland reminded them of Makan.

[Well, you can relay a message to the Denmother that we'll be there to greet her.]

[I would be happy to do so. I will also send a message to Chirk that you don't intend to come to the White House today.]

[Not unless I have to,] he agreed.

[I will see you in Kosigi then,] Cybi nodded, then her hologram wavered and vanished.

Jyslin wandered down, yawning, wearing nothing but a rather skimpy pair of lacy panties. "Rowr," Jason said aloud, which made her laugh and slap him lightly on the back of the head as she sat down.

Rann up yet? she asked.

On his way down, Jason answered as Ayama put a cup of oye juice down in front of Jyslin.

Syrup or nectar, my Lady?

Both, she replied as Ayama picked up a plate of waffles from the warmer, drizzled liberal amounts of both syrup and Kizzik nectar over them, then set the plate before her. She attacked it immediately. *You're gonna be in Kosigi today?*

Yup, I'm not going to the White House before Zaa arrives, he nodded as he took a drink of coffee. The string jammer should be finished today, and I want to be there when we test it. Where you guys at on that Consortium flagship?

About halfway done. We're starting to tear through its sensor network now. Their sensors are highly advanced, we're actually learning a few things, she replied.

Nice. I haven't seen the report yet.

She nodded. You should have the report on your console over at 3D, if you'd go there, she sent lightly.

Hey, I've been busy, he protested, fetching his floating handpanel from the far side of the table with his power. As in busy, not that light-assed playing around shit you and Myli are doing up in Kosigi.

Watch it, buster, she winked.

Rann hustled into the kitchen, wearing his armor. Aya wouldn't even let him go to school without the armor, especially since it had a tactical gestalt in it. His helmet was locked behind his neck and shoulders in its resting position. *Morning Daddy, Mommy*, he sent as he climbed into his chair, and Ayama brought over his waffles, already dressed with syrup and nectar just the way he liked them.

Morning, pippy, Jason sent.

Morning baby boy, Jyslin mirrored. Did you have a good sleep?

Yeah.

Where's Danny?

She's coming, he answered as he started cutting his waffles.

Danelle! Ayama called. Hurry up, you have school!

I'm almost ready, Ayama, she replied. Danelle had been more or less a permanent houseguest for the last two weeks, since Myleena was so busy with the Consortium ship, the string jammer, and the 50 million other things clogging her inbox. Jason certainly didn't mind, in his mind, the clever little

girl was his adopted daughter. *Daddy Jason, I think I may need you or Mommy, my armor's not working right.*

Come on down with what you have, pips, and I'll take a look at it while you eat breakfast.

I got it on, it just won't move right.

Disable the power assist, pips, don't take any chances trying to come down the stairs if the power assist isn't working right.

'Kay. Be right down.

Danelle hurried down into the kitchen and climbed into a chair, and Jason got up and got behind her, leaning down. He jacked the handpanel into the armor using the neckport, at least after taking off her helmet, and interacted directly with the armor through his gestalt and handpanel, which was biogenic. He had the armor run a passive diagnostic while Danelle got to work on the waffles Ayama put in front of her. *What's the prognosis?* Jyslin asked.

Definitely a problem, looks like with the motion sensors. I'm not sure if it's hardware or software. This is a new one to me.

Me too, and I don't remember seeing sensor issues in the bug list, Jyslin agreed.

Pips, where's your backup suit?

Uh, it's in my room at home.

Then go change into it before you leave for school and I'll take a look at this one for you.

Aww, I don't like my old armor. It doesn't have the gestalt in it.

You shouldn't be showing off using the tactical anyway, young lady, Jason sent lightly, amusement bleeding into his sending.

After breakfast, Danelle solved the problem of having to carry her malfunctioning armor back by taking it off right in the kitchen. Jason found her solution to be both practical and amusing, especially when a naked Danelle hurried out the deck door and headed for her house...but that was Danelle. Her solutions were usually practical to the point of being not

entirely socially acceptable, but that was the mind of a six-year-old girl who was raised to believe that nudity was entirely proper. Danelle had similar tendencies when asking questions. She had very little tact.

After breakfast, Aya sent the guards out to escort Rann and Danelle to school, Jason picked up his own retinue of Dera and Suri, and they headed up to Kosigi in the Marine corvette *Honor*. Jason had Danelle's armor with him, troubleshooting it back on the tactical deck of the corvette. Ryn had been going with Rann much more lately, since she was probably the most skilled telepath on Karis, and she'd been privately tutoring just about all the kids on the strip both in school and after school. Shen was her usual partner, so Jason hadn't been paired with her for a few days either. With the Ducal family so spread out now and more than one plot against Jason thwarted, Aya had been spending more and more time at the house, overseeing security from her office in the barracks behind the house and ready to dispatch the Rapid Response Team at the first hint of trouble. That team was a unit of 6 Imperial Guard and 12 Marines in a corvette with two Wolf fighter escorts that stayed in the exact center of all Ducal family positions, minimizing the response time to any one of them as much as possible. With Jason and Jyslin at Kosigi, Rann in school, Tim at work at the White House in the intelligence office, and Symone doing pusher duty over at the Gladiator factory, the RRT would be in orbit over Karis, right smack in the middle.

Jason had Danelle's armor repaired and on its way back to her at school via courier by the time they docked at the 3D bay. Cybi had wanted him at the string jammer, so that was where he went after dropping Jyslin off at the dock holding the Consortium flagship. Myleena greeted him at the guarded entry into the contained dock, grinning brightly as she used her armor's grav drive to move around in the zero-G environment. *Hey babes, we're installing the last lattice array now.*

Cybi told me, that's why I'm here. I'll be in your hair until Zaa arrives on the Iyaneri.

I'll just put you in the naughty box if you cause too much trouble. This is my dock, she winked.

Says who? I'm the Grand Duke here, not to mention I'm still the leader of the Legion.

Big whoop, I'm the one that makes everything work. So that makes this my toybox, she sent smugly.

Someone needs to have her butt taken down a few pegs, Jason sent with a smile. *And what do you know, I outrank you.*

She laughed. *You take my Duchess title, and you're gonna wake up some morning with far more of a surprise than you ever bargained for,* she threatened. *Aya won't stop me from coming into your house.*

Touché, he returned with a chuckle, rapping his armored gauntlet on her shoulder.

Jason rolled up his sleeves in a figurative sense and helped them install the last of the lattice arrays, enjoying something he rarely got to do anymore, which was build things. The string jammer had eight arrays, four on each side of its ovoid central body, which held all the jammer's circuitry and engines. The jammer had its own hyperspace jump engines in it, why it took so long to build, so it could self-deploy, redeploy to a new position on remote command, and also remove itself from possible danger. The jammer would be paired with an interdictor that the jammer would carry in an internal bay, which was one reason why it was so big, and give the string jammer powerful defense. The jammer could deploy in real time and jump the entire distance in one jump like any other robotic device that had no living things in it, deploy its interdictor, and then pick up its interdictor and move if it was necessary. For direct threat, such as an asteroid or some space object on a collision course, the jammer was armed with rail cannons and pulse cannons, and was equipped with the strongest Teryon hard shield they could fit in it without interfering with the jammer's function. They'd been forced to put the lattice arrays *outside* the hard shield else the Teryon shield would interfere, but the jammer wouldn't be slugging it out with enemy ships. Those weapons were defensive only and geared almost specifically for dealing with rogue objects, not a hostile ship. If the jammer was under any kind of direct threat from a hostile force, it would pick up its interdictor and jump out...or just jump out and have the interdictor self-destruct if it was a panic situation. The jammers would be controlled by a console over at the military command center, allowing an operator to move the jammers if necessary.

Once the jammer was tested, they were going to deploy it. After what happened at Raxxad and Pathrana, they were very wary of putting it in the home sector as first planned, fearing that the jamming of their long-range communications would incite an attempt to eradicate the population of Trieste. They *would* sacrifice Trieste if they had no other choice, but they were going to try to avoid that if at all possible. So, this first jammer was going to be deployed to Exile, in a position where it could jam *all* of the communications between Andromeda and the Milky Way due to the angular vectors that the intergalactic communications had to take to come from Andromeda to their galaxy. That one chokepoint would jam any attempt for Andromeda to communicate with *any* part of their galaxy. Once they had an idea of what to do about Trieste, the second jammer would be deployed in Alliance space not far from the Imperium border, which would allow that one string jammer to jam all Consortium long-range communications in the entire sector, as well as a whole lot of uninhabited space in the sectors surrounding them, and blanketing about 15% of the Verutan Empire and 12% of the Haumda Federation, which were in the next sector over. From there, they already had a plan drawn up to completely destroy all Consortium long-range communications in the entire *galaxy*, which would require 26 string jammers deployed in a specific pattern along critical vectors, which would cripple any attempt for the Consortium to use string communications anywhere that it mattered. String communications were, in a way, *line of sight*, meaning that if there was no “direct path” between the transmitter and the receiver, then the transmission would fail to reach the receiver. The string jammers were designed to more or less put up a wall between the two, and their string jammer placement more or less choked off all the main transmission vectors. What this meant was that a string jammer would disrupt all communications within its jamming field, but *also* disrupt any communications attempting to pass *through* its jamming field en route to a receiver on the far side. An additional 138 string jammers would saturate the entire galaxy in a string jamming field and make it absolutely impossible to use string communications *anywhere* in the Milky Way galaxy. That was the ultimate goal, but in the short term, preventing communications in critical areas was what mattered most.

Between the interdictors and the string jammers, Jason fully intended to render the Consortium as helpless as a slug on a salt flat.

Jason got so wrapped up in helping them build the string jammer that he was honestly surprised when Cybi told him that the *Iyaneri* was an hour out. The Kimdori were planning a 45 minute jump, giving the crew a chance to rest since not *all* Kimdori had the same resistance to hyperspace that Zaa did, as well as pausing to inspect the jump engines, which would be the first time they were used when the flagship was fully operational. Jason headed to the ops center and met Miaari there, then invaded Dellin's command center to watch its progress on the board. Down on the surface, Admiral Haema was forming up her crew, some 7,390 Faey, Terrans, Makati, Kizzik, as well as a handful of Shio, Bari-Bari, Jakkans, Shurai, and Beryans, some of the first Alliance races to graduate from the KMS training academy in non-training intensive PTS roles; their Primary Training Specialization, their "job" as it were. Jakkans were scholastic in nature, so they would excel in the scientific departments, as would the Beryans, who were both highly intelligent and exceptionally cunning. Bari-Bari, Shurai, and Stevaki were by no means dumb, but Jakkans and Beryans were more or less the scientific specialists in the Alliance. There were no Stevaki in the crew, at least yet, but the Bari-Bari and the Shurai certainly weren't hard to pick out of the formations. Bari-Bari were highly intelligent, versatile, and adaptable, very human-like in that regard, and could be found anywhere in the Alliance, doing most anything, which meant that there would be Bari-Bari in most any department on the ship. The Shurai down there, seven or so foot tall aviods with feathers, beaks, and taloned hands that only had three fingers and a thumb, were all fighter pilots, the first to rate on the Wolf fighters using an interface. And *holy fuck*, were they *nasty*. Shurai had reflexes almost five times faster than the average Terran or Faey, and they had flight instincts that made them holy terrors in the cockpit of a ship. And when they used an interface, which cut down their response times even more due to not having to *move* to *react*, their reflexes shot up to nearly eight times faster than a Terran or Faey. Those two traits made them almost born to fly fighters, but Shurai also excelled in any pilot's position, even piloting a battleship. Some of the best scores in the Pilot's Academy were being posted by Shurai pilots undergoing flight training for big ships after passing basic KMS training.

Zora had better look out, the Shurai were coming for her job.

Jason was actually a little surprised when Miaari and Tim came into the command center with a Beryan along with him, wearing the uniform of Miaari's Intelligence Division. Miaari *did* say she was hiring some Beryans, and this had to be the first she'd brought into contact with him. At first glance, Jason could see why the Kimdori had a fondness for Beryans, for both were canine races. But where Kimdori were anywhere from five to eight feet tall, Beryans were only about three to four feet high, and had short, narrow muzzles that were almost vulpine, expressive eyes that were usually brown, yellow, or orange, and long, slightly shaggy tails with an artificially dyed, colored tip in colored bands that denoted the Beryan's breed, and therefore their family lineage, which was a *big fucking deal* among the Beryans. The banding of the tip was like the tartan of a Scottish clan, identifying the Beryan's family to all those around him. Beryans were fully plantigrade, having no elongated feet, and their arms were slightly longer than normal in Terran proportions. Not grossly so, but a Beryan's hands hung just over their knees, where a Terran's hands would hang just below the crotch. What Jason found most curious and slightly disturbing about the Beryan race was that the females had permanently pronounced breasts, like Terran, Faey, and Shio women, but they had *four* of them. This Beryan was a male, thank goodness, with mottled black, white, and brown fur where Jason could see it, and a tail banded with red, yellow, red, blue, black, and red, which marked him as *Ng'grrah-breh*, a member of the Ng'grrah family. Beryans organized themselves by families, in a pack mentality, similar to the clan structure of the Kimdori. There were only 17 Kimdori clans, but there were 296 different and unique Beryan families, and every Beryan belonged to one of those families.

Thank God for gestalts that could instantly supply that kind of information, so Jason didn't have to memorize all of it.

"Kravakk, might I present the Grand Duke, Jason Karinne. Jason, this is one of my recent hires, Kravakk Evakk Rahdeh Mragah Ng'grrah of the *Ng'grrah-breh*," Miaari introduced. "He has just been assigned to Tim's analysis office."

"It is good to greet the Highest of High," the Beryan said, putting a clawed hand over his muzzle and bowing it.

“I have high expectations of you if Miaari deemed you worth hiring,” Jason told the diminutive canine. “But the reputation of the Beryans fills me with confidence that you will be a worthy addition to her staff.”

“You honor me, Highest of High,” the Beryan said smoothly. In that respect, Beryans were as charismatic as the Shio. Beryans were glib and well-spoken, and excelled as merchants, politicians, and diplomats. In the Alliance, the vast majority of embassy workers, diplomats, and ambassadors were Beryan, and as such, they were the race with which other empires had the most contact.

“Is this your first visit to Kosigi?”

“Yes, Highest of High. I have only just completed basic orientation yesterday and am still settling into the division.” He looked Jason in the eye. “If it more suits you to send, Highest of High, I am graced by Mr-ra-geh with talent. It’s not nearly as strong as our Faey companions, but it is acceptable.”

“Wow, a talented Beryan? How did the Alliance let you slip through their fingers?” Jason asked in honest surprise. Only about 0.6% of the Beryan race was telepathic.

“High Miaari made me an offer I couldn’t refuse,” he smiled, showing off his little fangs. “Let us simply say that my resignation tendered to the Organization was...abrupt. I gave them no chance to try to talk me back into the fold.”

“He was one of their best,” Miaari smiled. “But he found my offer far too tempting to refuse.”

How is he so far? Jason asked Tim privately.

Fuckin’ scary, he replied. *He doesn’t forget anything, and he talks as fast as Symone does when she wants something.*

Jason had to stifle a laugh. *Better be careful, your job is on the line, Tim.*

Don’t I know it, he agreed without much humor.

If he’s that good, odds are he won’t be in analysis for long, Jason noted.

Yeah. I think she’s just giving him exposure to the different offices.

Jason chatted with Kravakk for a few moments as Miaari watched on, then she almost casually stepped up to him. She didn't say a word, she simply reached out and put her hand on his cheek, one of the few places she could make skin to skin contact. Jason felt her reach out and connect to him in the way Kimdori could. She imparted to him that while Zaa was here to take Miaari's cubs back to Kimdori Prime, she was *also* carrying very important and highly sensitive information concerning the Consortium, and also the Syndicate. Jason nodded silently when he processed that, then put a finger on his gestalt, which was becoming something of an unnecessary habit when communing with Cybi. *[Cybi, we're going to the White House after we're done here,]* he warned her.

[Shall I warn Chirk?]

[Just tell her than I'm not coming to do any business. This is a meeting, so if you could, have her prepare my office.]

[I understand. I'll have her prepare it for your arrival.]

Jason spent most of the time waiting talking with Miaari and Tim as Kravakk listened intently, and then the *Iyaneri* arrived. It was indistinguishable from the *Aegis* except by the name painted on the bow in both English and Faey script, and the fact that the *Iyaneri* was immaculately clean. After so much action, the *Aegis* had a few scars and smudges on it that they hadn't had the time to attend quite yet. Cosmetics were the last thing on their minds right now. A holo of the bridge winked on in the ops center, and Admiral Dellin stepped up with Jason and saluted sharply when the Denmother Zaa appeared on the bridge. "This is the *Iyaneri* requesting permission to enter the base," she said formally.

"Permission granted, Denmother. Telemetry instructions are being transmitted as per dock assignment as we speak."

"Understood. Navigator, access telemetry instructions and follow them."

"At once, Denmother," a voice replied off the screen.

"You are looking well, Jason."

"It's nice that you're not visiting as the harbinger of doom this time," he noted dryly, which made her laugh.

“Yes, for once, I am visiting for a *happy* occasion,” she smiled roguishly. “Are you prepared to surrender your cubs to me, Handmaiden Miaari?”

“I am, my Denmother, at your convenience.”

“I have all prepared,” she replied. “We will retire upon the transfer of the flag to your command, speak of several affairs, and then Handmaiden will deliver her cubs into my custody.”

“You’ll have to endure giving me a tour of the ship, Denmother,” Jason said. “It’s my tradition upon the christening of any new ship.”

“At least you will know your way around,” she smiled lightly, then the image vanished.

“Dellin, I’m going to be busy with the Denmother, so delay the christening ceremony of the carrier until I have time to attend, if you don’t mind,” Jason ordered.

“I’ll see to it, your Grace,” he nodded.

Jason and Miaari went down to the staging area while Tim and Kravakk returned to work, and he chatted with Haema while they waited for her new ship to navigate to its assigned docking space. Haema was middle aged as Faey reckoned things, her face showing a few age lines and her lavender hair showing a few strands of blue, which was the Faey version of gray hair, but she was sharp as a tack and still a handsome woman. She was one of his Imperial steals, had been a cruiser captain before they stole her from the INS, and had worked her way up to the Admiral’s diamond and command of a capitol ship. The entire crew stared as the massive *Iyaneri* melded into view through the gloom, a hulking monstrosity whose gravitational pull would have affected the core center of Kosigi and pulled it out of position were it not held in position by gravometric stabilizers and its physical support struts. Jason, Dellin, Haema, and Miaari went over to where one of those miles-wide supports pierced the core and boarded an elevator, then rode up to a docking facility built right into the side of the support, which was but one function those struts served, forming permanent anchors for construction as well as providing elevator access between the inner core and outer shell. The *Iyaneri* pulled up to the docking facility, and four different docking ramps extended from the docking array and connected to its

docking ports on its starboard side. Three of those ramps were for personnel, and one was for cargo and supplies. The four of them walked down the docking ramp and reached the hull of the ship just as the docking doors opened, and a group of Kimdori led by Zaa stood inside the docking port room. "Permission to come aboard?" Jason asked formally.

"Granted, and welcome," Zaa replied. Jason stepped up and put his armored hand on her neck, and she mirrored the motion in the standard Kimdori greeting. "We deliver to you the *Iyaneri*, Grand Duke Karinne, and I pronounce it operational and ready for service."

"Let's take my tour as the crews transition and they unload the equipment and cargo, then we'll handle the flag transfer."

"Why Jason, do you not trust me?" Zaa asked playfully.

He laughed. "I don't now," he replied with a smile. "I better make sure you didn't use shoddy materials to cut corners and pad your profits."

Haema put her finger to her interface. "Begin crew boarding and cargo onload, Commander Brenia," she called, utilizing the gravband in her interface. "We have been granted permission to board."

"At once, Admiral."

Zaa allowed one of the shipbuilders to conduct the tour for Jason and Haema, showing them all the major departments and explaining the differences in construction techniques they'd used with the *Iyaneri* since they'd learned so much building the *Aegis*. Those learning experiences were already in use in the construction of the third flagship that was happening in Kosigi with Karinne builders and Kimdori consultants. The Kimdori were training the Karinne shipbuilders in the technique, and it would translate to the third ship being built even faster than the second. The new ship was exactly the same as the *Aegis*, so Jason already knew his way around, but he found Gremaani's discussion about improving the construction method sincerely fascinating, from one engineer to another if nothing else. Jason was one of the few leaders in the *Siann* that understood all the technical jargon that the Grand Duchesses dismissed as irrelevant *science talk*. Haema and Miaari listened quietly as Jason debated the construction changes, learned the *guts* of it as only an engineer could, and endeared himself to the Kimdori shipbuilder in the process. By the time they reached

the bridge, Gremaani was treating Jason like an old friend, a fact that Zaa found strangely amusing. The bridge crew had already transitioned by the time they arrived, the Kimdori replaced by Faey, Terrans, one Makati, and a nearly criminally cute Shio female with shimmering emerald hair, to Jason's surprise, who was sitting at the comm station with three of her other comm officers. She had Ensign's bars on her armor over Shio military rank of First Lieutenant, which was also a surprise that a Shio had come out of officer's academy and training school that fast. Then again, Javra Blackstone had graduated even faster, and was receiving very good reviews, from Pemai's reports. Jason just had to go over and make her uncomfortable. She looked up at him in surprise, then stammered out a greeting in a very pretty, clear, strong voice that would make her a good choice to sit at the comm terminal.

But it *was* an odd position for a non-Faey to hold, since the captain would often send to the comm officer to relay communications.

"Another Shio officer, it's good to see," Jason said with an earnest smile that made a little dark green creep into the young lady's cheeks. Shio had green blood, which was what colored their skin. "What's your name, Ensign?"

"Ensign Mikano Strongblade, your Grace," she replied, her waist-length emerald hair shivering as her head bobbed.

"I added her to my crew personally. I liked her scores in OTS and PTA," Haema noted from the side.

"That's some high praise if Admiral Haema thinks you're worth her time, Ensign," Jason told her. "What brought you to comm? That's an unusual position for a Shio in the KMS."

"I have talent, your Grace," she replied, almost self-deprecatingly. That wasn't a *complete* surprise. Every race around except the Kizzik, Jobodi, and the Kimdori did have *some* telepathic talent in their ranks, to varying degrees. The Colonists had the highest percentages among their population, where some 50% of their population had some kind of telepathic or empathic ability, where the other races had a telepathic representation of anywhere between 0.002%-5.5%. Even the Zyagya had telepaths, albeit maybe a grand total of 5,000 in their entire population. Most telepaths ended up getting roped into jobs that made them deal with the Imperium,

pitting telepaths against telepaths, since the only defense against talent was another talent. Virtually every single ambassador, diplomat, and embassy worker in the Imperium had talent, from the Colonists to the Zyagya, and quite a few corporate executives as well that did business in the Imperium were telepathic as well. They would be crippled in business negotiations if they didn't have talent.

"Well, that *does* help when you're on comm," Jason chuckled.

"Another reason I picked her," Haema agreed. "I'm not prejudiced against the non-talented members of my crew, but the bridge is far too important a place to have a sending barrier. Especially at the comm position."

So, that told Jason that the Terrans here and the lone Makati were all telepaths. It wasn't a mandatory requirement on a bridge to have talent, but it was Haema's ship, and she could staff it as she saw fit. Nobody, not even Jason, had the right to gainsay her personnel decisions within the bounds of her own ship.

"At least here, I don't feel, you know, *different*, your Grace," Mikano blurted, something Jason could understand. Faey had serious problems outside of the Imperium due to paranoia, since *everyone* knew that *every* Faey was a telepath. The talented members of other races did tend to suffer the same paranoia from their peers if it was found out that they had talent, to the point where many kept it a secret if they weren't in a job that required them to use it. For a talented Shio, she was, in a way, among her own, among those who understood her talent and weren't afraid of it, because they had talent themselves.

Jason could see the appeal for a telepathic Shio to join House Karinne, if only to be in a place where people weren't suspicious of her or afraid of what she could do. And here, she'd receive *far* better instruction in her talent, since the Faey had raised the training of telepathy to a science. After all, they more or less *had* to, since the entire race was telepathic. Faey middle school and primary school were the only schools in the galaxy where students had telepathy classes as part of their standard curriculum. It was as ingrained into Faey scholastics as language, art, social studies, science, and math.

“Well then, do us all proud, Ensign,” Jason said, patting her on her armored shoulder and making her beam at him.

Jason and Zaa more or less stood to the side as the ceremonial passing of the flag was conducted on the bridge. Gremaani had the honor of passing the flag as the representative of the building contractor, officially transferring the ship from the contractor to the recipient. Haema kissed the flag and then passed it to her Ex-O, and Jason stepped up and accepted the official charter of commission from an aide. He offered it to her, and a floating camera pod took several pictures as they paused with both of them holding it, looking in the camera. “Are you keeping the name *Iyaneri*, Admiral?”

“I am, your Grace.”

“Then I officially declare that the KMS *Iyaneri* is commissioned and entered into active service, under the command of Haema Karinne. May he serve long and well. Congratulations, *Captain*,” he stressed with a smile as the bridge crew applauded.

“Thank you, your Grace. Note this event in the ship’s log. Ex-O, place the flag and charter in the display case in my ready room,” she ordered.

“Aye, Captain,” her first officer replied, scurrying off to the hatch leading to Haema’s ready room. “Comm.”

“Your orders, Captain?” Ensign Strongblade answered.

“Relay orders to complete crew transitions as soon as possible and begin duty rotations,” she said as she sat in her chair, then gasped, got up quickly, and pushed a laughing Jason into her chair. “I almost jinxed the whole thing,” she complained, which made Jason laugh harder.

“This isn’t mandatory, you know,” he said, leaning on the armrest and grinning at her.

“It is to me,” she said. She let Jason sit in her chair for about a minute as she issued orders, including a complete systems diagnostic of every major ship operation, then finally let him up and sat in it herself. “With your permission, Captain, we have some things to deal with,” Jason told Haema.

“Of course, your Grace. You have my permission to disembark. And thank you for delivering him whole and ready, Denmother,” she said,

bowing in her chair to Zaa.

“It was our pleasure, Captain,” she replied regally. “Come, cousin. There are matters requiring our attention.”

Jason took Zaa and Miaari to the White House aboard his corvette, and as soon as they were in his office, he activated secure mode and sat behind his desk. Miaari sat in one of his visitor’s chairs, but Zaa stood behind her. She touched her memory band and caused the holo emitters to activate. “If you would join us, Cybi,” she called. Cybi’s hologram wavered into view behind Jason’s chair, and she almost immediately sat on the edge of his desk, as was her custom, leaning on her hand and regarding Zaa soberly. “I have received several packages from our infiltrators in the PR sector, which were of critical importance,” she began. The holos activated, creating a hologram of a strange spherical ship that had two mast-like projections from its top and bottom. “My children in the main command center of the Consortium have finally managed to crack their computer security, with the help of Mahja Siyhaa. She must be granted a bonus for her hard work, Jason,” she noted as she turned to face the ship. “This is the standard ship that makes up the Syndicate fleet. It is their mainstay destroyer, to put it in terms, with all other ship classes larger than this. Jason, this ship is nearly the size of a KMS tactical battleship,” she declared. “Their largest ship classes are significantly larger than the *Iyaneri*. Their size equates them to small moons,” she remarked.

“What? That big?” Jason gasped.

“That explains the Consortium’s complete lack of use of small craft and fighters,” Miaari breathed. “Against a ship that size, a fighter has limited effectiveness.”

“It does, as well as their complete lack of tactical experience against civilizations that employ fighters as a core complement of their militaries,” Zaa agreed, touching her band again. A shockingly human figure wearing a blue tunic and baggy leggings appeared, his skin a greenish tinge like a Shio. “This is the primary controlling race of the Syndicate. They are called the Benga. As you can see, their resemblance to Terrans, Faey, and Shio is quite striking. However, this race averages fourteen shakra tall. Some are as short as eleven shakra, while others are as tall as seventeen shakra.”

“Holy *shit*, that’s more than three times as tall as we are!” Jason barked. In Terran measurements, that was just a touch under 17 feet tall, or a little over five meters.

“Yes. They are giants compared to most forms of life in our galaxy. This also explains their preference for massive ships, since they are a giant race,” Zaa intoned. “My children have managed to download basic technical information about Syndicate technology and capabilities, which they deemed so critical that they forwarded it to us as quickly as possible. Further and more detailed data are to be sent later, as possible. I have a file for your analysts to study, but in summary, Syndicate technology is slightly behind Consortium technology. In fact, most of their technology was *stolen* from the Consortium. Their weapons are primarily Torsion, as well as hot plasma. As yet, they have not yet managed to acquire dark matter weapon technology from the Consortium. Tactically speaking, KMS ships will be highly effective against the Syndicate,” she surmised. “My children have run simulations based on this information, and even your Wolf fighters will have impact, due to the firepower of pulse weaponry. However, their effectiveness diminishes as they come up against larger and larger ship classes.”

“I get it, they’d be a gnat coming up against their largest ships. Small moon...that almost sounds like a fucking Death Star from *Star Wars*.”

“That is a fitting comparison, just without the planet-killing weapon,” Zaa nodded. “The Benga are an enigmatic race. Consortium information on them remarks that they are both skilled orators and deadly soldiers. Theirs is a warrior society, much akin to your Romans, who employ commerce, diplomacy, and naked force with equal effect to continue their self-avowed mission to expand their influence over all inhabited worlds. Their system of government is a corporate plutocracy, where the heads of the Syndicate’s mightiest mega-corporations form a governing council that directs all Syndicate activities. Their entire society is based on these corporations. Every citizen works for one, is actually *owned* by the corporation as chattel, whose contracts the corporations buy and sell among themselves as needed. To say that it is a slave empire would not be incorrect. The greed of the corporations drives the Syndicate to make war against all others, for they want to own everything everywhere. Of important note is that they are also utterly ruthless. Their answer to any challenge to their authority is the utter

obliteration of the offenders, their families, their neighbors, and anyone even remotely connected to them. Power within the Syndicate is similarly ruthless, where the ambitious move up the ladders of power by assassinating those above them while protecting themselves against those below. Over the last thirty years, the Syndicate has decided that endless war with the Consortium is no longer *profitable* and has resorted to truly ghastly tactics to defeat their adversaries, including the destruction of entire planets and wholesale genocide. Our intelligence suggested that the Consortium are the *honorable* ones in Andromeda, and this information only confirms it. The Syndicate is far more ruthless than the Consortium could hope to be.”

“Given what they’ve done here, I’m not inclined to agree with that,” Jason growled. “They resorted to sinking themselves to the level of their enemy. When they did that, they *became* their enemy.”

“Yes,” Zaa agreed with a nod. “For the crimes they have committed here, the Consortium should not be bargained with, only defeated,” she declared. “We just got back scans from long distance hyperspace probes. The Syndicate fleets have just come into the very edge of our range. We have counted them at approximately thirty thousand of various ship classes, though the bulk of their ships are of the destroyer class. They felt that their smaller, more vulnerable ships would be capable of stamping out Consortium presence in our galaxy and beginning the conquering process. They are on schedule to arrive in our galaxy just beyond Exile in three years, two months, and nine days by the Faey calendar, right here,” she said as she pointed at a starchart, pointing at the galactic edge very close to Exile. “This is their first intergalactic troop movement, where the Consortium has been undertaking these actions for the last fifteen hundred years, even before they could jump hyperspace in real time. Those crossings would take them *centuries*,” she said evenly.

“How? A standard Faey ship would take nearly two thousand years to reach Andromeda from here,” Jason protested.

“They utilized a technology which Myleena has played with in the past, the hyperspace catapult,” she answered. “It reduced the relativity delay in hyperspace jumps. They would jump to another galaxy with all the supplies they needed to build a catapult on the other side. We have located the

ancient catapult they used when they captured the Karinnes, but it was completely destroyed. It was struck by a meteor storm.”

“Oh. Ohhhhh,” Jason breathed, nodding. “Too bad. That’s something we could use.”

“That technology is no longer used now that they can jump in real time, and we have no access to their archived data,” she replied, causing the hologram to shift again, focusing on the PR sector, while the image split and those curved arc sections they were building came into view in a recon image. “We have also determined what they are building out here,” she said, pointing first to the smaller arced sections. “As we suspected, these sections are for the quantum phase launcher they acquired from the Imxi. Using phased Eretrium cores to agitate a bubble of space into a singular quantum state, they then launch the bubble at a speed faster than light. Their plan is to build the device in stages in the PR sector, then jump them to Trieste and complete the device behind the bulk of their defenses, which then deploy when the device is complete.”

“Alright, that means we destroy them before they get the chance,” Jason nodded. “What about the big ones?”

“Those are part of an augmentation array, to exponentially increase the size of the quantum bubble,” she replied, giving him a steady look. “They chose Trieste for a reason, cousin,” she added as a new holo appeared in front of the others, one showing the local sector with Trieste on one side of the chart and Karis on the other. “Their plans are quite ambitious, but also very clever. As you know, Trieste III has four moons. The moon of particular interest is this one, which the Bari-Bari who colonized Trieste named Go’jur’mi,” she said, zooming in to show the orbital tracts. “Every twenty-three days, this moon reaches a perigee that, if it were knocked from orbit by an outside force,” she trailed off, then zoomed the image back out and traced a line away from Trieste....

And right to Karis.

“It is quite remarkable that this moon would consistently form a nearly perfect course to Karis were it dislodged from orbit at the right time. Their plan, Jason, to put it in layman’s terms, is to throw Go’jur’mi at Karis like a baseball.”

“Well, I would say that I’d have to worry about it in about twenty years, buuut,” he urged.

“But, they are outfitting the moon with the largest hyperspace jump system I have ever seen,” she replied, zooming in on massive construction efforts, huge pits dug into the surface of the barren moon with a constant line of supply dropships entering and leaving. “Should they jump the *moon* at the proper window and use the engines to refine its trajectory, it will be knocked out of hyperspace by the interdicator and then be on a direct collision course with Karis.”

“How big is that moon?”

“Roughly the same size of Terra’s moon,” she replied.

“Holy *fuck*, that big? Can we do something about that?”

“Yes, it could be turned, but this is not a ship, cousin, built to withstand the stresses of hyperspace. The moon will have so much inherited velocity and gravitational flux, the entire moon is going to shatter during the jump. It will jump out whole, but jump *in* as a dense asteroid field as the stresses of hyperspace on an object of such mass that it carries its own significant gravity field interacts with the sheer velocity the moon will be carrying into hyperspace. A single moon would be very easy to turn aside but turning aside an asteroid field will be significantly more challenging. Their plan is to jump this *in front* of their invading force, using it as both weapon and shield to make trying to attack their ships in transit significantly harder.

“It’ll be a year—”

“Jason, it will not. We have further learned that the Consortium has completed its study and has determined that ships encapsulated within this phase bubble can *jump hyperspace without disrupting the phase shift*,” she said intensely. “The key of it is for the ships to jump *instantly* when the bubble forms, before the ships have too much relative velocity to stably enter hyperspace. As you know, both inertia and *potential energy* are saved while a ship is in hyperspace, causing the ship to re-inherit those states when returning to normal space. If they do it exactly right, they form the bubble, jump their fleet, and then it accelerates to a faster than light speed *after* it hits the interdicator and drops into normal space,” she told him.

“Their plan is to form the fleet ahead of the moon, beyond its gravity, form

bubbles around both the fleet and the moon, then jump the moon and the fleet separately. They drop out of hyperspace at the interdicator's edge, the moon shatters from the stress, then the fleet moves into the asteroid field to use it as protection, using their engines and towing beams to keep the debris from drifting to where it isn't dense enough to protect the fleet. And mind, cousin that this will all be moving faster than light, which will severely restrict our ability to fire on them. They have also engineered a defense in case we find some way to launch our own ships at a faster than light velocity to attack them. Just as our phased energy weapons can fire *in*, they can fire phased weapons *out*. They have appropriated a phased ion weapon technology from the Imxi and will use those to attack any ships that jump to attack that fleet while in transit. As you know, ion weapons *will* affect ships using plasma energy, and with that energy being phased, that means that they would pierce the shields of any of our allies, but not Karinne and Kimdori Teryon shields. Even if we find some way to achieve faster than light speed ourselves, chase them down, and engage them, we could *only* effectively attack those ships using KMS and Kimdori ships, which would be vastly outnumbered."

"Holy fuck," Jason breathed quietly. That was...*fucking brilliant*. If they could build a bubble big enough to enclose an entire moon as well as the volume taken up by all those ships, then *jump it*, they'd have fourteen days to get their fleet to Karis, and those asteroids would make getting at them *much* harder. The only thing that could hit a phased object was multi-phased energy like pulse weapons or MPACs, plasma torpedoes, and objects or energy that was in the same phased state. And if they had phased ion weapons they could use to fire *out*, it would make trying to ambush the fleet as it passed by at faster than light speeds really, really, *really* tricky. Their only real plans for attacking that fleet if it got in was to refit a GRAF to fire a multiphased version of its resonance beam, which would significantly reduce its power, but *would* let it hit a ship phased into a singular quantum state. That weapon literally had no range limitation, letting them fire on the oncoming fleet and beat it down to make it much more manageable to take it out when it got to Karis.

But now, with that moon in the equation, it just got *much* nastier. The planetary shield would be assaulted by those asteroids when it came out of phase and reverted to a normal state, which would most likely bring it down

and do *massive* damage to the planet when it was bombarded by island-sized chunks of rock. They knew that Cybi's core could retreat into the mantle, which put the big prize they wanted safely out of harm's way when those asteroids obliterated the surface of Karis and turned the planet into a hellstorm of fire and liquefied rock. All they had to do was time the attack so Kosiningi was on the far side of the planet when the moon debris started falling.

"We can't let them do it, Denmother," he said in a grim, hollow tone. "If the spiders somehow fail, even if it means losing Trieste and its entire population, we can't let them do it. If they manage to pull this off, they'll get their fleet here, the debris from that moon will eradicate all life on Karis, and if Cybi isn't captured, then she'll be destroyed."

"We have time, cousin," she soothed. "They do not know we know their intent, and we have the spiders in their system, and that gives us the advantage. But, to consider the matter, the easiest way to foil this is redeploy our interdictors in a *line* from Karis to Trieste," she said. "If we interdict every *shakra* of space between here and there, they can't pull off this little trick. It shows our hand that we know what they intend, but we do have an option here," she replied. "But they are relying on keeping this an absolute secret, for they know we *can* counter this easily if we know their plans. That is why they're constructing the hyperspace jump system inside the moon deep under its surface and have spread the construction of the quantum device out to hide its purpose from our spies. They are all but hollowing out the moon to install the hyperspace system, pulling any available jump engine out of a ship that is too damaged to easily repair. For the moment, let us put this aside and consider instead the Syndicate. Their combat strategies differ from the Consortium, and as such, we must consider battling them *after* we have defeated the Consortium. But we also cannot ignore the Consortium as a threat."

"We fight the current war with an eye on the next one," Jason grunted, leaning back in his chair. "I know you ran the sims, Denmother. How effective is our current strategy of fighter-based tactics?"

"Against their smaller ships, very effective," she replied. "A squadron of Wolf fighters poses a sizable threat to their destroyer class vessels. But they have too many heavy battleship, flagship, and even larger ship classes

to rely solely on Wolf fighters. I have already ordered an increase in the production of battleship class and larger ships. I would highly suggest you do the same.”

“But we can’t shift away from the Wolf strategy because of the Consortium, the Wolf fighters are just too effective,” Jason grunted. “And if the Consortium has no tactics for dealing with Wolf fighters, then neither will they. It sounds like they don’t even *employ* fighters.”

“They do not. They have a mindset similar to the Urumi, cousin. Big, powerful ships that can withstand battle damage and simply beat down the opposition. The Consortium’s ships and tactics are designed around combating the Syndicate, and they are effective. They use the KMS strategy, actually, employing smaller, highly mobile, very fast ships equipped with powerful weaponry.”

“That’s why they use such oversized engines on their ships,” Jason reasoned. “To be more maneuverable than their enemy.”

“That is their strategy, and as I mentioned, it *works*. In a battle between evenly numbered navies, Consortium ships win the battle more often than not. They have a technological advantage, and they exploit it.”

“But *we* have the edge over *them*,” Jason said, to which Zaa nodded.

“The only technology the Syndicate employs that the Consortium has yet to truly capture or master is a technology that Myleena has been tinkering with in her spare time,” she said, causing a technical diagram appear on the holo behind her. It was a Torsion shockwave generator; Jason knew that piece of equipment. “Myleena has been tinkering with devices she calls Torsion diffusers, a concept based on a shockwave generator, which attempts to *smooth out* the Torsion effect and reduce the power of the beam, or completely nullify it.”

“I’ve read her reports on it. It has some promise, cutting the penetrating power of a Torsion beam, but she hasn’t had much luck getting them to be effective enough to use yet.”

“This is a technology that the Syndicate has just mastered and installed on all their ships, according to the data that my infiltrators have sent back. It reduces the power of a Torsion beam by nearly half, but the problem they have with it is that the diffusion effect works *both ways*.”

“Dampening Torsion weapons the ship uses itself,” Jason finished. “In order to attack with their own Torsion weapons, they have to turn off the diffuser, same way we can’t run a shockwave generator and fire through the effect. Myli’s been having some issues with the idea on any ship with a shockwave generator, because it diffuses the shockwave effect. And the shockwave is far more important. Our ships can take hits from Torsion weapons, but the shockwaves protect them from missile attacks that could wipe them out. That’s why she’s not been too optimistic about it. She’s only really tried using them on the *Aegis*, since she hasn’t miniaturized the idea far enough to fit it on a fighter.”

“This is why the war has turned against the Consortium,” she continued. “These diffusers weaken their primary long-distance weapon and force them to close in range to use dark matter weaponry or force them to retreat and utilize missiles. Neither of which are as effective. At close range, the Consortium’s speed and maneuverability is less effective, given that Syndicate ships are larger and carry far more weapons, and the sheer size of the Syndicate ships makes relying on missile attacks uncertain.”

Jason could see what she was saying. The Torsion weapons were the Consortium’s primary weapon against the Syndicate, and the Syndicate had developed a defense that weakened their primary weapon, and then used that defense as a battering ram to steamroll Consortium defenses over in Andromeda.

“How effective are these Syndicate diffusers?”

“Unknown, but it must be enough to let them take the upper hand in the war. It also means that when the Syndicate arrives, our allies will not be effective against them. They are adapting Torsion weaponry.”

“Then we need more information,” Jason grunted. “We need to know if the weapons our allies already use will be effective. I’m fairly sure that Faey MPAC technology would be effective, but I don’t know about ion and hot plasma weapons, or Colonial iso-neutron weaponry.”

“I have told my children to bring us that information,” she nodded. “It again raises a tricky situation, cousin. We need the Torsion weapons against the Consortium, knowing that that effort we invest in them is effectively wasted when the Syndicate arrives. Unlike the Wolf fighters, who have

value in both theaters, we are using up resources to fight one enemy, which will then put us at a disadvantage against the second.”

“Fuck,” Jason growled, leaning his chin on his hand and regarding the holo. “I’m going to have to have a long talk with the generals. And then I’m gonna have to tear out my hair. I *can’t* equip the sector with Karinne weaponry, Denmother. I took an *oath*. And I’m almost positive that Dahnai wouldn’t just hand over MPAC technology. Even with Torsion weapons, MPACs give her an edge. Ounce for ounce, they’re even more powerful than Torsion weapons, and if this diffuser technology becomes mainstream, then the Imperium will have a major leg up on everyone else.”

“I know, but we have some time to consider a solution, cousin,” she nodded. “What we need is more data concerning the Syndicate. Detailed analysis of their ships. Their tactics. Their technology. We must find the weaknesses much as we have done with the Consortium, and then exploit it. I have tasked my children to this, and they will not fail me. After all, this was but the *first* packet to be delivered, what they considered the most critical information to get to us. But in the short term, I would highly suggest a shift in logistic planning. Reduce your output of Wolf fighters and shift that production into larger class vessels, that way you have blanket coverage against all elements of the Syndicate fleet, yet all those resources will be viable against Consortium ships.”

“And Gladiators,” Jason grunted. “If they consider themselves a warrior race, then they’ll definitely initiate ground attacks. And a Gladiator is virtually the same size as one of these Benga. I’d love to see one of them come up against Kyva,” he said with dark humor. “But we can’t ignore the Consortium either,” he growled. “If they pull off what they’re planning, fuck, they could actually *win*.”

“It is devious,” Zaa agreed. “When will your forces in the PR sector begin their attacks?”

“They’re gonna start *now*,” Jason declared. “We can’t wait for the rest of the equipment and supplies to get there now. We need you to call in our strikes, Denmother. Tell us where to point our toys.”

“I will see to it personally,” she replied with a nod. “I will have my children prioritize on slowing down or disrupting the completion of the

quantum phase device, which will lull them into belief that we *don't* know what they're doing at Trieste. Theirs was a feint within a feint, causing you to believe they were pulling your eyes away from what they didn't want you to see, look to the PR sector precisely when they *didn't* want you looking at Trieste."

"And I fell for it. *Again*," he growled.

"Patience, cousin. You *are* relatively young in the chair. With experience comes wisdom," she soothed. "Besides, you have us. That permits you certain...growing pains," she said with light humor. "Our time grows short. Cybi, I will download all relevant files directly to you, to distribute as necessary," she said, looking to the hologram.

"I am ready. Allow me access."

Zaa touched her memory band, and then she took on a distant expression for a second.

"Files are copied. I will place relevant files on the mainframes at 3D and the military command center," she told Jason. *"All files are available on your home panel, Jason."*

"Alright. Let me go talk to Myri and the girls. When will you be ready to have your babies, Miaari?"

"Anytime I so wish," she replied.

"I would speak with Miaari about personal matters," Zaa said, putting her hand on Miaari's shoulder. "Though I am the foster, she *is* the mother. Even my title as Denmother gives me no right to raise her cubs in a manner of which she disapproves. She must make her wishes known to me."

"Alright. How about we meet back at my house in four hours?" he proposed.

"That is more than enough time. I would enjoy Ayama making me some pizza for lunch," Zaa said, licking her chops in anticipation.

"I will tell her," Cybi said.

Dera, we're going over to the command center, Jason sent into the next room, where his guards were waiting, probably chatting with Chirk and Brall. *[Myli.]*

[Yeah babe?]

[Get everyone in the Legion together and be ready to have us all meet, probably in a couple of hours. I don't have a specific time yet.]

[Sounds important.]

[It is. What I want you to do is take your hands out of that Consortium ship and get together every single megastring of data you have on those Torsion diffusers and get it organized, and pick a team at 3D to take it over and work out all the bugs. It needs to be viable now.]

[I've been trying—]

[You're too busy to keep tinkering, Myli. Package it up and get ready to hand it off.]

[You got it, babe. I have to go back to 3D to do that.]

[Then do it. I'll explain later.]

[No sweat. See you soon.]

"Diffusers? What idea do you consider, Jason?" Cybi asked.

"If the Syndicate developed them to the point where they've turned the tide of the war, then they can help *us* do the same thing," he replied. "If we can develop a solid defense against Torsion weapons, then we can shift our production to start preparing for the Syndicate *now*. We don't have infinite resources; we have to use them wisely."

"But our allies utilize Torsion weaponry."

"True, but just like the Syndicate, our allies have *other* weapons that can be effective if their ships can survive long enough to get in range to use them," he finished. "Even Skaa ion and hot plasma weapons will deal damage if the ship is protected from Torsion bolts enough to get in range. Dark matter weaponry has a far shorter range and doesn't ignore *armor* the way Torsion weapons do. We develop it and offer it to everyone else in the Confederation, stressing that using them diminishes their *own* Torsion weapons, and with the Consortium armor available to them, it will let them protect their ships. We'll let them decide if they want to use them or not."

“Clever,” Cybi said with a smile. “But it reveals our intent to move away from Torsion technology.”

“That can’t be helped,” Jason grunted. “The others are gonna be majorly pissed off, though. Torsion weapons were leveling the playing field, making any war too costly to wage, but with us developing the diffusers, we’re more or less putting things back the way things were when the Faey had the strongest weapons and everyone else built up to combat that advantage. Not even Consortium armor can really stand up to MPAC weapons for long. I’ll have to put a serious fucking leash on Dahnai,” he breathed. “She might start getting expansionistic, especially with the Confederation. She all but has this idea that *she’s* the one in charge of it. It wouldn’t be a stretch for her to start thinking that she should be the *Empress* of it as well.”

“I will notify Jinaami to keep a closer eye on her,” Zaa nodded. “Now, by your leave, cousin, Handmaiden Miaari and I must retire and speak of highly important matters of a personal nature.”

“Yeah, be my guest, Denmother. And thanks for not being the harbinger of doom this time.”

She laughed. “I am glad you did not start to consider my appearance on Karis to be akin to the angel of death.”

Jason stood up and beckoned to his helmet on the side table, causing it to float over to him. He seated it on the back shoulders of his armor, in its locked resting position. “Alright, let me go break the bad news to Myri and the generals,” he said. “I’ll do my best to be back at the house in four hours, but I might be late.”

“We will be there, cousin,” Zaa nodded.

Jason opened the door and strode out. “Chirk, arrange transport for the Denmother to my house at the strip, and warn Ayama and Surin they’re en route. I’ll be over at the command center if anyone needs me. Come on, girls,” he nodded to Dera and Suri.

“I will arrange it immediately, your Grace,” Chirk’s monotone translation sounded. *“Would you require refreshment while there is waiting?”*

“I am content, noble Kizzik,” Zaa said. “But the transport must arrive with haste. We have little time.”

“It will be on pad six in four minutes. If it pleases you, revered Kimdori-leader, I will escort you there.”

“Please,” she nodded. “Until later, cousin.”

“Don’t eat everything in the house,” he replied as they headed into the hallway.

What goes on, your Grace? Dera asked curiously.

A change of plans, Dera, he replied, sending privately to his guards. Zaa brought some critical information about the Syndicate, and it’s going to significantly alter our long-term strategy.

Ah. Good or bad?

Both, he replied as the corridor doors opened, and the Marines stationed at the hallway intersection snapped to attention. Jason nodded to them as he passed by, turning to the corridor that led to the tram that would take him from the administration building to the military command building. Girls, send down the order that all Marine guard units in the White House will be carrying external pulse rifles or railguns from this point forward, he sent back to them. Make sure they’re the ones equipped with smartgun links. And from now on, double the number of Gladiators on patrol on the White House grounds.

The order will be sent immediately, your Grace, the guard replied, and he heard her call out to her commander to relay.

Your Grace, might I ask why the increase in security? The White House watch captain, Gemai Doyalle, sent.

Just an overall general increase in security, he answered. *I’ll fully explain the reason for it in a report I’ll have sent down from General Myri.*

Understood, your Grace. I will call in the additional Gladiators immediately. All guards report to the armory in standard shift change rotation to pick up additional equipment, effective immediately, her sending rippled across the White House complex.

Jason walked in on Myri and Navii poring over a starchart of Trieste and its surrounding systems. He had them call in Sioa and Juma, then he sat down with them at the main holoviewer, a circular device set like a table in the middle of the main command center and brought up the images Zaa brought him, as well as thoroughly explaining everything she told him. The entire command staff gathered around them, Dellin listening in via holo from Kosigi, and they all listened in attentive silence as he briefed them, then brought up the file that Cybi had transferred to Myri's office vidlink. "It's all in this file, which you'll need to study. It lists everything about the Syndicate that the Kimdori was able to pull from the Consortium archives so far," he surmised. "What it means for us in the long term is that we have to shift our focus away from the Wolves. They're damn effective against the Consortium, but they won't be as effective against those fuckin' moon-sized superships the Benga use. We'll need more heavy weapons, and that means we have to shift our production to the bigger ships."

"Not *just* the bigger ships, your Grace," the venerable Navii mused, scanning the file on a handpanel. "If the Consortium enjoyed tactical superiority utilizing smaller, faster ships that are heavily armed, that same tactic will work for *us*. Yes, we're going to need more ships from the heavy cruiser class and higher, but we should not ignore the value of our destroyers. A particle beam is going to do damage, even to those megaships, and we can get more particle beams into the theater on thirty destroyers than we will with six heavy cruisers."

Everyone listened intently to Navii. Myri was the one that was in overall command of all house military forces, but Navii was almost legendary in the INS and now the KMS for her military expertise.

"How many carriers are on the board?" Juma asked.

"There are eight under construction," Dellin supplied immediately.

"Fighters still have use, so we should complete those carriers," Navii suggested. "Possibly build one more to bring our inventory to ten. That allows us to deploy five thousand fighters to any theater quickly, and even one of their moon ships will feel the bite of five thousand Wolves," Navii said with a malicious smile. "We should shift our resources to a balanced approach to our fleets," she continued, bringing up a text list of all available KMS warships. "We should pursue the idea of a task force able to employ

all three major tactical assets to any theater. Wolf fighters, ranged heavy weapons, and close combat support. If the description of these Benga turn out accurate, then a major increase in the production of Gladiators is also advisable. Our infantry will need heavy support against individual infantry elements the enemy can deploy that are the size of a Gladiator themselves.”

“Well, they’ll be easier to hit if nothing else,” Sioa grunted. “Our infantry should be able to stand up to their assaults, since we employ superior ground weapons. Even though pulse rifle blasts don’t detonate on impact like MPAC and heavy mount pulse weapons do, they’ll do massive damage to a living being the size of a Gladiator. Something that size will employ *chubchaki* tactics. A frontal assault utilizing heavy armor as a spearhead. Something that big is not built for flanking and slashing tactics.”

“But this report said they consider themselves a warrior race, so don’t assume they’ll rely only on their size,” Navii warned. “Alvarian blood apes are even bigger than these Benga, but they move as fast as a scared *chabi*. The largest of them can overtake a hovertank at full throttle. We’re going to need more information from Denmother Zaa’s spies before we start making assumptions like that. I would wait until we have more intelligence before we start considering ground tactics to use against them.”

“Listen to Navii, girls,” Jason grunted, nodding.

“Oh, we do, Jason,” Myri chuckled, smiling at the elderly woman.

“Dellin, how does it look up there?” Jason asked.

Dellin glanced to his left, taking a handpanel from someone. “I can manage a seamless transition to the altered ship projections,” he answered as he looked over his panel. “We have six docks coming open within the next ten days, and we have twelve other docks under construction, all of which can build anything but a capitol ship. I have thirty-six docks coming open within the next ten days capable of building anything up to a mark two cruiser. We’re freeing up one of our big docks with the completion of the carrier, that one could begin on the fourth flagship. We’d been planning to build another carrier in that dock, but we can shift to another ship class in two days. I have all the major ship class keels in inventory and ready for use.”

“I would suggest you go ahead and build that carrier, Admiral, since you’re already set up to do so,” Navii said with a nod. “Then shift that dock to building a heavy class ship upon its completion.”

“I’d have to concur,” Myri grunted. “If he has everything laid out for a carrier, and we need one more, go for it.”

“I agree. Go with that, Admiral,” Jason told him. “We’re going to need you to update our board with most recent list of ship projects and estimated completion times.”

“I have it right here,” he said, holding up the panel. “One moment, I’ll update your display with my most recent data, updated two seconds ago.”

“Good man,” Navii smiled at the hologram.

“I run a tight base, General,” Dellin replied with a smile and a nod. “You’ve seen my board.”

Navii chuckled. Dellin’s board was his base layout board, where the location and progress of every ship being built as well as every parked ship already completed inside Kosigi was displayed. Five base officers constantly monitored and updated that board in real time. A change on a dock was reflected on that board within thirty seconds. The command center had a similar board, but it updated every hour rather than in real time. The board shimmered and reset, showing every ship under construction and estimated completion time. Jason noticed immediately that Dellin had taken the carrier just completed off the list. Navii stood up and walked over to the board, studying it for a long moment, as everyone remained quiet and let her think. “I would suggest as a basic precaution that we focus in the short term on mark two cruisers and tactical battleships, at least until we have more detailed information. Both carry more firepower than their sister class ships, in particular the tactical battleships and their multiple particle beams. Bulldogs, I believe you call them, your Grace,” she said with a smile over her shoulder. “An appropriate nickname if there ever was one. We have found great success with that ship class, and we have few enough of them as it is. They pair well with the carriers, and they are a generic asset that we can employ with equal effectiveness against both the Consortium and the Syndicate, if Denmother Zaa’s information is valid.”

“I’ve never known it to be wrong,” Jason noted.

“Me either, but a wise general never *assumes* anything, your Grace,” she said calmly. “You believe what you can see with your own eyes and take everything else with a *fann* of suspicion.” She tapped the crystal of the board, bringing up a list of tactical battleships both completed and under construction. There were two active and 18 more in production. She then brought up the battleship list, with four active and 26 in production. “We have enough battleships on the board, but not enough tactical battleships. We were waiting to get performance reviews from the ones in service before committing assets to the ship class, and both have performed admirably. We should turn around every heavy dock to produce a tactical battleship while our small docks rotate to mark two cruisers, build up those numbers, and hopefully by then we have more detailed intelligence to plan our next build rotation. Juma, how is staffing?”

“As of right now, we’re just *barely* holding the line,” she replied. “We have enough recruits in training to man the ships currently on the board, but if we increase production any more, we’re going to have more ships than we have crews.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad thing,” Navii said easily. “Every navy needs a mothball fleet to draw upon in emergency. We can put those ships in reserve and activate them as needs be, in case we lose ships. We have very low casualty rates among our naval crews thanks to Crusader armor, so a reserve ship can just pick up the crew of a ship that is lost and get right back into service. We will even leave them unnamed, so the captains can simply assign the name of their old ship to their new one to provide a sense of continuity,” she chuckled. “It would also give us real ships to use to train our recruits, rather than simulations, without taking ships out of active service to do so.”

“That might be useful, General, since our newest recruit classes aren’t showing the kinds of scores I want to see on a ship,” Juma said seriously.

Navii and Dellin more or less hammered out a new build rotation after new ships were completed and the docks came available, which relegated Jason to the position of spectator...but that was fine. These were the experts, and this was what he paid them to do. They discussed the matter for nearly two hours, then Jason managed to extricate himself when they went past his training and understanding. He walked out of the command

center and almost knocked Yila over, who was waiting outside with Kumi, as well as four Marines escorting Yila around the White House as security. *What are you two doing?* he demanded.

Waiting for you, babes, Kumi replied, falling into step with him as he walked down the hall, Dera and Suri behind him. *We need your authorization on a few contracts.*

Contracts? For what? he asked, giving the fox faced Yila Trefani a glance.

Today it's piracy, not general mayhem, she answered lightly, holding up a handpanel. *The Verutans want an increase in the metals we're selling them. I have the freighters for it, but you have to authorize the replication. Trenirk wouldn't do it without your consent.*

He'd fuckin' better not, Jason said with an audible snort. *I can't okay this right this minute, girls. We have something going on, and I need to talk to Trenirk about replicated material availability. Get back with Trenirk tomorrow, and he'll have the figures for you.*

Sure thing, babes, Kumi nodded.

What's going on, Jason? Yila asked privately.

I can't explain yet, he replied. *I don't have all the information myself, so I can't move until I know more.*

Ah. Say no more, she nodded.

Kumi, I need you at the staff meeting. Yila, feel free to go to my house and wait, we can catch up later. Just to warn you, Zaa and Miaari are there.

Ah, no thanks. Kimdori give me the creeps, she replied. *I'll go shopping. You have quite an interesting bunch of stuff in your shops down in the commercial district. Not often that I can get Verutan silk in one store, and Colonial firepowder in the next.*

We are a multicultural house, he replied lightly. *And go ahead, pay the house back some of those credits you swindled from us in the first place.*

She laughed and gave him a darling smile. *I'll do just that, Jason. If I'm staying for dinner, mind if I bring Dara?*

Still fishing for that betrothal, eh?

You know it. I'll cheat outrageously to get Zach.

Just to warn you, if Dara marries Zach, she moves to this house, he sent lightly.

She bristled a little bit. Now wait just a minute! she protested. Zach is the boy here!

He's a Karinne, that trumps him being a boy, Jason answered immediately. So keep scheming, just understand the consequences if you succeed, he sent lightly as he turned down a different hallway, leaving Yila alone with her Marine escort.

What do you need me for? Kumi asked. You know I don't sit in on staff meetings that often.

I don't, I just want to know what she really wants. I don't even have a staff meeting.

She laughed. Pretty much what we said. We've arranged an increase in our replicated tungsten and titanium sales to Veruta, but we need the replication slots to get the metal.

And what about Zach?

She gave him a sideways, clever little glance. She knows the truth about the Karinnes, Jayce. She's trying to get her claws in among the Generations, and what better way than to get her daughter married to one?

I figured.

I wouldn't put my nose up at it if I were you. It gives her a foothold in the house, but it gives you a foothold in House Trefani. That works both ways, you know. You know what the Trefanis are like, babes. They're much better allies than they are enemies.

I'm not sure my father ever dreamed I'd be considering allowing his grandson to marry into the mob, Jason sent darkly, which made Kumi laugh.

You're a politician now, Jayce baby. That's worse.

Oh hush, you, he threatened with the back of his armored hand, which made her laugh harder.

He left the White house aboard the *Honor* and flew straight to 3D. Everyone was there, and they settled down the chatter as he and his guards came in through the airlock-like main warehouse door. “Everyone gather in, we have work to do!” he shouted as he handed his helmet to Dera. Jason sat at the main conference table and regarded his Terran and Faey compatriots in 3D, which was the original Legion and the scientists and experts they’d recruited from the Imperium. They all gasped when Jason brought up a holo of Trieste and explained what all the Consortium’s construction was about, then laid it out on the table. “Alright, we know what they’re doing, and if the spiders fail, we have to stop them,” he said. “Tom, what are the inventories like over at PR-371?”

“I think we have enough to do some damage,” he replied. “We’ve been waiting for the Kimdori to finish their surveillance so they can direct our strike packages.”

“Well, we should start getting those strike targets anytime now,” he replied. “We’re going to focus on the Imxi right now and let them think we don’t know what they’re doing at Trieste. I want you and Bo to ride that bronco, Tom. Jenny, Myli, what about the spiders?”

“They’ve spread to almost forty percent of the Consortium fleet at Trieste, as well as nearly sixty percent of the orbital platforms,” Myleena answered. “You give the word, Jason, and we can fuck them royally with the push of a button.”

“Good, because we’re going to need it, and maybe sooner than we expected,” Jason replied. “We haven’t tried their defenses over in the PR sector yet, and they might be waiting for us. We can’t just assume that our strikes at their construction facilities will succeed, not with literally everything on the line.” He turned a bit and looked at Gerann. “How’s the broadcast power conversion going?”

“On schedule, Jason,” he replied. “We should have a complete switchover of small-scale units by twenty Demaa, and the industrial applications should be online by thirty-two Demaa. The planetary use interfaces are already completely converted, and I’ve included a subroutine

that shuts an interface down if it leaves its permitted operational areas. That should prevent the overly curious from wandering where they shouldn't be."

"Excellent, that'll be a hardwired backup to our software protocols," Jason nodded. "Myli, did you get it done?"

"Sure did, babe," she replied, holding up a memory stick. "It's all on here. I'm putting Jenny and Eraen on the job."

"What job, boss?" Eraen asked. He was a steal from the Imperial Bureau's Research and Development department.

Jason explained the diffusers to the group and stressed how the Syndicate had used them to turn the war in Andromeda to their favor. "So, we're going to work up our own version of it. Myli's been tinkering with the idea for a few months now, but she's too busy to pursue it seriously. If she put you two on it, then you're the best suited for the job," he said, smiling at his fellow Legion member and eager young and brilliant scientist, whose specialty was spatial propulsion, producing better engines for the INS and now tinkering with Karinne translation engines to make them less of a power demand...and that made him perfect to lead a project dealing with Torsion. "Myli's had working prototypes, but they haven't come close to cutting enough power off a Torsion bolt to make a difference. That's *your* job now, and you have the run of 3D until you finish it. You have priority over everything but the implant project. And how is that going?" he asked, looking to Olan.

"Much better than planned," he replied, standing up. "Doctor Songa has been of incalculable help. We've acquired three hundred volunteers here on Karis to undergo the procedure to do larger scale testing, and they've already been implanted with the devices and are in assimilation training. Myleena's spiders made the operation minimally invasive, they did much of the work laying the fiber from the *inside*," he said nodding at a grinning Myleena. "The only thing we really had to do was implant the jackport, behind the left ear."

"How are the volunteers doing?"

"So far, it looks very hopeful," he replied. "They're still in assimilation, learning how to control the interlink and the devices attached to it, and there

have been only two incidents of side effects, which we were able to correct with secondary procedures. After just twelve days, they've improved dramatically. We've mapped out synaptic implant patterns for Terrans, Makati, and Shio so far, and are currently working on synaptic patterns for Urumi and Skaa. We also have plans to map out implant procedures for any race that joins the house, just in case they wish to undergo this procedure once it becomes mainstream."

"Do those implants interfere with talent?" Leamon asked.

"Used *against* them? Not at all," Olan replied. "No telepath has yet dared volunteer for this to see if it can be adapted to use with talents. And I don't blame them one bit," he said with a shiver.

"Amen," Gerann agreed. "No way would I risk that procedure damaging my talent."

"Well, send Olan your ideas if you get any about the interlinks," Jason ordered. "In the meantime, I want you to get with Trenirk and get some factory space, Tom, and get more toys out to the PR sector. And kick Myri's ass to get some of our stuff back from the military."

"I love yelling at Myri," he grinned.

"Expect the first strike targets to come in over the comm within the hour, so be ready to back up our operators over at PR-371," he added. "I just hope Maggie and Jake are ready over there."

"Imagine all that time in hyperspace," Jenny shuddered. Maggie and Jake were the two 3D engineers that drew the short straw and had to deploy all the way across the galaxy to manage the attack packages.

"Anyway, that's about it. I'm going to go see if they have the carrier ready for christening yet, then get back with the Denmother and discuss some things."

Don't forget, you have the daily briefing with the Confederate Council as well, your Grace, Dera reminded. *In three hours and six minutes.*

"Oh joy," he said blandly, which made a few of the telepaths chuckle.

Shall I warn the Honor we're about to leave? Suri asked.

“Yeah, go ahead,” he nodded to her, then he turned back to his friends. “Any questions?”

“Just one, Jayce,” Bo spoke up. “When can we get a day off?”

There were some boos, and Bo was pelted with random pieces of machinery laying around, which made him laugh.

“Don’t worry, the party’s at my house when we drive the Consortium out of our galaxy,” Jason said as he stood up. Dera handed him his helmet, which he seated into place. *[Cybi, get me Dellin.]*

[Certainly. One moment.] There was a pause. *[Cybi said you wanted to talk to me, your Grace?]*

[I have about a spare hour, Admiral. Is that enough time to attend the christening of the carrier?]

[They’ve been holding it off until you had time,] he chuckled. *[Just go straight to it.]*

[Thanks, Admiral. Tell them we’re on the way up right now.]

[Will do, your Grace.]

The corvette *Honor* took them back to Kosigi, and they docked with the massive new carrier. It was even larger than a battleship, but it was like a honeycomb inside, massive amounts of empty space to store, prep, launch, recover, and repair fighters. The final design allowed a carrier to carry 500 fighters at full capacity, as well as all the personnel and equipment to operate and maintain those fighters. The carrier would have a crew of 3,106, which included both ship operations and fighter support, not counting the pilots themselves. Though it was larger than a battleship, it had been much easier to build due to the lack of heavy power systems and complex and power-draining equipment, like weapons. The carrier was designed to be dependent on the escorting ships and its own fighters for its primary defense, always part of a task force of a minimum of 17 ships, from missile gunboats all the way up to escorting heavy ships, be them heavy cruisers, tactical battleships, or battleships. Because of its size and purpose, the carrier looked unlike any other ship in the KMS. Most KMS ships were triangular with stubby, narrow wings at the stern that ran along the back third of the ship, vaguely similar to the Star Destroyers from *Star Wars*, or

more closely like the Jedi cruisers from *The Clone Wars*, but much less vertical. They were more like flying pie wedges with flared hind ends, the bow 63% as thick as the stern, an angular design that helped deflect incoming fire. The particle beams on those cruisers were installed in the bow and at the edges of those stern wings to provide maximum coverage. The wing-mounted particle beams had full 200 degree coverage laterally and 220 degrees vertically, allowing them to fire at least one particle beam at any enemy from any angle, and usually get at least two beams on the target given the bow particle beam emitter had a 155 degree range. But the carrier almost looked like a bloated whale, with a rounded, tapered bow that expanded radically to form the wide-bodied design that allowed the carrier to launch and recover fighters literally from all surfaces. It was pretty fast despite its ungainly design, equipped with some *hardcore* fucking engines that would get it the hell out of there in case of an emergency.

Jason sat in the cockpit but didn't fly as the pilot brought them into the main landing bay of the carrier, which was on the starboard centerline not far from the bow, the bay where visitors would arrive. It was a small bay designed to be just big enough to hold a corvette, and the *Honor's* pilot showed her mettle by swinging the corvette around and backing into the bay, since it was too small for the corvette to turn around. Jaiya was there with two companies of her crew, mostly the higher-ranking officers, who all snapped to attention as the corvette's gangplank lowered. Jason chuckled and ambled down the ramp and right into Jaiya's arms, giving her a fond hug rather than a salute, which made her cough a bit uncomfortably. The pink haired Faey patted him on the sides. *Not in front of the crew, your Grace*, she complained privately.

Jason laughed and kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry to take you off your battleship, Jaiya," he told her lightly.

"That's alright, your Grace. Bigger is bigger," she winked in reply. "I may not have the big guns on this boat, but I have *lots* of toys."

"I'm glad you're not mad at me," he chuckled.

"Posh. Now, we know you don't have much time, so we should get going."

"True enough."

Jason visited with the upper officers of the carrier in his usual way, stopping to chat as he was supposedly inspecting the troops, then Jaiya got him on the ship's internal tram and showed him the ship's vast interior. The carrier used cargo trams as the primary means of movement inside, each of the six tram tunnels that ran from bow to stern large enough to put a Wolf on the platform and transport it to another hangar. The ship had 9 major hangars where fighters were stored, utilizing the entire space by hanging fighters on wall and ceiling racks, a tenth hangar for fighters that required extensive repairs, holding specialized equipment. The maintenance hangar was in the exact middle of the ship and had dedicated tramlines and elevators to all the other hangars for the fast movement of fighters from hangar to hangar, but they still designed the primary conveyer tramlines to be able to carry a fighter in a pinch...which was fairly foresighted in Jason's opinion. She then took him through engineering and crew quarters, then to the bridge, which was a huge affair designed to coordinate and direct its fighters, so it was a massive ops center. Jaiya's captain's chair was in the front around ship control, but her ready room was in the rear of the center, with her personal quarters just behind it...and like all bridges in the KMS, it was actually in the middle of the ship's bow section, close to amidships, between the two forward hangars and providing protection for the critical command staff. There were no windows looking out in the bridge, but every wall was actually a monitor to display information along with consoles and display holos all over the bridge. Jason sat in her chair for a moment as she smiled, then he got up and offered it to her, helping her sit down. While she was there, he leaned on the arm with his hand and looked down at her. "So, time to settle the bets, Jaiya," he said. "What name are we painting on the bow?"

"I've already had the honor of naming three ships, your Grace, as I have rose through the ranks, and it got me to thinking. You are our Grand Duke, and *you* 've never been given the honor of naming one of your own ships. So, your Grace, the question is, what name do *you* want to put on the bow?" she asked with a smile.

He laughed. "Nobody's ever passed on the naming rights," he smiled.

"Then allow me to be the first," she replied cheekily.

“Well then, if I get to name it, I could make you embarrassed everywhere you go for the rest of your career,” he threatened lightly, which made her gasp and laugh. “But I won’t do that to your crew. Instead, how about we name this ship the *Brian Fox*, in honor of my father and his memory. He was a fighter pilot, I think he’d have loved having a carrier named after him.”

“Then that is what he will be,” Jaiya smiled. “This ship is named the *Brian Fox*.”

“Thank you, Jaiya, that means a lot to me,” he smiled. “I hereby declare that the KMS *Brian Fox* is commissioned for active duty and ready for service. May he serve long and well,” he declared in a strong voice. The bridge crew applauded as his aide presented Jaiya with her ship’s charter of commission and its flag, which she cradled to her breast a moment before handing them to her first officer.

“Set these in their places in my ready room, Ex-O,” she ordered. “Would you like to stay and oversee the boarding of the first squadrons of fighters, your Grace?” she invited.

“I wish I could, but I’m really busy today, Jaiya,” he replied, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. “And you’re busy, so with your permission, I’ll go ahead and head back home. I have meetings scheduled all day,” he said with a sour face.

She laughed. “Much as I enjoy having you at my mercy, your Grace, I suppose that I *should* let you get back to those dreadfully boring meetings instead of making you stay here and do something much more fun,” she winked.

“Bitch,” he accused, which made her laugh.

“You know it. Now with all due respect, your Grace, get off my ship,” she winked.

The corvette took him back home and made a water landing, letting him and his guards off as they tied up and prepared to just wait until he needed to go out again. He took off his helmet and carried it, waving to Ilia and Sheleese, who were splashing in the water of the beach further down. *Hey Jayce, you home for the day?* Ilia called.

I hope so. I have meetings, but I can do them from my home office. What are you two up to?

Day off, we're just dicking around, Sheleese replied. *Just got home from shopping.*

Well, Yila's on planet, so she might be having dinner with me, he warned.

We'll tell Ayama to hide all the knives, Sheleese replied impishly, which made him chuckle.

Someday that might be necessary, he agreed as he started up the stairs leading to the walkway that would get him home.

Zaa and Miaari were in his living room, talking, when Jason stumped in through the deck door. He tossed his helmet in the general direction of the side table and missed, and left it laying on the floor as he came in and flopped down on his recliner chair, which had been reinforced to handle him sitting in it in his armor. Dera and Suri shut the door behind him and stayed outside, but Aya padded into the living room and leaned over, wordlessly taking hold of his gauntlet and pulling it off after he unlocked it. "Thanks, Aya," he said with a nod. She knew he hated staying in his armor when he was home. "How went the conference, Denmother?"

"Acceptable," she replied. "Miaari clearly has much skill and experience in the rearing of young. Her wishes are what I would do myself."

Miaari looked away modestly, a little embarrassed by Zaa's praise.

"She does have practice, after six thousand years of raising kids," he said lightly.

"I am not *that* old," Miaari protested.

"Until you tell me how old you are, you leave it up to me to guess," he replied with a grin as Aya helped with his other gauntlet. "When are you going to have your cubs?"

"I already have," she replied simply. "It is not something I would do as part of a ceremony, my friend. And it does require certain preparations. I think that you would have found attending the event to be quite dark."

“The newborns are very sensitive to light,” Zaa explained. “She had need to bear them in a completely lightless environment. They are currently on board the transport I had brought aboard the *Iyaneri* under the care of a personal attendant who has extensive experience in such matters.”

“Damn, I was hoping to be there,” he sighed. “I hope you at least have pictures?”

“Of course I do, taken with a special low-light recorder,” Miaari said proudly, touching her memory band. A holo popped up in the living room showing an extremely tiny little bundle of wet fur, looking strangely *unformed*, with barely recognizable features and eerie black eyes that didn’t even look to have eyelids...no wonder they were sensitive to light. They looked premature. Weirdly cute, but premature. Two of them had the same color fur as Miaari, while the third had honey colored fur with black hands and feet, color not far from Jinaami. She cycled through several of the pictures, then brought up a picture of all three nestled in a bassinet. “This is Yemaari, this is Haan, and this is Maaaleth,” she said, pride and motherly love rippling through her voice. “My cubs. My beautiful cubs,” she breathed, almost reaching out to them.

“They show much potential, Handmaiden,” Zaa said with a prideful nod. “It will be both my duty and my pleasure to care for them until you can take up your duties.”

“Any time you need to go to Kimdori, Miaari, you just go,” Jason said as he unlocked his vambrace. “I don’t want your babies to ever not know who their mother is.”

Miaari gave him a kind smile. “Not that I ever need your permission to leave, but I am grateful for your sentiment, Jason,” she said.

Jason laughed. “Damn Kimdori,” he grinned as Aya popped the seals on the sides of his armor. “Now excuse me while I go put on something *much* more comfortable, and we can continue our conference up in my office.”

A few minutes later, Jason was in a tee and sweatpants, and the three of them continued to discuss Zaa’s information up in his office. Instead of discussing the Benga and the Syndicate, they instead focused on the Consortium and the PR sector, studying many of the various Imxi systems and the massive construction efforts going on there. Shipyards and

production facilities were studied along with the construction of the quantum phase device. Zaa had the most recent information, as well as the first strike orders sent from the infiltrator craft surveying the systems. Maggie and Jake would take those orders, study the systems, and design strike packages of toys that would attempt to sabotage their efforts. The one thing they couldn't really use was spiders, since the Imxi systems hadn't been converted to broadcast power yet, so the spiders would have no power source. That meant that conventional automated weapons would be deployed, and they also had four solar collectors in their inventory to use as they saw fit.

"Have you tried to make contact with the Imxi, Denmother?"

She shook her head. "They are *willing* allies with the Consortium, cousin," she replied. "They are a species much akin to the Faey, I fear to say, in that conquer and rule are their primary motivations. They exist in an island of sorts of habitable planets in a cluster, with large tracts of uninhabitable systems surrounding them and separating them from their neighbors. Those deserts isolate the Imxi from their enemies, but also make conquest nearly impossible given their tech level. It is a two-week hyperspace jump to the nearest neighboring enemy system, at least for them. Their hyperspace technology has a *worse* relativity delay than this sector's norm."

"So they've barely just started developing hyperspace applications," Jason surmised.

"The Imxi see alliance with the Consortium as the opportunity for conquest of their side of the galaxy, with the Consortium allowing them to rule it by proxy. That was the price they exacted for their willing assistance, one the Consortium was willing to pay, given they have found a kindred species and even intend to use the Imxi as a safe evacuation point in case they must flee Andromeda."

"Well, there's no accounting for taste," Jason grunted, leaning back in his chair. "And if they're willing allies, I see no reason for us to be nice," he added. "That means that *any* Imxi system is a potential target."

His vidlink beeped, a timer reminding him about the upcoming meeting. "That's the ten-minute warning," he said. "Do you want to sit in over here,

or just stay quiet and let them think you're unavailable, Denmother?"

"I will sit in here. They know I visit Karis from time to time, Jason. It is no secret."

Cybi manifested and joined them as Miaari left his office to let them have their meeting, Cybi sitting on the edge of his desk on one side, and Zaa sitting on the edge of his desk on the other. Cybi had been of the habit of attending these meetings in person in the last couple of weeks, as if to reinforce to the others just what she was, and a stark reminder of what the Karinnes were fighting for. Dahnai liked to banter with Cybi, and Magran seemed to have a fondness for her, but it was Grran of the Jobodi that seemed most inclined towards the CBIM. Their faces appeared near the far wall as a series of flat holograms, and Jason almost reflexively focused on Dahnai's lovely face. "Alright, we're all here. We were wondering where you were, Denmother, your emissaries simply said you were unavailable."

"I am over for dinner, your Majesty. I am ever fond of Ayama's cooking."

"You're not the only one," she said with an honest smile. "Jason's servant is one hell of a good cook."

"I find myself curious. Perhaps she might prepare something in the Skaa traditions and have it shipped to me," Assaba declared.

"I'll tell her, your Imperial Majesty, she would find preparing a Skaa meal fit for the Emperor to be quite a challenge," Jason said earnestly.

"You're in for a treat, Assaba," Dahnai chuckled. The other rulers had agreed to drop formal titles ten days ago, after nearly a week of wrangling over it. They would fight over fucking *anything*, it seemed. Since Jason wasn't a ruler, however, he still addressed them with the respect they deserved.

"Let us settle in and discuss business, my esteemed friends," Grran's vocoder intoned as his dexterous fourteen fingers danced in front of him. *"I am happy to report that the factories on Joboda are retooled and already producing Torsion cannons bearing universal mounts."*

Jason listened only half-heartedly as each ruler brought up the day's business, discussing production, troop dispensation, and infrastructure

related to the war effort. Jason knew that they'd probably *really* want to know what the Consortium was doing at Trieste, but Zaa had said that keeping it a secret was imperative, so he held his tongue. They didn't let him escape unscathed, however. "You seem distracted, Jason," Sk'Vrae noted.

"I have reason to be," he replied with a grunt. "I was going to tell you this after I had some information to pass along, but my forces over in the PR sector are going to be conducting their first attacks any time now," he announced. "I'm waiting for reports as we speak."

"Finally. What took so long?" Prime Minister Vizzie asked

"The kind of warfare we conduct requires a *lot* more intelligence to do effectively," Jason replied. "We were waiting for the Kimdori to conduct thorough surveillance and on-site recon missions to tell us where and how to attack. We have that information now, so we're going to start moving. When we do, it might provoke a response over here. They may make noise to try to draw our attention *back* to this sector."

"As we have discussed in the past," Magran nodded, his black eyes shimmering a bit in the hologram. "If the Consortium moves out of Trieste, we will be ready."

"We have Trieste effectively surrounded and blockaded," Ba'mra'ei Me'ber stated, "and Alliance sensor posts are tracking every move they make. They seem remarkably unconcerned about allowing us to monitor them."

"Having that many ships in one place makes them bold, and boldness can be a weakness to exploit in the proper circumstances," Assaba stated.

"How is the food situation? Are the transport schedules my transportation secretary drew up still working effectively?" Jason asked.

"Entirely," High Prince Grayhawk answered. "My people are well supplied as we rebuild, and for that, you have my eternal gratitude, your Grace."

"The replicated food augments our shipments, but no Skaa goes hungry in the Republic," Vizzie agreed.

“I am extremely impressed with your Kizzik allies, Dahnai,” Assaba told her. “I had no idea they were so exceptional.”

“It’s the language barrier, Assaba. They can be very...difficult to understand sometimes. But we’ve never doubted their intelligence, or their capability. They have been an integral and vital part of the Imperium for two thousand years.”

“Kizzik are just built to handle complex logistical problems,” Jason agreed.

“I find myself considering the possibility of seeking council with you to employ Kizzik logistics consultants, Dahnai. They might help the Empire improve the efficiency of our own freighter fleet,” Assaba intoned.

“I’m sure we could come to some kind of mutually beneficial agreement, Assaba,” Dahnai said with a honeyed smile. “They can be... well, let’s just say that you don’t have a conversation with a Kizzik like you would about any other sentient being. They’re quite unique. Intelligent, but unique.”

“As are we all in the eyes of our creators, my young Empress,” Magran said sonorously, as if he were quoting from Colonist religious texts. “There is beauty in all life forms, it just sometimes takes study and an open mind to see it.”

“Speaking of rebuilding, we have received the next round of relief convoys, and have already restored the critical operations at Faroll. We will be returning to the Allied Congress building within the week,” Ba’mra’ei Me’ber said, and they shifted back to boring reports that Jason didn’t listen to quite as attentively as he should. He listened to the rulers discuss the rebuilding of the Shio Federation and Alliance, with the Moridon leader, Overseer Brayrak Kruu chiming in from time to time to discuss financing through Moridon banks. The Moridon weren’t part of the Confederation, but they did sit in on the meetings to provide financial advice and also, so they knew what was going on. The Moridon were just as threatened as everyone else, they just fought their wars with money, not guns.

The council wound down, and it startled Jason with a request. “I am of the notion that it might be time for another face to face conference to discuss certain matters in a more intimate and secure format,” Assaba said

as they wrapped up. “I also would like the opportunity to set foot on the fabled planet of Karis at least once in my life,” he added, looking at Jason. “Would you object to hosting a conference of rulers, your Grace?”

“Huh? Of course not, your Imperial Majesty,” he replied immediately. “Our accommodations may not be up to your usual standards since we’re not used to hosting such nobility, but I’m sure we can make do.”

“I think that would be a good idea,” Brayrak agreed. “There are some things that are best not discussed over galactic crypto. It is a security threat. Our most critical plans should be formed in a secure setting, and there are few places in the galaxy more secure than Karis. Even Moridon is challenged by the House Karinne in that regard.”

“On that we do agree, Overseer Brayrak,” Zaa nodded. “We must find a time that is optimal for all parties.”

“Let’s start with ten days from today and work from there, that sound good?” Dahnai asked, and they all assented. “Okay, unless something changes, we will convene a meeting of Confederate Council members and our most trusted advisors among the Kimdori, Zyagya, and Moridon on Karis in ten days. I’ve been there myself, my esteemed peers, and trust me, you’re in for a treat,” she smiled at Jason. “Karis is a place unlike any other.”

Ten days...that was Rann’s birthday. That was going to be a seriously busy day if the Confederate rulers were going to arrive, given he’d had several things planned for Rann. It was going to steal a little of his son’s thunder, but he could still work around it. If anything, one of his presents could be letting him greet all the different rulers. He’d have to get the schedules as early as possible, work Rann’s birthday events into the day... somehow. He couldn’t very well tell them to hold it some other day *just* because it was his son’s birthday. He could make it work. He’d find a way to make it work.

“I find myself quite eager to see its wonders,” Magran said.

[That is Rann’s birthday. Aya is going to kill you, Jason,] Cybi noted lightly.

[She probably is, and I know. I’d better wear my armor for the next month,] Jason said, which caused Cybi to chuckle.

“What did she say, your Grace?” Magran asked curiously.

“Just reminding me that my security chief is going to spank me for such short notice,” he said, which made Dahnai laugh. “But don’t let that dissuade you. We’ll have everything ready. Not everyone is going to stay in a penthouse suite in a luxurious hotel, but we’ll work something out,” he said, frowning a bit. “We don’t exactly have extensive facilities to cater to a galactic ruler. Like I said, some of you might be roughing it in comparison to what you’re used to. We’re actually a very humble house in that regard. Pomp and circumstance are not things you find in any large amount on Karis.”

“We fully understand, your Grace. Karis is a closed planet not used to a large number of high-ranking visitors,” Ba’mra’ei Me’ber assured him. “And I am quite happy with average accommodations, as long as you find a bed large enough for me to fit in it,” she added, which made Jason laugh.

“I’ll have to rush order something suitable from an upscale Alliance furniture outlet, High Staff, but we’ll take care of you,” he replied.

“I can take care of that for you, your Grace. I can have a bed fitting for the High Staff en route within the hour,” Cybi assured him.

“Then that’s your chore, Cybi,” he agreed. “In fact, I think our esteemed fellow council members might appreciate your personal touch, my friend, so you get together with our Secretary of State and help her make the preparations. Go kick some butts and get things moving.”

“It would be my pleasure, your Grace. I will start with the hotels and procure any suitable suites available. It will also let us arrange your personal matters that day as efficiently as possible.”

“You reveal yourself to the common Karisian populace, Lady Cybi?” Magran asked curiously.

“Of course I do,” she replied lightly. *“After the Consortium revealed my secret, there was no longer any reason for me to remain hidden. Not all fully comprehend what I am, but they know that I am a member of his Grace’s personal staff and afford me the respect due that station.”*

“Personal? What’s—Trelle’s garland, how could I forget?” Dahnai gasped. “Jason, I’m sooo sorry!”

“What is the problem?” Sk’Vrae asked.

“That’s Rann’s birthday!” she declared. “I totally forgot, or I’d have suggested another day!”

“It’s alright, Dahnai, we chose ten days, and we’ll work with ten days. My personal matters don’t give me the right to inconvenience everyone else. If anything, I can bring Rann with me when I meet all of you as you arrive as part of his birthday present.”

“I will ensure to bring a present for him when I arrive,” Sk’Vrae told him. “That will ease the sting of his father being taken from him on *his* day.”

“Thanks, Sk’Vrae,” he said gratefully.

“If the anniversary of one’s birth is so important in Terran society, I would be remiss to ignore the custom myself,” Assaba stated. “I too shall bring a token of cheer to raise the heir’s spirits on his personal day of celebration.”

“Just don’t go crazy,” Jason warned, which made Dahnai laugh. “Rann is a very modest and intelligent boy, and he doesn’t need someone to bring him his own star yacht. And for the love of God, no pets. Rann already has a vulpar kit, and she’ll get *intensely* jealous if someone brings him another pet.”

“I can give you some suggestions, Assaba. I know Rann very well, I know what he likes,” Dahnai offered.

“Well, I could easily see fit to bring young Rann one of the ceremonial swords of the High Prince. And if Lady Cybi is overseeing our accommodations, I’m quite sure they’ll be satisfactory,” Grayhawk said, giving Cybi a smile.

“You might be disappointed, your Highness,” Cybi warned. “His Grace was not being overly modest about our hotel situation. We only have two hotels that are up to the task of hosting guests of your excellence, and luxury suites within them are few. I would highly suggest being prepared for rude housing, and it would behoove all of you to limit your retinues to those that can handle a common hotel room with no luxuries.”

“We can work with what is available, Lady Cybi,” Assaba assured her. “I am sure I can, as you say, *rough it* for a few days.”

Dahnai snorted. “Don’t tempt him, you should see what he did to *me* the first time I visited,” she said, which made Jason laugh.

“A little humility is good for the soul, your Majesty,” he said with a slight smirk.

“I’m not *that* humble,” she shot back.

“Well, if I’m hosting this conference, excuse me if I drop out and start making the arrangements,” Jason said. “There’s a lot to do.”

“Of course,” Magran nodded.

“Sit in for me, Cybi. Denmother, my office is yours,” he said, standing up.

Aya was *not* happy when he sent for her and told her what the Confederate Council wanted. *Ten days? Ten days? I barely have the time to prepare for one leader in ten days, let alone ten! And that’s Rann’s birthday! I’ll have all of his activities on top of this!*

Eleven, the Moridon are coming too, he corrected, which earned him an ugly glare. *Cybi’s going to help Yuri handle the preparations, so get with them and arrange security. We’ll put them up in the five big hotels in Karsa. And I know it’s Rann’s birthday, you dink, you think I’m happy this is happening on his birthday? Half the things I had planned just got axed, and now I have to work my son in around my schedule like he’s not that important to me,* he bristled a bit. *Get in touch with Yuri and make it happen, Aya. And please, keep me informed as much as you can so we can at least get Rann’s party in somewhere in a block where I have the time to show him how sorry I am this happened on his birthday,* he added.

Aya put a compassionate hand on his shoulder. *I will, Jason. If anything, we can arrange a morning party for him and have Yuri convince the leaders to push their arrivals back into the afternoon.*

That might work. Make me proud, Aya. It wasn’t my idea to hold it here, and seriously not my idea to ruin Rann’s birthday. But I don’t have any problems with playing the host, since you can’t get much more secure than

Karis. If anything, maybe it'll make them appreciate a little more just how serious we are about protecting Cybi.

Yuri rushed onto the Strip before he could even talk to her, since Cybi beat him to it, and she looked both frenetic and eager. "We're hosting the entire council?" she asked breathlessly.

He nodded as he looked through the fridge, as Ayama was busy preparing dinner. *Cybi told you?*

Of course she did. What do you want me to do?

I thought state was your job, Yuri, he winked. I'm entirely confident that your preparations will be everything I hope for.

She gave him a huge smile. *I won't let you down, Jayce. So, I have permission to step on toes?*

You can even wear spiked boots, he replied as he fished a bottle of oye juice out of the door.

She laughed. *I can do that. Not often I get to flex my diplomatic muscles,* she winked.

Cybi's going to help, so get with her and hammer out a plan. I assigned her to the project, mainly to give her something worthwhile to do. Sometimes she gets a little bored.

I'll be overjoyed to have her along, Yuri assured him.

Remember one thing, Yuri, he sent. That is also Rann's birthday. I want you to try to arrange things so I at least have four or five hours for Rann's birthday party. Try to get the rulers to arrive later in the afternoon so we have the morning. Keep Cybi and Aya as updated as possible so I can arrange my schedule that day.

Of course I can, your Grace. Don't worry, I'll get you more than enough time for Rann's party. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a fuckload to do and not much time.

Go get 'em, Yuri, he smiled.

She grinned in reply, then rushed off almost at a dead run.

Zaa came down into the living room almost the same time that Yila and Kumi knocked on the deck door. Aya escorted them in, and Yila looked a little unwilling to hang around with Zaa in the room. However, she came over to Jason and put her hand on his neck. “The meeting is finished, and I have a precious cargo to return to Kimdori Prime,” she said, glancing at Miaari as she came down the stairs. “By your leave, Jason, I will return home.”

“Of course, Denmother. Thank you for coming. It was good to see you again,” he said, leaning in and kissing her on the side of her muzzle.

“Attend, Handmaiden. There is one final thing I wish to discuss.”

“Yes, my Denmother,” Miaari said, following her towards the kitchen and the deck door.

Thank Trelle, Kimdori give me the creeps, Yila sent in relief when they left, flopping down on his couch. She’d changed into a bra-like halter top that had a left sleeve that ended at her elbow and a pair of hot shorts, much less formal attire. She put her feet up on his coffee table, and then accepted a glass of oye juice from Surin after he scurried in. *So, can I stay for dinner?*

Of course. Dara coming?

She’s at home waiting for a ship.

Aya, can you organize that, please? Jason sent.

I’ll have a ship dispatched immediately, your Grace.

Where’s Zach? Yila asked.

Still at school, but he should be home any time now, he answered.

What are we having for dinner? Yila asked.

Broiled grall, Terran corn on the cob, ruga roots, imi beans, five spice bread, and jhru pudding for dessert, your Grace, Ayama answered.

Zyagyan pudding? Brave.

Don’t complain ‘til you try it, it’s pretty good, Jason retorted.

Do you know what’s in it?

Nope. I don't care, he replied. I learned long ago not to ask.

Coward, she winked.

You'd be a coward too if Ayama was your cook.

I heard that, your Grace, Ayama sent tartly, which made him laugh.

Then you won't be ashamed when I tell Yila that you make up ingredients when I ask what's in something, he shot back. I happened to find out that krammaki eyeballs are not an ingredient in Fremga stew.

They are in my cookbook, she replied teasingly.

There are two rules in this house concerning food, Yila. First is you never tell Ayama whatever when she asks you what you want. Second is you never ask her what's in what she cooks.

It keeps you on your toes, your Grace, she sent shamelessly from the kitchen, which made Yila and Kumi laugh.

Bullied by your own servant. Such a man, Yila teased.

I put up with it because Ayama's one of the best cooks around. Temperamental, erratic, and obnoxious, but sometimes you just work around the thorns when you enjoy the rose.

You are so getting a special meal now, your Grace, Ayama threatened.

If I eat it, you eat it, he retaliated.

I'm not afraid of spicy food, she teased in return.

Rann and Danelle all but skipped into the living room from the kitchen with Daila, one of the morning shift guards, behind them. Hello Miss Grand Duchess, Danelle sent, bobbing her head in a little bow.

You can call me Yila when we're here on Karis, little pippy, she smiled, sitting back up and holding her arms out. Come give me a kiss, Rann!

Hullo, Miss Yila, he greeted, coming over and kissing her on the cheek.

How was school?

Boring, but okay, he answered. Is Mommy home yet, Daddy?

Afraid not, little man. She's up in Kosigi right now, we had a meeting that slowed her down today. But I think she's worked long enough, lemme get her home.

Good.

Jason put a finger on his gestalt. *[Love.]*

[Hey baby, what's up?]

[You about done?]

[I'm boarding the corvette right now. I'll be home in about twenty minutes.]

[Sounds good. Just to warn you, Yila and Dara are coming for dinner.]

[I don't mind, I like Yila,] she replied.

"She'll be home in about half an hour, pippy," he replied aloud. *Now go get your armor off, both of you.*

'Kay, Danelle sent in reply, heading for the stairs.

Ilia, mind if you and Zach come for dinner? Yila's here, and she's bringing Dara. Jason sent, casting out enough to reach Ilia's house. *She's doing a rather poor job of trying to throw Zach and Dara together, hoping for a betrothal.*

That sounds nice, I'd like to get to know this little girl a little bit.

Then come on over.

The ship is on its way, your Grace. Dara should be here within an hour, Aya reported.

Sounds good, thank you Captain, Yila replied.

Ilia got to know Yila and Dara as they sat out on the deck to eat dinner, enjoying the breezy, warm Karis afternoon. Dara made sure to sit beside Zach, talking with him as Yila talked shop with Jason and Kumi, discussing some additional metal sales she was trying to arrange with the Haumda. They made room when Myleena came over, still in her armor, and she plopped down in a chair at the far end of the table. "Man, what a day," she said aloud.

“Busy?” Yila asked.

“Since when am I *not* busy, Yila?” she replied with a grunt, causing a *grall* flank to float up off the platter and onto a nearby spare plate, then the plate came over to her. Yila didn’t react, mainly because she knew that Myleena and Jason were telekinetic. *How was school, pips?* she asked Danelle.

We learned about fractions today, she replied. And we went to Karsa on a field trip, to that new museum that has all the bones in it. It was really neat.

Sounds like you had a fun day, Myleena smiled lovingly. Gather your things after dinner, my girl, I’ll be home for the next few days.

‘Kay.

Aww, I like having Danny in my room, Rann complained.

She does live in her own house, son, Jason sent, a bit amused.

I heard that you’re pregnant, Myleena. Congratulations.

Aww, thanks, Yila, she smiled. It’s his, she added, pointing at Jason. We put aside our mutual not-attractiveness for each other and did the deed. He’s my best friend, I owed him the chance to father one of my children.

She’s probably the only woman on the strip that isn’t attracted to Jayce, that makes her defective, Kumi teased.

Hey, different people have different tastes. I’m not offended, Jason chuckled. Mainly because I’m not attracted to her that way either. It’d make it awkward if one of us was and one of us wasn’t.

True, Yila nodded. I had that problem when I was younger. I was lucky enough to have a rather handsome attractive young man be very attracted to me, but I didn’t have the same attraction for him.

What did you do?

You think I’m crazy, Kumi? I laid him every chance I could get, she replied, which made Kumi laugh. A girl doesn’t pass up an opportunity like that. I’m not stupid.

So, you led him on as long as possible to get everything you could out of him, then crushed his hopes and dreams without a second thought, Jason teased lightly.

Damn right I did, she replied shamelessly, which made Jyslin and Myleena burst out laughing.

At least you're an honest pirate, Jason sent, amusement tinging his thought.

Raping and pillaging is no fun if they don't know who did it, she winked in reply.

Jason laughed helplessly.

I did have a request, Jason, she sent privately.

Oh, here it comes, he sent cheekily.

Hush, she shot back, which made him grin. *I would like to come to Rann's birthday party, both me and Dara. Is that alright?*

Actually, that's just fine. Rann likes you and Dara, and the more the merrier when it comes to a party. Just remember, only you and Dara are invited. No entourage.

Well, can I at least bring my son? He's ten, he's young enough to enjoy a birthday party.

Well...okay, that sounds alright.

Who else is invited that I know?

Dahnai, her family, and Anya, he answered.

I'll find a good present for Rann. Something nice, but not extravagant. I don't think you'd let me get away with that, she sent lightly.

I already laid down the law on the Confederate Council when they talked about bringing Rann gifts, he told her, which made her laugh. The others gave her a curious look, then shrugged and went back to the public conversation. *Nothing outrageous, and no pets. Amber would throw a complete temper tantrum if we brought another pet into this house.*

Vulpars are like that, Yila nodded, glancing at the tiny vulpar, who was sitting on the table beside Rann, her own little dinner plate and water dish

before her. *Well, thank you, Jason. I appreciate being allowed to come.*

Don't worry, I'm sure whatever it is you're scheming is going to fall apart on you, he replied, which made her grin impishly.

Posh, I'm not scheming. I'm just coming to his birthday party.

Riiiiight, he answered, which got him that same smile in return.

Chapter 2

Daira, 11 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 28 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 11 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

The first attack was a complete success.

Maggie had sent back video taken from a hyperspace probe watching the system of PR-106, which was one of the major construction hubs. The system had three inhabited planets that were packed into an almost shockingly tight series of orbits, the three planets existing in orbits about the same distance as Terra was from Venus, and all three planets were life sustaining. That was almost unheard of, and something Jason had never seen before. How those planets formed without crashing into one another was a miracle. The three planets had all kinds of heavy industry in orbit around them, for it was the Imxi's primary shipyard systems. It was also where they were building 26% of the quantum phase device.

Or...it *was* where they were building 26% of the device.

The attack was a great success, but it was also a costly one. While the Kimdori's SCM ships could easily fool sensors, what they could *not* do was fool that clairvoyant energy being, nor did they expect to fool it for long. The SCM was there to prevent their enemies from seeing them *move in*, but once they were there, they weren't worried about being detected. The Consortium knew that they were there and had been preparing their Imxi systems for KMS attacks, but it was very hard to prepare for the Legion.

The initial attack was with Buzzsaws, launched from a suicide freighter, which accelerated at flank right at their primary target, the core body of the

quantum phase emitter, on a collision course. The Buzzsaws were aimed at their primary control station in orbit, while the freighter was careening towards the phase device, but the Imxi and their Consortium allies managed to destroy the freighter at the price of taking moderate damage by the Buzzsaws, as well as a few ships, since the freighter's engines and power plant were rigged to explode if the freighter lost power, and that massive detonation took out two Consortium destroyers. Almost immediately, ten more freighters dropped out of hyperspace, and they launched nearly 50% of the inventory they'd brought with them. This was the most critical target to hit, so they dedicated sizable assets to taking it out. A virtual cloud of Buzzsaws, missiles, gun drones, and backpack robots carrying other toys exploded out of those freighters, which also turned to try to ram the main body of the quantum phase device. It was a chaotic swarm of intense action in almost every direction as the gun drones and Buzzsaws tried to get the other devices to their target, attacking anything that fired in that general direction as the backpack robots acted like living shields for the other weapons, jettisoning their cargo boxes when they detected that their destruction was imminent, which sent a cloud of debris floating in the direction it needed to go. The Consortium desperately tried to protect the device, the control station, and several of the Eretrium arc sections from rampaging missiles and Buzzsaws, with more weapons coming up behind them. In the chaotic scrum, the Consortium managed to protect the device from the onslaught using their ships, Imxi fighters—which actually looked halfway decent, on par with *Skaa Un'Dara* fighters, from watching them in action—and automated defense weapon platforms in orbit around the planet. The Consortium lost 14 ships, 128 automated platforms, and sustained heavy damage to the control station because of Satan's Marbles, but they managed to fight off the entire onslaught. Two missiles holding Satan's Marbles managed to hit the device and deliver their payloads, but the Consortium was ready for that with a sustained magnetic field projected from a nearby ship, pulling the marbles towards the ship and out of the device.

Then the device exploded like a nova, when it was struck by the intense blast of a solar collector that had been deployed 1.2 light seconds from the system, the entire device contained in a CMS box that opened and deployed the collector. The Consortium seemed to pause in shock as the incandescent beam of coherent solar radiation lanced in and struck the device, hitting its

power plant and causing it to explode, then it fired again 17 seconds later and hit the command station, melting through the connecting neck holding one of its flared wing sections to the main body, causing the entire wing of the station to tumble away and start its death spiral into the atmosphere of the planet. Two Consortium destroyers quickly turned and raced away at flank speed to get to jump distance, but it gave the collector time to fire again 17 seconds later, another 126 *shakra* wide blast of overwhelming solar energy lanced into the chaos and struck one of the arc sections of the device, melting it in half almost exactly in the middle of its curved length, as the impact of the beam knocked the piece against its drydock construction scaffolding. There was no fourth shot, however, for the Consortium destroyers that deployed quickly locked in on the device and destroyed it, but not without taking shock damage when they fired on it just as it was about to fire, all that energy pulled in from the ramjet-style collector unleashed when its guiding force was destroyed suddenly. Had they fired a split second before or after, the collector would have just blown up, but they had the bad luck of firing when it had all the energy gathered to fire.

God bless pinpoint targeting systems, capable of letting the collector hit a target the size of a car from over 350,000 kilometers away.

Even after the attack was over, it wasn't over. Every freighter had mines and conduit smashers disguised in the bulkheads and cargo doors that were ejected to open the cargo hangars, the units offline to avoid detection, equipped with broadcast power units attuned to the Consortium's broadcast frequencies. Those mines slowly drifted towards the planet, then activated and attacked when they got within range of the broadcast power emanating from their ships. The Consortium lost two more ships to the mines, making the fatal mistake of not giving those blown doors a wide berth and wandering too close to them as they commenced cleanup operations. That reminded the Consortium that *anything* that the Legion left behind could be deadly, even the trash.

In the end, Maggie and Jake had been right to send all that equipment in, because it kept the Consortium busy while the collector deployed and powered up, but the video proved that the Consortium were adapting to Legion tactics...so that meant that they were going to have to adapt themselves. The collector had done that job, for it was something *new* that

the Consortium had never seen before. But, the lack of collateral damage from their other weapons was a bit of a disappointment. There was supposed to be more damage to shipbuilding docks and other arc sections, but the Consortium had responded quickly and almost perfectly to the toy attack. They had deployed proper counterstrategies to everything but the conduit smashers and the Buzzsaws, which had no counterstrategy except shooting them down before they could hit something.

Clearly, the Legion had to get more underhanded...or go back to their roots with *surprise* attacks rather than *frontal* attacks.

So, while the attack was considered a success in that it destroyed the primary target, it had been a failure in the lack of collateral damage inflicted. It had also proved that the solar collector had been a *smashing* success. Jason had gone to bed last night right after ordering more CMS-packaged collectors. That little toy had some serious potential.

And they still had the meson cannons and gravity guns in their arsenal to try out as new weapons against their enemies.

If only they could get some interdictors in place over there to use offensively. The only time they tried, the Consortium jumped *instantly* to the interdictor's location and came in through the effect on a 7 hour sublight cruise, launching a massive barrage of missiles in front of them that could go faster than they could, and arrive in 4.5 hours. Their clairvoyant energy being was paying special and very intense attention to the Imxi systems, making it hard to move about in CMS. The thing couldn't see into hyperspace, they'd worked that out, but the instant anything dropped out of hyperspace *anywhere* in the PR sector, that energy being knew about it immediately, and it quickly deployed ships to attack the interdictor before the effect put it out of reach. Their counterstroke was effective, but not unstoppable. After seeing that report, Jason ordered them to stockpile enough interdictors to interdict *every* Imxi system in the PR sector at the same time and force them to sacrifice *some* systems to protect the *critical* ones. The Consortium wouldn't be able to attack *all* the interdictors, especially when every interdictor was jumped in with a defensive picket that would force them to commit real resources to destroying the interdictor. And once they knew which systems the Consortium would actively fight to protect, well, they knew where to start focusing their attacks.

Jason yawned and sat up as daybreak sun poured in through the windows. He'd gotten up before the alarm by about twenty minutes, mainly because having about ten hours to sleep was usually about three hours more than he needed. He'd fully adapted to a 29-hour day, but there were times when he slept too long or not long enough, as his 24-hour based body occasionally yearned for the good old days. Faey had a 30-hour rhythm gleaned from evolution on Draconis, but oddly enough, they needed less sleep on the average than humans, so they still only slept about 7-8 hours a day. Their telepathic minds were highly organized and developed, and thus needed less sleep to regenerate than non-telepathic humans. Jason himself had never needed much sleep either, which had been really handy at the University of Michigan, and again when he was taking classes in Faey technology. Jason had been able to go on very little sleep for long periods, but those always came with a "crash" sleep where he was dead to the world for seven or eight hours.

It was one of the ways that the human telepaths were different from the rest of humanity. In a way, Cybi had always been correct to call him a different *species* than regular Terrans, and not just because he was a Generation. There were very small but very significant differences between the humans and the human telepaths, mainly dealing with mental acuity and basic thought patterns. Not all telepaths were intelligent, but telepaths were naturally disposed to be slightly more intelligent than Terrans. Virtually all telepaths had naturally strong minds, capable of discipline, willpower, and virtually all of them had faster than normal cognitive abilities due to *how* telepaths thought. The most significant difference was that all telepaths of any race had a natural aptitude to manage multiple tasks simultaneously, able to quickly and efficiently shift their focus from one matter to another. This was a critical ability that was absolutely required for any but the simplest telepathic applications. Some telepaths, like the Generations, could actually *think* of more than one thing at a time, allowing them to perform highly complex telepathic tasks. Most sentient beings were hardwired to think *serially*, to think of or be able to pay attention to only one thing at a time, but many telepaths were capable of *parallel* thought, able to maintain focus on more than one thing at a time. These were natural aptitudes that allowed telepaths to excel in life, for they had willpower and discipline, and that gave them the drive to achieve goals, and in a way, it was why the Faey were so good at fighting, able to take in, process, and react to vast amounts

of information faster than the non-telepathic mind. The ability to commune, to think and communicate with more *bandwidth*, naturally required the ability to think in a more expansive way than just one subject at a time.

Jason was a different species from the Terrans, and even the Terran telepaths, but that did not make him *better* than them. It only made him *different*.

So, while he was technically married outside his species...he could let that slide. After all, for him, the pickings were pretty slim, since everyone thought he was the only pure Terran Generation in existence for about five years, before they stumbled across Rahne, and now they knew that he and Rahne and his children were the only Terran Generations in existence. They were literally a race of seven, with five more on the way; the twins Siyae and Bethany, Raisha, Yana's son Walter—why she chose Walter instead of Brian was beyond Jason, and Siyara.

He looked down at Jyslin, who was sleeping on her back with her head turned towards him, and he just had to marvel yet again at how beautiful she was. Their pair bond was true, he could feel it pulling him towards her gently, inexorably, powerful bonds of love and friendship and trust and companionship that would ensure that they were together for life. For commoners, the formation of a pair bond was a guarantee of marriage. For the nobles, who married for political reason, the formation of a pair bond was the realm of *amu*, the most favorite subject of Faey poets and writers since they invented paper and ink. The pair bond could bend a little, allow a bonded person to form different kinds of bonds with others, but it always ensured that no matter how many women Jason slept with, or even loved, Jyslin would *always* be first in his mind, heart, and soul. She was *the one*, and he wouldn't want it any other way. He leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek, and almost immediately, her beautiful gray eyes opened, and she smiled at him. "Mmmmm," *now that's the way I should be woken up every morning. So, is it morning enough for you to want the morning girl?* she asked sensually.

Can I give you a kiss without turning you on, woman? he accused.

No. That is absolutely impossible, she replied impishly, grinning at him as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. They had a little episode of some fairly heavy making out, at least until he heard an odd whining sound

in the distance. He glanced at his clock and saw that it flickered as it lost power, and then was brought back up by the power generators in the basement, and almost instantly, surprised sendings spread across the strip and through the upscale neighborhood on both sides of it.

What the fuck, the power just went down, Jason grunted, sitting up and focusing himself, then casting his sending halfway across Karsa by accessing the tactical gestalt in the basement, far enough to reach the White House when he *wasn't* sending with Jyslin. *What's going on over there?* he demanded.

His gestalt, which hadn't been switched to broadcast power, started to beep. He picked it up and put it on, enduring that moment of it intertwining itself into his thoughts, then Rund Hervakk appeared in his mind's eye. *[Power should be back up in a moment, your Grace. We had a cascade shutoff. We're rebooting the master command system now.]*

[What happened?]

[I'm not entirely positive yet. I'll have a report for you as soon as the power management center tracks it down. We'll be bringing up the continent grid by grid, and we'll start with yours.]

[Alright. This doesn't bode well, Rund. We've never had an unintentional power failure before.]

[No system is utterly dependable, your Grace. I'll call back the instant I know what's going on.]

What's going on, baby? Jyslin asked as Jason rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed.

Rund isn't entirely sure yet, something caused the entire continental power grid to execute an emergency shutoff.

Trelle's garland, Jyslin send soberly.

Yeah. There goes my mood, I'd better go find out what's going on.

Oh well, there's always tonight, she purred, sliding her hand along his side sensually.

Don't start or I'll be calling Aura to come to my office during lunch.

Jyslin laughed. *So easy to get turned on*, she teased with a smile.

When you do it, you bet your ass I'm easy to turn on, he replied shamelessly as he stood up. Shey's image appeared as a holo against the back wall, her using the command center override to get in touch with him directly. "I know, I already contacted Rund," he told her.

"We get the feeling that the plume of smoke to the northwest might have something to do with the power failure, your Grace," she said, looking down. The holo split, and an image of smoke rising in the grasslands northwest of Karsa appeared. "It looks like a major substation had some kind of cataclysmic failure."

"Ouch," Jason noted. That *was* about where the Karsa Substation was located, where the industrial, high-capacity plasma exchangers stepped the plasma down from transmission stage to distribution stage. Fortunately, however, Rund had designed the entire planetary power grid with redundancy. Backup station Karsa-B would come online to take over for the primary once the power came back up. The feedback must have gone back down the transmission pipes and to the primary singularity plants that powered the entire planet and caused an emergency shutdown. He opened the armory door and caused his armor rack to extend out, then stepped over to it. "I'll be over as soon as I get dressed," he told her. "And why are you still at work?"

"My shift ends in ten minutes, your Grace, but I'll probably stay over until we get things ironed out," she replied, glancing at Jyslin. "I hope you don't mind that his Grace enjoys parading around naked in front of me, my Lady. He's hopelessly incorrigible."

Jyslin laughed. "I like him bold and sassy," she winked in reply. "He's told me that it's one of your perks for working nightshift."

"Oh, it most certainly is," she replied with a slight smile. "And he *finally* got to allow me to return the favor."

"I bet it was awfully drafty sitting at your console bare-ass naked, Shey," he said as he started putting on his armor.

"I found the experience strangely liberating, your Grace," she replied with aplomb, which made Jyslin laugh. "I did enjoy being the only woman

in the command center allowed to be out of uniform. Literally,” she added dryly.

“Next time I’ll have them turn the climate control way down, so it won’t be quite so much fun,” he threatened.

“Your Grace, if I happened to contact you with nipples starched due to the cold, you might get the wrong impression,” she protested, which made Jyslin roll over on her back laughing.

“Stop being bad and let me get dressed,” he told her.

“Of course, your Grace. I’ll send the warning that you’re on the way. General Myri will get your chair in the corner ready for you.”

Her image winked out before he could respond, which made Jyslin laugh harder. “I knew there was a reason I liked her,” she giggled after she got control of herself.

“And here I thought making her pull a duty shift wearing nothing but a sign would pull her fangs. I’m going to have to get creative,” Jason grunted as he connected his breastplate to his backplate and settled them over his shoulders, then went about locking them to the codpiece and sealing the border along his sides.

“You still haven’t stirred things up between Kumi and the twins yet,” Jyslin winked.

I haven’t thought of anything good yet, he replied. They’re getting a little too sickeningly nice to each other. If they’re not fighting like kree in heat, they’re no fun at all.

They are going to kill you when they find out that half of what they blame on each other, you’re doing, she winked.

Life is boring if there’s no adventure in it, he replied dryly. Kumi and the twins let me act like an arrogant little ass, it’s a good outlet for my delusions of grandeur, he added lightly, which made her laugh.

Jason picked up Dera and Suri just as they came on shift, then he headed for the White House without even so much as breakfast. He marched right down to the power management satellite office in the basement of the administration building, where Rund had his main office

and his staff monitored the power grid and made any planned changes using simulations. The place was filled with Makati who were rushing all over the place, and he went right over to Rund Hervakk, who had his horned head bent together with three other Makati. “What’s the word, Rund?”

“I was just about to call you, your Grace,” he said with relief, stepping away from them and pointing at a distribution board. “The failure was caused by a cataclysmic conduit failure leading into this step-down exchanger,” he said, pointing at an icon on the board, its caption [Karsa SS-2B]. “The plasma fed back into the unit, and that triggered a cascade failsafe protocol due to the sheer gigawattage of power buildup. It looks like that conduit junction might have been defective, but on a microscopic level. It took it nearly four years to fail.”

“We’d better inspect all industrial conduit junctions to make sure it was an isolated incident,” Jason noted. “We can’t afford some kind of microscopic design flaw wreaking havoc with our power system for the next year.”

“I already have an inspection team assembling to do just that, your Grace,” Rund nodded in approval. “This was *not* caused by the broadcast power or anything else, your Grace. It looks like a simple case of the wrong piece of equipment failing at the right time.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at a board, which caused one of his lieutenants to rush over there. “We have primary power back online for all grids, and Karsa is running off its primary backup substation while we effect repairs. We’re going to shift to the secondary backup station to run the exchangers for two hours once the repairs are complete, give them some operational uptime, then return to the primary substation after the uptime cycle. We had that planned for Brista, but we may as well do it now.”

“Good man, Rund. It looks like this is under control, so I’m gonna go eat some breakfast, then head to my office and tackle my inbox,” he sighed. “Keep me updated.”

“I’ll send hourly reports until we’re back to normal operational procedures.”

Jason nodded. “Good job, everyone!” he shouted to the office.

Jason stopped for breakfast in the complex cafeteria, then headed for the office. Chirk and Brall were already there, sitting at their stations and hard at work, and he stopped at Chirk's desk and leaned on it with his hands. "Alright, hit me," he said without preamble.

"Your schedule today is light, Revered Hive-leader," her translator intoned. "Routine paperwork and three appointments. Trenirk Bruun of resources in fifty-two minutes, the daily meeting of the Confederate Council at twelve twenty-three, and the weekly meeting of the cabinet at fifteen thirty."

"Oh yeah, I need to talk to Trenirk, guess he beat me to the punch and made an appointment," Jason chuckled. "Alright, sounds good. Paperwork?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary or requiring your immediate attention, Revered Hive-leader."

"Good. Oh, that reminds me. Schedule a call for me at, umm," he said, accessing his gestalt, "thirteen forty."

"Contacted party?"

"Rillen Shaddale, Jyslin's father. His contact numbers are in the database. And do *not* tell Jyslin about this."

"I will set up the appointment," she affirmed.

Jason moved over to Brall's desk. "Whatcha got, Brall?"

"Just the usual, your Grace," he replied, bringing up a holo. "I'm following up on the administration rule changes for residential infrastructure service calls, and the broadcast department finalized the programming lineup changes on planetary vidlink services. They're adding nearly five hundred new channels, mainly from outside empires. Since we have other races in the house now, broadcast incorporated some of their entertainment transmissions into the vidlink lineup. Half of the new channels are feeds from Alliance entertainment broadcasts, and the rest are Shio, Colonial, Jobodi and Skaa. Oh, except for five. We're bringing two Verutan channels and three Zyagyan channels in as well. The Zyagyan farming colony on Exile specifically requested those three channels."

“Glad we could get them for them,” Jason nodded. “No doubt one of those channels is the *grazkaur* channel.”

Brall laughed. “Indeed it is,” he replied. “Violent, nasty sport, that is.”

“The Zyagya love it, and that’s all that really matters to them, since *they* play it,” Jason said.

“True, your Grace, true,” Brall chuckled. “I have appointments today up in Kosigi and in various spots around Karsa, so get me on gravband if you need me after I leave in twenty minutes.”

He went back to his office and started tackling his inbox, but he was interrupted barely a half an hour into the most boring part of his job.

“Revered Hive-leader, you have a visitor. Grand Duchess Yila Trefani is in the reception room.”

Jason chuckled. Yila had stayed overnight in the guest house, had even kept Dara with her, and clearly hadn’t gone home yet. She must be *seriously* hot for those contracts. “Go ahead and send her in,” he replied over the intercom.

Yila came in when the door slid open, wearing something that was quite normal for the Faey but would get her arrested on Terra. It was a wrap that went over her left shoulder and down her body diagonally, looping around her right waist, which left her right breast bare. The garment had a left sleeve on it that reached her elbow, with the Trefani crest embroidered into the shoulder of the sleeve. She had *nothing* on outside from that except a pair of knee-high boots, leaving her virtually nude. But what she was wearing was quite acceptable in Faey society, where they considered the nude body to be something beautiful and worth displaying. It wasn’t uncommon at all to see men and women walking around on a warm day in Dracora wearing nothing but shoes. She wouldn’t walk around like that in Dracora, though, because of the two small *jaingi* tattoos that flanked her dark, trimmed pubic hair, which were considered fringe for a Grand Duchess. But that was Yila, breaking the rules in her understated, subtle ways while appearing completely above board to the community at large, demonstrating her mafia don’s mentality. She looked around almost as soon as she got into his office, taking in his decorations. From a football and Michigan jersey hanging in a glass case on one wall, a replica of his jersey

from his days as a college football player, to a Jobodi spirit spear, Jason had a wide variety of trinkets, gifts, and knick-knacks arrayed about the office, but his office wasn't all that big, nor was it richly furnished. He *did* have a small bedroom and living room attached to it, like a little apartment where he could relax a little without leaving work, but that was behind a door and solidly separated from his work space. *Not what I expected to see in your office.*

And what were you expecting?

Something more...grand.

Then you don't know me well at all, do you, Yila? he asked seriously as he finished up the form he was working on. *You're early. I haven't talked to Trenirk yet.*

He said he has an appointment with you this morning. I was hoping it was done already.

Or that you could just happen to crash in during the middle of it, he sent acerbically.

Well...mmmmmaybe, she sent lightly, taking a seat in one of the two chairs facing his desk, then putting her booted feet up on the edge comfortably. *So, when will you have an answer for me?*

My, we're just moving right in, aren't we? he sent with mild amusement as he read through the next form. *You don't have that betrothal yet, woman.*

I'm working on it, she admitted shamelessly. *Dara really likes Zach. And I think he likes her too. But there is one thing I wanted to put past you before we get into other business.*

What?

Well, given Dara wants to play professional batchi, I keep my ear to the ground when it comes to the various batchi leagues. Well, I happened to find out that Frinia Foralle intends to sell the Velta Paladins.

The IBL team? he sent in surprise.

The very one. Velta has two IBL teams, and the Paladins are a consistent basement dweller, so the price isn't that outrageous. And you

know that if you want to be taken really seriously in the Siann, your house has to own an IBL team. It's a matter of prestige.

I'm not all that worried about prestige, Yila.

Well, I am. I could afford to buy the Paladins on my own, but I thought you might consider going into a partnership.

You already own an IBL team, Yila. Aren't the Tamiri Tigers yours? And doesn't that mean you can't own a second?

Of course, which is why I'm here talking to you. Here's the deal, Jayce. We go in fifty-one forty-nine on the Paladins, and you are the majority partner. I'm allowed to be minority owner in a second team. The Paladins move to Karis, you pick the people to manage the team. We split away game and merchandising profits fifty-fifty, and home game arena and broadcast profits eighty-twenty in your favor. After all, you're doing most of the work.

You want me to move an IBL team here? To Karis? he protested. What part of complete isolation and security do you not understand, Yila?

Jayce, you could fill the stadium just with your own people, and you already have an IBL-quality stadium in that games arena you built in Karsa that hosts the Karis Planetary Batchi league's team, the Karsa Knights. How many does it seat, a hundred fifty thousand? Two hundred thousand? That's easily an IBL-level arena. The Knights and the IBL team can share the arena, quite a few arenas host both IBL and planetary league teams at the same time. Hell, my arena in Tamirin hosts three batchi league teams, and they don't have any problems. The only people that would be coming here would be visiting team. You could even make agreements with the IBC that only local broadcast crews manage the Paladin home games, and IBC gets the exclusive on their feed off-planet. It's win-win, babes. Karis gets an IBL team, your people get to see IBL-quality batchi live, you get the prestige of being the face of IBL ownership and a seat at the owner's council. The only people your Kimdori will have to inspect are the visiting teams' players and support staff, which you can arrange well before the game itself. Oh, and both of us make money, she winked. You said yourself that there's not as much reason to keep Karis so secret now, babes. You can keep your security and still bring an IBL team to Karis and make your Faey house members seriously happy.

You're serious about this, he accused.

I'm completely serious, she replied, taking her feet off his desk and leaning her elbows on it, getting her face closer to his. *I found out that Frinia's asking price will be a hundred fifty-three billion credits. That's a price both of us can easily afford if we split the cost. If we jump on it, we can lock it down before she goes public. If it turns into a bidding war, it could go as high as five hundred billion, but Frinia doesn't want to do that to the team. They have enough problems with their twenty-three-season losing record without having to worry about ownership issues on top of it, then the pressure of having to earn that half trillion back for whoever wins the bidding war. It's odd, but Frinia cares about the team. The only reason she's selling it is she's not been well, and she doesn't want to give it to her daughter, who'd be a terrible owner. Like I said, she cares about her team.*

Well, that explains why you're wearing that outfit, or lack of one, he accused. *Eye candy to butter me up.*

She laughed. I usually wear even less around my home estate outside Tamirin, she winked. *Besides, you're pretty sexy, and a girl doesn't mind showing off a bit for a sexy guy.*

And you didn't wear that outfit for any other reason, eh?

She just smiled naughtily.

You are such a bitch.

I know, she purred in reply. *In fact, I already mentioned the idea to Jyslin and Rann over breakfast,* she added lightly.

You didn't! he sent with an audible gasp. If Jyslin found out they could buy an IBL team, she would hound him *mercilessly* to get him to agree to it. Very few little girls in the Imperium grew up without dreaming of being involved in the IBL in some manner, though usually as a player. If a little girl couldn't be a player, then *owning* an IBL team was the next best thing.

I didn't get where I am by being stupid, silly boy, she sent smugly. *I know how to go over someone's head, and I know who really holds the whip in your house.*

Damn you, woman, I'm gonna murder you!

Whine all you want, cause I'm gonna get my way in the end, she sent with an audible chuckle. *I always do.*

You drop that bomb on me and expect me not to throw you off the planet? he retorted.

As long as I leave with what I want, she sent teasingly, leaning back in her chair, putting her hands behind her head, her feet back on his desk, and grinning at him victoriously. *Besides, I'll be back as soon as Kumi needs to talk to me. We never discuss business any way but face to face. It's prudent business sense for women that do what we do.*

I can't believe you, he accused, but in reality, it just showed how smart and how *dangerous* Yila Trefani really was. He pointed imperiously at his door. *Out, you treacherous bitch!*

She laughed brightly. *Alright. I'll be back after you have your meeting with Trenirk and discuss the metal sales. And you should expect a call from Jyslin anytime now.*

“Out!” he barked, which made her explode in laughter. She got up, blew him a kiss, then sauntered her naked, sexy butt out of his office like she owned it.

Give her twenty years, and she *might* own it.

After fuming a bit over her power play, he *did* sit there and consider the idea from a more objective point of view. He didn't give a care for being on the IBL council or any of that prestige shit, but from a pure morale perspective, having an IBL team on Karis *would* be a good thing. The team could pay for itself just from ticket sales and merchandising, and Miaari could probably manage the security for their own players and for visiting teams, their players and staff. And 153 billion was actually a major bargain for an IBL team. Yila was right that either of them could afford to buy it themselves.

He considered it seriously enough to call Miaari into his office immediately after his meeting with Trenirk, where they arranged to get the full metal quotas that Kumi was asking for to trade without messing up their other schedules, as well as wrangled more factory space for 3D orders. Miaari padded in just as Trenirk left and sat in front of his desk. “What did you need, Jason?” she asked.

He leaned over his desk and offered his hand. She leaned forward and took it, and he felt that sense of *expansion* that came when a Kimdori accessed his nervous system using their uncanny ability. Instead of spending ten minutes explaining, he related everything in less than a second, and far better than he *could* have explained it.

“Hmm, it does have potential,” she said clinically. “The security for such a venture wouldn’t be that much more burdensome given how many outsiders are *already* on planet. I agree that we should permit no travelers to attend the games, make it home planet only, however. I can manage a couple dozen opposing team members in Karsa, but not several dozen thousand drunken fans. That is *too many* to safely manage.”

“And the inevitable attempts by other organizations to try to get spies in through IBL teams?”

“I can manage that,” she answered.

“I can’t believe I’m seriously considering this,” Jason snorted.

“It *is* a good idea, cousin,” she answered. “It is good for the people of Karis to have their *own* IBL team, and the venture will easily pay for itself. And since we can buy it outright, well, I see no reason to involve Yila in the matter,” she said with a wolfish smile.

Jason burst out laughing. “If we backstabbed her like that, she’d declare war on us, Miaari,” he warned. “Besides, us co-owning an IBL team gives me a hold on her. And I get the feeling that I’m gonna need a *bunch* of them.”

“She is a dangerous woman. Affable and charming, but dangerous,” Miaari chuckled. “I’ll put a hand on her and take measure of her true intentions over the idea, then get back to you.”

“Do that, she should be hovering somewhere near the office waiting for my answer on the trade deal. But she thinks Kimdori are creepy, so you might want to change.”

She nodded. “Look away if it bothers you, friend,” she winked.

“I’ve seen it before.”

He only glanced a couple of times as Miaari undertook the rather gruesome process of shapeshifting, but he couldn't deny that it was *damn* effective. Miaari was replaced by a rather cute Faey male staffer that usually worked evenings wearing a standard Ducal office worker uniform. But Yila wouldn't know that he didn't usually work days, and she certainly wouldn't think twice if Miaari touched her under the guise of a Faey male, since males were very tactile. "I'll tell her you're ready to see her now," she said in a mellow voice much different from her usual one.

"Go sic her," Jason chuckled. "Band me your answer while she's on the way."

"Will do, friend Jason," she said as she opened the door of his office.

"By the way, you look creepy as a male," he called.

"Trust me, it's much creepier for me. This feels *all* wrong," she answered as she pointed down, which made him laugh.

A few moments later, while Jason was tracking down Kumi to get her to come to his office, Miaari sent him a message using her memory band, which would allow her to do it without speaking. *[She has no ulterior motives outside of getting another grip on you, trying to insinuate herself more and more into the house,]* Miaari reported, her band using the biogenic network. *[And she made a rather bold pass at me.]*

[Why am I not surprised,] Jason chuckled. *[So, that's why she's after Zach?]*

[Partially. In reality, half the reason she is so intent on Dara marrying Zach is that she has something of a crush on him.]

[Yila has a crush on my five-year-old son?] Jason gasped.

[Not sexually,] Miaari answered. *[His looks remind her of one of her earliest lovers, for whom she still has fond feelings. So she is quite inclined towards him.]*

[Ohhh, okay, that's not so bad,] Jason replied. In the no-holds-barred realm of *Siann* politics, well, that was something that Jason could use if it came down to it.

Yila sauntered back in and took a seat, and Kumi rushed in seconds later, carrying a handpanel. *You wanted to see me, babes?* she asked.

Take a seat, he replied. Miaari came in behind them, back in her normal form; she hadn't had to change mass to shift into the Faey form. "Alright, first order of business. Trenirk has the space to handle the increase in tungsten and titanium production, and he'll have those quotas you asked for on the schedule you asked for," he said aloud as both Kumi and Yila looked at Miaari as she walked in a stately manner around Jason's desk, then sat on the edge of it. Both of them had the sense not to object to her being there. "Now, that second order of business," he said, looking at Miaari. "I talked it over with Miaari, and she assures me she can handle the security."

"Easily," she nodded.

"And despite a certain someone's attempts to go over my head," he said, looking at a completely unrepentant Yila, "I'm not too dumb to see the advantages in it. As long as Miaari assures me she can keep house security, then I'm inclined towards the idea."

"What idea?" Kumi asked as Yila all but fist pumped.

"We're buying the Velta Paladins," Yila stated victoriously.

"Demir's holy dick, you're *serious*?" Kumi gasped. "I didn't know an IBL team was for sale!"

"It's not common knowledge yet," Yila replied. "I keep that vast network of information gatherers for a *reason*, Kumi."

"We and House Trefani are going to enter into a joint venture on it," Jason told Kumi. "But those terms aren't acceptable, Yila. If our house is the controlling interest, we're gonna *control* it. We'll let you in for a thirty percent stake."

"Bull *shit*!" she barked, jumping to her feet and glaring down at him. "You wouldn't even *know* about this if not for *me*!"

"If I'm taking all the risk, I'm getting the lion's share of the rewards," Jason said, unmoved.

What ensued was nearly four hours of intense haggling. Kumi and Miaari found themselves spectators as the two most headstrong house

leaders in the *Siann* butted heads like two rams fighting over a flock of ewes. Yila was highly cultured and civilized, but when it came to money, the dark mafia overlord part of her personality boiled out of her like cancerous ooze. Every time Jason boxed her into a corner and forced her into a concession, she made veiled threats about costing Jason his profits in throwing her control of so many parts of Imperium commerce at him, threatening to hamstring him. Jason countered that by causing a Friendly Puppy to float off its shelf and into his hands, and he set it on the desk as a constant visual reminder that Jason Karinne was *not afraid* of Yila Trefani. Kumi actually learned a few things about bargaining watching two masters of the craft go at it in a veritable fight to the death over ownership percentages and profit sharing.

In the end, neither of them was entirely happy, and Jason was actually running late for his Confederate Council meeting. They had agreed to a 58/42 split in ownership in favor of Karinne, with away games and away game broadcasting split 52/48 in favor of Trefani, merchandising split evenly between the houses, and home game profits split 77/23 in favor of Karinne. Yila had minority voice when it came to team operations, able to make suggestions, but Jason had control over all team decisions...which he intended to delegate out to experts anyway. Jason knew almost nothing about professional batchi, but he could find people who *did*. In his opinion, the meddling of house rulers in batchi operations was why some teams did so poorly. Jason was no Jerry Jones.

The one thing Yila *didn't* like in the contract, but she couldn't get Jason to back down from, was a buyout clause. After 20 years, House Karinne could buy out House Trefani's interest in the team for C100 billion plus a percentage based on one year of average profits from broadcast and merchandising. Further, there was a penalty clause in the contract that would allow Jason to buy out Yila's interest in the club if House Trefani used its position or its own IBL team to hamper, hinder, or otherwise devalue the Paladins in any manner. They were allowed to bid for the same players competitively, but if Yila used her knowledge of the Paladin organization as an advantage for her *own* team, then she was busted and had to sell her interest in the Paladins to Jason for what she paid for the minor interest, as well as *every credit of profit the team had earned them*. After a dozen years or so, that would be such a staggering amount that Yila would

wet herself at even *thinking* of trying something like that, cheating for her Tamiri Tigers team at the expense of the Paladins.

“Kumi, you build the buyout offer. Expect to have to go up to as far as three hundred billion credits.”

“I have that in the bank,” Kumi snorted. “Tell Frinia we can do a credit transfer on the spot.”

Yila gave Kumi a slightly surprised look.

“I’ll talk to the legal team about the buyout and make contact with Frinia Foralle after my council meeting, which I’m *late* for I might add,” he said, giving Yila an accusing look.

“Well, this was more important anyway,” she said airily. “After all, this involves *profit*.”

Jason had to sigh, which made Kumi laugh and Miaari smile. “So both of you, out,” he ordered. “We’ll talk about this more later.”

Kumi and Yila hurried out, heads together and sending privately, and Jason gave Miaari an annoyed look that made her laugh richly. “Children will be children, Jason.”

“I see why you like Kumi so much. After ten thousand years, you need someone silly around to make you feel young.”

Miaari swatted him behind the head, which made him laugh. “Let me get this meeting over,” he said. “You can do me a favor and start building a security plan for dealing with us delving into the realm of sports.”

“I’ll have the initial outline on your desk in three hours,” she replied, standing up.

“Chirk,” he said, into the intercom, “I need to talk to Mayor Dela of Karsa. Have her come here, we need to talk face to face.”

“Yes, Revered Hive-leader. At what time shall I appoint her?”

“As soon as she can get here,” he replied. The city of Karsa owned the arena, and by extension Jason himself as the Grand Duke, which put control of it in Dela’s realm. Jason didn’t have an interior department, he instead split up the planet and put it under control of its regional governors and

mayors, with oversight from the Land Use Division, which was an office that answered directly to Jason rather than a department secretary. In effect, Jason *was* his Secretary of Interior. Public use buildings were administered by the elected executive in control where that building was. Dela was the elected mayor of Karsa, so that meant that her office had operational control over the arena. “If I’m still in conference, just make her wait ‘til I’m ready.”

“*Yes, Revered Hive-leader.*”

“See you for dinner?” Miaari asked.

“Only if you’re coming over.”

“I am now,” she smiled. “Until later, cousin.”

Jason secured the office and got the council on holograms in front of him, and he popped on just in time to listen to Dahnai and Assaba squabble over something...probably something of little or no importance. He cut them off by speaking over them. “Sorry I’m late, I just got in some information,” he lied artfully, bringing up a holo of the aftermath of the attack on PR-106. “We executed our first major attack in the PR sector, and it was a success. We destroyed the main body and one arc section of the quantum phase device the Consortium is building and did collateral damage to twenty-nine Consortium ships and a control station.”

“How much damage is that in relative terms?” Sk’Vrae asked.

“It’s set them back nearly two months,” he replied. “We’re preparing to make two more attacks, at PR-75 and PR-112, with automated weaponry, but the Karinne fleet stationed in the PR sector is going to begin its first probing action of the nebula holding the Consortium’s main command center,” he explained. “It will be *very* hard to get in there to get at that station, but we’re going to keep them honest by making them devote defensive resources at the nebula against our ships. Every ship we can pin down is a ship we don’t have to worry about popping up somewhere else, especially since their ships can’t *jump* while they’re in that nebula. The nebula’s mass and gravity field make it impossible. Consortium hyperspace engines are much less tolerant of gravity fields than standard engines,” he explained. “That’s why they drop out of hyperspace so far from planets when they attack. It’s the closest they can get. What we’re trying to do is effectively blockade them inside their fortress, lay siege to it to use a term,

which I think we can do. As soon as we start poking around their nebula, they'll bring in more ships to reinforce it."

"Well, that's some progress, at least," Dahnai said. "It buys us more time to come up with some way to dig them out of Trieste without them killing off the civilians."

"We're working on that," Jason said. "We can discuss it in detail when you come to Karis for the conference."

"I expect quite a few briefings on what the Karinnes are up to that you won't discuss over crypto, your Grace," Vizzie said calmly, but her eyes were hard. Vizzie was smarter than she looked.

"It will take at least two full days," Jason said dryly, which made the Leader of the Zyagya grin. He literally *never* spoke at these conferences and didn't even attend half of them. He usually had an ambassador listening, who didn't speak either.

"Then this conference is overdue. And alert your Secretary of State and Cybi that I have solved a part of your hotel space problem," Assaba declared. "I will be arriving in my personal yacht, which be will used as my residence and to house my staff while attending the conference. It will only need water at least sixty-two Skaa *dragtha* deep. It is capable of water landings."

"Our harbor in Karsa is deep enough, your Imperial Majesty. I'll alert Secretary Yuri of your intentions."

"Then you can take the suite intended for me and assign it to another of our worthy associates."

Jason daydreamed his way through the rest of the conference, which only lasted about ten minutes, but Dahnai contacted him almost immediately. Her face appeared on a hologram just on the far side of his desk. "What is it, hon?" Jason asked as he finished jotting down a few notes.

"We're gonna talk about PR-371," she stated.

"What about it?"

“I think you may have forgotten, baby, but you can’t just *claim* that planet,” she told him. “You are a house of the Imperium, Jason, no matter how independent you are. You jumped to that planet while under Imperial authority under the rules of war, that means it becomes Imperium property.”

“I can make the most basic claim on it, Dahnai. I can *get there*. No other house can,” he replied. “Now, if you want to arrange shared food profits, that’s fine with me. The entire reason I’m claiming the planet is because it’s arable, and the Imperium needs more food-producing planets. But I’m not just *giving it* to you.”

“I think you need to remember that I’m your *Empress*, Jason,” she said with a dark look.

“And what will *you* do with it, Dahnai? Auction it off to the highest bidder, who’s going to just turn around and use it as a way to gain more power, like what was done to *my* planet? Not just no, but *hell no*. I’m willing to enter into a contract that states that every house in the *Siann* receives an equal share of all food produced at cost plus one percent to cover maintenance expenses and run the planet as a non-profit, but I’m not going to disrupt the balance of power in the *Siann*, which happens to keep that sexy ass of yours *in* your chair.”

“I don’t want it for the *Siann*. *I* want it. House Merrane wants it,” she retorted. “Why do you think I made you give me passage rights through Exile, Jason? House Merrane is in a weakened position, and we *need* some additional house assets and the profits they bring, or what happened with Terra and Trillane’s gonna happen *again* the instant one of the Highborns think House Karinne won’t interfere. Sure, *I’m* safe enough on my chair, but how safe will *Sirri* be?” she asked pointedly. “The fact that you’re my *amu* scares religion into all the Highborns, but I have to look at the long-term health of the house, and the Imperium. You and me won’t be on these chairs forever, Jason. If I want Merrane to hold the throne after we’re gone, and keep stability in the Imperium, I have to start acting *now*.”

He’d thought the same thing himself a few times, but mainly from his point of view, protecting the house against the Imperium when he was gone and some granddaughter of Dahnai’s was on the throne. It seemed that Dahnai was thinking the same way, and in that respect, she *did* have a point. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “You can’t have PR-371,” he stated

bluntly. “I have plans for it. But,” he said, splitting the screen and causing a tan planet to appear. “This is QMC-202-3, planet three in a seven-planet system. It was charted by Karinne scouts just before the Third Civil War. It’s 214 light years from Karis. I’ve had hyperspace probes and some research ships conduct exploration of the system since we found it. It’s almost exactly like Exile in that it’s a life-sustaining planet in a region that seems completely devoid of spacefaring races. Gravity, pressure, temperature, and atmospheric gases are all within Faey tolerance. This planet has a desert climate with heavy deposits of several ores that make up Neutronium, and can be terraformed to become arable, it just lacks water. *But,*” he stressed. “This system also has an arable terrestrial planet, QMC-202-2, which has a pre-industrial society on it that have just started employing steam engine technology. I wasn’t going to show you this because I didn’t want a repeat of what happened on Terra, but you do have a point. So, here’s the deal, Dahnai. We’ll help Merrane get to QMC-202 and allow House Merrane to claim the other six planets, all their moons, and the asteroids and comets. You can have every other asset in the system, but you *do not make contact* with planet two. You leave them alone. They are *off limits.*”

“Why? We’ve incorporated primitive cultures into the Imperium before. Aren’t you trying to bring the *Gruug* into Karinne?”

“No, I’m not,” he said intensely. “I’m *sharing* the planet Exile with the *Gruug*. They’re not part of the house, and there’s no contact between us and them. And the simple fact of the matter is, Dahnai, I can’t trust you to be as generous with this indigenous race. I respect the *Gruug*’s right to live on Exile as an independent entity, but I *know* you won’t do the same for this race, so I’m going to remove that temptation from you. That’s my deal. You can take it, or you can leave it.”

“The point of finding planets is to add their assets to both the house and the Imperium, Jason,” she said patiently. “The Goraga and the Menoda and the Parri had no problems coming into the Imperium, and the Kizzik and Makati weren’t far behind us technologically when they were added.”

“You *conquered* the Kizzik and the Makati. The other races didn’t put up a fight. It’s just been so long since then that the modern Kizzik and Makati don’t mind all that much. They’re *Imperial* now.”

“So? Incorporated is incorporated, Jason. The modern Imperium wouldn’t be what it is without the Kizzik and the Makati. We need them as much as they need us.”

“You’re missing the point, Dahnai. The point is, this race should have a *choice*, not you rolling in there with a couple of divisions of Imperial Marines. I saw my *own* race get subjugated by the Faey. I’m not going to be a party to seeing that done to *another* race.”

“Then how about a compromise,” she said, leaning her chin on her hand. “We make contact with this race and *give* them that choice. We’ll *invite* them into the Imperium. If they say yes, then they’re the eighth race of the Imperium and subjects of House Merrane. If they don’t, we offer to keep communications lines open, and I won’t claim that planet until they *do* join us willingly. Which I think would just be a matter of time,” she said confidently. “Why would they want to hoe their fields with hand tools when we can make them a hundred times more efficient, bring them technology to make their lives easier, and open the entire galaxy to them?”

“It’s not quite that easy, Dahnai. Like most pre-starfaring races, they’re not unified. They exist in a series of national entities, much like Terra, and they’re not very cooperative with one another. That means that not *all* of them are going to be in agreement. So, until such time that the planet is unified under a single government, they are *hands off*,” he said sternly. “You can have every other planet in the system, their moons, every asteroid, but you *do not touch* planet two or its moons. In return, we’ll interdict the system and provide towing and transportation in and out until you can arrange a Stargate.”

She looked at him, tousling her beautiful bronze hair. “Fair enough,” she finally said.

“I’ll have your word on this, Dahnai,” he said seriously.

“Alright, you have my word, Jason. We can set up some short-term hydroponics until our water replicators get enough water into the atmosphere to start the organic infusion terraforming process.” Faey water replicators were terraforming equipment that didn’t actually replicate water, they instead replicated hydrogen and oxygen and combined it chemically into water, then released it as a vapor. It was a basic piece of heavy

equipment they used in terraforming operations, transforming desert planets into Earth-like planets by creating water and infusing organic particulates into the desert floor. This process turned a barren desert planet that was potentially life-sustaining into the rarest of all planets, a blue and green jewel that was an oasis of life in a barren universe. A standard water replicator was about the size of the Superdome in New Orleans, and House Merrane would deploy about 100 of them in key locations around the planet based on its weather patterns to spread water vapor as quickly as possible. “Is there any life on that planet?”

“Some, desert flora and fauna,” he replied. “No sentient life.”

“Anything dangerous?”

“Nothing outrageously dangerous but do take perimeter fences and shields if you set up any equipment in the equatorial belt. That’s where the biggest animals are, and like any desert environment, they’re fairly nasty.”

“Send me the sensor logs and field reports on the system so we know what we’re getting into,” she said. “But I *do* want to make at least diplomatic contact with planet two,” she stated. “If they’re up to steam engines, no doubt they have telescopes that will notice activity. *Diplomatic*,” she said before he could reply, holding up a hand. “We just call them and say who we are, that the universe is far bigger than they knew it was, and by the way, we’re going to move onto planet three and do some farming and mining since it’s uninhabited.”

Jason pondered that. “Alright, I’ll give you that. We make *peaceful* contact. And I’ll even go so far as to allow you to trade period-quality goods for food with them. No technology. Just goods.”

“That was more than I was asking for, but I’ll take it,” she nodded. “We can get samples of their indigenous food plants and see if they’re worth producing on our own farm planets.”

He looked to the side, and tapped out a contact number on his console, calling New Karsa on Exile. Meya’s face appeared on the side, and Myra crowded in beside her. “Hey baby, what’s up?”

“Pack up the *Scimitar*, girls, you’re being sent out. QMC-202,” he told them.

“Alright! We’ve got everything all running smooth here, Jayce, it’s about time we got something new to do,” Myra grinned.

“You won’t be alone. I’ve given Empress Dahnai authorization to claim every planet in the system *except* for planet two, and she’ll be organizing a deployment to colonize planet three. Go ahead and jump out now on the scout ship and do the initial landing and perimeter setup over the largest mineral deposits, and miners and terraformers from House Merrane will get there as soon as the Empress can arrange it.”

“You’re being awful formal, Jayce. I take it her Majesty is listening?” Meya asked lightly.

“Yes,” Dahnai called over the comm, which made both of them laugh.

“Yeah, we know who owns you, Jayce,” Myra winked.

“Unless you want to make another adventure special, get your asses moving, you two,” he threatened, which made them grin. “Full escort, girls.”

“We have all the ships here and ready, we were just waiting for you to let us out,” Meya assured him. “Can we go on with the full scout deployment, or stay at QMC-202?”

“Stay at QMC-202 at least until Merrane has everything under control, then go ahead and check out QMD-239. But you have six days *only*,” he stressed. “I want you back at New Karsa in six days no matter what. I’m going to need you two for something else.”

“You got it, Jason,” Meya nodded, then they winked off.

“There, everything’s set up, love,” Jason told her. “Get your people on the move, and we’ll be waiting for you at Exile.”

“I’ll get a schedule to Myri as soon as I can,” she nodded. “So, you don’t have *every* ship over on the far side of the galaxy,” she winked.

“I have three ships outfitted for exploration and escorting the *Scimitar*, a cruiser and two destroyers, and we re-refitted the *Scimitar* back to its original mission as a science vessel. After all, that’s what it was built for. That’s what’s sitting out at Exile right now,” he answered. “The escort

cruiser also carries a specially designed interdictor around with it, so they're safe no matter where they go."

"Clever."

"I don't leave my people's asses hanging out in the wind, love," Jason replied simply.

"Alright, let me get on this, get my people moving," Dahnai said, then she blew him a kiss. "I can't wait to see you, Jason. Make sure Jyslin understands that she's kicked out of the bedroom when I get there," she winked.

"You are just so predictable."

"I don't get to wrap my legs around you half as often as I want to, baby," she said huskily, giving him a smile.

"Dahnai, sleeping with me isn't going to make me change my mind about QMC-202," he said with amusement, putting his chin in his hand and regarding her.

"Never underestimate the power of the Imperial pussy, baby," she purred, then her image vanished in mid-wink.

Jason just had to chuckle. Dahnai was never going to change.

Dela was waiting in his office for him, so he knocked that bit of business out. She almost fell out of her chair in excitement when he told her about their plans, the elderly Faey woman showing more animation than he'd ever seen out of her...which justified the idea in his mind almost immediately. If Dela was *that* happy about them trying to get an IBL team, then most of the Faey on planet would be as well. And Jason would go to extremes for his people. Kumi ran in as they were discussing the arena sharing time between the IBL and the KPL teams, carrying a handpanel and waving it around. "I got it!" she cried. "Yila forwarded a credit line for her portion! I can pay *cash* for it, babes! You talk to her yet?"

"Not yet, so go back to your office and calm down," he told her, which made Dela laugh. "Such a spazz," Jason sighed as Kumi ran out of the office.

I heard that! Kumi warned.

I meant you to, he shot back, which made Dela burst out laughing.

It took nearly three hours to get to the point where he was ready to talk to Frinia, because he spent most of that time with the legal team. The sale of an IBL team was *serious fucking business*, so he needed a great deal of expert advice and opinion on possible conditions of the sale. Frinia could demand all kinds of things in return for selling the team, and his team briefed him on quite a few different scenarios. So, when he had Chirk track down the contact number for Grand Duchess Frinia Foralle, Jason felt he was entirely ready for the conversation.

Frinia was a very curious Grand Duchess. She was the head of one of the smallest minor houses in the *Siann* and almost never came to court, yet she owned an IBL team, which was a status symbol among the houses. House Foralle was quiet and went about its business and didn't bother anyone, yet Frinia was very good friends with Emae Shovalle, one of the most powerful Grand Duchesses in the *Siann*. Frinia was a very hard woman to know, and in all the time he'd been part of the *Siann*, he'd met her all of three times. The only reason Frinia had an IBL team was that she managed to win a lottery when the IBL expanded to 64 teams back in 4336, and probably sold her soul to the Faey religion's devils, the *gara uka*, the Fallen Ones, to pull off that miracle.

But she was friendly enough. It took him all of ten minutes to get her face on a hologram in front of him, and most of that time was giving her time to get out of the bathtub to come talk to him. She was an elderly woman even as the Faey reckoned things, but like most Faey, her age didn't touch her face very much. She was very thin, almost gaunt, with pronounced cheekbones and a sharp chin, and her white hair had liberal streaks of blue through it, and had turned coarse over the years, which was another indication of her advanced age. "Well, Grand Duke Karinne, I'm quite curious why you would be calling," she said, tugging on her bathrobe a little.

"Just a little business, Frinia," he replied calmly, leaning on his elbow. "As you know, I have something of a passing friendship with Yila Trefani."

"That young pirate, she's quite a force," Frinia chuckled.

“Well, she heard it through her channels that you’re expressing interest in selling the Paladins,” he continued. “Don’t ask me *how* she knows, I didn’t ask her. But that bit of information has a great deal of importance to me,” he said evenly, which was a polite way for a man to say *I want something* from a woman. He always had to mind his Faey manners as a man when dealing with the Grand Duchesses that didn’t know him very well. Men were very indirect when dealing with women. They never directly said *no*, *I want*, or *you’re wrong* to a woman. A man had to be discreet, using formulaic expressions that conveyed those intentions both politely and indirectly.

“Why am I not surprised,” the old woman cackled.

“Why are you considering selling, Frinia? That’s not something that a house usually does.”

“It’s part being a petty bitch and part doing what’s best for the Paladins,” she replied honestly. “My daughter is already measuring the curtains in my throne room at our home estate,” she noted dryly. “She can smell the crown, Jason, and it’s making her both bold and embarrassing. And she’d be a *terrible* team owner,” she added. “She doesn’t have the temperament or the experience to handle it. Running our house isn’t that hard. We only have one planet in the Velta system, one planet in the Imbria system, and a mining colony on a moon over in the Tamiri system.”

“Which is how Yila got wind of it,” Jason reasoned.

“Probably,” she smiled. “Running this house is *easier* than owning an IBL team. She’ll be an absolute disaster at it, and my poor Paladins have enough problems. I can’t compete with the Highborns and all their money over prime talent free agents, and my poor GM and coaches do the best they can with what talent I can afford. The simple fact of the matter is, Jason, I want to see my team be what it used to be before they removed the luxury tax and salary caps. I want to see them *win*, and they won’t do that if my daughter’s running the team. So yes, I’m considering selling the team. I take it you’re interested?”

“I can pay you a hundred and fifty billion, *in cash, right now*,” he declared.

“Well, it’s not that easy, Jason,” she smiled. “Just proving you can *afford* my Paladins doesn’t mean you can *support* my Paladins. Where are they going to play? Do you have suitable facilities? An office complex for the front office? Who’s going to *manage* the franchise?”

“Well, why don’t you come to Karis and take a look for yourself, Grand Duchess Foralle,” he offered. “I can *show* you.”

“Then you make the arrangements, and I’ll be there as soon as I get dressed,” she declared, tugging on the lapel of her Terran terrycloth bathrobe, one of the many exports from Terra to the Imperium.

“Alright. You’ll be cleared all the way through to Karis. Just hail the Karinne ships orbiting Draconis, and they’ll escort your ship here.”

“Then I’ll be there within two hours,” she said immediately.

After that, he got the last bit of business out of the way, tracking down Jyslin’s parents before the scheduled call he’d put in his itinerary, knocking it out early while he had time and before he got involved with Frinia. He got her father while he was at work, getting a holo of him sitting at a control console with a factory assembly line behind him, where robots were assembling goods. “This is Rillen Shaddale—Jason!” he said with a smile. “It’s good to see you, son! What brings you by?”

“Trying to talk you into coming to Karis again, Rillen,” he replied with a smile. “Just not permanently.”

“Jyslin’s birthday?” he asked, and Jason nodded with a smile. “Done! You’ll, ah, have to help out a little, though,” he coughed. “I don’t think I can arrange time off that quickly.”

“I can pull a few strings,” he promised. “I know the Grand Duchess Ynara Duralle fairly well. She’ll do me a favor.”

“Then we’ll be there.”

“I’m trying for you and Vari as well as Ivin and his family,” he said. “Think I’ll have problems with that?”

“With Vari, none, she has plenty of vacation time saved up,” he replied. “I’m not so sure about Ivin and Yerae. Ivin has midterms coming up, Yerae

still has three months in her conscription, and you know how unforgiving they are in the Academy.”

“Rillen, I *own* the Academy,” he pointed out. “If I say a student gets excused time off, he gets excused time off.”

Rillen laughed. “Well, he’s terrified of losing his scholarship,” he grinned.

“Like that’s gonna happen, *I* gave him that scholarship,” Jason snorted. “Who has Yerae’s conscription? House Denalle?”

He nodded. “We were subject to their house when Yerae started her conscription.”

“I’ll get her some leave, I’ll twist Aniliya’s arm,” Jason mused, making a note. “I should just buy her conscription and move her here,” Jason mused. “You know I hate you guys not being on Karis.”

“I signed a *contract*, Jason. And I’m *making* something here,” he replied. “I’m rather proud of my factory. This place was a disaster when I took it over, and now it’s both productive and efficient. And Grand Duchess Duralle might skin you if you poach me,” he added self-importantly, which made Jason laugh. “When my contract is over, we’ll talk about it. Vari won’t mind one way or the other, as long as she can find a job as a teacher.”

“On this planet, that’s *no* problem,” Jason assured him. “But you’d save both of us a lot of gray hair and worry lines, not to mention save me about a hundred thousand credits a year,” he said dryly.

“What for?”

“You think I don’t have people near you protecting you, Rillen?” Jason asked bluntly. “You are my *stepfather*, and if you didn’t notice, I’m in a *slightly* sensitive political position. I have Kimdori in place around both your family and Ivin’s family. They keep you safe, and it keeps my mind at ease.”

“I had no idea,” he murmured.

“You’re an important person now, Rillen, if only because of who your daughter married,” he said dryly. “I’ve had protection in place around you for five years. If you’ve never noticed, they’re doing their job,” he

chuckled. “But enough of stuff you can do nothing about,” he grinned. “I’ll call you back in five or six standard hours, I sorta have a lot going on. I’ll make some calls and get it organized. And *don’t* tell Jyslin, this is supposed to be a surprise.”

“I won’t,” he smiled. “I’ll still be at work in six standard hours, Jason. It’s barely an hour into the workday here.”

“It’s a little past lunch here,” he replied. Jerama had a 27.65 standard hour day, not too far off from the Imperium’s 30 hour day, and while the planet had its own day cycle, the Faey that lived on it still worked a 10 hour day, and worked an Imperium-allowed maximum of 70 hours in a takir, or 7 out of 10 days, 70 hours out of 300 hours in the “standard week.” That was Imperial labor law, and every employer had to observe those rules and fit them into their planet, moon, or station’s local daily time rotation as best they could. That was a standard through the Imperium, if the planet or moon had a 6-hour day or a 147-hour day, which one planet *did* have. Its day was about 7 months of its year.

“Alright, I’ll be waiting on your call, Jason.”

“I’ll make sure Chirk reminds me to call before you leave, even if I don’t have everything set up.”

Jason disconnected the call, then stood up to go to 3D and see how things were going over there. He still had quite a bit to do, but thankfully he had all day to get it done.

Daira, 11 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 28 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 11 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Command Ship Aegis, Task Force Seven flagship, orbiting planet PR-371-2

She didn’t like this.

Admiral Palla Karinne moved through her ready room from her personal quarters to the bridge, passing by her collection hanging on the walls and sitting on shelves within without paying much mind to it. Her pale pink eyes flinched slightly when she came out onto the bridge deck, which came to attention when the chime on her door called to signal her arrival on the bridge. “Resume your posts,” she called as she stalked right over to the comm, where three officers with microphones attached to their interfaces for more clear transmissions sat. “Are you sure it was decoded properly?” she asked, motioning at the handpanel.

“Yes, Captain,” her primary comm officer, Lieutenant Yari, answered.

She sighed. “Get me Station Liberty. Baroness Maggie MacCleod.”

Station Liberty was the station they’d towed through hyperspace for three days to get here. It was part control center and part staging area, filled to the bulkheads with automated weaponry, and while it was the headquarters of all operations at PR-371, in reality the whole thing existed for two people. Maggie MacCleod and Jake Wagner, two of the original members of the Legion, and representatives from the shadowy government entity known only as 3D. Most had no idea what it was or what it did, but Palla was high enough in the chain to know the truth of it, and that made those two humans probably the most important things at PR-371. Cunning and resourceful, the two Legion members were the ones who had *real* control of this theater. That was why the orders that came across the galaxy confused her a little bit and caused her to get some corroboration. Maggie MacCleod’s face appeared on the main viewscreen as Palla took a seat in her chair. She was cute even by Faey standards, short and petite, but with stormy blue eyes and flaming red hair. “What’s up, Captain?” she asked in her unusual twangy accent, product of some place called *Texas* if she remembered right.

“We’ve received orders to jump to the nebula holding our enemy’s main command center and gather information, my Lady,” she replied. “Given I believe those orders entail something you’ll do later, do you have any specific requests on what we look for?”

“Nothing really. We have some long-range scans, but nothing solid. If you can get a sensor dropship into the nebula and get us some internal readings, it might help.”

“That will be very dangerous.”

“I know, so I’ll leave the military stuff to the military, Captain. Do what you think best. No matter what you get, it’s gonna help.”

“Understood, Baroness.”

“Good luck,” she nodded, then her image faded.

Palla frowned and crossed her legs demurely, which wasn’t that hard in Crusader armor due to its fit and pondered the situation. She rapped on the arm of her command chair a moment, then glanced to her left. “Comm, get me Captain Marayi Karinne aboard the *Dreamer*.”

“At once, sir.”

“Marayi’s handsome face appeared on the main screen, sitting at her desk in her ready room. “Admiral, what can I do for you?”

“We have orders to initiate a probing action against the nebula holding the enemy command station,” she revealed. “To gather intelligence and survey its defenses and capabilities. I want to send a sensor dropship into the nebula, and it’s going to need fighter escort. Given the dangerous nature of that kind of a mission, I need the *best* fighter squadron in the KMS, Marayi.”

“The 76th is on standby and awaiting orders, Captain,” Marayi said proudly. Nobody needed to say *who* the best fighter squadron in the KMS was. Everyone already knew.

“I want you to carry out the initial probing action, Marayi,” Palla ordered. “I’m assigning Squadron B to your command for this operation. Jump in, scan as best you can, and try to ascertain their defenses while the sensor dropship enters the nebula and tries to get more refined scans of its interior and whatever surprises it holds. Find a sensor dropship and the best pilot you can stick in its chair and prepare the ships under your flag to jump to the nebula, Captain.”

“Understood, Captain,” Marayi said with a nod. “When do we begin?”

“As soon as you’re ready. Orders will be sent down as soon as we get off the comm.”

“Then we’ll be jumping out in thirty minutes,” she replied, standing up and picking up her helmet.

“Trelle be with you, Captain. Be careful.”

“Always am, sir,” she replied, then Palla cut the connection.

“*Aegis* out.” Palla leaned back in her chair, rapping her fingers on the arm, then she hit the intercom button on her chair, one of her hardline connections. “Commander Grevkik.”

“Aye, sir?” her Makati engineering officer said.

“Our enemies are hiding their base inside a nebula. What do you think you can do about that?”

The Makati chuckled. “Oh, there are ways to get around those problems, and a couple that will turn the nebula against the Consortium,” he replied.

“I want you to sit down with your engineering team and flesh out all those ideas in a report, which you’ll place on my desk as soon as possible.”

“Give us two hours, sir. Me and Grzz’kik have been discussing this a little, since we figured we’d be going in there eventually. We already have a few ideas.”

“I’ll be waiting to hear them.”

“Aye, sir. Two hours.”

“Very good, Commander. Bridge out.” Palla stood back up. “Send down the orders from Karis command to Squadron B and give them permission to deploy for the mission. I’ll be in my ready room. Keep me updated as to Squadron B’s mission status, Commander. You have the conn, Ex-O,” she said as she headed back for her ready room.

“Aye sir,” her first officer nodded.

Commander Justin Taggart of the 76th Tactical Fighter Squadron, nicknamed the Ghost Squadron by most in the KMS, called the meeting of his 39 pilots and 40 wizzos to order. Most of his girls had been with him long enough not to take the fact that he was a Terran and a man lightly, but

his two newest recruits looked a bit irked taking orders from him. They'd only been with the squadron for about three weeks, coming on board just before they deployed to the PR sector. A couple of the girls were wearing nightclothes, since they'd been called to the briefing room out of the blue, but they were awake and alert. Everyone knew *something* was going on, because the entire ship was ordered to general quarters and the twenty-minute warning for jump had been issued.

"What's going on, boss?" his wizzo Joae asked.

"Not sure yet, Captain Marayi ordered us to assemble. She said she'd brief us personally."

"Another drill," Lieutenant Iyoi growled. She was the greenest member of the team, just out of flight school. She had a lot of talent, but like most young pilots, she had something of a discipline problem. She was also a bit scornful of being assigned under a male commander.

The briefing room door opened, and the squadron came to attention. "At ease," Captain Marayi Karinne said as she rushed in, clearly in a hurry. "We'll make this quick, ladies, Commander," she said as she touched her interface, and a holo appeared at the front of the room showing a nebula. "We have orders to probe the defenses of the nebula holding the Consortium's egg-laying queens and command center. Squadron B will be jumping out in twenty minutes to execute this probing action. What I need from you, Justin, is ten pilots in a Wolf and your absolute best pilot that can handle a heavy SSI dropship. We're sending that SSI dropship into the nebula to conduct internal scans, and it's going to need fighter escort."

Taggart didn't even have to think. "Wing one, you're on escort duty," he ordered. "Wing two in your Wolves and on standby in case a scramble is issued. Wing three on passive standby and four on regular duty rotation."

"Who's flying the dropship, Commander?"

"I am," he replied bluntly. "What's the orders?"

"Once you launch, you have complete discretion, Commander. We'll buy you as much time as we can. Get in there, get as much data as you can, then get the hell out. The fleet will drop out of hyperspace here and come to the edge of the nebula," she said, using her interface to put an icon on the holo. "If we're forced to retreat, we'll follow this vector so you can

rendezvous with the fleet. Don't be late, Commander. It's a long flight back to PR-371 from here."

"That's all we need to know, Captain. Now if you'll excuse us, we need to get in place before the jump."

"Further information will be sent to your ship," she said with a nod, then she put on her helmet deliberately. "Good luck, Justin."

"Who's flying your position if you're in the dropship, Commander?" Iyoi asked.

He looked at her. "Berya, you take my place as the tenth fighter in the wing. Lassa, you have command of Wing Three if you're called up."

"Aye-aye, boss," both said.

Iyoi came out beside him as they left the briefing room and entered the hangar. *Come on, Commander, give me a chance!* she sent privately. *I can do this! I grew up flying a skimmer through the Wastelands, I know how to handle nebula turbulence!*

You haven't even flown your first combat sortie, Lieutenant.

No, Commander, not a fighter. I want to second chair the dropship. I have the rating for heavy dropships, and I have real experience flying nebulas. I can help.

He glanced at her. *You have three minutes to armor up.*

Yes! she sent in glee, literally jumping up and pumping her fist in the air. She then ran for the locker room, her nightshirt riding up to show her bare blue butt.

On board the sensor dropship, the four sensor officers back in the control compartment were bringing the ship online as Taggart locked himself in his chair and assumed command of the ship via interface. The cockpit lit up as the ship started startup diagnostics. Taggart explained what they were about to do as he saw his element of the squadron float up into their fighters. *Swap your drones,* Taggart sent. *I don't want anything with a pulse cannon getting lost in that nebula and picked up by the bugs. Torsion drones only.*

Got it, boss, Berya sent. You heard the boss, ladies. Why don't I see drones swapping?

The drones did just that, unlocking from the wings and floating over to the munitions rack on their own engines as the Torsion-equipped drones replaced them, all done by computer control. Deck officers were conducting the final inspections of the Wolf fighters and the dropship as the three minute warning blared over the intercom. *Clear the deck, get in your jump restraints! We'll have time when we arrive to finish the inspections!* Taggart boomed across the hangar. Iyoi all but jumped into the second chair and waved her hand in front of the blackglass, which activated her side of the cockpit, then she jacked her interface into the ship using a fiber cable. Like all military ships in the KMS, it had no manual controls on either side of the cockpit. Everything was interface controlled, and the hard fiber cable was an emergency backup in case the interface remote system got fried in combat. It would fly by remote by default, then switch to the hardline connection if there was a problem with the primary system.

All systems online, Commander, Iyoi reported.

Sensor systems online and ready, Commander, the sensor officer reported.

Drone swaps finished, boss, we're ready to rock, Berya called.

Taggart called up all the information they had on the nebula as the jump countdown continued. It was pretty big, and the command center was square in the middle. Like all nebulas, the density of the gases varied within the nebula, and there were also currents of gas flow formed by its creation and fueled by the nebula's gravity field, as well as a tiny proto-star that illuminated the entire thing, which was located at the edge of the nebula's side that faced the galactic core, or *inward* in naval ship navigator lingo. If the fleet dropped out of hyperspace in a direct line to the nebula, they'd arrive on the "southeast" side of the nebula if inward was east, far enough away from the protostar not to have to worry about it, but close enough for its light to illuminate the nebula's gas and make flying through it like driving through pea soup fog in twilight. Taggart plotted a course that would take them on a 26 minute course in and back out in a roughly elliptical route, getting them close enough to get some long-range scans of the command station in the center and relying on the nebula to hide them.

Inside a nebula shields wouldn't work, MPAC weaponry had reduced range, and the gases created magnetic, ion, electrical, and gravitational fluxes that screwed with sensors. That was why Marayi was sending in a sensor dropship, so they could get more reliable readings deeper inside the nebula.

Iyoi, however, disagreed. *That's not going to work, Commander,* she sent quickly, pointing. *This is a primary wake current; it's going to make it impossible to follow your course. Do it like this,* she said, tracing a different path. *Let the wake current pull us in, get out of it here and swing around for the lateral pass, then hit this branch current here and let it carry us to this point. Then we punch out and head back to the Dreamer.*

And you're sure it'll work?

I'm positive, Commander. I was flying worse currents than this when I was fifteen. This nebula is nothing compared to the Wastelands. That nebula isn't for the meek.

Alright, Lieutenant. We'll play it your way. Send that flight path out to the fighters and the bridge before we jump, so it's there when we come out.

Aye, ma'am, she sent and used her interface to lock in the plan and then transmit it to the fighters in Wing A and the bridge, telling the navigator where they intended to go, just in case.

Don't call me that, I'm not a Faey. Call me boss, he sent in irritation. *Human men don't like being called that.*

Whyever not?

It's a military tradition on my planet for men to be called sir, and I was a military man long before we joined the Imperium.

But only the captain can be called sir.

And that's why you'll call me boss, he sent evenly.

Aye, boss, she corrected, a bit amused.

Some people hated hyperspace jumps, but Taggart wasn't one of them. He suffered from the hallucinations and the sensations like everyone else, but since he knew it was nothing but sensory ghosts, he was usually more curious about them than afraid, and hyperspace never made him dizzy or sick to his stomach like it did others. The more intense the sensory ghosts

got, the more curious they made him. He had well over five minutes to study the wildly contorting space around him, eyes open and looking around as Iyoi's eyes were closed tight under her helmet. The instant they came out of hyperspace, Taggart was alert and moving as Iyoi shook her head and moaned a little bit. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that," she complained in a weak voice.

"Welcome to the Navy, Lieutenant," Taggart said crisply. "Primaries online."

"SSI Two, you are cleared for launch," the order came over gravband. "Maintain radio silence within the nebula."

"Understood," he called back, adjusting the comm system, then he grabbed the assist posts that kept a pilot's hands busy while he flew, since many pilots had the habit of trying to "fly" a ship with his hands as well as his mind, and that created a secondary ghost echo in the command stream that occasionally confused the interface control computer. *We're cleared for launch. Diamond formation around the dropship, and pay attention to the nav. Radio silence, so sending only. Watch it for unmapped currents, watch your spacing, and stay on your toes, ladies. Nebulas are notorious for rogue currents. Also remember to run your de-ionizers, you're gonna pick up massive charges on the hull in a hurry out there if we run into high-density gas clouds.* Iyoi nodded approvingly as Taggart picked the dropship up off the deck, then turned it towards the airskin shield.

Least we're using translation engines. Flying a nebula on standard grav engines is an adventure, Iyoi remarked as they cleared the ship, then accelerated geometrically towards the roiling mass of reddish-orange gas, backlit and illuminated by the protostar some 56.5 million *kathra* from their position. *All that gravity flux plays havoc with them.*

I see you've read up on the specs.

Since the day I got into the flight academy, boss, she replied.

Taggart picked the dropship up off the deck and accelerated through the airskin shield and saw the reddish mass before him like a dawn sky. The fighters came out behind him and assumed the diamond defensive formation, three fighters in front, two to each side, and three behind. The fighters were synced to the dropship to match speed, and any course

corrections Taggart made showed in the fighters' heads-up displays to let them know exactly where he was going. The squadron of 15 KMS ships veered off on 16 mark 1, while the dropship and its escorts turned into the nebula along 302 mark 355. The dropship shivered a little when they crossed into the gas field, then started to vibrate as both ionization and heat gauges for the hull began to rise. Then moving through the gas ionized the hull and caused friction heating. The sensor officers started their scans, probing deeper into the nebula as they headed inside, as the visual turned into a reddish mist caused by dust particles suspended in with the hydrogen and helium. *Nebula density increasing by six hundred parts per million per second*, one of the sensor jockeys sent.

Keep off STG, send only, Taggart reminded them. *The bugs can access gravband.*

This shit is getting thick, Berya noted from the lead fighter, which was 320 *shakra* in front of him and slightly lower. Her Wolf was hazy in the reddish gloom, vanishing into some of the thicker dust clouds.

Keep your local mass density sensors on primary, Taggart sent. *We're coming up on the wake current in two minutes. When we enter it, keep a loose stick, don't fight the current.* Iyoi nodded professionally as she glanced over at him.

Surprising you know how to fly a current, but you didn't know how to navigate through one, Iyoi sent privately, a bit lightly.

You can cross a current, just takes plotting for the drift, he answered.

Yeah, but the current will take us right where we want to go, why fight it?

That's why we went with your plot, because it does do the job. We'll get a nice lateral scan of the interior. I was going to reduce speed, but I like the idea of keeping moving. The bugs learn fast, rookie, and they adapt.

The ship rocked when they entered the current, and Taggart moved into the center of it, allowing the river of gas and dust carry them deeper into the nebula. The fighters drifted in their formation as Iyoi watched the chronometer, counting the seconds until they veered out for their lateral pass. *I'm getting some contacts, Commander*, one of the sensor officers called. *Mass variances at maximum range.*

Debris?

They're moving.

How big?

I can't get a solid reading because of the nebula, but it looks around 12 benkonn mass variances. Maybe some rocky debris, maybe small ships or drones. I'd lean towards ships, Commander, the mass variances are pretty consistent across all contacts. That's not normal for a cloud of meteors.

Gravity distortion from a grav drive?

No, Commander.

Taggart frowned as he veered out of the current and began a lateral pass of the enemy installation, which was still some 25,500 *kathra* deeper in the small nebula. But for the sensors on the dropship, that was close enough to get some readings. *What about those mass readings?*

They're changing course, Commander. They're definitely small ships, but they're not using grav engines.

"Fuck!" Taggart snapped, jacking the throttle. He almost rammed Berya when the escorts didn't react fast enough. *They've got fighters!* Taggart barked.

Where? I don't see—

They're incoming from three o'clock low, ETA 39 seconds! He replied. *Get those readings, ladies, cause this is about to become a full contact sport!* he sent back to his sensor officers as sparks danced along the hull of the dropship, ionization causing electrical discharge. *Do not chase them!* Taggart ordered. *Protecting the dropship is your primary goal!*

Deploy ECDs! Berya barked. *Keep them leashed! Set drones to protect the dropship!*

They passed parallel to the facility lost in the reddish haze, speeding up as they entered a lighter density area of the nebula, trailing sparks and with arcs of lightning dancing between the fighters, dropship, spinners, and drones. *Forty-one contacts, Commander, accelerating! Definitely fighters, I'm getting energy readings through the static!* the lead sensor officer warned.

They're not drones?

I'm getting life signs, they're fighters!

Well, the bugs have a new toy, Taggart growled as he adjusted course.

They must have their own fighters, Berya grunted.

I'm getting an echo at the edge of my scope, boss, Houri called.

Multiple contacts! Coming in fast!

Show 'em why nobody fucks with the 76th, girls! Taggart called. *How much more time?*

Try to give us twenty more seconds, Commander, the sensor officer replied.

Incoming!

The enemy fighters streaked in out of the gloom directly behind them. They were armed with Torsion cannons, and they looked maneuverable. The pilots in them looked to be somewhat competent, but they were *not* the insectoids from the Consortium, and that meant they were Imxi. They'd never come up against Faey before. *I can sense their minds. They're not bugs! Wizzos, nail 'em!* Taggart boomed to his wing's mindstrickers, who sat in the cockpits so they could conduct telepathic combat while the pilots flew.

Not all of them, let's see how well those fighters operate, Berya added. *Don't nail all of 'em.*

Yes, nail all of 'em. Make them fight each other, we'll see how good those ships are in case they put bugs in 'em, Taggart countermanded.

You got it, boss, Vecha, the closest mindstriker, replied.

The shooting quickly trailed off as the ten mindstrickers in the fighters around them did their jobs. They dominated the pilots of the fighters, putting some to sleep after putting them in a parallel course, but actively controlling others, forcing them to fire on each other, releasing them somewhat from their control but convincing them that the other Imxi were the enemy and that they were defending the dropship. Taggart didn't relax, for those fighters might just be the vanguard for a Consortium destroyer, and they *couldn't* dominate the bugs that would be on that enemy ship. The

enemy fighters were very agile, fast, and like most fighters that weren't Faey or Karinne, they had almost no armor or defenses. They relied almost completely on their speed and agility to protect themselves. They got some solid data on the ships, and then they destroyed all of them but one. That one Vecha herded along with them, to interrogate its Imxi pilot and analyze Imxi technology. She had the pilot shut down all the fighter's communication and telemetry, making it look like his fighter was destroyed along with the rest of them.

I'm stunned that they made such a basic mistake, Berya growled as they turned back for the edge of the nebula. They know we're telepaths. They know what we can do, like when we took back the Shio and Alliance systems.

But they didn't know if the Imxi were resistant to talent, like some races are. Now they do. They sent those pilots out as guinea pigs, Taggart reasoned. They were just a probing action.

Well, now we have an Imxi to debrief and one of their fighters to take apart, Berya noted. Their little trick is gonna cost them more than us.

Maybe. Maybe not, Taggart grunted as they neared the current that would carry them back out towards the edge of the nebula. Did you get good readings, girls?

We got some solid readings, Commander. We're good to go.

Any large ships moving in our direction?

Yes, but they can't go that fast in the nebula. We'll outrun them easily, Commander. The bigger the ship, the more ionization and hull heating it causes when it moves around in here. We can just flat-out go faster than they can.

Interesting. Do a full scan of that Imxi ship. It might have some virus or nasty on it they want us to bring back.

Starting the scan, Commander.

Good deal. Alright, girls, let's get the hell out of here.

It took them nearly seven minutes to clear the nebula, and the parting of the red haze revealed far more going on outside than inside. The ten

Wolves, dropship, and their captured prey streaked toward a ferocious battle, as the 15 KMS warships retreated from the nebula with 39 Consortium warships hot on their tails, and the flaming debris of several other of the spike-winged vessels and a different type, a much smaller sleek nacelled corvette class that had to be Imxi, trailing behind the battle. The retreating KMS ships lanced white bars of death back at the pursuing ships, sharing the sky with plasma torpedoes and missiles as the KMS employed their open-space tactic of holding the enemy at optimal range, within range of particle beams but outside of Torsion range. Another Consortium ship bloomed in a greenish-red explosion on its port wing as a particle beam sheared through its left wing, slicing the ship in two pieces and the explosion of plasma and decompression causing the small spiked wing and several compartments of the stern section spin away from the main body, fire and atmosphere gouting out of the fatal wound. Another ship was hit dead center by a plasma torpedo, the entire ship simply dissolving in a hellstorm as the torpedo detonated. The KMS ships were surrounded in a reddish, wavering aura as their Torsion shockwave generators employed as enemy missiles streaked in, exploding before they reached the shields. Taggart turned into the planned course of the KMS ships before they made the turn themselves and maxed out the throttle, holding onto the posts as the dropship vibrated from the exponential acceleration, feeling himself being pressed into his armor and the chair as the inertial dampers were overtaken by the inertial force being exerted, and the towing beam they had on the Imxi ship was red-lining, since the Imxi ship couldn't match their velocity. The KMS warships made their turn and moved to intersect their course, but they also attracted unwanted attention, as a lone Consortium destroyer came out of the red haze behind them and started to accelerate.

Consortium destroyer moving to intercept! Iyoi sent, fear bleeding into her sending as the rookie got her first real view of naval combat. *Where did that come from? They couldn't have caught up to us!*

Defensive rear, Berya! Time to use up the drones! Taggart ordered. *Send them in!*

You heard the boss, set drones to attack the destroyer. Suicide mode! The forty drones turned and streaked towards the advancing destroyer as the fighters realigned, all ten of them getting behind the dropship to protect it, turning around and flying backwards to point their pulse cannons in the

direction of the enemy but still accelerating along the same vector as the dropship. The drones accelerated far faster than the fighters could since they had no pilots, and both the destroyer and the drones opened fire on each other when they came into range of their Torsion weapons. 28 drones were destroyed as they passed through the optimal range of the destroyer's heavy guns, but once they got inside, where they couldn't track well, the drones blasted dozens of smoking holes in the black armor of the enemy ship. Several more explosions ruptured its hull as the drones continued to fire, then the drones turned and dove into those smoking craters within the destroyer's armor at full throttle and guns blazing. The Consortium ship shuddered and immediately started to tumble when the drones crashed into the interior of the ships, huge fountains of flame erupting from the holes, its power blinking on and off several times, and then going dark.

Recall ECDs, get ready to dock on the Dreamer, Taggart ordered, then he realigned his thinking to command thought. *[We're coming in hot, Dreamer,]* his thought was translated to gravband.

[Port bow hangar deck, Commander. Don't miss the window,] came the reply.

The intersection of their courses was smooth and without incident. Taggart turned into the path of the battleship and matched velocity almost perfectly to line the dropship up with the hangar, and the dropship streaked into the hangar and quickly decelerated. The fighters followed it in, landing skids deploying as Taggart set the dropship on the deck, then Vecha caused the Imxi pilot to land just behind the Wolf fighters and then fall into a comatose state. *Do not approach that fighter!* Taggart barked. *Get Medical down here to scan the ship for microbes! Vecha, keep the Imxi comatose. Captain, we need your best mindbender down here, we have a prisoner,* he sent with enough strength to reach the bridge.

I saw it. Everyone in the hangar bay, strap in for emergency jump! Marayi's sending washed over them.

Mission accomplished, girls. Good work, Taggart sent as they felt the ship turn again, then start to slow down to minimum jump speed. He knew that behind them, the ships were laying down a withering carpet of defensive missile fire which would saturate enemy sensors and force them to break off or get plastered. Those missiles were MIRVs, and one missile

would release 60 separate cluster warheads to form a wall of warheads that would make a ship that didn't have a shockwave generator *really* think about trying to fly through it. Like a spy car releasing a smokescreen, the missiles' purpose was not to attack the enemy, but to force their pursuers to slow down or break off pursuit.

The missiles accomplished their goal. Taggart felt the ship stop decelerating, achieving maximum safe jump velocity, and then they snapped out of reality in the blink of an eye, jumping away from the nebula and towards the safety of PR-371.

Vesta, 15 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 2 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Vesta, 15 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

Everything was ready.

Jason almost skipped down the hall towards his office as tomorrow's plans whirled in his mind. Jyslin's parents, brother, and brother's family were all waiting to be picked up, and Lorna and *her* family were already en route, where they would hide on Kosigi until tomorrow. Jyslin had *no idea* that her family was going to be at her birthday party tomorrow, and that made all the cloak and dagger worth it. He had even gotten her the best present any husband could ever give a wife, at least in the Imperium.

An IBL team.

Frinia Foralle was in his office that very moment and ready to finalize the deal. Houses Karinne and Trefani would buy the Paladins for C165,000,000,000 in cash, payable by immediate credit transfer by the attending Moridon bank officials, who had to be there to approve a private, non-governmental transaction of that magnitude. House Karinne would front the entire payment, and House Trefani would pay their 42% of the buyout price back to House Karinne in yearly installments over the next ten

years, which was fine with Jason because it gave him a solid financial hold over Yila...and Yila didn't mind, because she was confident the profits she earned off the deal would pay the installments, which gave her 42% of a second IBL team with virtually no money out of her pocket. Frinia certainly didn't make it easy for them, though. She had spent three days inspecting the Karsa arena, the city of Karsa, speaking to city residents about their enthusiasm for having an IBL team, almost interrogating Jason, Kumi, Meya, Dela, Yila, and even going so far as to interview the *groundskeepers* in the arena to ensure they were up to the task of managing a batchi field for an IBL team. She spent nearly nine hours reading Kumi's buyout proposal, then spent nearly a full day haggling the fine points of the contract, which to her credit *completely* revolved around ensuring her team was going to be made competitive in the IBL. She wasn't selling her team to someone who wanted to have the prestige of being an IBL owner. She wanted a team owner that cared if the team *won*. If she wanted someone that wouldn't care about the team, she had her own daughter for that. Jason had played college football and he was *extremely* competitive, almost Faey-level competitive, and he impressed upon Frinia that while he didn't know much about batchi, he'd hire the best damn front office and coaches he could find, and he *would* compete with the Highborns and their bottomless bank accounts for top-tier talent to fill his roster. After nearly four days of discussion, inspection, and investigation, Frinia haggled a buyout price with Kumi and Yila, and the contract was drawn up.

And finally, Frinia would keep a 10% ownership stake in the team so she could continue to have a say, as well as earn 10% of *all* Paladin profits taken equally from both Jason and Yila. The minority stake would revert back to Jason and Yila upon her death, and the 10% profit sharing would end. Her daughter would *not* inherit that 10% team ownership. Frinia would also help transition the team to Karis, moving the operations from Velta to an office building right beside the arena, four entire floors of office space for the front office to build an operation. The team would share the training facilities with the Knights for off-season minicamps and workouts until their own could be built, which would take all of two months once Jason put Red Horn Construction on the job, more than enough time to get them built and ready for the team when they started preseason training camp in Kiraa.

Or, more to the point, *Jyslin* would be running the team. Jason was giving operational control of the Paladins to Jyslin. She wasn't as busy as he was, and while she did do a lot of work, she would be more than happy to find the time to build a contending IBL team for next season. It would bring a great deal of positive morale to Karis, the house would profit from the Paladins, Miaari already had an operational plan in place to protect Karis and Karinne's secrets from interlopers hiding within visiting IBL team organizations, and everyone would be happy.

This contract signing was taking place well after dark, 2338 by his clock on his gestalt, but his legal team had needed time to read the contract and approve it. That was fine with him, because he'd had a busy day. The destroyer *Tikanne* had just arrived from the PR sector after a three-day hyperspace journey back to Karis, and it was carrying an Imxi fighter and its Imxi pilot. Captain Gai Edanne had delivered the Imxi fighter to Myleena personally, and the pilot went to Ryn. Ryn was the most highly trained telepath on all of Karis, a mindbender in all but official title, and Ryn had paired with Haelen Karinne, the oldest Generation male and one of the most skilled male telepaths in the house, to give Cybi the ability to upload virtually the pilot's entire mind right into the archives for analysis and storage and dissemination of the Imxi language. The Imxi themselves were both humanoid and quite unusual. They had brutish human-like faces, like Neanderthals, had the same beige coloring as a Terran, and had a very humanoid body that put another peg on the board for the theory known as Gora's Law. The pilot was exactly 6 *shakra* tall, which put him around 6'5" or about 2 meters, and he was hexapoid. The pilot had four arms, a second set of arms below his *normal* arms that were more slender and slightly longer than his upper arms, and only had four fingers on each hand, but had five toes on his feet. He had human-like male genitalia, and a DNA scan showed that he had remarkably human-like DNA, very nearly able to produce children with a Terran or Faey, but not quite...much to the relief of the image-conscious Faey. This Imxi was *ugly* to a Faey, and the idea that they could have a baby with something that ugly would be very disconcerting to them. He was of the same basic family classification as the Terrans, Faey, Shio, and Jakkans—though the Jakkans were radically different from the others, they were still *humanoid* by classification—in that he only had coarse black hair on his head, in a patch just over his collar

bones, above his genitals, and on his forearms and calves. Jason would classify him as a four-armed Neanderthal and not be far from the mark.

While he looked brutish, Ryn and Haelen proved that he was pretty damned intelligent. He was both highly educated and well trained and had been a fighter pilot for 6 standard years. The Imxi had just discovered hyperspace technology about 250 years ago, used a mixture of plasma to power their engines and positronic power systems to power everything else, but had not yet mastered spatial technologies. That meant no phased plasma, no artificial gravity on their ships, no gravometric engines. Their engines were standard reaction engines, expending fuel in a chemical reaction that produced some pretty incredible energy, more than enough to move their warships, the largest of which were about the size of a tactical battleship. They utilized a very clever form of phased ion energy that was shield-piercing for their weapons before the Consortium gave them Torsion weapons, and the Consortium was upgrading their ships to striated metaphased power systems for them, taking equipment out of damaged ships and refitting them on Imxi craft. Before the Consortium came along, their technology was about 2,000 years behind the Faey, and that entire quadrant of the galaxy was similarly technologically backwards. The Imxi were in the vanguard among their sector's civilizations, one of the first to develop hyperspace technology, but they were *millennia* behind the empires of the Imperium and its neighbors. This Imxi had the *intelligence* to comprehend modern technology, his race simply hadn't progressed to that level. They would have gotten there on their own had the Consortium not given them advanced tech, it would have just taken them time to research, study, discover, and grow.

That explained why the Kimdori had no information on them. They really only interacted with civilizations that had enough technological advancement to be a threat to galactic peace, then they moved in and tried to keep war from exploding across an entire sector, or even across a quadrant. Systems like Terra had no idea that the Kimdori were out there, and if they did, they'd be kissing the Denmother's feet. It was the Kimdori's actions that prevented what happened in Andromeda from happening in the Milky Way, where the entire galaxy came to be dominated by only two pan-galactic empires, which then engaged in a war so ghastly that a normal person would be emotionally scarred for life to learn the extent to which

both sides had devolved into monsters. The Kimdori worked to allow empires to grow and expand, but *not* become a threat to an entire sector, sector cluster, or even a quadrant, which would lead to galactic aspirations.

So, while they wouldn't learn anything from the Imxi from a technological standpoint, they *would* learn about the Imxi themselves. Everything that pilot knew, they would know, pulled out of every corner of his mind by Ryn and Haelen. Their language, culture, customs, the names they gave their own systems and planets, *everything* would be archived by Cybi into the Karinne knowledge base. That information might be *very* useful later on, even if the Consortium knew they had an Imxi fighter and most likely its pilot. They wouldn't be able to sneak by anyone by pretending to be Imxi, but the more one knew about one's enemy, the easier that enemy was to defeat.

When he reached his office, everyone was there waiting for him. Two representatives from the First Bank of Moridon, where Karinne had its house accounts, and two representatives from Moridon Pan-Galactic Bank, the bank Frinia's house used, were in attendance. Frinia was sitting at the meeting table in the outer office along with Kumi, Yila, Mayor Dela of Karsa, Miaari, and Trameken Lenarre, the facility manager for the Karsa Sports Complex. Also there were four members of the legal team, holding the approved contract and its three official copies, Ten Marines stood as guards within the room, and Chirk and Brall sat at their desks watching on.

"Ah, there you are, Jason," Frinia smiled as he came in, Jason taking off his helmet. "I was starting to wonder."

"I had something important come up, I'm sorry I'm late, Frinia," he replied as he came over to the table and sat down between Kumi and Yila. "Is everything in order?"

"Sure is, babes," Kumi replied. "We've got the contracts, and we're all ready to sign."

"This contract will transfer ownership of the Velta Paladins from Frinia Foralle, Grand Duchess of House Foralle, to the ownership alliance of Jason Karinne and Yila Trefani, Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of their respective houses. Transfer of operational control will be immediate upon the filing of this contract with the IBL Ownership Committee," Jack

Weathers, the Terran leader of his legal team, instructed. “Here to officially witness the signing of the contract and enact the transfer of the agreed to credits are the four members of the respective banking institutions with jurisdiction over the transaction. All four are officially accredited with the Moridon Overseer Agency as fully licensed, bonded, and accepted Notary Publics, with the authority to witness and confirm this transaction. Does anyone disapprove of the use of these Notaries in this transaction?” Jack asked. When silence greeted him, he nodded. “Very well then. Upon the signing of the contract and transfer of funds, this contract will be filed with the IBL home office immediately by courier, and the Paladin organization will begin moving to its new offices in Karsa.”

The legal team set down the four contracts, one in front of Frinia, Yila, and Jason, and the fourth on the table in the middle, which would be the IBL’s copy. “Very well then. This contract will require only one signature and authorizing thumbprint from each party of the contract. Shall we proceed?”

The signing ceremony was recorded by one of Cybi’s cameras, where the three house leaders signed the four copies of the contract, affixed their thumbprints to confirm ID, then the Moridons carefully examined each contract and affixed their seals of authorization. Then came the much more invasive transfer of C166 billion in cash, which required all four bank officials and a dedicated crypto link back to the Council of Finance on Moridon, which had to authorize a private transaction of that size for legal reasons, to prove that the contract price was paid. After the exhaustive ID scans, which included a DNA sample, the transfer of credit was approved. A *big* chunk of the house’s bank account was transferred to House Foralle, but as far as Jason was concerned, he’d earn every credit back. An IBL team was a *gold mine* of income. After that, they traded handshakes and kisses, and the four Moridon took up the fourth contract and immediately left for Draconis, to deliver the transfer of ownership contract to the league’s home office.

Thankfully, the IBL commissioner and offices had no say in the sale of IBL teams. Sending them the contract was simply telling them that the team had been sold, and that an alliance of the Houses Karinne and Trefani now owned the *Karis* Paladins.

Once the Moridons left, Jason kissed Frinia on the cheek and patted her on the shoulder. "Call your front office and tell them they're about to move, Frinia," he told her. "I hope they don't mind changing systems that much."

"Suitable severance packages were part of the contract if my front office people don't want to leave Velta," she smiled. "But most of them will move with the team. They're devoted to the Paladins, Jason. That's why I hired them in the first place."

"Provided they can pass the security screening," he reminded her. That was also part of the contract.

"I'm sure they will, Jason. Batchi is their *life*. They won't be a security threat. They're working to make the team great. Just give them the offices and the resources they need, and they can do it. I'm sure they can."

"They'll get their chance, Frinia, I promise," he told her. "Now go break the bad news to them."

"I see it as good news, Jason. With you bankrolling the team far beyond what I could, the Paladins are going to finally *compete*. And to me, nothing could make this old woman happier," she said with a brilliant and earnest smile. "I just hope I'm still alive the first time the Paladins make the playoffs."

"You will be," he assured her, patting her on the shoulder.

Jason walked along with Miaari after the meeting ended, Frinia and Yila heading home, Kumi heading for home herself since it was so late, and Jason heading for Miaari's office. It was in the same building and down two floors, and when he came in, he saw that her entire staff was in and working, including Tim. "We're analyzing the data that Haelen is putting on the mainframe, even as we speak," she reported. "We already have the Imxi language fully decoded and stored, available for gestalt download on demand, so a Generation can insert it to one of the other telepaths. Songa has medically screened the pilot as well and cultured all Imxi common microbes. Her team is working up cures to the microbes in the Imxi's body."

"Sounds good. Written language too?"

"We have it all," she nodded.

“What about the fighter?”

“Friend Myleena has an engineering team inspecting it. They haven’t sent any reports yet. I can almost hear Myleena rubbing her hands in anticipation of something *else* she can take apart,” Miaari chuckled.

“You know how she loves her toys, Miaari,” Jason agreed. “But about all she’ll learn from that fighter is how the Consortium adapted it to their own power system to run the Torsion cannon.”

“It is probably one of the self-powered models, the bunker emplacement units, so they only had to run control lines so the pilot could fire it.”

“Probably, he nodded. “Myli might take their engines apart, though. Reaction engines like that aren’t something you see in this sector much anymore.”

“Truly. They are antiques by Imperium standards, and positively ancient by ours.”

“Well, if that’s all we have so far, I guess I’m gonna go home. We have a big day tomorrow.”

“I’ll have a report ready in the morning, if you even read it,” she said lightly.

“Hey, some things are more important than being a Grand Duke, and my wife’s birthday is one of them,” he retorted. “And remember, thirteen hundred hours, my house, party.”

“Why so late?” she asked lightly.

“Because my first present to her is making her walk funny for the rest of the day,” he said, which made Miaari laugh.

Kaista, 16 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 3 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaista, 16 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Jyslin wasn't the one walking a little funny when Jason finally got out of the bedroom. She'd been *very* amorous that morning, and since it was her birthday, he felt honor bound to stay in that room and do his solemn duty until she was completely satisfied.

What it did do is upset his daily plan a tiny bit. The Confederate Council was meeting *before* her party today, the only convergence of times so all rulers would be on their "day" cycle, so the meetings were pretty wildly spread across a day. It wasn't easy when the members had activity cycles that ranged from 10 hours to 30 hours, so every day's meeting time was usually the only window where all involved would be awake and alert. Some might be there early in the morning, some very late in the afternoon, but that was the only way it could really work. It was worst when Draconis and Karis were opposite one another, which would be happening in just a week or so. Right now, Draconis was some 9 hours ahead of them, so in that week or so, day for Dahnai would be night for him, and their council meetings were always crammed into the very end or beginning of the day. There would be a three day span next week where there would be no window for meetings, either. When that happened, they went with the window that served most of them, and some unlucky ambassador or two would be sitting in on the meeting in the dead of night to report back to their rulers when they woke up.

He ate breakfast with one mental eye inward, reading a report on the fighter. It had the most efficient and powerful reaction engines Myleena had ever seen, giving it nearly grav engine-level velocity, but like any reaction engine in space, it wasn't as maneuverable. It had to rely on thrusters to turn, or in the fighter's case, a clever series of exhaust ports that channeled the engine's thrust in any direction required, and the thrusters were never as good as a gravometric engine. The result was a high-speed but slow-turning fighter that was probably superior to any other fighter in the Imxi's sector but was no threat to an alert Wolf pilot. But the Torsion cannon the Consortium had stuck on it did make it dangerous in that it had a viable weapon. Miaari had been right, they were using self-powering Torsion cannons not unlike a ground artillery piece, an enclosed unit with its power supply integrated, then rigged up control systems so the unit could interface with the fighter's computer. The cannon replaced the bulky ion weapons in

the fighter, which allowed them to integrate it inside the fighter's central body in place of the ion weapon's main assembly and power supply and fire from a port in the nose, not unlike the gatling gun on the old A-10 ground attack fighter. The pilot was literally sitting on the barrel of the Torsion weapon, and it was a curious matter of serendipity that the ion array and its power plant that they took out was only slightly larger than the Torsion weapon they installed, making swapping out the weapons very easy for the Consortium engineers. Metallurgically, the fighter was composed of an inferior version of shocked titanium, a form of altered titanium that was stronger than normal titanium and wouldn't burn if subjected to intense heat within an oxygen atmosphere, but it did show that the Imxi had some expertise in spacefaring metallurgy. Their metallurgical skill actually exceeded their other technological fields, such as power generation, propulsion, and shield technology. Metallurgy seemed to be their specialty, and they knew how to exploit that technological edge against their neighbors.

Biologically, the Imxi were very similar to Terrans, Shio, and Faey. They had similar tolerances for heat and air pressure, were slightly more tolerant of cold than the other three species, but they breathed *both* oxygen and nitrogen...which wouldn't be a problem on most terrestrial planets, since most had nitrogen/oxygen atmospheres. Their metabolism was quite unique according to Songa's report, requiring oxygen for fuel and nitrogen for cell health, which they acquired through aspiration...Songa and her fancy words. She couldn't just say *they get their nitrogen by breathing*. Their metabolisms were consistent with most carbon-based species, which meant that the Imxi could survive on their food and vice versa. The series of pictures Songa took with her report did creep him out a bit, though. He'd never seen a four-armed species before, and he'd never dreamed of looking at what he'd call a four-armed Neanderthal. Low forehead, coarse hair, big nose, wide mouth with heavy teeth, reinforced cheekbones, the Imxi were right behind the Jakkans and the Bari-Bari on the Terran *ewww-o-meter*. They were *not* genetically compatible with Terrans, Shio, or Faey, no doubt much to the eternal relief of all three species.

Which wasn't really an indicator, since Shio weren't compatible with Terrans and Faey either, and all three races looked almost exactly identical. That green blood of theirs was the big one that made them incompatible.

Shio...he was starting to wonder if the entire damn race was trying to join the House Karinne. They comprised nearly 40% of the newest class of 23,995 house applicants and had held numbers that high since the Shio were attacked. Shio were dominating the orientation classes, the majority race most of the time, with the Faey a distant second. Then again, Jason knew that Grayhawk was *encouraging* his people to join Karinne. The Shio's planets were devastated, and they were in no condition or position to fight, and many of them wanted revenge for what was done to them. The only way they could really do that was apply to Karinne and join the KMS. He perused those numbers as he finished up his oatmeal with slices of *oye* fruit and strawberries in it and was encouraged a bit. There were more external races applying now, mainly Skaa and Shio, but what got his attention was that even more Verutans had applied, some 460 of them.

He almost dropped his spoon when he saw what was on the bottom of the list. Five *Imbiri* had applied. Imbiri! The Imbiri were a very reclusive and enigmatic species that lived in the Verutan sector. Much like how nobody bothered the Moridon, the Imbiri were not bothered or harassed by either the Veruta or the Haumda, since the Imbiri system sat on the border between the two empires. Both empires respected the small system's desire for neutrality, and often used it as a neutral site for talks. This was because the Imbiri were complete and utter pacifists. They didn't believe in warfare or violence in any form, but they did engage in trade with the empires of the Verutan sector and offered their services as mediators and neutral observers. The Imbiri were sylvan creatures, almost like the fairies or pixies from Terran mythology, about four or five feet tall, slim, graceful, ethereally beautiful to Terrans, and sporting large chitinous wings that gave them ability to fly. They were a low-gravity race, however, their home planet .83 standard gravity. They were *extremely* intelligent, and favored jobs in the sciences and education, but their code of honor prevented them from developing or building weapons. Their home planet was held in a natural state akin to a planetary national forest, with only ten major pockets where the Imbiri had their cities, allowed technology to intrude into nature. Anywhere else on Imbiri, there was nothing but small hamlets and farms that minimized their impact on nature as much as possible. There was an entire complement of Imbiri at the Academy, both students and instructors, but one didn't have to be a member of House Karinne to be employed by the Academy.

You alright, your Grace? Ayama asked.

Just a little surprised. Five Imbiri applied for house membership. I'm kinda wondering why.

That is interesting, she agreed mildly. Maybe you should go talk to them.

I might do that, but not today, he replied.

After nearly an hour of listening to the council members talk, Jason finally freed himself and ran downstairs, spun Jyslin around in the living room, then kissed her exuberantly. *And is the birthday girl ready for her party?* he asked with a smile.

Not if you make me throw up, I won't be, she replied with a wink, which made him laugh and set her down. *I'm starting to wonder what you have hidden in your garden, love. No decorations, no guests?*

We're not having the party here, silly, he told her. *Now come on. I had to fight Aya in a duel to the death to get her to let us leave the strip without armor, so let's not waste this opportunity.*

I'm still very much alive, thank you very much, Aya sent dryly from the barracks next door, which made Jyslin laugh.

Where's Rann? Jyslin asked.

Myli has him, he's already at the party. So c'mon, they're waiting for us.

The two of them boarded the corvette sitting on the dock without armor, but with all four of his usual guards, and they took off for a three-minute journey from the strip to the Karsa waterfront district. They disembarked at the waterfront pier for the most luxurious hotel in Karsa, the *Imperial*, where Jason had rented out one of the ballrooms for the party. Jason went so far as to put a blindfold over her eyes and lead her out of the corvette, Jyslin honestly intrigued. Jason was making it a mystery, and the Faey in her adored the mystery. Everyone in the ballroom remained quiet as he led her in, then he stepped behind her and took off the blindfold. And right in front of her, among her many friends and co-workers on the planet, were her parents, brother, brother's family, and her aunt Lorna. "Happy birthday!" they all shouted, but Jyslin was already throwing herself into her father's arms.

Papa, I'm so happy to see you! she sent gushingly, surprise and elation threaded into her thought. She then turned and crushed her mother in an embrace, then her brother and his wife, then Lorna, both laughing and crying at the same time.

So, can I find guests for a party, or can I? Jason asked lightly as she turned and gave him a fierce hug.

I can't believe you got them here without me knowing!

It's easy when I can make them work you half to death, he sent teasingly. *You were too busy to notice.*

She laughed helplessly, kissed him, then punched him on the shoulder. *So you're the reason why I've been working so hard!*

Myli was in on it, too, he winked.

Having her family there made the party a smashing success, at least for Jyslin. She sat with them for the entire party, catching up with them, as friends and family drifted back and forth to her table to talk to them. She talked to them over vidlink quite a bit, but it wasn't the same as having them there, able to hold her two year old niece Jiji who was an absolute cutie, and let her family get to be right there with Rann and hear him send. Her telling them he could send wasn't the same as them *hearing* him send. For his part, Rann and all of Jason's other children were drawn to Jyslin's family, called them *aunt* and *uncle* and *grandpa* and *grandma*, which surprised Rillen and Vari and made them quite happy. Kyri and Sora and Aran and Zach weren't their grandkids, but they were still technically their grandparents since Jyslin was Jason's wife...sort of. It was enough for them to happily accept the titles and get to know Jason's other children, though. It wasn't all just local friends, though. Yila and Dara were there, sitting with Myleena and Kumi at the table beside the table of honor. Jason didn't entirely invite Yila, she'd heard about the party and more or less crashed it, and since Zach was going to be there, she made sure to bring Dara along with her. Yila was getting bolder and bolder, and Jason had the feeling that he was going to have to step on her fairly soon.

Then came the gifts. Jyslin had an entire table full of presents, and it took her almost half an hour to go through them. From the silly and naughty—Kumi—to the soberly practical—Navii—Jyslin got clothes, jewelry, art, a

Parri Dream Stick directly from the *shaman* of the Parri village, a device that was supposed to bring pleasant dreams, and Dahnai had sent Jyslin both a gag gift in a fully animatronic sex doll patterned to look exactly like Kellin, *so you never miss him* read the card, which made Jyslin laugh, to a new double occupancy hoverstroller for the twins. Jason made sure that his gift was last, because he had it in his pocket.

When it was his turn, he sat down beside her and fished the envelope out of his back pocket and unfolded it. “What is this, love?” she asked aloud, so Miaari wouldn’t feel left out.

“Happy birthday,” he told her.

She opened it, read the first line of the paper, and then screamed so loud that she scared most in the room half to death. She *literally* knocked Jason off the chair when she crashed into him, knocking them to the floor, covering his face with kisses as the gathered friends laughed.

“Whatever could produce that?” Temika asked with a laugh.

“He gave me the *Paladins!*” she screamed.

“The whut?” Temika asked, but that produced some gasps from the Faey in the room.

“We bought the Paladins IBL batchi team, Temika,” Yila chuckled from the side. “And this is the official announcement. We had the IBL office sit on this until today. In fact, the press release should be going out any minute now,” she added, glancing at her watch, which was a Rolex she bought from Terra that was built for the Faey’s 30-hour day.

That caused some excitement in the room. Jason ran some footage of the Velta Paladins for Temika on a holo, then revealed the new uniforms, which were almost exactly the same as the old, just with the Foralle crest replaced with the Karinne crest on the shoulder. Jyslin received the first uniform jersey, which amusingly the players didn’t wear when they played, just to and from the field, with Jyslin’s name and the number 1 on the jersey, which was always reserved for the owner as a matter of tradition. “Jyslin’s going to be the one that interacts with the team’s front office,” Jason explained. “In effect, she’s the one that’s going to be signing the checks and will be the face of the ownership. Most of the team’s front office is coming here with the team during the move, and Frinia, the last owner,

assures me they're a good organization. They do seem to know their batchi."

"Ah, 'kay. Ah never did watch batchi much. Ah'm a football kinda gal."

That buzz swirled through the room for quite a while, at least until Miaari stalked up to him and put a finger on her memory band. *[I just got some news, Jason.]*

[Good or bad?]

[I'm not sure yet. One of my packmates just caught someone trying to infiltrate the biogenic warehouse in Kosigi.]

[What? Who? What happened?]

[I don't have the specifics yet. Cousin Braan is still gathering information. What he tells me is that it was a sleeper agent, an Imperial mindbender under the effect of a psychic clone. Not even we can detect that,] she banded to him grimly. Psychic clones were a division of the psyche, forming a secondary personality that could be as detailed as any real person, with its own memories, history, and if set up right, its own presence in the system. The other personality was sealed away and required either a telepath to bring it out or some kind of conditioned trigger that caused the personalities to switch. Psychic clones were *extremely* hard to do right. Jyslin could do it, as well as about 300 telepaths on Karis, but Jason himself didn't have that kind of training. From the sound of it, this agent was triggered, probably using some audio phrase or specific image that caused the sealed personality to replace the initial one, which in this case would most likely be the spy's original personality. They had used the psychic clone to sneak the agent past the Kimdori, but from the sound of it, the agent was caught after she activated and tried to steal something, be it technology or datafiles.

The reason why Kimdori couldn't detect a psychic clone was because the sealed second personality was completely suspended, comatose, and thus there was no mental activity to give it away to a Kimdori's unique ability. Even a telepath couldn't detect a psychic clone unless they knew *exactly* what they were looking for, and they were also *very* good. Jyslin could *create* a psychic clone, but not even she could *detect* one. That took very specific training of a level that possibly only Ryn possessed on the

planet. But given how hard it was to create a psychic clone of that kind of complexity and stability—setting one to trigger on some visual or audio trigger was *not easy*—it wasn't something Jason had honestly expected to come across quite like this. Psychic clones became unstable over time unless there was a mindbender there to constantly stabilize it, as Jyslin had to do for Luke when he volunteered to carry a psychic clone back in the Legion days. If they'd sent an agent here with a psychic clone that was still stable months after creation, then whoever created that clone was a fucking telepathic *savant*.

Jason gave Miaari a grim look. [*Holy fuck, if Dahnai has a mindbender that can do that,*] he communed, then shook his head.

[*I know. This will surprise even the Denmother,*] Miaari agreed with a nod. [*It also means I will double security at all sensitive locations. There might be another agent carrying a psychic clone among us, but we will be hard pressed to find it until the clone activates.*]

[*I know,*] he nodded, then blew out his breath. *Fucking Dahnai*. This was from her, there could be no doubt. This had to come straight from her stable of most experienced mindbenders, and she was demonstrating that she was *not* going to stop until she managed to steal Karinne technology. The fact that she was his *amu dorai* sure as fucking hell wasn't getting in her way. She'd wanted the secrets of the Karinnes since he claimed the house, and since he'd stonewalled her for five years, now that she had access to Karis, she was sending in the spies, sending spies with more and more cunning and complex covers to get them into a position to make an attempt to steal secrets.

But what earthly gain could it be for her? She knew that if he found out, he'd have a nuclear meltdown, and he'd find out pretty damn fast. She didn't know that Cybi could *detect* biogenic devices, and the instant one was where it wasn't supposed to be, Jason would know within two minutes. Did she really think it was worth having Jason have a conniption just to get her hands on biogenics?

Well, obviously, she did.

And there *were* some biogenic applications that didn't need a Generation. Their entire interface system was based on biogenics, using a

slightly different kind of biogenic crystal that could “read minds,” as it were, sensed thought and reacted to it. It was the closest the ancient Karinnes had come to their dream of machines that could interact with any telepath. Any empire in the sector would kill for interface technology.

[I am quite wroth about this,] Miaari conveyed, anger creeping into her banded communication. *[I am going to contact Jinaami and have her raid the Imperium’s intelligence agency. We may not be able to detect these psychic clones, but if Jinaami can get her hands on the list of clone-carrying agents they have sent, we won’t have to look.]*

[Good idea. You have my backing,] Jason agreed. That wouldn’t be easy. The Imperium’s sensitive areas were defended by mindbenders, and since Kimdori weren’t Faey, they’d see through a Kimdori’s shapeshift. For that reason, the Kimdori had to be much more *Mission Impossible*-esque to get their hands on that kind of information. Jinaami would call in specialists who would invade the intelligence agency and steal the information from their computers or get close to high-ranking members and lift that information directly from their minds.

Damn it. Just when he thought they had a handle on security, *fucking* Dahnai sends something new at them, something that actually got into a position to try to steal something. Zaa wasn’t going to be happy, but this wasn’t Miaari’s fault; in fact, she acquitted herself well by having a security system in place that caught the spy before she could accomplish her mission.

He sighed, frowning. There was a reckoning coming between him and Dahnai, he could smell it. She wasn’t going to stop until he put his foot down, and when he did, she was going to be pissed off. But if she actually pulled off stealing something, she would force him to do something drastic to get it back, and something that might poison both their relationship and the alliance between Merrane and Karinne, and therefore destabilize the entire Imperium. She was using the fact that Jason couldn’t back away from the Imperium to send in her spies, abusing the situation, but she didn’t realize that the repercussions if she succeeded could have heavy repercussions, the least of which was the expulsion of every outsider from Karis.

He had to do something, and do it soon, before this got entirely out of control.

Chapter 3

Brista, 23 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 10 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 23 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

Jyslin was in heaven.

It's not every day a girl gets an IBL batchi team for a birthday present. For the last week, she'd split her duties between 3D and the Paladins, finishing working on the Consortium ship, then overseeing the transition of the team to Karis. She was there along with Frinia to welcome the front office, *all* of which had made the move from Veltana to Karsa, settling them into truly huge and luxurious office space, floors 12-26 of the 207 story Bren Isala building right beside the arena. The building was mostly empty, so it was not a problem at all to secure 14 floors for the offices and organization. Red Horn Construction was already on the job to build a first-class practice facility for the team built to Frinia's exacting specifications, and they promised to have it done in 27 days.

Ah, the joys of having a top rate Makati contracting firm at one's beck and call.

Actually, the practice facility wasn't all that far from the strip. The common practice was to place practice facilities close to where the players would be living to cut down on commute times, so the practice facility was square in the middle of some of the upper class housing not far from the strip, only about 12 kathra away. There, the Makati would build four full size batchi pitches, workout facilities, training rooms, offices for the coaches and equipment managers, a warehouse for equipment, individual offices and private rooms for every member of the team so they could

conduct *their* business, almost like an apartment complex and office building in the practice facility. IBL batchi players were paid a hell of a lot of money, and not all of that came from their salaries. Like pro players back home, they had endorsement deals, investments, side businesses, parlaying their batchi skills into a personal financial empire that would support them when their playing days were over. The average life span of an IBL-level batchi player was 7 years, it was a much rougher game than most people realized, so they had to make sure they made those 7 years *count*. And part of what the franchise did was help them do *that* as much as possible so they could focus on playing the game.

So, while Jyslin and Frinia got to know each other, even become friends as they worked to bring the Paladins to Karsa, Jason was hard at work on the real stuff...the war. The energy being had thwarted four other attempts to attack Imxi systems over the week, using its clairvoyance or whatever the hell it did to almost instantly call up a response to anything that Maggie and Jake did over there. All of their attacks, even the last one that was supposed to be an ambush, had failed. The Consortium was *not* stupid, they were adapting to the toybox that his Legion members had taken, but to be fair to Maggie and Jake, they were trying to fight a different kind of war than the one that the Legion usually did. The Legion was a guerilla operation at its core, meant to strike without warning at targets of opportunity and then fade away. Jason was asking them to conduct actual warfare, so they were having problems with it.

The only thing that was really working over there was the solar collector. They had deployed a second one and gotten a successful kill with it, taking out an arc section under construction at PR-72, which was Gervaxia by Imxi designation. The energy being had trouble seeing those things for some reason, so it was able to deploy, power up, and get off two shots before Consortium cruisers jumped in to stop it, when Maggie had it self-destruct to deny them the chance to study it. Those two shots were all it needed. The first cut the arc section in half, and the second cut one of the halves into two quarters, which would make it *extremely* hard to simply put the thing back together and repair the cut section.

Not bad at *all* for something that ran off a class 7 PPG. Efficiency wise, it was the best weapon they'd ever built. A weapon running off basically a hovercar power plant that could blow a hole in anything not made of

Neutronium...given optimum conditions, of course. The only thing that came anywhere near close to that kind of efficiency was the railguns and rail cannons.

Yeri was hard at work as well. She'd secured hotel space for the visiting rulers and was hammering out all the details, making sure palatable food was available for all the various species, organizing tours of Kosigi and parts of Karis deemed not high security, and despite Jason's misgivings, the opportunity to visit Cybi...sort of. They all knew who Cybi was, they all actually *knew* Cybi since she did interact with them, but there was no way in hell Jason was allowing *anyone* not in the highest circles of Karinne anywhere near Kosiningi. It was the only part of Karis where the KDF had orders to shoot to kill with no warning if any unidentified ship or flying craft violated its territorial space. But the rulers would be given the chance to interact with Cybi at a much more personal level

Yeri was also working out the itinerary with the staffs of the rulers. It would be a six-day conference with the rulers being on Karis for seven nights. They would arrive late in the afternoon and be given the chance to settle in and rest overnight, then the first day after their arrival would be mainly sightseeing and relaxation after their journey, a little down time for the busy wartime ruler. The second day would start with a tour of Kosigi, then they'd have their first major conference at the White House that afternoon, after Sk'Vrae had a chance to sleep and the others had time to rest a little. The days after that would be with two conferences daily mixed in with personal time and down time for the rulers, with the rulers returning home the seventh morning. Yeri, Aya, Myri, and Miaari had worked out all the logistics for security, both for the rulers and *against* the rulers, since each one was coming with a personal staff that would no doubt hold a spy or two. Jason would almost be disappointed if they *didn't* try anything. Sk'Vrae wouldn't, though, she had too much respect for Jason to try anything quite so...*rude*. Urumi had some unusual social conventions, but they also made them very predictable.

It was dirty deeds that brought him to work today. He had all four of his usual guards with him today, Ryn and Suri walking behind with Shen and Dera walking ahead, part of the increased security Aya had ordered in preparation for the summit. Jason had been escorted by all four of his guards since the summit was announced and would be until it was both over

and Miaari gave clearance for him to go back to just two guards. And most of the guard detachment had been pulling extra time guarding the school. There were 10 guards deployed in and around the school whenever it was in session, in addition to 25 Ducal Guard, which were the elite guard unit in the Karinne Marines, attached directly to Aya's Imperial Guard and under her command. It was the Ducal Guard that guarded the White House, the Shimmer Dome, Kosiningi, 3D, and other highest security locations, and it was Aya that commanded the Ducal Guard, handled the security for them in addition to the strip. She was a specialist in guarding people and locations, and Myri had been more than happy to give Aya jurisdiction over the places on Karis most needing protection. The Imperial Guard restricted themselves only to the Ducal family and where they were, but Aya had admitted that the women in the Ducal Guard weren't bad at all, and she trusted them to keep the most important sites on Karis secure. It was white-armored Ducal Guard that stood in posts at key intersections in the White House, their white armor with red stripes going down the arms distinguishing them from all other military units. Much as the Imperial Marines were easily identified by their signature black armor, the Marines in the Ducal Guard wore snow white armor with red stripes and the Karinne crest emblazoned on the breastplate. The Imperial Guard wore white armor in the palace, but on Karis, they wore black Crusader armor with a gold crest. Most KMS Marine and Naval armor was black unless they had specialist PTS jobs, the natural color of compressed Neutronium, but the gold crest on the armor made it abundantly clear just who those women were to anyone with absolutely any experience with military heraldry.

When Jason once asked why Aya didn't have the guards wear white armor like they did in the palace, she told him it was to remind them that they weren't *in* the palace.

Their destination revealed itself around a corner, the Division of System Intelligence, or the DSI. This was Miaari's realm, where she did her job as the Gamekeeper of Karis...one of the most important Gamekeeper positions among the Kimdori, Jason had managed to find out. It was Miaari's job to protect the cousins against a repeat of what happened during the Third Civil War, protect technology that the Karinnes developed that the rest of the galaxy wasn't ready to have quite yet. And since the Karinnes had more or less opened up to the Imperium, Miaari's job had become very, very busy.

The three security breaches into the system were just a handful of successes among *thousands* of attempts, and from more than just Dahnai. Every single empire in sector and several in the *quadrant* had made attempts to get surveillance or infiltrators onto the planet, usually in the form of sleeper agents trying to get past the screening process to become part of the house. Though they were in desperate need of new house members, the screening process had not been changed in any way other than to make it even more stringent. A hopeful had to pass a background check, a session with a Karinne mindbender—usually a Generation—and then get past the Kimdori...and that was no easy trick. So far, only one agent had managed to elude the screening process, and that had been someone implanted with a psychic clone. The main threat was with the temporary workers, whose screening wasn't as stringent because they were here to do a job and they were confined either to Kosigi or to the northern continent, which had only started the terraforming process. It was a barren desert up there where they were building a series of factories—almost done with them, actually—then those workers would leave Karis and return to the Imperium. Most of Miaari's work dealt with keeping those outside workers under control up in Kosigi, and it was where most of the Kimdori that worked on Karis, the Clan Thresxt, did their jobs.

Miaari was the Gamekeeper, so it was her clan that was responsible for Karis. And that in itself was yet another source of pride for her father among the Kimdori. Her daughter the Handmaiden was entrusted with one of the most critical Gamekeeper posts in the galaxy, while another daughter, the youngest Gamekeeper ever in the history of Kimdori, protected the Academy and Terra, which was also an extremely important position in that so much information flowed through Terra that it was a gold mine to the Kimdori. Nearly every spacefaring civilization in the sectors making up their entire arm of the galaxy had students, emissaries, and spies on Terra, and Kiaari managed that cesspool of intrigue with an increasingly deft hand. Kiaari often unearthed new information from Terra long before other Gamekeepers got word of it in other systems.

Miaari's office was in the main administration building just two floors below his office, and it was *big*. The place was milling with Kimdori, Faey, Terrans, a few Shio, a couple of Makati, and now a few Beryans. These were the diligent information gatherers, analysts, surveillance personnel,

and field agents that Miaari employed to keep Karis safe. Tim worked there, had his own office just down the hall from Miaari's, where he worked as an analyst, studying information to extract useful intelligence from it. He was *very* good at his job, Miaari had confided, one of her better analysts. His guards lounged about near Miaari's main secretary, a very young Kimdori male from her clan here for training, and Jason headed into Miaari's office. She was sitting at her desk in discussion with Tim, Kravakk, a Faey woman and a Shio male that Jason didn't know, which showed him more and more how multicultural the house was becoming.

"Ah, Jason," she said as the door closed. "It's good to see you, friend."

"Well, I'm here, so what's going on?" he asked, glancing at the Faey and Shio. The Faey was very young, looking to still be in inscription, tall and willowy, with pale lavender hair and luminous yellow eyes, while the Shio was a very tall man, looking youthful but experienced at the same time, with black hair that no doubt made Faey women look his way and strong amber eyes only slightly darker and richer than the woman's yellow eyes.

"Firstly. Tim and Kravakk you know, friend. This is Kini Demalle and Kendru Stormfury, two of my more recent hires. Kini is from the IBI, and Kendru is a recent acquisition from the Shio Federal Investigative Service." The IBI was the Imperium's intelligence agency, the Imperial Bureau of Intelligence. The Federal Investigative Service was one of the elite law enforcement agencies of the Shio Federation, like the FBI, sent out to investigate and solve the most daring or baffling crimes, or to track down and capture criminals that crossed system jurisdictional lines. In the Shio Federation, every system was semi-autonomous when it came to law enforcement, so if a criminal managed to cross to another system, the FIS was sent in to hunt down the criminal. The FIS was the only Shio agency that had Federation-wide law enforcement jurisdiction.

"Your Grace," they both said, Kini bowing slightly to him.

"Good to meet you," he nodded to them, taking the chair in front of her desk. "Now what's going on?"

"Denmother sent me a new packet of information about the Benga," she said. "It had little in it, but it was important for one reason. The Benga are

not resistant to telepathy as the bugs are. In fact, the bugs were engineered to resist telepathy because of the *Benga*,” she stressed, bringing up a holo of a Benga over her desk. “Approximately five percent of the Benga populace has some kind of telepathic, empathic, or psionic capability, and they use talent as a weapon, just as the Faey do.”

“So, Wolf fighters *will* be effective against them,” Jason declared, leaning on the arm of the chair, a chair designed to handle someone in armor.

“Yes, your Grace, but on a ship the size of a small moon, even a mindstriker in a Wolf would be hard pressed to take control of someone that could do any real damage,” Kravakk said.

“That’s a point,” Jason agreed, scratching his chin. “Did you send this down to Myri?”

“I will as soon as we finish,” Miaari answered. “It explains why the Consortium wants the secrets of the Generations so badly,” she continued. “It also explains why the Consortium will *only* allow their insectoids to fight. Anyone else would be vulnerable to Benga telepaths.”

“Well, I guess we’re going to find out who has better training in about three years,” Jason grunted.

“I dare say we have the advantage, my Duke,” Kini said dryly. “After all, we Faey fight each other far more than anyone else. If anything, Faey have extensive experience fighting against telepaths, where I doubt the Benga have the same background.”

“I know that my own training in telepathic combat was woefully lacking the first time I faced a Faey instructor,” Kendru said dryly. “I thought my training in the FIS prepared me for fighting another telepath. I was wrong.”

“When did you lock horns with a Faey?”

“It was *in* the FIS, my Duke,” he replied. “We hired her for formal telepathic combat training, in case one of our talented investigators had to capture a telepathic suspect. We wanted to be ready to fight in the realm of the mindscape. It was a rude awakening,” he grunted. “But it was a good move for us. Our Faey instructors prepared us for the day when we *did* have

to capture a talented Shio criminal. Our Faey telepathic battle training saved our investigator from having his brain burned out.”

“It is what we’re known for, Kendru,” Kini chuckled.

“Yeah, I remember those lessons,” Jason noted lightly. “My wife trained me. I think I spent about a solid month with a nosebleed.”

“God, I remember that,” Tim grunted. “I never believed that a telepath could do half the things that Jyslin could.”

“Well, Jys *is* in the top ten percent,” Jason noted lightly. “She would have been a mindbender if she hadn’t have washed out. She didn’t have the temperament for it.”

“Now, as to the other matter. Ladies, gentlemen, remember that this is privileged information,” Miaari said evenly, hitting a switch on her desk that put her office into secure mode. When her console beeped, she put her elbows on her desk and looked over at Jason. “Friend Jinaami has received her orders,” she declared. “She is even now formulating a plan to gain access to the IBI, so we might get a list of names of the agents they’re sending against us.”

Kini whistled. “Dangerous.”

“We are Kimdori,” Miaari said simply. “We will succeed.”

“So, any idea when we might get something back?”

“That will depend. As Kini intimated, friend Jason, breaking into the IBI is not an easy task. Only someone as clever and capable as Jinaami would be able to do it. It is not a task for anyone but a master Gamekeeper. The IBI is probably the one place with more mindbenders than anywhere else in this galaxy. Even for the Kimdori, that is a challenging obstacle to overcome. The sheer number of top-tier telepaths the IBI employs makes any attempt to infiltrate their headquarters difficult.”

“Sounds like Jinaami might need some help,” Kini said. “Even you have to admit, Miaari, the best defense against a telepath is another telepath. And I used to work there.”

“Your reports are going to help Jinaami immensely, Kini, but they *do* know you. I’m sure they’d love to get their hands on you,” she said dryly.

Kini laughed. “No doubt. I had no real loyalty to them, Miaari. Like most mindbenders, I wasn’t given much of a choice. It was work for the IBI or have my brain scrambled. Sometimes I wondered why in Trelle’s name I didn’t just wash out in phase one. I think the smart ones did it on purpose,” she growled.

Kini was a mindbender...interesting.

“You’re a mindbender, Kini?” Tim asked in surprise.

“*Was* a mindbender,” Kini corrected. “But yeah, I went through mindbender training. It’s more like brainwashing if you ask me,” she said darkly. “Half my class were psychotic, sadistic bitches.”

“Being a mindbender requires a certain...enthusiasm for the work, Kini,” Miaari said delicately.

“Yeah well, I lost that enthusiasm pretty damn fast,” Kini grunted. “I had the *tolerance* to do the work, but that tolerance went straight to the bottom of the Jerjik pit after I graduated and the IBI made me interrogate people. I don’t get off on hurting people. That’s why I’m here. I always wanted to go into law enforcement anyway,” she noted.

“So, Jinaami will be starting her operation very soon. With any luck, we will know just who programmed that psychic clone, and who else they have sent carrying them.”

“Can you find a psychic clone, Kini?” Jason asked.

She shook her head. “That’s advanced even in mindbender circles,” she answered. “I only graduated from mindbender training last year. You have to earn your diamonds in the IBI before they start teaching those advanced techniques.”

“If friend Jinaami succeeds, then we won’t *need* someone with sufficient telepathic training to find a psychic clone,” Miaari noted. “Now, on to the other matter. The summit. As much as we must defend against our allies’ attempts to gather information, this is also an opportunity for us to gather information against *them*,” she said with a toothy smile. “I’ve briefed the rest of the office, friend Jason, so let me go over my plans with you.”

Jason listened along with the others as Miaari went over both her preparations to defend against espionage and putting non-Faey telepaths

into positions where they might skim the surface thoughts of the entourages of the rulers, or the rulers themselves. There was absolutely no doubt that a majority of those staffers with the rulers were telepaths, since Karis *was* an Imperium planet that just *happened* to be the home of the most powerful telepaths in the galaxy, so they'd be insane not to bring telepaths to protect their people from telepathic snooping. This was where recently acquired people like Kravakk or Kendru were going to come in *very* handy, since nobody would be absolutely sure if they were telepaths. Faey didn't have that luxury, since even civilizations with no contact with the Faey had heard about them just through traders and rumor. Half the galaxy knew that the Faey were a race of telepaths, the only fully telepathic race in the entire galaxy.

They finished up, and Jason headed for his office to tackle his inbox, as well as attend the daily Confederate briefing. He was fairly sure that Jinaami was going to be able to pull it off. She was actually one of the most capable Kimdori, her position as the Gamekeeper of Draconis and ambassador to the Faey a glaring indication of her capability. Zaa wouldn't put just anyone in such an important position. Jason had dealt with Jinaami quite a bit over the years, and he'd held certain aspirations to get his hands on her and bring her to Karis, have her work for him...and he also rather liked her. He was very comfortable calling Jinaami a friend.

Someone that he wasn't quite so sure about in the friend department was waiting in his office when he arrived. Yila Trefani was sitting on a couch to the side, chatting with Brall. The fox-faced Grand Duchess was wearing something nearly as scandalous as she did when she talked him into buying the Paladins, a simple black halter-like top with the Trefani crest on it, elegant black slippers, a necklace and waist chain, and nothing else. She had her legs crossed demurely as she talked to Brall, then smiled when Jason came in. *Jason*, she sent easily as she patted Brall on the hand. *It's about time.*

What do you want, Yila? he asked absently as she stood up and stepped over to him as he approached Chirk's desk.

Who said I want anything?

You're not wearing panties. You want something, he answered bluntly as he accepted a handpanel from his Kizzik aide.

Yila laughed lightly, patting the shoulder of his armor. *Okay, okay, I might have some business I wanted to propose.*

Mmm-hmm, he sounded mentally, nodding at the mantis-like Chirk. And you're not sure if I'll go for it, so you came dressed for negotiation.

I'm not that predictable.

He gave her a long, steady look, and a faint flush of purple bloomed in her cheeks. *Come on, let's get this over with before I have the daily meeting.* "Hold any calls for a bit, Chirk," he told her aloud. "Yila has something on her mind."

She nodded silently.

Yila followed him into his office, then sat on the edge of his desk rather than sit in the chair beside it. "Cybi, could you come out please?" Yila called. *Lock down the office, Jason, she sent.*

Cybi manifested herself on the other side of the desk from Yila, putting her phantom feet on the carpeted floor. *"What is it, your Grace?"*

"I have some information I didn't want to bandy around," she replied, her voice much more serious.

"What's going on, Yila?"

"I don't have all the information yet, but this is what I have so far," she replied, reaching under her halter and pulling out a memory stick. "I've had my people keeping their eyes open for anything weird coming down on my side of the Imperium, and this got my attention."

"What is it?"

"Someone is trying to procure large-scale cloning equipment," she answered. "And I mean they want a factory. It's being done by a new corporation that formed with some Highborn backers, from house Luralle. They're supposed to be a medical supply company, growing cloned replacement organs. But the problem is, some of the equipment they're trying to get through the black market isn't for growing cloned organs. It's for full-sized clones, both the conception tanks and the growth acceleration tanks," she added, handing Cybi the stick.

"Full sized? As in cloned people?"

She nodded. “As you know, cloning has been illegal in the Imperium for about three thousand years,” she said. “You can’t buy those kinds of cloning tanks here, it’s massively illegal. So, the company’s trying to get cloning equipment from the Alliance. Full cloning is legal there under certain conditions. Anyway, since the interdictors make smuggling impossible now, the company’s trying to smuggle them in through the TES. If they can’t manage it, they’ll bring in Alliance engineers capable of building them from scratch to do it, but they’d rather have the vats *now*.”

Jason frowned, because it certainly did raise a red flag with him. Cloning anything other than organs or tissues was *massively* illegal in the Imperium, based on their religious beliefs. The same reason a Faey woman would never, *ever* have an abortion unless her life depended on it or undergo in vitro fertilizations was the same reason that they didn’t allow cloning. A life conceived outside the body and against the natural order was seriously, seriously against all three of their religious teachings. The very fact that any corporation in the Imperium was even *thinking* of buying cloning vats large enough to clone a person was a major aberration, and right now, anything that unusual was something that had to be checked out.

House Luralle...it was the smallest of the Highborn houses, and a staunch ally of House Merrane, as the small Highborn houses were. Carissa Luralle was a fairly young Grand Duchess that had the sense to stay out of the political machinations and intrigue that plagued court, since her house was small and not in all that much of a solid situation. She just kept to herself and listened while in court, and because of that, she was one of the few Grand Duchesses in the *Siann* that Jason didn’t mind talking to all that much. She was on the Highborn Council, but the other Highborns didn’t think that much of her because her house was small and somewhat poor compared to huge, rich houses like Doralle, Shovalle, Trillane, and Merrane. Carissa was like Anya and the other five Highborn Grand Duchesses, shunted to the side and forced to play a dangerous game to hold their position without getting pushed into anything stupid by the more powerful and ambitious Highborn houses. Much like Anya, Carissa openly allied herself to Dahnai and just went about its business while trying to stay out of the way of the more powerful houses as much as possible.

And now sensible, *I don’t take chances* Carissa was trying to smuggle cloning equipment into the Imperium? That wasn’t just unusual, that was

bizarre, and that meant that it was something that Miaari had better check out.

"How much equipment are they trying to get?" Cybi asked.

"Enough to fill an entire factory, Cybi," Yila answered. "My sources say they're bargaining with Faroll Medical for ten thousand vat systems to grow a clone to adulthood, but they're *also* trying to close a deal with Inzik-Ketrik for *twenty* thousand vat systems."

"Thirty thousand cloning units? That's some serious credits, Yila. How can they afford it?"

"That's a damn good question I'm gonna find an answer for," she replied grimly as Cybi slotted the datastick in a handpanel. "Either they're sucking a whole lot of Moridon dick, or Carissa's a whole lot richer than she pretends to be."

"I believe I should investigate their computers, Jason," Cybi said as she seemed to be reading the handpanel, though she was probably directly accessing it through the handpanel. *"They might have more data hidden in their computers that might solve the mystery."*

"Go for it, Cybi, if that's what you want to do," he answered.

"Well, I feel justified bringing this to you," Yila noted, leaning on her hand and looking over at Cybi. "When I heard about this, I immediately thought of the Generations."

"Why?"

"Because if I could, Jason, I'd clone you," she said directly. "But I'm not that crazy. I'm too tied up in the Karinnes, and besides, I'm making way too much money to topple the pillar. Thirty thousand cloning systems inside the Imperium? Someone has the same idea, and I doubt it's Carissa. She's too smart to try something like *this*. I think someone's using her house as a front to hide who they are, and they have Carissa by her bush to make her cooperate."

"You think so?"

"Jayce, dear, any of the larger Highborn houses have the resources and the ambition to try something like this," she told him seriously. "Even

without the biogenics, a Generation is stronger in talent than we are. Clone up a few hundred thousand programmed soldiers that can kick the shit out of the average Faey soldier, and you've got an army capable of challenging Dahnai for her throne."

Jason growled wordlessly, then leaned back in his chair. Fuck, Yila was right. If they were going to try something like *that*, they'd have to keep it as secret as possible, which meant they'd have to keep it inside the Imperium. No way would a Grand Duchess *dare* try to set something like that up outside the Imperium, not with the very strict entry protocols...it would be hard to explain where all the Faey coming through the TES from some other empire came from, since they'd have no records. And since Generations *were* stronger talents than regular Faey, it would give that Grand Duchess a strong army of telepaths to overwhelm others.

Fuck...this was *exactly* why Jason had pulled all his people back to Karis in the first place.

"That is a viable concern," Cybi agreed. *"Any time a Faey starts to dabble in cloning, she has something nefarious and wicked in mind. It violates the most sacred teachings of Trelle to create a life outside the womb. Such a life would have no soul."*

"Most politicians are only as religious as they need to look, Cybi," Jason grunted, to which Yila nodded with a dark smile. "Could you take that datastick to Miaari and brief her?"

"Certainly," she replied, tucking the handpanel under her arm. She then picked her feet up off the floor and floated towards the door, which opened for her.

So, you owe me now, Jason Karinne, Yila sent with a predatory smile, reaching over and patting his cheek with a manicured hand.

I certainly owe you thanks for bringing that in, he agreed.

You owe me more than that, and you know what I want.

I told you, woman, Zach gets to choose who he's going to marry, he reminded her archly. There's not going to be any betrothal unless he asks for one. And he's only five, for God's sake, he's too young to make that kind of a life-altering decision.

I knew who I wanted to marry when I was three, she snorted.

You had that choice made for you.

No, I chose Emrin, she answered easily.

You must not care all that much about him, since I've never even so much as seen him at court, he shot back.

And that's exactly why I chose Emrin, she added. He's sweet, kind, and innocent, and I don't let him know what I do. He's what little bit of a moral anchor I have in this world, she sent with a slight smile. I don't love him the way you love Jyslin, but I'm very fond of him, and he's a wonderful father. While I'm out swindling pensioners, as you love to put it, he's making sure our children are raised with love and attention. He's the perfect husband for someone like me.

And how did you decide that when you were three?

Because he used to share his oye with me, so I knew he was a kind and generous boy. And my mother always said that kind and generous boys make the best fathers, so I picked him. Besides, he was really cute. It took me six years to nag my mother into securing the betrothal, she chuckled aloud. After all, he was from House Hemalle, so it wasn't much of a political advantage for my mother to betroth me to him.

Where did you meet him?

He was the son of a minor Hemalle noble that lived on Tamiri. We'd leased out a mining operation to them, since we don't do all that much mining. So I saw him quite a bit. She leaned over and kissed him playfully on the cheek. But don't you worry, I'll convince Zach that Dara is the girl for him.

You stay out of it, Yila.

I won't have to do much of anything, she told him lightly. All I have to do is bring Dara here. She really likes him, he really likes her. Nature will take its course.

And you're sure he's going to pick a girl he only sees maybe once a takir over some girl in his class that he sees every day? My, we're very confident.

Of course I am, it's the nature of a criminal to be confident, she winked. Dara's the mystery, and you know how we adore a mystery.

Well, at least you're honest.

Never accuse me of honesty, Jayce, it's insulting, she retorted, which made him laugh helplessly. Now, as part of you paying me back for bringing this to you, you will invite me and Dara to dinner tonight, a nice little intimate dinner with just you, me, Dara, Jys, Zach, and his mother Ilia, she declared haughtily. You will have Terran steak and lobster, and you will have Ayama make another cheesecake. In fact, she's going to make two, so I have some to take home. Then you will sit with me in the hot tub while we discuss a few business ideas, maybe take a walk on the beach.

Oh, listen to this.

I know how to get back what people owe me, Jayce, she grinned, poking the upper chest of his armor.

How about I put you on the next transport back to Draconis, you demanding little bitch?

Bring it on, Jayce, I'm not afraid of you anymore.

I need to fix that, he noted dryly.

You can try, baby, you can try, she sent patronizingly, patting him on the cheek, then she uncoiled herself from his desk and sauntered out of the office, making sure to wiggle her bare butt for his benefit...mainly because she knew he really admired her butt, thought it was really sexy. And like any Faey, she loved to show off what a man thought was sexy, which explained her recent penchant for choosing attire that lacked anything below the waist and above the knees. She knew that Jason thought she had a sexy body, and in particular a very sexy ass, so she'd been showing him as much of her body as possible, particularly her ass. It was a form of harmless flirtation in Faey society, so he didn't take it seriously.

But she was certainly a piece of work. Sometimes he wondered if it was worth it to be her friend, but what she'd brought to him just a few minutes ago proved she was worth the aggravation. Yila had her hands elbow deep in almost everything going on in the Imperium, and she was one of the few

that could have found out what she'd brought to him...something that made him get a strange sense of dread.

Clones. Something about it just made a chill go up his spine, because Yila was right. Someone out there had finally come up with the one thing he hoped they wouldn't consider, and that was trying to clone a Generation. It made him triply glad that the only Generations not on Karis were deeply entrenched in Dahnai's palace, virtually untouchable to whichever Grand Duchess got that bright idea.

Even if it didn't concern him, some house trying to bring in a large-scale cloning operation, well, that was something that Miaari needed to check out anyway. It was completely against both Faey law and religion, so that meant that it was not something that was meant for anything moral, ethical, or even beneficial.

At least Yila wasn't being an insufferable bitch.

He decided to humor her at least to the point where Ayama served grilled steak and lobster, with *ruga* roots cooked on the grill, salad, *imi* beans, and cheesecake for dessert. Dara was running around after dinner with Zach and Rann, heading for the beach so they could build a sand castle, Ilia and Jyslin walking behind them after shedding their clothes, not bothering to go get their bikinis on *just* to take them off again when they got there, finally adopting Jason's mentality when it came to the beach. Jason and Yila, however, stayed behind, and Kumi joined them in the hot tub as the fox-faced, dangerous Grand Duchess broached a few new business ideas to Kumi with Jason there listening, since he had to approve most of them. Kumi did a lot on her own, but when it came to factory production or replicator access, Jason would find out about it, so they had to tell him about it. Yila wasn't proposing anything outrageous, thank goodness, just some trade deals between the Karinne/Trefani business alliance and some of the more distant empires. They'd gotten their claws into the Verutan sector through metal sales to the Verutans, and there were six other major spacefaring civilizations in that sector, which meant six other potential trade partners. To trade that far away, what Yila was fishing for more than anything else was space on Karinne freighters not tied up in the Skaa food efforts, since Karinne freighters that weren't robotic could jump in real

time, and that translated to profit. Karinne also employed robotic freighters, but they didn't put their jump engines in those, since they were too easy to capture. The ability to jump trade goods to the Verutan sector in real time was a major cash cow, since it was a 15 day jump from the two closest systems between the Imperium and the Verutan Empire...which ironically was Karis. From the next closest system, Praxis, it was a 19 day jump to the Verutan system of Urkarr.

Strange, though, that Yila was getting so...well, *cozy* with him and Kumi. She had to have something else up her sleeve outside of just trying to get her daughter married off to Zach. But he also couldn't deny that in a weird way, he rather liked Yila Trefani. She was an unrepentant criminal, thief, and all-around bad girl, but she was also intelligent, charming, and affable. In some ways, she reminded Jason of Semoya, one of the most well-liked Grand Duchesses, but also one of the most feared.

But business only went so far at his house before much more fun things presented themselves. Symone stepped out of her house on the far side of the hot tub deck with nothing but a towel over her shoulder, showing off her sexy body, then she climbed into the hot tub and snuggled up to Jason *Mmmm, hey baby*, she purred mentally, putting her hand on his chest. That contact told him everything he needed to know; Symone was on the prowl.

Well, about time you got home, lover, he told her, looking down into her eyes. *What took so long?*

We had to test over a hundred Gladiators today, she replied. *They've almost doubled production of 'em, so all the riggers are putting in extra time getting them off the line and into service.*

That's what you do, Symone? You're a rigger? Yila asked.

More or less, she replied. *He won't let me do anything fun, so I'm stuck testing the units off the production line and making sure they're ready for service. But I still get to blow stuff up, so it's all good*, she added with a grin that made Kumi laugh.

Nothing but practice targets, but at least those don't shoot back, Jason noted. *Have you tested the missile pods yet?*

Yeah, we just got the first of them three days ago. They're pretty cool, she replied. The missile pods were an external add-on system that the

engineers had designed, like the flight pods, that armed a Gladiator with 72 Hellstorm mini-missiles. They were primarily defensive weapons, the Hellstorms designed to intercept incoming missiles, but they could also be used offensively to fire on enemy targets. It was a necessary addition since the Consortium used missiles a great deal, giving Gladiators an extra layer of defense on top of their shields and armor. The Hellstorm system connected to the rig's left shoulder, across from the railgun scabbard, and it was just one external shoulder-mounted system the engineers were designing for the mecha. Gladiators were built to be modular, able to equip and utilize multiple external systems, which they called pods. They were also designing a heavy pulse cannon pod for the Gladiator that could fire a heavy-mount pulse cannon, the kind whose shots explode after penetrating rather than just dissipating like infantry-level pulse weapons did. The power requirements for the heavy mount version was too much for smaller mecha, and even a Gladiator needed an additional power plant in the pod to augment its own power plant to fire the shoulder-mounted heavy cannon. It couldn't fire *only* on the Gladiator's power plant. Well, technically, it could, but the rigger would have to literally shut down every system on the rig except the pulse cannon. *What are you guys up to?*

Not much, just discussing how we can open up new trade routes into the Verutan sector, Yila answered. *After I made him serve me Terran steak and lobster anyway,* she added with a sly smile at him.

Be lucky, I have to suck his dick to get that kind of treatment, Symone replied with a naughty tilt to her thoughts.

You do not!

Well, maybe not have to, but I love to do it anyway, she sent, throwing all kinds of sexual innuendo at him as her hand slid under the water meaningfully.

I think we're being dismissed, Yila noted lightly to Kumi.

Not Symone, she'll do it right in front of us, Kumi answered with a dirty smile. *She's way more fun than Jyslin is.*

Symone, you dirty girl, Yila laughed.

I'm the kinky one in the family, Symone sent back shamelessly. *Shall we give them a show, lover?* Symone sent as nastily as possible, her hand

gripping him...and naturally, she got a response. She was his *amu dorai*, she was in the mood, and she knew how to get him excited. Of course, her tongue in his ear certainly was helping that along.

He was almost thankful when Cybi broke in. [*Jason, Myri needs to talk to you immediately,*] she communed.

[*Thank god, I think you just saved me from a compromising position,*] he answered.

[*Symone can be enthusiastic, I've noticed,*] Cybi answered lightly.

Sorry, love, Cybi just told me that Myri needs to talk, he said, disengaging himself from her. She pouted a bit but didn't press the issue.

Alright, but hurry up. I'll be in your bedroom, she sent sensually.

Jason dried off on his way up to his study, and as soon as he got in and put in secure mode, he used his gestalt to get in touch with Myri, causing a wall-sized hologram to shimmer into being on the far side of his desk. She was in the main situation room along with all the generals, and the place was pretty busy. "What's going on, hon?" he asked.

"The Consortium is on the move," she replied. "A significant fleet just jumped out of the PR sector heading here."

"How big?"

"Three thousand ships," she replied. "En route to Trieste, and we estimate they'll be here in about three days."

"What? How much of their fleet is that?"

"About a quarter of it," she replied. "Nearly half of the jumped fleet are Imxi ships. Those fuckin' Imxi have a four thousand ship navy. I don't see how they fuckin' *paid* for it."

"Most of them are corvettes and small destroyers, though," Navii noted. "Those aren't that hard to build, at least for us."

"How many ships do we have in the PR sector?"

"Two hundred and nine," Juma answered. "As well as a heavy garrison of automated weaponry."

"Their defenses?"

“The Kimdori are conducting surveillance as we speak, we’re waiting for their report,” Juma replied, looking away and pointing at something, then snapping her fingers. An aide came into the hologram and gave her a handpanel. “We’re getting some images in from Trieste, as well. Hold on.”

The hologram split, and he saw some video of Trieste. He saw the Consortium moving their ships *inside* the moon, flying them down the tunnel they dug into the moon to install those hyperspace jump engines.

“They’re definitely making a major move,” Jason grunted. “I think when we took out that quantum phase device, they decided to do something else.”

“Most likely, Jason,” Navii agreed. “We should alert the war room on Terra and prepare the Confederation for an attack. I have a hunch that the Consortium is about to launch a major offensive. I think they’ve realized that the KMS has its forces split between the home sector and the PR sector, so they may try to pull us back here by attacking anything and everything they can using the Imxi ships.”

“How are they *getting* those ships here?” Jason asked with a growl. “The Imxi’s hyperspace technology is about two hundred years behind mainstream. They couldn’t even *manage* to jump their ships across the galaxy, yet here are some three thousand Imxi ships in transit.”

“Odds are they’re being towed behind the Consortium ships,” Juma reasoned. “Consortium ships utilize those oversized engines, Jason, they could *easily* tow the smaller Imxi ships through.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right,” Jason agreed. “They might even be able to tow two or three ships, if they’re corvettes.” He studied the images from Trieste. “Is there some way we can break up this little party? Think we could ambush their fleet in transit to Trieste?”

“They’re smarter than they used to be, Jason. They’re not making the jump in one trip. For one, they have the Imxi with them, so they have to stop and rest. That’s why I told you it’s going to take three days for them to get here, Jason,” Juma noted. “If they didn’t have the Imxi, they could have their entire fleet over here in 238 minutes. With them dropping out and conducting sensor sweeps, setting up an ambush for them wouldn’t be easy.”

“Well, we can put a few traps in front of them, along the likely trajectories,” Jason grunted. “That won’t take much in the way of resources, and we might get lucky. I’ll get 3D on it as soon as I can.” He blew out his breath. “Fuck. Let me get my armor on, and I’ll be in, we can talk about this face to face. Cybi,” he called. She manifested her hologram in front of his desk. “Get the Legion back to 3D as soon as you can and tell them I’ll be there as soon as I’m done over at the White House. Tell them what’s coming and to start thinking of ways we can slow down that fleet.”

“I’ll get right to it, your Grace,” she nodded, then her hologram winked out.

His hologram split again, and Zaa’s face appeared unsolicited. “Jason, I see you already know,” she said. “Generals.”

“Denmother,” Myri replied with a nod. “Any word from the surveillance ships?”

“They’re conducting scans of PR systems now,” she replied. “But the information I bring comes from my infiltrators on the command station in the nebula. The fleet from the PR sector was deployed to Trieste in preparation to attack Karis. My children haven’t discovered the exact means, but they have discovered that the Consortium believes they have an alternate method to bypass the interdicator, using their current technology in some new application. From what my children report, this is the first of a series of ship movements. The Consortium intends to bring the majority of the Imxi fleet to Trieste as they build whatever device they plan to try to bypass the interdicator.”

“Their ships just don’t have the power to overcome the interdiction effect,” Jason protested.

“I know. This is something else. I don’t know what it is yet, and the Consortium is understandingly being extremely secretive about it. They know we have eyes on the inside, so whatever it is they’ve come up with, it’s only known to only those with critical need to know it.”

“Juma, I want you to get the *Victory* and *Jenda* to tow a Stargate out to the PR sector *right now*,” Jason said immediately.

“We don’t have a Stargate to spare, Jason,” Juma protested.

“We have two available, Juma. We can take the one in the quasar and keep it linked to its sister gate here, we don’t need those anymore now that we can jump interdicted space,” Jason replied. “The only reason we left them up and running was as an emergency way into Karis around the interdictor in case a ship without our jump engines had to get here in a hurry. Denmother, can your ships drag that Stargate out of the radiation shield and bring it to Karis? But leave the shielding up in the bubble, we might have use for that.”

“I will do so immediately, cousin,” Denmother said. She turned her head to look to her side and nodded. “It will be at Karis in two hours.”

“Alright, now we get that Stargate to PR-371 as fast as we possibly can, so our ships there can get back here, and also give us a window back to the PR sector. I’ll tell the Legion to send even more defensive toys there to protect the system while we’re away.”

“I will keep a ship large enough to tow the Stargate at PR-371 and remove it in case it is threatened,” Zaa offered.

“That sounds perfect, thank you, Denmother,” Myri nodded.

“Have them tow that Stargate *carefully*, General Myri, your towing ship might literally cross paths with the Consortium fleet.”

“We’ll make sure they take a less direct route, Denmother,” Myri answered.

“I’ll have a task force ready to take possession of the gate as soon as it gets here, then deploy it to PR-371,” Juma said.

“I’ll be right over,” Jason said, “unless you have anything more to report, Denmother?”

“No, I have my own tasks to oversee, cousin. I will contact you when I have more information.”

“Alright then. I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

“We’ll have your chair ready for you in the corner, Jason,” Myri said with a slight smile, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“I probably won’t be there long enough to complain,” he replied. He got up as the hologram winked off, then he opened to door directly to his room.

Symone was laying on the bed, naked and in a sensual pose, and she stretched languidly as he stepped in.

It's about time, baby, I was starting to get lonely.

I'm afraid you'll have to go chase down Tim, love, he sent with sincere regret as the armory door slid open, and his armor stand slid out on its motorized mount. *Something really big is going down, so I have to go in to work.*

Aww, come on, I'm seriously in the mood, she complained.

Baby, believe me, nothing would make me happier than trying to break the bed, but work always come before fun. It even comes before sex, he sent seriously as he picked up the codpiece of his armor. *Kaera,* he called.

She's off, your Grace, Hara answered. *I traded some hours with her.*

Hara, track down two guards, I have to go to the White House, and then to 3D afterward, he told her.

I'll have them at the corvette as soon as you're ready.

Good girl. Jyslin, he reached out. *I have to go to work, something came up.*

Alright, love. Danelle's staying over the next couple of days, so she'll be here when you get back.

Okay. Yila, I'm not coming back, he told her, sending openly. *Something's going on, the Consortium just made a big move. Go ahead and head home.*

Kumi offered to take me a couple of nightclubs, I think I'm going to hang around a bit, Jayce.

Whatever, but I'm gonna be busy. Probably real busy.

Keep me up to speed, if you can.

Aya was off duty, but she roused Dera and Ryn from the barracks to accompany Jason. They were standing by the corvette hatch when he got there, and he explained what was going on as he boarded the Marine corvette *Broadsword*, and sat back in the tactical post as they took the four minute ride to the White House. When he reached the main command

center, Myri already had Lorna and most of the generals and commanders of Confederate forces on holos around the main display console, along with a tactical map of the galaxy showing the position of the Consortium forces. The Confederate command staff had increased with the inclusion of the Jobodi, who was sitting between a Shio and a Stevak from the Alliance. The Stevak really stood out. Stevak were one of the most unusual sentient, spacefaring species in the galaxy, because they weren't a carbon based life form. They were silicon based, and that fundamental difference had created, literally, a living thing made of stone. Stevak had a mineral exoskeletal covering protecting their soft tissues—which was a relative comparison, since they were mineral-based—so they resembled stone-covered, seven-foot-tall gorillas. Their arms were so long that they could put them on the ground and walk on all fours just by slouching, kind of like a gorilla, and when they did that, they were capable of bursts of speed of up to 40 miles an hour for short distances. What made them somewhat disturbing was the fact that their faces had three eyes behind an armored lid that looked like the visor of a helmet, and a small mouth with no teeth, just a ridge of bone-like rock behind their lips that were sharp enough to chop up food and strong enough to crush rock. Being silicon based, their diet was also radically different from most other species. They literally ate silicon in addition to the meat of carbon-based and silicon-based creatures, and *only* meat. They were incapable of digesting the vast majority of plant-based food. Things like sand and glass were something of a food source for them as well, what they used to replenish and maintain their armored exoskeleton. They were a silicon-based species that evolved by preying on both carbon-based life forms and other silicon-based life forms that shared their home planet, eating only meat and sand and sandstone.

What was creepiest was that they were genderless. A Stevak produced one offspring every twenty years in a cycle they called “the budding,” and it was consistent through the entire race. Every twenty years, all Stevak returned to their home planet and produced an offspring, all at the same time, which effectively doubled the Stevak population every twenty years. A Stevak youth couldn't survive anywhere but on their home planet, due to its unique ecosystem. Only after they finished growing could a Stevak leave.

“There’s little doubt that this is meant to be a second offensive against us,” the Stevak declared in its raspy, bellows-like voice. “With Faroll interdicted, they’re likely to go after the closest systems to Trieste, primarily Stevon and Hashir,” it surmised. “We should move defensive forces to those systems.”

“That or an interdictor,” Lorna said, looking at Jason. “Are there any extra ones available?”

“Lemme look,” Jason said as he sat down, bringing up the inventory with his gestalt. “There’s only one available right now, General Shaddale. So you’d better decide where it’s gonna be the most useful. But before you start planning, let me give you what Denmother just got in, like ten minutes ago,” he said. “She got information that this fleet movement is the first of a series of deployments to bring the Imxi fleet to our sector. Her infiltrators found out that the Consortium thinks they’ve come up with some other way to get around the interdictor, so they’re bringing their fleet in and massing it in preparation.”

“That does explain a few things, but it doesn’t mean that they’re just going to sit at Trieste,” she answered. “It would behoove them to harass the local Alliance systems to keep us on the defensive.”

“That’s true,” Jason agreed.

“If only we could interdict Trieste, but the Consortium would wipe out the population,” Queen’s Admiral Gr’Vess grunted.

“That will be our last resort,” Lorna said. “I don’t think anyone at this table wants to see some five billion Alliance citizens exterminated.”

“Stevon is the more precarious of those two systems,” the Shio said, wearing Admiral’s rank. “Our Stevaki friends cannot afford a wholesale disruption of the delicate balance of their home planet.”

“I should be selfless and discount you, Admiral, but I will not,” the Stevak grunted. “The Budding takes place in two years. The preparations have already begun.”

“Alright, so we interdict Stevon and have the Karinnes add it to the logistical schedule. Any objections?” Lorna asked. When nobody at the table said a word, she nodded. “That means we can concentrate our main

defensive pickets at Hashir. That gives our fleets response to the other Alliance systems in that area,” she said, studying the holographic starmap showing the 12 Alliance systems on that side of their territory, with Trieste being close to the edge. “From the intelligence we’ve gotten, the Imxi ships won’t be as much as a threat as the Consortium ships, but ships are ships,” she grunted.

“They’ve been installing Torsion weapons on the Imxi ships,” Jason supplied. “That makes them dangerous enough. Did you get the logs and video of the Imxi ships attacking our ships?”

“We’ve analyzed it, but it doesn’t give us much useful information, Jason,” Lorna chuckled, giving him a wry smile. “Your ships destroyed them too fast for us to get any real idea of what they can do, especially since they didn’t really fire back.”

“Well, blame my girls for being smart,” Jason said with a smile.

“Holding them outside Torsion range is one of our best tactics,” Myri piped in with a chuckle.

“The big question is what they’re going to do when they reach Trieste,” Lorna grunted, staring at the hologram, which cast a pale light over the scar on her face, which passed down through her eyebrow and upper cheek. The eye between those scars was cybernetic. “If they’re starting to mass for an attack on Karis, then their best course of action would be to try to retake the Alliance systems to hide what they’re doing. But they also wouldn’t want to risk too many ships. And if the Imxi can’t jump in real time, then they’d have to risk their *own* ships. Hmmm,” she mused, studying the map.

“It comes down to whatever this alternate plan they have is, and how fast they can implement it,” Jason told her and the other military leaders. “They must have shelved it in favor of the quantum phase device, but when we blew that up, they brought this other plan back out. Their primary target has always been Karis, and specifically Cybi.”

“Are your people ready for something like that, your Grace?” the Shio admiral asked.

“As ready as we can be,” Jason grunted. “Even with half our fleet in the PR sector, Karis has some pretty heavy defenses. Our fleet will be the *least* of their worries when they attack,” Jason grunted. “But we do need to slow

them down a little, and I think I have an idea how to draw them back to the PR sector.”

“The nebula?” Myri asked.

Jason shook his head. “Denmother got intelligence that suggests that this is the first of a series of ship deployments to bring the Imxi fleet to our sector. Well, I don’t know how enthusiastic the Imxi will be to leave their *own* empire undefended when the KMS starts attacking their systems. And I don’t mean with toys. Sioa, draw up plans for a ground invasion of, hold on,” he said, bringing up a list of Imxi systems. “PR-88. It’s got three inhabited planets, and two of them are arable. That’s a major prize, and it should foment a little discord between the Imxi and the Consortium. They may want to conquer and rule, but they may not be so willing to throw all their ships in with the Consortium if it means losing their own systems.”

“What do we know of the Imxi?” Lorna asked him. “I haven’t had time to read the reports on them.”

“They’re vulnerable to talent,” Jason said simply.

“Ah. That means the ground attack will be successful,” Lorna nodded. “Just consider the *politics* of invading PR-88, your Grace. I think the Confederate rulers might have something to say about that system.”

“I have no intention of keeping it, Lorna,” he replied. “I just want to slow down the Imxi from coming *here*. The Karinnes have no desire to hold planets on the other side of the galaxy, especially ones holding a hostile race that’s highly aggressive. The Karinnes are *not* conquerors, there is no member of this house that didn’t come to us willingly, and we’re not about to change that policy. We’ll invade and occupy the system to provoke the Imxi, then pull them out when the Imxi respond. It’s a delaying tactic, nothing more.”

“An effective one, if it has *two* arable planets,” the Shio admiral agreed.

“It has some possibilities,” Navii agreed. “We should also consider using small attack craft like corvettes and gunboats to attack Imxi supply routes, ships that can jump in real time and have the firepower to attack and destroy freighters and supply ships quickly, then jump out before the Imxi can respond. Disrupting the Imxi empire’s operations would make them

extremely reluctant to commit the bulk of their forces to this side of the galaxy.”

“I have lots of toys over there, Navii, I’ll tell Maggie and Jake to do just that,” he said. “Going after their freighters is more along the lines of what the Legion does anyway.”

“How many small attack craft do you have over there?” Admiral Gr’Vess asked.

“There are twenty corvettes and sixteen gunboats deployed with Task Force Seven,” Sioa answered. “That should be enough to cause some chaos.”

“That just might work, your Grace,” Lorna agreed. “Now, how many KMS ships are on the board on this side?”

“A little over a hundred are available,” Juma replied. “Including our newest capitol ship, the *Iyaneri*. It was commissioned just a takir or so ago, and just finished its initial shakedown cruise.”

“Good, good,” Gr’Vess chuckled raspily, smiling. “Those should be kept at a state of constant readiness to respond if the Consortium sortie out from Trieste.”

“Actually, I think it would be a good idea to bring the *Iyaneri* to Hashir so we can use it as a command center and have it there to react if the Consortium moves,” Lorna said. “Would that be alright, your Grace?”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it. Do you guys?” he asked his generals.

“It would be good to get him out into the theater. A flagship does little good sitting in orbit at his home planet,” Juma replied. “I can have a task force ready for deployment in two hours.”

“We should send the carrier as well,” Myri said. “They could use some field experience.”

“And that puts all those fighters in position to fight off a surprise attack,” Juma chuckled with a nod.

“Alright then, let’s go with that. We’ll jump the task force to Faroll, so it can sit in defensive picket until the Confederate fleet arrives at Hashir. How

long of a jump is it for Confederate ships from Faroll to Hashir?”

“Two days, sixteen hours,” the Stevak replied.

“So they’ll beat the Consortium fleet to Trieste,” Jason noted. “Good. How are the defenses at the other systems?”

“Improving daily, thanks to automated weapon platforms the factories are cranking out,” the Skaa admiral spoke up. “Every Confederate system not behind an interdictor has both a Skaa defensive picket and weapon platforms in place. Our allies have graciously allowed us to move our defense ships into Alliance systems.”

“We won’t say no, Admiral,” the Stevak answered. “Given you have so many.”

“Numbers are our strength, my comrade,” the Skaa said simply. “And it’s easy to defend even with obsolete ships, when you have enough of them.”

Jason almost chuckled. He’d seen that particular viewpoint in action, back when the Consortium first attacked the Skaa, and were repelled by uncountable hordes of smaller, older ships. Their tactic was to build dedicated defensive corvettes and frigates and reinforce them with older naval ships when they were replaced in the active navy with newer or bigger ships. The Skaa didn’t mothball their old ships, they sent them to planetary defense force pickets. And now the Skaa had moved their defense forces from interdicted systems to Alliance systems, since they weren’t needed at the interdicted systems anymore. It must have taken the freighters *weeks* to tow them all out.

The Skaa’s advantage was sheer numbers, and they made sure to exploit that even when it came to naval combat. Trying to launch a ground attack on any Skaa system would be the definition of insanity.

“Alright, it sounds like that’s our best course of action,” Lorna stated. “We’ll get the Confederate fleet to Hashir and let the KMS wait at Faroll. Just have your captain be ready to accept the fleet admiral,” she told Jason and Myri. “I have no doubt he’ll want to use the *Iyaneri* for his flagship.”

“That’s not a problem,” Jason replied.

“Given how important this operation is to the Alliance and to my own people, I think I’ll handle this personally,” the Stevak declared. “I’ll depart for Faroll as soon as we’re done here and take command of the theater.”

“If you want, Admiral Gnud,” Lorna answered. “It’s certainly your privilege as a staff officer.”

“My thanks, General,” Gnud replied.

“Just be a little wary of Captain Haema,” Jason said lightly. “Her ship is brand new, so I have no doubt she’ll be overprotective.”

“All captains are when their ships are newly commissioned,” the Stevak replied with a rocky smile.

“We all have some things to arrange, so let’s meet again in two hours,” Lorna suggested. “Admiral Juma said it would take two hours to assemble her task force.”

“About that, General,” Juma nodded.

“Then let’s reconvene in two standard hours,” she prompted.

When the holograms blinked out, Jason looked at his three military commanders and their mentor. *Sioa, how many Imxi systems do you think we could overrun in ten days?*

Depending on how we do it, maybe six, she replied. More than that if we just go in and smash their defenses then jump out, less if we deploy ground forces and try to hold the planets in the systems.

Alright. I want you to draw up plans to invade both PR-88 and PR-106 to start out with. That’s one of their major food producers and one of their biggest industrial hubs. That should seriously get their attention. If it doesn’t, then we’ll invade PR-70 and PR-122. That scatters out the invaded systems to the far corners of their territory and makes it harder for them to consolidate a response without Consortium assistance.

That’s rather clever, your Grace, Navii chuckled.

I’ve been known to think of clever things from time to time, Navii, he smiled. Minimize contact between our ground forces and the civilians, Sioa. And make sure our rockjumpers can pull out in a hurry when they get the order. We will not be interdicting. We’ll have one there to turn on in case we

think they're going to send too many to get our girls off the planet, but the idea is to draw them back to the PR sector.

I know what you mean, and that'll be relatively easy to do, she nodded. After all, we don't intend to stay there.

Exactly. We go in, invade, make a lot of noise, and try to pull the Imxi back to protect their own territory. Every ship we pull to us is a ship that doesn't go to Trieste. Mainly because we'll be able to blow them up much easier over there, he stressed with a grin. We do to them what they did to us, make them fight a war on two fronts.

We do need to interdict, Jason, Sioa injected. Even if everyone's all but sitting on the troop ships, it's still going to take about an hour to get them all out of there. Besides, if the idea is to keep the Imxi in their own territory, then taking two or three of their most important systems and denying them to them will make them crowd the other systems to keep us from taking them. Meanwhile, we establish a garrison behind a hard shield in the capitol city of every system to pour salt in their eyes, but otherwise just leave the systems alone. If that fighter is any indication of Imxi technology, they won't be a threat to our ground units. We just establish the hard shield out of Torsion rifle range, and there's nothing they can do.

That might work. How many interdictors do we have available?

On their side, they have two interdictors on top of the one protecting PR-371. They're the emergency backup and the one we were going to put at the nebula to trap the energy beings in the nebula so we could capture them. There's none on the board right now over here, but four are coming off the production line in the next 29 hours. So, if we're going to do this, I suggest we invade PR-88 and PR-106, like you initially suggested. We strip them of their biggest food producer and their major industrial center, then roam a strike force around their territory, jumping in, attacking, then jumping out, just trying to do damage and keep them from leaving to protect what they have left. Guerilla tactics, something I know you're well versed with, Jayce.

I like it. It does maximum damage with minimum risk, Navii agreed with a nod. We can use a fast attack package of destroyers, corvettes, and gunboats, ships so fast that they can't possibly hope to keep up with them.

Myri, that sound good? Jason asked.

Yeah, I say we go with it, she agreed.

I'll make the orders, Juma offered. *Should we just let Palla organize the ground assault, or do you want to do it, Sioa?*

She's a great captain but doesn't have much experience in ground attacks. I'll design an invasion plan. Give me four hours, then we can send down the orders.

Alright, sounds good. I'm going to go talk to Miaari, guys, see what the Kimdori know that they haven't gotten to us yet, Jason announced. *Keep me up to speed on what's going on.*

No problem, Jayce, Myri nodded.

Jason went up to Miaari's office, which was jumping. Miaari was in, as was Tim and most of her staff, poring over images being fed to them. When he got to her office, he used her comm to bring up Maggie and Jake. They looked a little sleep, Maggie's red hair a serious case of bed head. "What's up, Jayce?"

"Prepare our inventory for something we know how to do, Mags," he answered, then explained their plans. "We'll have much better success choking off their supply lines than we did trying to fight a straight-up war," he concluded. "I want the Imxi to be so afraid to jump a freighter that the crews of them make out their wills before departing."

Maggie gave a wicked little smile. "We can do that, no sweat. We've already mapped out their main supply routes thanks to the Kimdori, so we know where to set up the ambush spots. Give us three hours, boss, and we'll have a plan ready to make those four-armed cavemen wet themselves. You can talk to Myri and tell her we're going to need to borrow four of the gunboats over here to carry the inventory. We can't use jump boomers for this, we have to jump shit in real time."

"Just tell Palla, you guys have blanket authority. If you need those gunboats, she'll give them to you."

"This is shit we're good at doing," Jake added with a grin. "It'll almost be like old times."

“That’s why we’re the best when it comes to being asses, Jake,” Jason chuckled as Miaari came in.

“Yup, it’s time for Maggie Mac to go PMS all over the Imxi,” Maggie declared, which made Jake burst out laughing.

“Don’t have *too* much fun, Mags,” Jason warned with a smile. “And give Palla some help with some of our toys. The KMS is going to invade two systems over there on top of us attacking Imxi supply lines, it’s all to try to keep the Imxi from allowing their ships to be deployed over here. Mainly, have the solar collectors we still have in stock ready to deploy to back up the ground forces. One or two shots from one of those will scare the piss out of the Imxi, especially if they can’t do anything about it.”

“I know just what to do, boss,” Maggie nodded. “We’ll supply them some of our other toys as well, we won’t need all *that* many if we’re going after freighters.”

“That’s why you two are there, guys. Now do 3D proud.”

“You bet we will,” Jake nodded, and Jason cut the communication after they said their goodbyes.

“Any more missives from Denmother, friend?” Jason asked as he got up from Miaari’s chair and let her take it. It was *her* office, after all.

“Not yet, but we’re busy analyzing Go’jur’mi, trying to figure out what they’re up to,” Miaari replied. “We can’t get anything inside that moon to see what’s going on, it’s too close to the system and they’ll pick up our infiltrators with passive mass sensors. I think Denmother will authorize field agents to attempt to infiltrate. We need eyes *inside*.”

“I thought we already had them.”

“No, we have no units inside Trieste,” she shook her head. “What intel we have from there we picked up from the Consortium’s communications. We know what they do from their own status reports.”

“Damn,” Jason grunted, taking off his gauntlet. “What we need you to do is get in touch with Denmother and explain this to her,” he said offering his hand. She took it, and he felt that sensation of *expansion* that came when a Kimdori interfaced with his nervous system. She took in all their plans inside a second, then nodded.

“Clever,” she praised as she let go of his hand. “I’ll inform Denmother, and she’ll direct our surveillance to provide accurate information for Palla and Maggie.”

Jason sat in the chair in front of her desk. “We might have to activate the spiders, Miaari,” he said with a dark grunt. “We have no idea what the Consortium has up its sleeve, and I get the feeling that they’re gonna pull it off as soon as they get those ships to Trieste. Everything may go to hell in a handbasket.”

“We may, but not yet,” Miaari replied, putting her elbows on her desk and putting her hands under her muzzle, supporting it. “Activating the spiders tells the Consortium that we have a presence there. If they fail, we’ll never get another chance. We should save the spiders for the eventuality that we have to attack Trieste, or when we’re certain that they’re about to begin their operation. To use them prematurely gives them a chance to counter them. We have until those ships gather at Trieste. Only when they arrive should we consider the spiders.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like the idea of letting them gather all those ships in one place, *then* attacking them,” Jason replied. “That’s why we’re going after the Imxi, to slow down those ship movements and try to drive a wedge between the Imxi and the Consortium.”

“Well, either way, there is little else you can do now, Jason,” she said. “You should go home and get some rest.”

“No, Lorna’s gonna call back in about an hour, I should be there.”

“That’s Myri’s job, not yours,” she told him. “Go home, Jason. Get some rest, and we’ll get you back up to speed in the morning.”

“I guess I can,” he yawned. “It’s not that late, but I am a little tired.”

Jason was taken home, and after saying goodbye to his guards, he carried his helmet up to his house. Ayama wordlessly offered him a cup of coffee when he came in, and he took it with a grateful nod. He could sense that neither Jyslin nor Symone were home, but Rann and Danelle was... which was a bit odd. He went upstairs to take his armor off, bypassing to look in on Rann and Danelle. They were in his room, awake, playing a game on the vidlink. *Hey kidlets*, Jason sent as he came in. *What you doing?*

Just playing a game, Daddy, Rann replied. What happened that you had to leave?

The Consortium is making a move, I had to go talk to Myri and Miaari about it, he replied. It's almost bedtime, guys, so find a place to wrap it up. Have you had a bath yet?

Nuh-uh, Danelle answered.

Well, finish up your game and we'll take care of that. Where's your mother, Rann?

She and Aunt Symone went out somewhere. Mommy said she'd be back before bedtime.

Huh. Well, we'll have everything done before she gets home, That's her punishment for not being here, he smiled.

Jason herded his son and his adopted daughter into the bathroom after he got his armor off, and he relaxed in the tub while they showered, pondering the Consortium's moves. They must have been working on more than one way to attack Karis at once, just in case the Karinnes countered one of them...which was only smart. It was what *he* would do if he were in that situation. Whatever their backup plan was, it couldn't be as effective as the quantum phase device, but since he had no idea what that plan was, he almost felt stupid for blowing up the quantum phase device now. At least, they *knew* about. Now he was going to worry about what else they had planned, something major enough to incite a major force movement. He wasn't sure how effective attacking the Imxi's systems was going to be, but it was a good idea. The Consortium was using the Imxi, and not just for their ships. Their resources were being used as well, and wreaking havoc on the Imxi's systems would disrupt the flow of materials and hopefully knock a dent in the Consortium's master plan, in addition to trying to prevent the Imxi from committing their navy to the Consortium cause.

Knowing the Consortium, they would simply abandon the Imxi to the mercy of the Karinnes, take their ships, then attack Karis with them. But, the *Imxi* might not allow that to happen. The best-case scenario was the Imxi declaring war on the Consortium. The worst-case scenario was the Consortium and Imxi military abandoning its civilians to Karinne attack, with the intent of coming back after the fall of Karis and retaking the

systems. It was just going to come down to where the Imxi stood, if their society would allow harm to come to their own to further the Consortium's goals.

One thing they'd better start considering is a siege of Karis. If the Consortium pulled off this plan of theirs and somehow got that fleet to Karis, then they'd be fighting a fleet of thousands and thousands of ships, but those ships would have to get past Karis' last and strongest defense.

Jason himself.

Danelle climbed into the soaking tub and sat on his lap, her little legs straddling his and her hands on his chest, a very improper position given they were both nude...but Faey didn't think like that. *[Are you alright, Daddy Jason?]* she asked seriously.

[I'm fine, pippy,] he replied, giving her a gentle smile and pulling her into a warm hug. *[Thank you for your concern. You're always so thoughtful.]*

[Well, is there anything we can do to help?]

[Just keep being you, Danelle,] he answered, touching her tiny nose with his own, which made her giggle a little. *[Sometimes I'm amazed that your mother doesn't murder me for keeping her so busy, which keeps her away from you.]*

[You can be honest, Daddy Jason, she loves that stuff she does. But I don't mind, I know she loves me,] she replied seriously. *[And I know how important it is. Mommy says all the time that if not for her, the Consortium people might destroy our home.]*

[That's more or less true,] Jason chuckled aloud. *[Your mother's not just my best friend in all the world, pippy, she's one of the most important people on Karis. She's way smarter than me, so she's the one that handles all the technology.]*

[Well, at least when she's busy, I always get to stay here,] she grinned impishly. *[It's almost as good as being with Mommy.]*

[Don't let her hear you say that or she'll tear my hair out,] Jason laughed. Rann climbed over the side of the tub and promptly fell in,

broaching the swirling water and spitting out a mouthful of water. *[Careful there, Rann,]* Jason warned.

[I'm okay, just missed the step,] he replied. *[Look at what I learned how to do today!]*

[Show me.]

Rann took on a look of intense concentration, then a column of water rose up out of the tub. He narrowed his eyes, gritted his teeth, then jerked his head, and the water shuddered, then broke away from the water below, rising above them as an undulating globe. The globe then changed into a cube, then into a pyramid. A bead of blood formed under Rann's little nose as the pyramid rotated over their heads and reformed into a huge sphere of water, then he gave a smile as he deliberately dropped it right over his head back into the tub. Danelle laughed as the water sloshed over the sides, but Jason was far more impressed than he was amused. Affecting water like that was *not* easy, and to form different shapes and hold control over it for that long? Well, Zach wasn't going to be the only one with some talent in telekinesis. Rann wiped at his nose as it started to bleed more seriously, which caused Jason to fetch a rag from the rack with his own power and dislodge Danelle, then tend to his son.

I've told you not to make your nose bleed like this, Rann, Jason sent chidingly as he tilted Rann's head back.

Aunt Ayuma says that a nosebleed just means you tried your best.

I'm going to have a long talk with that woman tomorrow, he sent darkly.

The good part about that kind of nosebleed was that it ended quickly. After just a moment, the bleeding subsided, and Jason leaned back and relaxed with Danelle on his lap and Rann playing with a little boat, the two of them chattering at each other via communion. It surprised him that they were so *good* at it...but then again, it was some kind of programmed ability, built right into their genetically modified DNA. It was instinctual, in a way.

Jyslin and Symone appeared in the doorway, both of them nude and carrying towels. *There you guys are,* she smiled as she came in. *What, you couldn't wait for us?*

You snooze, you lose, baby, Jason replied with a smile as Danelle sank Rann's boat, causing a short squabble to erupt.

Any word on Tim, Jayce? He had to go to work just like you, Symone asked.

I saw him there, he'll be a few more hours, he answered. *They're working on some fresh data.* Jyslin and Symone got in the shower together and started cleaning off, not afraid to carry on a little bit in front of Rann and Danelle. Like everyone else, the children knew, in the way of a child, that Jyslin and Symone were *amu*, were *very special friends*. It was hard to explain what imprinting was to a six-year-old, never mind trying to explain a concept like homosexuality as it applied to his wife and *amu dozei*. A child could understand the concept of a girl liking a girl, but it got a bit dicey when he tried to explain why Jyslin *only* like Symone that way, and Symone *only* like Jyslin that way. But they didn't hide their relationship, not from the general public, and definitely not from the children. Jyslin had completely gotten over her shyness and maybe a little embarrassment over imprinting Symone, and Symone was never that straight to begin with. Rann understood it better than most of the others, since Symone and Tim spent so much time in the house. His constant exposure to his parents' *amu* gave him a better understanding of the nuances involved...which just proved how mature Rann was, even as his very young age. Jyslin and Symone finished showering and climbed into the tub, Symone grabbing a laughing Rann and tickling him in her lap, making him thrash around a little bit as Danelle moved from Jason's lap to Jyslin's, leaning back against her with Jyslin's arms around her.

Well, we're cozy today, kidlet, Jyslin smiled over Danelle's shoulder, hugging her a bit. *What's got you so cuddly?*

Nothin', Mommy Jyslin. Just getting a little sleepy.

It is close to your bedtime, Jyslin said, looking at the clock over the door. It was later than Jason thought, almost 2250, and the kids' bedtime was around 2330. Faey children slept for about 12 or 13 hours a night, needing much more sleep than an adult, but it worked out fairly well on the strip, since it was very close to the equator and the nights ranged from 13.5 to 16 hours out of the 29 hour day, depending on the time of year. Rann usually went to bed not long after sunset and woke more or less right

around dawn. With them being in the start of the autumnal cycle, it meant that he'd go to bed right around sunset so he could wake up around dawn. As the nights lengthened, however, he'd stay up later and later into the night so he could wake up at the same time every day, to give him an established routine.

We had a busy day, Danelle told them. We went to the mountains today and learned about rocks. It was kinda fun, but we had to walk around a lot.

That armor can get heavy after a while, Jason agreed with her unspoken comment. Even with the power assist.

Yeah. And after that, Miss Ryn gave us all a long lesson.

What did you learn?

How to defend against someone trying to get in our minds, Rann replied.

She's training you in combat techniques?

Well, she said that since we're the children of the Grand Duke, we have to be able to protect ourselves from bad people. Miss Aya makes me learn how to wrestle, Rann replied.

That's to protect you from Shya, Jason chuckled.

When can Shya come visit again, Daddy? Rann asked quickly. I miss her so much! Talking with her over the interface just isn't the same!

I'm not sure, pippy, Jason replied. Things are very busy right now, and it's too dangerous for Shya to leave the palace right now.

Well, I hope we make the Consortium people go away quick, so Shya can visit, he proclaimed.

Jason chuckled. I can agree with that, son, he replied.

They finished up before Danelle fell asleep in Jyslin's lap, then dried off and tucked Rann and Danelle in bed. He then cast out and said goodnight to all his children via telepathy, which was his nightly routine, then Jyslin pushed him towards the bedroom. *Symone said what you did to her, she sent with a smile. I think you have to be punished for that.*

It wasn't my fault, it was pretty damn important that I had to go into work.

There's no excuse for leaving your amu dozei so horny she has to go chase down Jyslin, Symone grinned as they pushed him into the bedroom. *So you're gonna spend all night making it up to both of us.*

Well, I think I can live with that, he replied lightly as Jyslin closed the door.

It was a fun night, but a rather rude awakening.

[Jason!] Cybi called very forcefully, startling him out of a very deep, exhausted sleep. He jerked and half-sat up groggily, not entirely sure what was going on, at least until Cybi called to him again and shook the cobwebs out of his brain. Symone and Jyslin were similarly passed out on either side of him in the big bed, and the darkness on the other side of the window told him it wasn't dawn yet. He glanced at the clock by the bed and saw it was 0418, still a good two or three hours before dawn. He sat up fully and scrubbed his face with his hands, then blinked and looked towards the shimmer of light that heralded Cybi manifesting a hologram in the room. *[What is it, Cybi?]* he asked, a little more alertly.

[Miaari needs to see you immediately,] she answered. *[She's waiting in your den.]*

[Okay. Give me a second,] he said. Her hologram winked out, and Jason was left a little blinded with the loss of the light. He managed to untangle himself from his wife and *amu dozei*, climbing out of the bed by scooting down and sliding off the foot of it, then he padded for the door to his office without bothering to put anything on. Miaari was sitting in front of his desk when he opened it, the lights on, and she got up and handed him a robe wordlessly when he got inside. A hot cup of coffee was sitting on the desk waiting for him, which wasn't a good sign. Jason put the room in secure mode after he put on the robe and sat down, then took a long drink of some pretty strong, bracing coffee. "It must be fucking serious if you're here at this time of the morning," he finally said.

"Oh, it is," she said with a grim nod. Cybi manifested her hologram sitting on the edge of his desk, one of her more favorite places, regarding

the two of them. “Jinaami has finished her operation against the IBI.”

“That was fast.”

“Jinaami was not put on Draconis because she is inept, cousin,” Miaari said with a dark smile. “She managed penetration and acquisition of information in remarkable time. Denmother will be very pleased with her for her swiftness,” she noted.

“So, did you get the list?”

She nodded, holding up a handpanel that was on the desk. “There are nine other agents in Kosigi that are carrying psychic clones,” she answered. “We know exactly who they are, and we know *when* they are supposed to activate. For four of them, we even know the method of activation.”

“Good. Tell Denmother to give Jinaami a big kiss from me next time she sees her,” Jason answered. “But I’m betting that’s not why we’re here.”

“It is not,” she replied. “Jason, you must recall Saelle from Dracora *immediately*.”

“What? The IBI is going after *her*?”

“They already did,” she replied. “Jinaami discovered that it is the *IBI* that bought all that cloning equipment, and they used mindbenders on Saelle’s Merrane husband to dominate him.”

“*What*? The IBI attacked *Evin*?”

“They did,” she nodded. “They had him take a DNA sample from Saelle while she slept. The Kimdori she has with her don’t sleep in their room, Jason. They didn’t know about this, because the mindbenders erased knowledge of what he had done from Evin’s mind after he did their bidding. They know how powerful Saelle is in talent, they took no chances she might discover Evin’s unwitting duplicity. The IBI was of a plan to clone Saelle Karinne, and clone her by the *thousands*, to create a large segment of population with Generation DNA that could then be used to produce children to increase their numbers.”

Jason almost felt his stomach drop out. “Did...did Jinaami recover that DNA?”

“She did. It revealed to the IBI that they had been infiltrated, but she deemed it too important to leave. Jason, Dahnai *authorized* this operation,” she declared grimly. “We don’t yet know if she has personal knowledge of the exact specifics of it, but the operation had direct Imperial authorization.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, almost stunned. Dahnai...she *betrayed* him. She betrayed him as certainly as if she’d stuck a knife in his back. She’d made all those promises and assurances, then the minute she had Saelle in Draconis, she tries to *clone* her.

“Jason. We don’t know if Dahnai knew just *what* she was authorizing,” Miaari warned, knowing that look on his face. “The IBI is notoriously secretive, even when it concerns the Empress herself. There is a chance that they simply asked her for authorization for an operation that they didn’t explain, or outright lied to her about its objectives. What we do know is that Dahnai told the IBI to get their hands on biogenic technology. There is a chance that Dahnai doesn’t know just how far they intended to go, since the Generations themselves are, in a way, part of biogenic technology.”

“No,” Jason growled, his voice haunted. “She knew. I *know* she knew. This isn’t the first time she’s tried this shit, Miaari, just not on this scale. You’ve said it yourself, she doesn’t let her relationship with me stand in the way of *politics*. And that’s all this is to her, politics. Fucking *politics*!” he said with a loud scream, throwing the handpanel across the room, which shattered against the door on the far side. “I can’t believe she’d go this far! Trying to *clone* Saelle? What are we going to do about this, Miaari? If we pull out Saelle, they’ll have *Raisha*! If Dahnai is willing to go this far, she’d use her *own daughter* as a guinea pig. *That* was why she was so adamant about keeping her!” he raged, getting up and storming across the room, starting to pace. “She doesn’t fucking care if Raisha keeps her title as a High Princess or not, she just wanted her for her DNA! She wanted her for the part of *me* that’s inside her!”

“Calm down, Jason. Jinaami is even now trying to get into position to touch Dahnai and take stock. Let us not jump to any conclusions until she reports.”

“I want those cloning vats destroyed before they ever leave the Alliance,” he snapped, storming back over to the desk and sitting down,

then activating the comm. “Get me Yila Trefani, and I don’t care what you have to do to get her ass on the vidlink,” he told his board operator over at the White House.

“Your Grace, Yila Trefani is at Kumi’s house,” the reply came.

Jason turned his face in that direction. *YILA!* he sent with such power that he probably woke up everyone within ten miles of the house.

Mmph! What? came her reply.

Get your ass over to my house right now, he sent, rage bleeding into this sending no matter how hard he tried to control himself. *Wait in the kitchen until we have time to talk.*

What’s going on, Jayce?

We’re going to do something dirty and underhanded, he replied, venting a little. *So get over here so we can work it out.*

I’ll be right over.

“Yila’s on her way over,” he told Miaari, clenching a fist. *Fucking Dahnai!* Is *this* how she honors the bonds between them as *amu dorai*, to try to steal not just his house’s technology, but the very essence of what the house *was*? Trying to clone Saelle? Trying to breed thousands of Generations using Saelle as the alpha ancestor. And what would happen to his daughter Raisha once Saelle was out of there? Would *she* be the one whose face was stamped over thousands of clones, then used as brood sows? Was Dahnai so insanely determined that she’d go that far?

She would. She was the Empress, and that made her ruthless.

“Jason. Only you can recall Saelle,” Miaari urged him.

Jason gave her a look of equal parts fury and dread, then nodded and looked to Cybi, who looked both very concerned and afraid. “Cybi, it’s time for *you* to put a hand in. Invade the IBI’s mainframe. See what else they’re doing, then *destroy it*. Make it abundantly clear to them that they’ve fucked with the *wrong* people.”

“I will attend the matter immediately. If you will excuse me, this may take some time. A computer like that will have formidable defenses. It will take my full attention.”

“Just be careful, my friend, and don’t hesitate to abort if it’s too dangerous. You’re too important to me to let some IC system fry your crystals.”

She gave him a fond smile. *“I will be very careful, my friend. And your concern touches me,”* she said, putting a hand on her upper chest. Then her hologram winked out.

“I thought of asking her to do just that, but as she said, the IBI’s main computer has fearsome intrusion countermeasure systems,” Miaari said. “Cybi is far too precious to risk.”

“I have faith in her,” Jason said. “She’ll know when to back off if the computer’s defenses are too strong. Now give me a sec, I’ll get hold of Saelle.”

He wasn’t wearing his gestalt, so he had to utilize the biogenic network, then relay through the cruiser *Hanvari* and then through Saelle’s Gladiator. *[Saelle,]* he called. *[Saelle, answer. Answer right now.]*

[What?] came a bleary reply. Jason forgot that it was the middle of the night in Dracora right now as well.

[Listen to me, listen to me very carefully,] he communed, making sure that all his fear and concern transmitted through his thought. *[I want you to get your armor on, get in your Gladiator, and get the hell out of there. Right fucking now.]*

[What’s going on? Is there a threat?] she asked, much more alert.

[Yes, Saelle, and it’s sleeping right beside you,] he answered. *[The mindbenders in the IBI broke Evin. He’s already done something and they wiped it from his memory. But if they’ve broken him, that means they own him, and he’s a danger to you. Just get your armor on and leave. Don’t tell anyone but the Kimdori there, just get your ass out of there.]*

[What did he do?]

[I’ll tell you when you get here. Now stop asking fucking questions and get out. Get out now! That’s an order!]

[I’ll be on the cruiser in half an hour,] she answered.

Jason pinched his nose between his fingers, feeling a headache coming on. “Saelle’s on her way. I told her to just get in her Gladiator and take off, and not to tell anyone but her Kimdori. I hope they can get out of the palace on their own.”

“Easily, Jason,” she replied.

Jason waited in tense silence, keeping a touch on the *Hanvari*, accessing its sensors, after telling its captain, Himari Gemalle, to pick Saelle up as quickly as she could without entering the atmosphere. The KMS ship picketed at Draconis kept a constant lock on Saelle’s Gladiator as a matter of basic security, which was kept in a secure courtyard under the protection of the Imperial Guard, which was probably the one group that not even the mindbenders of the IBI wanted to cross. They’d been given orders to defend Saelle’s mecha, and that was *exactly* what they did. But they wouldn’t stop Saelle from getting into it and taking off, since it was *her* Gladiator. He almost sighed in relief when he saw Saelle’s mecha lift off from the palace and ascend towards the cruiser, using its flight pods. He even put a visual up from the cruiser’s feed, Saelle’s blue and gold mecha flying up towards them, a railgun in one hand and a large metal case in the other. That had been her mecha before she took the assignment at the palace, she was a rigger by occupation. Jason and Miaari watched as the mecha escaped the atmosphere, and about ten minutes of tense silence later, it was in the main hangar of the cruiser.

And her departure was certainly not missed. Not two minutes later, as the cruiser broke orbit and headed for the Karis Stargate, Dahnai was beeping his comm using her personal contact number. Jason shut it off, not even wanting to *talk* to her until Jinaami got in touch with them, which would tell Dahnai nearly as much as if he’d answered the call.

He didn’t know what he was going to do. If Dahnai *was* personally involved in this...*fuck*. What was he going to do? Declare war on Dahnai the instant Raisha was born and take her by force. Have the Kimdori steal her? They absolutely *could not* allow a Generation to be cloned, and despite Raisha being the daughter of the Empress, she was a *Generation* first and foremost. And had Dahnai completely lost her fucking mind? Right now, of all times, she tries to pull this kind of shit, which would force the Karinnes to do something drastic, and potentially tear the entire Imperium apart? It

was the *Karinnes* that kept stability in the Imperium, not the *Merranes*, not the Imperial Navy. The threat of the *Karinnes* annihilating any noble house that tried to do what the *Trillanes* did kept everyone marching in lock step behind Dahnai. She had to be absolutely *insane* to—

That *would* be insane. Dahnai was ambitious, she was unscrupulous, she was somewhat ruthless, but she *wasn't* crazy. And she wasn't stupid either. If she pissed Jason off, she could very well lose her throne, and *she knew it*. But it would certainly behoove another house if they could drive a wedge between Jason and Dahnai. Could this be a convoluted plot from one of the *Highborns*?

Maybe Miaari was right. Maybe Dahnai *didn't* know the specifics of it.

Before he could ponder that, Jinaami's face appeared on his Kimdori dedicated commlink, the same one Zaa used to talk to him when she was calling about something that was highly sensitive. He immediately reoriented his mind to speak in Kimdori, since their protocols wouldn't allow anything different, so automatic that he didn't even think about it anymore. "Jinaami, thank the Denmother," he said explosively. "What did you find out?"

"I got a hand on Dahnai," she answered. "She has partial knowledge of the operation."

"Partial how?"

"She fully authorized the agents sent to Karis to try to steal biogenic technology. But she does *not* have knowledge of the cloning operation."

"Well, that's something, at least," Jason sighed. "I'll have to kick her ass for that. But how did the IBI set this up without her knowing?"

"Jason, the IBI does *many* things Dahnai doesn't know about," she answered seriously. "Dahnai told them what to do, but she didn't say *how*, and they're far more ruthless than she is. They also don't care about the delicate political balance in the Imperium right now. They used Dahnai's blanket authorization to steal biogenics as a platform to pursue this cloning program. I'm not sure what the director of the IBI intended to do with the program, I didn't get a hand on her, but they certainly know someone was there," she said with a grim kind of smile. "We stole the DNA samples and destroyed the computers they were using in the lab. I'm going to send one

of our computer specialists in to invade their computer to make sure they don't have that information somewhere else."

"Way ahead of you, Jinaami, Cybi is doing just that right now, *personally*."

"She could do it far easier than we," she reasoned with a nod. "I just hope her Ladyship exercises extreme caution."

"Well, that's what I sort of suspected," Jason grunted, leaning back in his chair. "That Dahnai didn't know what the IBI was exactly doing. She'd be insane to piss me off to that extent, since she could lose her throne in the bargain."

"But this exposes a grave threat and risk, Jason," Jinaami said. "They extracted DNA from Saelle in hopes of cloning a Generation. Jason, what are we to do about Raisha?"

"I know," he sighed, looking at Miaari. "I once said that there wouldn't be anywhere *safe* for the Generations but on Karis after the Consortium outed us, and I hate how right I'm being proved," he said, to which both Jinaami and Miaari nodded. "They'll go after Raisha. Maybe not the IBI, but *someone* eventually will. The entire Imperium knows she's a Generation, and this little adventure proves that we're in as much danger from our own people as we are from groups like the Consortium. Karis is the only safe harbor in a universe where everyone and everything will want us for what we can do. I'm...I'm going to have to convince Dahnai to give up Raisha, and that might destroy our relationship," he said with a pained look.

"I dare say when she finds out what happened to Saelle, she might not be quite so vehement, Jason," Jinaami supplied. "Not when she considers that Raisha will be *next*. She may send her to you just to protect her from those that would take her for what she is."

"Dahnai will have to purge the IBI at the very least, but not even that can ensure that someone else does not have the same idea," Miaari agreed. "Unless Raisha wants to live her entire life a prisoner in the Imperial palace, she will never be safe...and them getting to Saelle through Evin proves that not even the palace is entirely safe."

“Yeah. We’re going to have to do something, girls. Something drastic,” he said, folding his arms on the desk in front of him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m not going to just look the other way over these attempts to steal our technology,” he replied, changing tacks on them, but they seemed to understand where he was going. “Miaari, seal Karis. Nobody *else* from outside will be allowed in the system. We’ll continue to recruit members for the house, but we’d better be more careful about who we take. They might try to get someone into the house carrying a psychic clone, or something even more sinister we don’t know about.”

“I’ve been considering that very possibility,” Miaari answered. “I’ve changed our induction process to take things into account.”

“In the meantime, we continue to let them work up in Kosigi, but we kick those people over on Virga off the planet. We’ll finish building the factories ourselves, we’ll put the Kirgan Kizzik on it. They can get it done without much effort. Those workers can just help build more ships. And I want you to quadruple the surveillance on those outsiders. I don’t want them to even go to the bathroom without us knowing if they flushed or not.”

“Locking down all biogenics is also a logical step,” Jinaami injected.

“We’ve already done that,” Jason replied with a nod.

Zaa’s face appeared beside Jinaami on the hologram, and she looked *pissed*. “Jinaami! Why did you not contact me *immediately*?” she demanded.

Jinaami shrank back a little. “I was going to contact you the second I finished conferring with the Grand Duke, my Denmother. You *told* me to report to him immediately upon the completion of my task.”

She frowned. “I did. Alright, I absolve you of that,” she replied, which made Jinaami sigh. “Now report your findings to me. Go over everything you have discussed.”

They all went over everything they’d talked about, from Dahnai’s knowledge to the very ugly problem of Raisha. Zaa tapped her fingertips together as she listened, then nodded. “I agree with you, cousin. It is time to

seal Karis off once again,” she stated. Miaari, I am sending your clan to Karis to ensure its secrets are protected.”

“The *entire* clan, my Denmother?” Miaari gasped.

“A good portion of it. You will need the assistance of your pack, and as the clan who restored our cousins to us, it is the right of your clan to accept the duty and the privilege of establishing itself on Karis, as was in olden times. Clan Grelvth must abdicate the honor they once held in favor of Clan Thresxt. It will be Clan Thresxt that oversees the training of the young on Karis.”

“I don’t have any objection to that, Denmother,” Jason agreed. “How many Kimdori is that?”

“Those who settle on Karis will number slightly in excess of fifty thousand, Jason,” Zaa replied with a steady look. “In the olden times, the clan who stayed on Karis dwelled on the Kirgan continent, in the city of Jaxtra, where young Kimdori from all clans were given training. This requires Kimdori from every field of expertise, from builders and laborers to the clan’s elite operatives, such as Miaari’s family, to support the training operation. I am sure that we can reach accommodation with the Kizzik already there to allow us to settle in Jaxtra. The city was rebuilt with the others and is simply awaiting colonization. As I understand, Jaxtra is very close to the colony they have built. They would be our neighbors.”

“You have my blessing,” Jason said immediately. “The city of Jaxtra is yours. I’ll talk to the hive leaders of Kirga and explain it to them. They’ll probably enjoy having someone else over there to talk to. Kizzik are actually very social creatures.”

“The hive mind is strong in them,” Zaa said. “I will contact your father, Miaari, and make the necessary arrangements. This is sooner than I intended to restore the clan ways of Karis, but current conditions demand it.”

“Well, you should have said something, Denmother,” Jason said. “I have no problems with the Kimdori coming here and establishing a colony.”

“We felt that the house needed a little more time to settle in before we returned to the old ways, as well as time for us to prepare our current school to be moved, which is no easy thing,” Zaa explained. “Besides, there is a

war going, Jason, and it would have been a distraction for both of us. But this escalation forces us to play our hand. Miaari needs many more of her clan there to defend Karis and its secrets, and there is no reason not to simply establish the original training school at the same time.”

“You draw up the timetable, and we’ll do our best to help you,” Jason told her.

Jayce, I just got a very nasty call from Dahnai, Jyslin sent. What the fuck is going on?

Fuck. Tell her I’ll talk to her in a few minutes. Something seriously major is going on, love, and Dahnai’s tangled up in it. Just tell her I’m in a critical meeting with the Denmother, and I couldn’t talk to her.

Alright. Just make sure you apologize very nicely. She’s seriously torqued off.

No doubt, he mused darkly. She must know about the attack on the IBI, and she was right in linking Jason to it. “Dahnai called Jyslin,” he told the three Kimdori. “She’s pissed off that I didn’t take her call. No doubt she knows I was behind the attack on the IBI.”

“There is little more to discuss, and we have things we must do quickly,” Zaa said. “Miaari, seal Karis. Jinaami, be prepared to assist Cybi in any way possible if she requires it. Also, make preparations to purge the IBI of those not loyal to Dahnai. If she will not do it, we will. Jason, you must confront Dahnai. Her ignorance of the cloning plot is no excuse, and besides, she is directly responsible for the many spies Miaari has uncovered.”

“Oh, that’s going to be lovely,” Jason grunted, pinching his nose between his fingers.

“We have our work to do, so let us get to it,” she ordered. Zaa’s face blinked off the hologram, and Jinaami nodded and her face vanished as well. Miaari stood up, then looked down at him with compassion.

“It won’t be so bad, cousin,” she assured him. “Just smack her nose, then impart to her how serious things have gotten.”

“Yeah. Have Yila come up when you leave, I’ll get that out of the way before I talk to Dahnai.”

She nodded, then put her palm to the plate by the door, which removed it from secure mode. She left, and almost immediately, Yila rushed in. She was only wearing a pair of blue silk panties, and her dark hair was disheveled. *About time. What's going on, Jayce?*

Yila, I want you to get with Miaari and make sure those cloning units you found never leave the Alliance. I want them all destroyed, he sent intensely. Before they even make it to the entry station.

She gave him a long, steady look, then nodded. *I take it you found out what they were for?*

Oh yeah, I sure fucking did, he replied darkly. They were going to try to clone Generations in them.

Who?

A rogue element of the IBI, he answered. That's why we have to destroy them before they get to the entry station, there's no telling who the IBI's mindbenders have dominated on the station that might help those vats make it to Draconis. We have to stop them before the IBI is in any position to get their hands on them. He blew out his breath. Dahnai is waiting for me to call her so she can read me the riot act. I sent the Kimdori into the IBI earlier to get to the bottom of all the spies we're finding, and they found out that it's the IBI that's trying to set up the cloning operation, and they're doing it without telling anyone what they're doing. Dahnai doesn't even know.

Trelle's silky hair, Yila gasped.

Yeah. They may not stop just because Dahnai tells them to, so we're not taking that chance. You and Miaari get together and make sure those vats don't make it into Imperium space, Yila, even if we have to attack and destroy the freighters they ship them on. I'm counting on you.

We'll discuss my fee for this service later, Jason, she sent with a wink, trying to humor him a little. I'll make sure it gets done.

Good. Now excuse me, I have to talk to Dahnai.

She nodded, then turned and hurried out of his office.

He steeled himself, then turned his comm back on, which immediately started to beep. After putting the room back in secure mode from his desk, he got a *very* angry Dahnai on a hologram in front of the far wall. “Have you totally lost your fucking *mind*, Jayce?” she raged almost immediately. “You attacked the IBI!”

“I had a damn good fucking reason to attack the IBI,” he shot back. “I sent the Kimdori in there, and you know what they pulled out? A cylinder filled with Saelle’s DNA and plans to make a few thousand *clones* of her.”

“*What?*” Dahnai gasped.

“You heard me,” he said with an ugly stare. “Mindbenders from the IBI broke Evin and had him take DNA from Saelle while she was sleeping. He’s the *only* one that could have pulled it off, he’s the only one that has access to her in a private situation, well, outside of *you*,” he almost snarled. “The Kimdori stole that DNA back, then they fried the lab where they were holding it to destroy the computers they were using. And right now, thirty thousand cloning vats are waiting over in the Alliance to be shipped into the Imperium through a dummy corporation that traces back to the IBI. They were going to clone Saelle, Dahnai. They were going to make *thousands* of clones of her. You don’t order thirty thousand cloning vats for an isolated experiment.”

“You can prove this, Jason?”

“When Cybi’s done raking it out of their mainframe, you bet your ass I can prove it,” he replied. “I also found out that *you* ordered spies to Karis to steal biogenic units.”

She blushed furiously, her entire face turning an instant and brilliant shade of violet.

“That’s how they snuck it by you, Dahnai,” he growled. “You told them to get biogenics, any way they could. Well, biogenics don’t work without *Generations*, do they? So, after they merrily stole some biogenic units, they were going to clone up Generations to use them, all nicely controlled by IBI mindbenders. You’d better take a good fucking look under the rocks the IBI are hiding under, Dahnai. As it is, I’m so pissed off I’m tempted to blow their fucking HQ off of Draconis from orbit.

“I’ve recalled Saelle. It’s abundantly fucking clear that she is not *safe* on Draconis, not even in *your palace*,” he said with a hiss. “They got a mindbender into your palace to break Evin, and I’m not putting her *anywhere* that someone I’m not absolutely sure about has any access to her. I’ve also ordered the immediately sealing off of Karis. No more outside workers are coming in, and most likely a bunch that are already here will be kicked out. I’m delinking the Stargate into hot standby from *this* side, so you can’t open it without my authorization. And I swear to God, Dahnai, if I find out you had direct knowledge of this cloning scheme, I’m gonna come to Dracora and I will beat you absolutely *fucking* senseless,” he said hotly. “Then I’ll fucking declare war on the Imperium, and I will burn every god damn city on Draconis to the ground. To the *fucking ground*!”

“I—I didn’t! I’d never do *that*!” she protested. “Jason, you think I’m stupid? If I turned the Karinnes against me, I wouldn’t be on this throne ten years from now! I *need* you!”

“You obviously didn’t think of that when you ordered the IBI to steal biogenic devices,” he snapped, slamming his hands on his desk, making Dahnai flinch. “I am so pissed at you that I can’t even put it into words! I *trusted* you, and this is how you repay me? Does our *amu* mean anything to you, or was it just a way you could get your claws into me?”

She looked almost stricken. “J-Jason, I wouldn’t do—I can’t *fake* being in love with you!” she protested. “You’ve touched me, you know my mind! You know I love you!”

“Well, I guess love isn’t enough for the *Empress*,” he said with a hiss. “Or is it that your politics matter more?”

She looked away almost unconsciously. That was *exactly* where she stood, but she wouldn’t admit it.

“You promised me Saelle would be safe. You’ve promised me a lot of things, and about the only thing I’ve gotten out of them were heartburn and disgust. Well, I don’t *trust* you anymore, Empress. You proved that swinging your tits around matters more to you than anything like love, or honor, or integrity. You played me, Empress, and I’m not giving you the chance to do it again.” He blew out his breath. “I’ll have what Cybi uncovers sent to you as soon as she gets it. I highly suggest you purge the

IBI, your Majesty, because they're operating outside of the bounds of your instructions and knowledge. Until the summit, I don't want to talk to you again," he said flatly. "I won't be attending the daily meetings, I'll have Yeri sit in for me. I'll just be too pissed off to be in any way cordial and polite, even to our allies. Now, if you'll excuse me, your Majesty, I have to track down and arrest the nine spies you sent to Karis carrying psychic clones. Expect them back in a couple of days," he said, then he killed the communication before she could reply.

Jason leaned back in his chair, feeling a little trembly after that. He was honestly, rightfully pissed off, and he felt he had the right to be furious after he caught her spying. But she was going to have her own problems, he could see, mainly with the IBI. If they could get a mindbender into the palace, if they were *willing* to send a mindbender into the palace without Dahnai's knowledge or consent, that said a whole hell of a fucking lot. Dahnai needed to focus on that particular problem at the moment, so if she thought Jason was too pissed to talk to her, she could put her attention where it needed to be.

Still...this did not bode well. If he couldn't trust *Dahnai*, someone whose very seat of power depended on Jason and the Karinnes, then his house truly could trust *no one* outside of the Kimdori. Dahnai's spying and this attempt to clone Saelle showed him a dark and unwelcome truth.

The House of Karinne could not stay in the Imperium. They could not be theoretically subject to the commands of an Empress they could not trust. And Dahnai had proved to him that no matter how much she loved him, she would always be the *Empress* before she was his *amu dorai*...and perhaps he was naïve to believe that she could be anything other than what she was. As much as he loved the Faey yet hated what they were, it was all personified in his relationship with Dahnai, a woman he loved, but could not help but be what she was.

And he couldn't allow his house to be subject to her.

She *was* the Empress, after all. She could demand, she could *order* him to open the Stargate, and she could bring her entire navy to Karis and park it in orbit if she wanted to, and Jason couldn't really stop her, not without committing treason. The only thing stopping her was the fact that she desperately needed him. But this proved that when she didn't need him

anymore, she would try to take what he would not give her, her love for him be damned.

He looked out the window, out over the dim light of pre-dawn shimmering over the rippling surface of the sea, lost in grim thought. It would be very dangerous to break away from the Imperium, for many reasons. Dahnai would fight to keep the Imperium intact, and the other empires would fall on Karis like a pack of wolves if the threat of Dahnai dragging the Imperium into it was removed. Yet, he couldn't leave things the way they were. He had worried about the day when some future Empress would demand of the future ruler of Karinne that they turn over their secrets, and with Dahnai's betrayal, he knew that wasn't just a worry, that was a mathematical certainty.

But he'd have to find a way to do it. The House of Karinne had to be independent, or it was doomed. If the Consortium or the Benga didn't wipe them out, then they'd be destroyed by those that called them ally today, or forced into a civil war against the Imperium itself when that future Empress declared the Karinnes outlaws for refusing to hand over their secrets. He had to find some way to free the Karinnes from the Imperium without starting the Fourth Civil War, and without having a battle fleet of Skaa or Alliance vessels trying to get past the interdicator.

And he knew for a fact that no Generation, not even him, would ever be safe anywhere but on Karis.

He sat there in dark reverie, knowing that today, he had reached a crossroads in his life. After today, nothing would ever be the same, and the fate of the house itself hinged on just exactly what he finally decided to do. The fate of millions rested on his shoulders, and he had to make the best decision he could.

He couldn't let his people down, nor could he ignore the needs of the Generations, the basic need—no, the *right*—to live their lives without the constant fear of ending up on some lab table.

Today, things were going to change. Whether they changed for the better, that, only time would tell.

Chapter 4

Vesta, 25 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 12 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Vesta, 25 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

295th Street and Oceanside, Karsa, Karis

Nobody recognized him...and to him, that was a good thing.

Jason Karinne walked slowly along a pathway between the Trentor Building and Bayside Arena, a small sports and entertainment complex that hosted a planetary AAA league batchi team, a Karsa Local League soccer team, a Karis Planetary League baseball team, and had just organized and began hosting a Shio *verziki* team. Jason walked without escort, without guards, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, just wandering aimlessly as he thought.

He'd been thinking for two days now, and only one thing had been on his mind, even over the meeting of the Confederate Council that would begin tomorrow. Yeri had been all but doing his job for the last two days, both organizing the summit and sitting in for him during council meetings, while Chirk and Brall more or less ran his office on their own.

He was thinking treason.

That was the non-polite way to think about it. The simple fact of the matter was, he was thinking of the survival of his house, the survival of the Generations, the very existence of Cybi, and preserving the essence of what it meant to be a Karinne at its fundamental level. The people around him had embraced that essence and had *become* Karinnes. The Faey woman with a teenage son, on their way to the public beach on the far side of the arena. The quartet of human kids riding hoverboards on the vehicle lane

beside the walkway. The Shio woman in a KMS trainee's uniform, enjoying herself while on a city pass, passing by a pair of Kizzik nobles and their four drones, which everyone gave plenty of room...not out of fear, but because Kizzik were pretty big and their legs stuck out from their sides a little bit. A laughing Faey child pulling a gravkite, watching with joyful eyes as the toy spun and whirled at the end of its string, getting further and further away from her parents as they looked at a projected hologram from their interfaces...the way they were dressed, they might be going to the theater on this warm, glorious late afternoon. They were his people, they were Karinnes, they had left behind their old allegiances and their old loyalties and had embraced the dream, *his* dream, of prosperity, and above all, peace.

He walked slowly, others passing him by from behind, his hands in his pockets and his head down. Aya would kill him for not paying attention to his surroundings, for not wearing his armor, for not having his guards...at least she would when she got down off the roof. She'd honestly tried to stop him, at least until he stripped her out of her armor in about two seconds and parked her, Shen, and Suri on the roof of Myleena's house, which was of Faey architecture and possessed of a flat roof Myleena used as a deck. Aya meant well, and it was her job to keep him safe, but from time to time, she had to be reminded that he *really was* the one in charge. He needed to think, and what was most important, he needed to be among those who would be affected by his decisions the most while he thought...the people who depended on him to make well-reasoned decisions. His girls in the KMS were the most at risk in the immediate future, but it was these people, the backbone of the House Karinne, who were the most vulnerable and the most dependent on him to make careful decisions. They depended on him for stability and security, they had shown faith in him by coming to a dead planet and breathing life back into it. They needed him, and he needed to be among them when he made decisions that would most affect *them*.

He sat on a public bench and put his elbows on his knees and his hands under his chin, his mind going in circles. He had to secede from the Imperium, though *secede* may be too harsh a term for it. The reality was, he needed to find some way to either convince or force Dahnai to let the Karinnes go, but at the same time, he had a duty to her to help keep the Imperium stable...which wouldn't be for long once the Dorranes and the

Shovalles saw one of the houses of the *Siann* successfully break away from the Imperium. *It is better to rule in hell than serve in heaven* is a saying that many Faey Grand Duchesses would adopt for their own, and it might cause the complete dissolution of the Imperium as house after house broke away so its Grand Duchess could be the Empress of her own territory. And with their new Torsion weapons, the Alliance and the two Skaa governments might decide to try to capture the renegade houses for themselves, which would turn the Faey into a subject race scattered across three or four different empires.

It was the mother of all catch-22's. Jason couldn't leave the Imperium without destabilizing it, but he couldn't stay in it either. Either he risked the Fourth Civil War that might lead to sector-wide war, or he risked the future of the Generations, and the House Karinne as a whole.

Dahnai...he sighed. He loved her. He loved her deeply, but she could not help but be who she was, and she was the Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Imperium, ruler of 77 star systems and a woman that got what she wanted, no matter who she had to trample under her boots to get it. He had expected her to send spies, but it still hurt. It was still a betrayal of his trust, that she would still do something like even when she knew, knew better than most anyone, exactly why he did what he did. She was a very intimate part of his life even with them living on different planets, and now, now he could no longer trust her. It was clear that she would not stop until she got what she wanted, and it was just a matter of time before she was buying cloning vats *herself*. He loved her, but he couldn't let that blind him to *who* Dahnai was any longer.

Dahnai was now the enemy.

But, despite that, he did have obligations here. He didn't want the Imperium to explode when he left it, and he wouldn't let the other empires attack the Imperium in its time of political upheaval either. As much as he hated what Dahnai was and everything she represented, he still loved the *woman*, still loved the Faey *people*, and he was hopeful that someday he wouldn't have to keep the knowledge of the Karinnes away from them anymore. But until that time, he had to be the one that would protect the Faey, from *themselves* if needs be. It was his duty to Dahnai and to the Imperium to keep it stable, because it wasn't just the lives of the people in

his house that were at stake. He had too much compassion for the *people* of the Imperium to make them suffer, but he also had a sacred duty to his house to protect *his* people.

So, how does one peaceably secede from a government that would fight to prevent it? How does one secede from a government that depends on you for its basic stability without having things dissolve into civil war?

That was the question that had tormented him for two straight days. He had gone over idea after idea, studied it, considered it, then discarded it. It was a conundrum, mainly because he could see no way to break away from the Imperium without either causing Dahnai to declare war on him, or having the entire Imperium descend into chaos. Even if she agreed to it, the Highborns would see that as weakness, and it would cause them to either secede from the Imperium themselves or challenge Dahnai for the throne.

And there were more personal implications for him. Raisha was just half of it. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about Shya. He had made it clear that his boys would marry who they wanted to marry, and God, did Rann *ever* want to marry Shya. It was almost like they'd already pair bonded. But Shya was Dahnai's daughter, an Imperial Princess, and there was no telling if Jason could *trust* her when she was fifteen and came to the house. Dahnai had some nine more years to prepare little miss High Princess Duchess Consort Shya Merrane Karinne to do her mother a solid and steal biogenic secrets for her. But, Rann had chosen Shya far beyond the piece of paper that betrothed them, and he wanted to honor Rann's wishes. He didn't want to break his promise to his son.

Then there was Raisha. He might indeed start a war when he came for his daughter when she was born, and he fully intended to do just that. When Raisha was born, he would be there to take her home to Karis, to the home of the Generations, to the only place in the entire universe where she could grow up *safe*. Not even her title as a Princess would protect her from some diabolical maniac out there with a needle and dreams of empire. As much as he didn't like to think of the Generations as *weapons*, that was exactly what they were. Jason Karinne was the most powerful weapon on the planet, because he had the strongest merge among all the Generations with Cybi, able to exert the greatest power due to their compatibility. There were many out there that would treat them like weapons instead of people, assets,

things. The rogue elements in the IBI had wanted an army of Generations, wanted thousands of living weapons. Though what they could do could be used in a military manner, they were sentient living beings, and they were not *weapons*. Making the rest of the sector see beyond what they could do and see *them* for who they were would be virtually impossible. Every government in the sector except for the Urumi and several outside the sector had all tried to steal Karinne secrets...good old Urumi, they were anything if not consistent.

To the rest of the universe, they were *numbers*. To Jason, they were *people*.

And there were far more people involved in this. The Karinnes theoretically had five systems in the Imperium on top of Karis. Terra and the four Urumi protectorates were under Karinne control, and those systems were part of the Imperium. Dahnai would fight to keep the Imperium together because of the critical assets those systems brought in. Terra was the second largest food producer in the Imperium, Aurigae was also a major food producer shipping food to both the Imperium and the Collective, and the heavy metals they were bringing in from Bellar was powering the military buildup without draining the Imperial treasury. Jason had made a promise to his people, the Terrans, to protect them, and he'd made a deal with Sk'Vrae, who might consider the secession of the Karinnes as a violation of their agreement...and he knew fully well how the Urumi responded to such betrayals. The last thing he wanted to do was run afoul of Sk'Vrae, particularly at this critical time. Though the Urumi in those four systems were only going to be in the Imperium for thirty years, for those thirty years, they were *his people*, and he had a responsibility to them.

They were the very people that surrounded him at that moment. He looked up and leaned back on the desk and watched them pass by. Most of them were Faey and Terrans, but with the opening of the house to other races, they were starting to appear in more than just the KMS. Just watching a moment, he saw a Shio, a Skaa, and a Bari-Bari walk by. They were people that were depending on him to do his best to make sure that the dream they had when they joined House Karinne would still be there after all this insanity finally settled down. These were not soldiers, they were the common citizens. They were factory workers, shop owners, employees, entrepreneurs, adventurers and explorers, those who wanted to breathe life

back into a ruined world and restore the *soul* of the planet, as the Parri *shaman* might say.

It was one of those newcomers that sat on the bench beside him, studying a map on a handpanel, looking quite perplexed. He was a Colonist, about five feet tall and with that big head, large black eyes, and grayish skin that many Terrans equated to the aliens from all the UFO conspiracies. He was young as a Colonist went, his black hair thick and cropped short on his head, his long-fingered hands wrapped around the small computer. Colonists had vision issues with the single-sided projection holograms they used in the interfaces to provide a visual interface, so they carried a handpanel, usually linked to their interfaces. “Excuse me, citizen, I’m looking for the Jentra building,” he said to Jason in a polite voice, speaking passingly decent Faey. “Might you know where it is?”

“It’s two blocks that way, on the left,” Jason replied, pointing towards the east. “It has a big sculpture in the plaza in front of it, you can’t miss it.”

“Many thanks,” he said, shifting the map on his handpanel.

Jason leaned back on the bench. “Mind answering a question before you go?” he asked impulsively.

“My, certainly,” he replied, looking at Jason as he looked up at the Trentor building and its 138 stories...which wasn’t that high compared to many buildings in Karsa. The buildings by the ocean tended to be shorter.

“Why did you join House Karinne?” Jason asked, still looking up. “What brought you here?”

“Why, opportunity,” he replied. “This house is going places, citizen. And it has nothing to do with the technology or this war. I could tell when I spoke to the recruiters that they were looking for people with drive, with vision, with determination. I imagined an entire planet filled with people who *wanted* to be here, who would roll up their sleeves and work hard for something important to them, and I could see that a planet like that would be a wonderful place to be.”

“The Colonies aren’t a bad place,” Jason protested. “The Grand Master is very wise, and he has great men and women advising him on the council. The Colonies live in peace and prosperity. It’s one of the most respected civilizations in the sector.”

“Of course it is. I love the Colonies, but as much as I revere the Grand Master, I wanted to be part of something *special*. And that is what Karis is to me.”

“Something special,” Jason mused, looking up at the top of the building. “Thank you, friend. You’ve given me something to think about.”

The nameless Colonist wandered off to find the Jentra building, leaving Jason on the bench, watching the people of Karsa wander by, continuing to ponder what he knew would be one of the most important decisions of his life; not seceding from the Imperium, but *how* he would do it. He sat there as the sun went down, as the walkway lights flickered on, as faint cheers came from the sports arena as a game was being played, as a pair of armored police officers walked by, sending between themselves. He continued to worry over the problem, discarding several more ideas, sitting there with his chin propped on a hand like *The Thinker* statue. He needed to come up with *something*, because he had to get this out in the open with Dahnai before the summit. He didn’t want to spring this on her in that kind of a situation, she’d never forgive him, so he had set a deadline with himself to have a decision and the framework of a plan in place by tomorrow. The summit was in 12 days, so he really had that long to have a plan in place, but he also needed time to work out the specifics.

At least Dahnai took his warning to heart. Even now, there was a massive purge going on over in the IBI. Dahnai was raking her claws through the entire organization, and she was out for blood. Half the upper management had been fired, several arrested, and she was subjecting the mindbenders to telepathic examination to ensure just where their loyalties lay...and the Imperial Guard was almost drooling over that. They were shamed, humiliated, and infuriated when they found out that the IBI had slipped a mindbender into the palace and attacked the foster father of the Empress’ future children, and an Imperial Guard was one of the few telepaths in the Imperium capable of putting a mindbender in her place. They were going to make sure that *never* happened again, because it reflected on them that someone had managed to get past their security and attack a highly sensitive target within the palace, even if it was theoretically someone on their own side. Then again, the history of the Faey was filled with betrayals that required the Empress to live in a fortress in the first

place. Faey fought each other even more enthusiastically than they fought outsiders.

He was still there, sitting on that bench, when the game let out, causing a swell of pedestrians down the walkway. He ignored them for the most part, at least until a Terran man sat down beside him, a young man wearing a baseball cap with the Karsa Bombers shield on it, which was the local KBA league. “Jason, whatever are you doing out here?” a female voice asked.

He blinked and looked up, and was almost surprised to see Molly Fletcher, with Ian sitting beside him. She was leaning over him, and from the looks of her, life on Karsa had been good to her. She’d lost some of her weight and her hair was much shorter now, but she had the same kind face. She put a hand on his shoulder. “Where are your guards?”

“Right now? Probably breathing fire and cutting a switch waiting for me to get back,” he replied dryly in English, which made Ian burst out laughing. Ian was a tall, handsome young man now, 21 years old and taking Academy courses in business management. Molly and Ian owned a little coffee shop on the north side of Karsa, he recalled, Molly taking her restaurant management skills to their natural conclusion, since she was also a pretty good cook. “They didn’t want me to leave, and I didn’t feel like debating the point with them.”

“Well, they’re there for a *reason*, Jason, seriously,” Molly chided him. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I feel completely safe being on the streets of Karsa, Molly,” he protested.

“You’re safe from *us*, but there’s a war going on, Jason. Even we’ve heard about that energy thing that managed to sneak onto the planet, it was all over the news. They told us to look out for anyone acting unlike themselves, since the energy thing couldn’t pretend to be the person they were possessing. Well, there could be another one around with a gun,” she said, her arm on his shoulder hooking under and making him stand.

“I’m fine, Molly,” he said firmly. “I just needed some time alone to think, that’s all.”

“No, it’s not *fine*, Jason. If you’re not worried about *you*, you could at least think about everyone who loves you. I’m sure they’re worried sick, you wandering around like this.”

Good old Molly, always knowing exactly how to go for the jugular. But this time, he wasn’t falling for it. He sat back down, then surprised her by almost dragging her onto the bench beside him, on the far side of Ian. “Answer me a question,” he told her.

“What? You want to ask questions?” she flared, then she put a finger to her interface. She gasped when Jason snatched it away with his power, then put it in her hand.

“Humor me,” he said evenly. “What would you do if you had to make a decision that was going to start a war no matter how you choose? Choice A starts the war immediately, more or less when we can’t possibly afford another war. Choice B puts the war off for maybe a hundred years but makes it ten times worse for waiting. If you had to choose between watching people die or knowing that you’re responsible for fifty times more deaths after you’re gone, which would you choose?”

Molly gave him a surprised look, then fell silent. Ian too fell silent, looking at the ground, and both of them spent more than couple of moments in thought as the rest of the game’s spectators filed by.

“I’d say that both choices suck, and I’d be looking for Choice C,” Ian finally said.

“There is no choice C.”

“There’s *always* a choice C, Jason. Usually there’s a choice D and E, too. You taught me that in the Legion,” Ian said with surprising maturity. “You *always* found another way to do something that nobody else thought of. It’s why we won the war against Trillane, cause you found Choice C. It’s why we’re *here*,” he said seriously. “There can’t just be an A or B. Maybe you just need to look at the problem a new way. That’s something else you taught me.”

Jason gave the young man a long look, then he chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s some good advice, Ian,” he said, then he stood up. “I think I need to go talk to someone with some insight into my problem. Who won the game?”

Ian laughed. “The Bombers, six to five.”

“Good,” he replied, then he put his hands in his pockets and joined the tail end of the crowd, looking like any other resident of Karsa.

It took him about an hour to get back home, and in that time, riding two subways and a tram, he started thinking about the problem as an engineer. It was a big problem, but it wasn't a *single* problem. If he compartmentalized the issue into individual units, he could find solutions to those unitized problems, which would give him an overall solution. It was like annealing components onto a moleculartronics board. There were all kinds of different little things you had to do, but when you finished, it all looked nice and neat and organized and it worked perfectly.

So, breaking it up into different problems, he foresaw six different individual issues that he had to address.

The first was the keeping Dahnai on the throne after he was gone.

The second was ensuring that the Imperium didn't fly apart after the Karinnes were gone.

The third was bringing Raisha to Karis.

The fourth was what to do about Shya.

The fifth was making sure that nobody *else* tried to mess with the Imperium after the Karinnes pulled out.

The sixth was figuring out what the hell to do about Terra and the four Urumi systems, who were Karinne systems but also critical parts of the Imperium.

And the seventh was ensuring the welfare of the house by making sure no other empire tried to attack Karis once they were no longer any part of the Imperium.

He sat on the subways and considered individual solutions to those six problems. Some he could find easy solutions to, but some were very tricky. He rode the tram consolidating those problems by finding a common solution that would solve more than one problem. He then walked the four blocks from the tram station to the gate of the strip, padding along as he considered how to apply those solutions in an interconnected way that

solved all six problems. He was completely oblivious to the malevolent glares from the guards as he came through the gate, though he did absently intercept Aya as she charged towards him, hanging her in midair as he walked by, her legs kicking in futility and sending both emotions and graphic impulses to beat Jason senseless for leaving the strip...though she could have sent a KMS unit to go get him and they both knew it. But she knew better, she knew when he got like *that*, it was best to just back off and shadow him from afar, as he was absolutely certain the guards had done. He had no doubt that every city camera was tracking his every move, there was a dropship at high altitude with a battery of cameras and sensors watching everything within ten blocks of him, and there was probably a few Wolf and Gladiator units along with Marine units in position for rapid response. Almost as an afterthought, he dragged Aya along behind him, her still hanging in midair, though she'd stopped kicking, carrying her to the bench by his *oye* tree, which was really filling out, the canopy thickening and widening over the house. He sat down and parked her on the bench beside him, then reached over and grabbed her arm, unlocking her gauntlet from her vambrace.

Just get over it, he sent curtly after he took her gauntlet off, then he took her hand so they would have completely personal and intimate communication, at a level where not even Dera would be able to hear them.

Aya's eyes widened in shock when Jason shared his thoughts with her, and his intentions. Aya knew Dahnai like few others did, even had insights into her that Jason didn't, and he needed her advice about how to deal with this situation. He needed to know how the *Empress* would react, not *Dahnai*. Aya was honestly not very surprised that Dahnai had tried to steal biogenics, and even the ultra-loyal Aya had to grudgingly admit that in the face of what happened, that splitting the Karinnes away from the Imperium might be the only way to protect Raisha and all the other Generations. Aya was flatly resistant to the idea that Dahnai would use her own daughter as a guinea pig, but if the IBI could get a mindbender into the palace, it meant that not even the palace would be safe for Raisha. If someone wanted her bad enough, they'd *find* a way to get at her. After all, they didn't need to kidnap her, they just needed to get some of her blood. Getting the stem cells around the stomach would be best for cloning, but sufficient DNA could be harvested from a blood sample to produce viable clones.

For nearly an hour, they discussed the problem privately, holding hands, as Aya gave him her honest advice, and he found that it was solid and dependable, just like her. They considered his individual solutions to the seven issues, debated them, expanded the discussion to analyze how the seven issues would interact, how the solution to one might affect another. They finished up, Jason letting go of her hand, then he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek gently. *Let me go discuss it with Miaari and Zaa*, he told her. *I'm sorry I scared you, but you know me. You can't keep me locked up in here forever.*

I'm going to prove you wrong, you stubborn man, you, she replied with grim amusement. *I warned you what would happen if you pulled on that leash, Jason. Don't even think this is over.*

Usually I'd submit myself for penitence, but not this time. I needed to go out there, Aya. I can't make a decision that affects every living thing on this planet without being out there with them, so they constantly reminded me just what was at stake. I'm not the house. They are.

She gave him a stony look, then sighed and stood up. She took her gauntlet from him and put it back on. *Still, you will be punished, Jason. Tomorrow, you and me are going to have one of those talks you really don't like. It's going to involve a paddle.*

You're going to look silly wearing pink armor with little lace ribbons tied all over it, he replied as he headed back to the house. *You'll look even sillier spending about two hours under the foot of Kyva's Gladiator.*

I can cheat too, Jason.

Nowhere near as good as I can, he replied dryly as he went back into his house.

He went up to his office, sat down, and called Miaari and asked her to come to his house. He then beeped Zaa asking for an audience, then leaned back in his chair and turned it around to look over the moonlit ocean. *[Cybi,]* he called. A shimmer of light behind him heralded her forming her hologram, and she floated over to the side of his chair and looked down. He conveyed the meat of his conversation with Aya to her in about a second. *[What do you think?]*

[I think some of it will work, but only if we can secure Empress Dahnai's cooperation,] she answered. *[Everything will hinge on what she does.]*

[I know,] he sighed. *[I can only pray that she's the woman I know more than she's the Empress, especially where it concerns the safety of her daughter.]*

[When are you going to tell her?]

[During the summit,] he replied. *[She'll be here in person, and in a place where I'm absolutely sure it won't go any further than her.]*

[True.]

Zaa finally got back to him, a full hologram of her forming on the other side of his desk. The hologram moved around to the other side of his chair form Cybi and looked down at him. "This must truly be important," she noted. "What decision have you reached?"

"The House of Karinne can't stay in the Imperium, Denmother," he replied in a calm, almost emotionless voice. "Our only protection is complete autonomy. If we don't have that, it's just a matter of time before Dahnai, or Sirri, or Sirri's daughter demands we give them everything. And we can't do that."

"It is a matter that past Grand Duchesses pondered themselves, Jason, when the Empress began to snoop," she told him calmly. "But with the secret of the Generations revealed, perhaps this time, it is worth consideration."

"Do you think that Raisha will be safe in the palace, Denmother?"

"No. I do not."

"Then it's time," he replied evenly. "The safety of the Generations is at stake, and more than that. The safety of the *sector* is at stake. The last thing any of us wants to see is ten thousand clones of Raisha grown in a factory, meant to be the breeding stock for an army of Generations, which could flatten any other military in the sector and turn whoever controls those Generations into a conqueror that nobody could stand against, not even *us*. That's what the IBI was trying to do using Saelle, and I'll be *damned* if I let them do that to my *daughter*."

“You have considered the intricacies of your decision?”

“For the last two days,” he replied quietly. “I think I have a plan, but I need your advice, and that of Miaari.”

“Dahnai will not be pleased.”

“I know, but all we can hope is that she sees the practicality of it. After all, the one that clones that army of Generations would use it against *Dahnai* first. If it’s not Dahnai doing it, anyway. I wouldn’t put it past her,” he grunted.

“I will be on Karis within an hour,” she told him. “This, we must discuss in person.”

He nodded. “I’ll be happy to have you,” he replied.

Miaari had a different reaction when she arrived and he told her what he intended to do. “It was inevitable, Jason,” she told him. “We’ve had many talks about parts of what you said, but now that the entire galaxy knows about you, complete autonomy is your only real defense.”

“It’s not gonna be easy,” he grunted.

“Nothing worthwhile is easy, my friend.”

When Zaa arrived, they spent more than half the night deep in discussion and debate about Jason’s plan, sitting downstairs in the living room rather than in his secure room, since Jason wasn’t all that worried about who might overhear what they talked about. Jason had learned over the years that Zaa wasn’t just a powerful ruler, she was a *wise* ruler, and the one person to whom Jason could take his most difficult problems for good, solid advice. Of course, she never *told* him what to do, she always *suggested* what to do. But more often than not, those suggestions were exactly what he ended up doing. They went over his seven individual problems and the solutions, and again discussed the ramifications and collateral actions that would come about because of them. Zaa liked his solutions for some, was skeptical of others, but she was adamantly against his solution for how to deal with Terra.

“No, Jason, that would be a monumentally bad idea,” she told him as Ayama, looking a little sleepy, served Jason coffee and Zaa hot chocolate, which she rather fancied.

“Go to bed, woman, sheesh. It’s not like either of us don’t know how to make a pot of coffee,” Jason told her, swatting her on the butt as she went by, then took a long drink. “Why not? Dahnai *will not* give Terra up, Denmother. We just work around that inevitability.”

“Giving Terra to any other house just won’t work,” she told him. “You forget, the *Academy* is on Terra, and the only reason many come there is because of the neutrality of the Karinnes. If you turn Terra into a partisan system, the Academy is going to suffer. Unless you move the Academy here to Karis, you cannot relinquish Terra under any circumstances. But you cannot do that. Because everyone knows about the Generations, Karis must be a closed system.”

Jason frowned...that was most likely right. Jason had been of a mind to simply hand over the system to Anya, because she’d proved over the years, she was a fair and compassionate overseer. She operated completely within the rules Jason had set, and the Suralles were actually very welcome on Terra because of their actions. The people of Terra *trusted* the Suralles and would have accepted being transferred to Anya’s house.

“So, you think that making Terra a neutral system even within the Imperium is best?”

She nodded. “The United Nations has proved that they can responsibly govern the planet. They maintain their treaties and contracts with the Imperium but are considered a neutral planet in all political matters. Dahnai lets them handle their own affairs, and they continue to produce food for the Imperium. As long as the farms meet the quotas, she has no reason to complain. It also provides a neutral meeting place for the various governments that doesn’t have the excessive regulations that the Moridon impose,” she noted dryly. “In addition, it further reinforces the neutrality of the Academy.”

“What about defense?”

“No government would be crazy enough to attack Terra,” she snorted. “At least none in *this* quadrant. We simply maintain the TES and interdiction, that should be defense enough. In fact, it might be to our advantage, Jason. If we approach the governments of the Confederacy, we can turn Terra and the TES into the entry point for *all* interdicted systems.

Trade for the entire sector would flow through Terra, which brings your birth planet profit and prestige. And that importance will also protect it, even above the presence of the Academy. It will bring the various governments of the sector closer together, sharing a common way station, and that will promote trade and peace.”

“But it also creates a bottleneck, as well as a means of paralyzing the entire sector by creating an irresistible target to attack,” Jason countered. “We’d have to do some reorganizing.”

“Well, we start the conferences in twelve days, and it would be the perfect venue to bring up the idea,” Zaa said with a slight smile. “We cannot piggyback their freighters with our ships forever, Jason. They will need a system of trade routes when the interdictors are turned on, and a Stargate hub can provide it. Dahnai makes a lot of money leasing out her Stargates, with proper protections for them of course, and everyone is safely behind their interdictors, at least as long as they want them. Besides, the Karinnes becoming autonomous would reassure some of the more skittish members of the Confederacy that they are not handing over the keys to their empires to Dahnai.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason agreed with a nod. “I’m not sure everyone will want to turn off the interdictors after we beat the Consortium,” Jason grunted. “Dahnai would be a fool to get rid of the interdictors when she has Stargates, it makes the Imperium absolutely unassailable by every other government in the sector. Sk’Vrae has the same good deal going, and I don’t think the Zyagya have ever been this happy with their lone system behind an interdictor and the only way in defended by both us and their ships. And the cooperation between the Imperium and the Collective can be a model for how we expand things into the Empire, the Federation, the Alliance, the Colonies, and the Republic. And as long as we can create a viable means of moving goods and ensure sovereignty and security for the systems, the other governments will probably want to keep their interdictors as well. They provide an almost impenetrable defense to protect their systems from attack, and that fits in with my overall plan to keep the peace in the sector. You know, just maintain the Confederate treaties even after the war is over. All the militaries working together, which also prevents any one military from getting any bright ideas, and the governments working in

a common logistic system for trade, which increases *everyone's* profitability.

"Now you are thinking like a galactic power player, Jason," Zaa smiled. "I'm sure we could work something out that turns Terra into a neutral system, but it maintains its contracts with Dahnai. You need to discuss these things with Secretary Kim, since this is a serious issue for Terra. As the leader of Terra in your stead, he should have a say."

"I know. I told him I want him here for the summit," Jason answered. "But I should talk to him about this before then. I'll give him a call and ask him to come to Karis tomorrow."

"Good. Now what about the Urumi systems?"

"I was thinking that we leave things the way they are. If I relinquish control of those systems, I'll have broken my word to Sk'Vrae, and I'm not *that* stupid," he snorted. "Those systems with *technically* secede along with the Karinnes, but they maintain all their contracts, treaties, and agreements with the Imperium. In a way, they'll be jointly held systems, just between *three* of us instead of *two* of us. The Karinnes will administer, the Imperium maintains its contracts, and the deal we made with the Urumi will be upheld. But I'll need Sk'Vrae's approval about anything we do with those systems. This involves *her* people, even if they're theoretically not under her control right now."

Zaa took a drink, then sighed. "The other problems are much more murky."

"I know," Jason almost groaned. "I can almost see a war starting over Raisha, Denmother. And then there's Shya. As much as I love that little girl, I don't know if I'll be able to *trust* her once she's Rann's wife. When I'm gone, that puts her literally in bed with the Grand Duke. If she has any loyalty to her mother, it could undermine everything we do."

"Faey are a race with little loyalty, Jason," Zaa said. "Their primary motivation in all things is self-interest, and Shya is virtually *obsessed* with marrying Rann. If she has to choose between Rann and her mother, she will choose Rann. After all, she's the second daughter, there's virtually no chance she'll ever sit on the throne. If she is smart, she marries the future ruler of an independent house, and becomes a ruler in her own right."

Jason sighed and nodded. That *is* what a Faey would do.

“It also solidifies the ties between the Imperium and the Karinnes. With Shya married to Rann, it creates an alliance that neither side would willingly break. Sirri and Rann would be attacking their own families if either ever declared war, if we’re talking about what happens after you and Dahnai are gone.”

“I know, I figured that that might be a selling point to make Dahnai go for it,” Jason agreed, leaning back on the couch. “Even though I intend to break away from the Imperium, I don’t want to sever all ties with Dahnai. I want us to be strong allies, just be in a position where I can protect the house from *her*.”

“Again, it all hinges on Dahnai,” Zaa noted.

Jason nodded. “Whether this all happens peacefully or it turns into the Fourth Civil War depends entirely on her, but I *won’t* be talked out of this,” he declared grimly. “The survival of the Generations is at stake, and it’s my solemn duty to protect my people. This is the *only* way I can think of to do it.”

There was a shuffling from the stairs, and Rann came around and into view. He was wearing a nightshirt and was yawning but gave a sleepy smile to Zaa and hurried over to her. “Miss Denmother!” he declared.

“Well, good morning to you, little Rann,” she smiled as she picked him up and put him on her lap. “But it’s the middle of the night. Whyever are you awake?”

“I got thirsty, and heard you talking,” he answered as she leaned over and put her muzzle over his shoulder. “Is it really the middle of the night?”

“Yes,” Jason answered. “I think a certain someone is just a little too excited,” he added.

“Well, maybe a little. Shya’s going to come to my party!” he said with growing excitement.

“In two weeks, you silly,” Jason teased. “I’m almost afraid of how keyed up you’re going to be in a week.”

Shey's face appeared as a hologram against the back wall. "Your Grace," she called, then she smiled. "Well, hello Rann."

"Hi, miss Shey!" he replied with a wave.

"What's going on, Shey?"

"You said you wanted to be informed when we had news from the PR sector," she said. "The invasion of PR-106 has begun. The invasion of PR-88 will begin in twenty minutes."

"Any casualties?"

"Only light damage to five ships," she answered. "We took them completely by surprise, and they had very little defense. The KMS has the system effectively blockaded, and the ground assault is underway at this moment."

"I think we should move up to your study so you can observe the telemetry," Zaa suggested. "I'll put Rann back to bed and meet you there. I rarely get to tuck in my favorite little cousin," she said with a toothy smile, making Rann laugh when she tickled his sides.

Though he'd wanted to invade two days ago, unfortunately, it took Sioa longer to organize a ground attack than she expected because they didn't have the right maps or intel on the inhabited planets in those systems. Once she had that, she organized a plan, then they had to wait for optimal conditions. The Imxi were very capable at night fighting, with eyes that were very effective in low light situations, so they waited for day cycle to coincide at the capitols of all three inhabited planets in those two systems, causing a nearly 30 hour delay in the invasion. His girls could fight at night as well, but the sheer bravado of a direct assault in broad daylight sent the message to the Imxi that the KMS had little but utter scorn for their military capabilities.

Jason did just that, moving up to his study but leaving the door unlocked. Four different holo screens popped up around his desk, and Cybi joined him, sitting on the edge of his desk as he watched a tactical holo of troop disposition, another of naval ship deployment, and camera feeds from his marines who were boiling out of their dropships at that very moment. The Imxi had responded with tanks and infantry, but they were firing ion weapons. The Teryon shields on a Gladiator, which his riggers rarely used

since they were useless against pulse and Torsion weaponry, made it virtually immune to those weapons, and the Crusader armor his marines wore was able to stand up to multiple hits from ion blasts, which gave his girls formidable protection from enemy fire. But that didn't matter all that much, because he watched the camera feeds of entire squads of Imxi defenders as well as fleeing civilians just drop to the ground in large swaths as the mindstrikers in the marine units did their jobs. There were telepathic techniques for attacking entire groups of people, very advanced ones, a telepath attacking an *area* instead of a *mind*, but it wasn't something that the lay Faey learned in primary school. It was mindstriker training, a military application of talent taught to those telepaths who specialized in using their talent in battle. The mindstrikers mixed in with his marine units, added to the talent of the other soldiers, simply withered any resistance, leaving it laying unconscious on the ground or running screaming in circles with two of their four arms holding their heads. His marine units just marched right up the street, knocking out, subduing, or outright controlling anyone that dared challenge them, to the point where a large contingent of slack-jawed Imxi, dominated by marines, marched in front of them like puppets, demonstrating the utter futility of the Imxi getting within five kathra of a Karinne Marine as well as forming a moving shield of friendly soldiers that made firing at the marines hard to do without the Imxi that weren't yet taken out by talent killing their own soldiers.

There was some fighting, however, when the Consortium's bugs reached the field, looking mainly like construction crews and other technical workers rather than dedicated infantry. They were wearing armor pieces over their exoskeletons that didn't look the same as they did on the infantry units Jason had seen when they retook the Federation and Alliance, and they certainly weren't afraid to fire through Imxi soldiers to hit KMS soldiers. The mindstrikers simply pulled back and used the Imxi they dominated to attack the bugs, softening them up for when the marines and the Gladiators rolled in and mopped up, done with Gladiators and Wolf fighters. The bugs didn't have any of their mantis mecha in the capitol, and after the KMS destroyed all the Imxi tanks, the bugs had no heavy armor or weaponry to try to counter the KMS. Besides, the Faey had turned the Imxi soldiers against them, letting them stay safely behind the hard shields while they made the Imxi do the fighting for them. Using that tactic, the KMS

swarmed over the Consortium bugs in about fifteen minutes, collected up their Torsion rifles, then marched onward.

It took his marines only about half an hour to conquer PR-106's capitol after destroying the Consortium garrison, leaving behind a large swath of unconscious Imxi and dead bugs.

And *that* was what made the Faey so fucking dangerous. Their most dangerous weapon wasn't their Gladiators or their pulse rifles, it was their talent. And he had some of the best mindstrikers in the fucking *galaxy* in his Marine Corps.

Jason checked out the aftermath. The navy had destroyed the shipyards at PR-106 rather than capture them, leaving burning hulks of mostly finished ships and a huge debris field of docks and support stations, some of which was falling into the atmosphere to burn up. The secondary space station at PR-106 was in three pieces, with equipment as well as quite a few Imxi bodies floating around the sliced-up station. One of the three pieces was tumbling out of orbit and would hit the atmosphere in just a matter of minutes, probably blown downward by the explosive decompression when a particle beam cut it in half. That same decompression was what had blown all that unsecured debris and Imxi out into space around the station. The beams didn't look to hit anything volatile enough to cause a major explosion, which left the three pieces in almost eerily good condition, with the bulkheads and decks of its internal structure quite visible, almost like an opened dollhouse. Imxi damage control was never meant to counter something being cut in half—no damage control was, really—which sealed the fate of every Imxi in the station that wasn't in a pressure suit. If they were in pressurized compartments within the station and no help came for them, they faced a slow death from either asphyxiation or starvation. But, KMS recovery units were already moving towards the remains of the station, they'd take the survivors prisoner as well as plunder the station for intelligence and anything that might be useful, mainly samples of Imxi technology, their station's computer core, and samples of their armor and weapons for future study.

PR-88 took nearly two hours to conquer by ground, because they had three inhabited planets in the system, but it took all of about ten minutes to secure by space. The *Dreamer* led a task force of 17 ships into the system

and wiped out the very weak defenses there, since PR-88 was well within Imxi territory and they probably never dreamed anyone would attack it. All they had were orbital stations and some defense satellites carrying missiles. The ships split up to attack all three planets at the same time, the interdictor being taken in to planet two, which was the only non-arable planet there. It was an airless, barren rock a little bigger than Mercury that the Imxi mined for metals, and Sioa had made no plans to take that planet by ground forces. Fighting to get into their domes might shatter them and kill everyone inside, so they just blockaded off the planet, the *Dreamer* parked by the interdictor to protect it. Planets three and four, on the other hand, already had dropships descending into the atmospheres. Those two planets were one of the most rare cosmic phenomenon in the galaxy when it came to planets, they were a double-planet system of two planets virtually the same size that orbited each other even as they orbited around the star. There was no fixed planet and orbiting planet, each planet orbited an imaginary axis created by their velocity and gravitational pull, the two planets spinning around that point, eclipsing each other from the star at regular intervals. Such systems usually weren't so stable that the double-planet lasted much more than a couple of million years, but those two planets were perfectly stable in their unusual orbit. For that matter, such systems usually tore each other apart while the planets were forming.

Both planets were almost tempting to keep. Planet three was .92 standard gravity, almost Terra's gravity, and .972 pressure, where planet four was .97 gravity and 1.01 pressure. Both had the exact same atmospheric composition, well within tolerances, and both planets were dedicated to farming, most likely feeding the vast majority of the Imxi systems. Jason, Cybi, and Zaa watched as a repeat of PR-106 happened on both planets, as Karinne Marines dominated, knocked out, or drove crazy the Imxi militias that opposed them. Marines took planet three in little more than an hour and took planet four literally without firing a single shot.

Myri and Shey's faces appeared on a hologram after the ground units set up a hard shield. "That's it, Jason. PR-88 is secured."

"Good work," Jason replied. "Now kick Maggie in the butt and send out the corvettes and gunboats to paralyze Imxi shipping throughout their entire territory. Strangle them, Myri."

“Easily done,” Myri nodded, then the hologram of her and Shey vanished.

“It comes down to how attached the Imxi are to their systems,” Zaa noted.

“Any delay we can cause them in assembling that fleet is time we can use, Denmother,” he replied grimly.

“Now then, I think we’ve talked enough, Jason. I am going to stay on planet for the conference, there’s little reason for me to go home now,” she noted dryly. “And you need to get some sleep. Rann is going to be very hyper tomorrow. You’ll need your rest to keep up with him.”

He passed a hand over his face. “You’re right. I am tired,” he said. “I’ll arrange—”

“No, I’ll stay in the guest room,” she replied, standing up. “I am not so pompous as to required luxury, cousin. I think I can ‘rough it’ for the night, as the Terrans say.”

“Don’t go all Dahnai on me, Denmother,” he said, which made her chuckle.

“Good night, Jason. Sleep well,” she intoned. She then walked out the door to the hall, but Jason went through the door to his bedroom, where Jyslin was sleeping. He sat on the edge of the bed and scrubbed his face with his hands, worrying a bit over his girls over in the PR sector, now occupying hostile planets to draw the Imxi back to their home territory and foment discord between them and the Consortium, but dreading 1325 and the arrival of Dahnai. He just hoped they could get through the party before Dahnai had her explosion, he didn’t want to ruin Rann’s day.

Jyslin stirred on the bed, then he felt her arm drape over his shoulder, pulling herself against his back. *It’s about time. What’s going on, love?*

I guess I can tell you now, love. I’ve made my decision.

And?

We’re seceding from the Imperium.

There was a long silence, then her hand gripped his opposite shoulder. *If you think it’s what we have to do, love.*

It's what we have to do, he replied grimly. I'm just trying to figure out how to break it to Dahnai and try to make her understand we don't want to sever ties with the Imperium. We just can't be under her control. Not now. What happened with Saelle just can't be ignored, love, because the next one they target will be my daughter.

She won't accept it, Jason. She'll fight.

She'll want to fight, Jys. She's in no position to say no, not when her ass staying on that throne is directly because of me. It's not her I'm worried about anyway, it's the rest of the Siann. Getting out from under Dahnai will be the easy part. Making sure the entire Imperium doesn't implode after the other houses sees a house successfully break away, that's going to be the trick.

And that's why she'll fight.

I have a plan for that, he assured her, patting her arm.

And what would that be?

Easy. The House Karinne is seceding from Dahnai's authority, but it's still going to be at her beck and call when she needs us. Say, to put down an insurrection from another noble house. And besides, Jys my love, don't forget that every system in the Imperium is interdicted. Not a ship can move anywhere in Dahnai's territory without her approval. And if she turns off the Stargates, then any noble house with designs of breaking away will find itself walled off and starved of supplies and food. Semoya or Emae might want to break away, but if they do it, they'll be stranded, isolated, and starving. As long as we supply interdictors to Dahnai, she maintains an iron grip on every system in the Imperium.

She was quiet a long moment, then she chuckled softly. Clever.

I just need to make Dahnai see reason and not focus on the negatives, he sent wearily.

What about Shya?

I'm leaving that up to Rann, he replied. If he wants her, then I'll do everything I can to keep the betrothal. But again, that's going to hinge on Dahnai. If she throws a complete temper tantrum, she might revoke it.

Give her a little credit, love. I think if you can get her to talk, she won't be quite so combative.

And that's gonna be the trick, he sent evenly. Now, if you don't mind, my love, I really need to get some sleep. I've had a very exhausting couple of days.

Jyslin nuzzled the side of his neck, then started to pull his shirt up. *Then let's get you undressed and tucked in so I can be your teddy bear,* she sent lightly.

If I did half the things to my teddy bear I've done to you, I'd be in jail back on Terra, he noted dryly, which made her burst out laughing.

Some teddy bears have all the luck.

Kaista, 26 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 13 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista, 26 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House

The invasion of the Imxi systems had been a success.

So far, there was no visible reaction from either the Imxi or the Consortium, which meant that the arguing was taking place behind closed doors. The corvettes and gunboats were already terrorizing the Imxi's shipping lanes, thanks to the limitations of their old-technology hyperspace jump engines. They were so antiquated that they could barely tolerate *any* gravitational well disturbance, requiring Imxi ships to get a serious distance away from the system's star. An Imxi ship could only jump if it were the same distance that Saturn was from Terra's sun, if the system's star was the same size. Larger stars required even greater distances.

Such engines weren't just used by the Imxi. Many of the Faey's older robotic cargo freighters had engines so old that the ship had to be all but outside the system's planetary orbits to make a jump, like the battered old

freighter that brought Jason and the squad to Karis in the first place. That freighter had had to all but leave the Draconis system, jump, then jump in at the very edge of the Karis system, because its jump engines couldn't tolerate the gravity well of the star. For a robot freighter, old engines like that were economical, since there was no crew in it to get bored as the ship came into the system at sublight, and what it was carrying was already scheduled with the time delay in mind. Those older engines also took less power to operate, so they were economical in a power consumption sense as well as a financial sense.

The damage had been considerable in just 11 hours. Maggie had gone nuts on the Imxi, deploying mines and automated hunter/killer drones along all the shipping lanes, taking advantage of the fact that the Imxi couldn't communicate with their ships in hyperspace. Those freighters and transports literally dropped out of hyperspace into the jaws of an angry lion. Maggie was a bit cruel about it, attacking *anything* that dropped out of hyperspace, including civilian transport ships...but this was war. Jason didn't like it, but those civilian ships might be carrying Consortium bugs, weapons, or supplies for the Consortium attack on Karis, so he had to swallow his disgust at attacking civilian ships and remember that at that moment, *anything* in the PR sector was a fair target. Maggie completely paralyzed all logistics in the Imxi empire within 10 hours, and then she started attacking the Imxi military ships trying desperately to secure those hyperspace arrival points to protect helpless ships coming out of hyperspace. But the Imxi learned quickly that the Legion fought dirty, utilizing CMS-enabled drones, mines, Buzzsaws, and dormant missiles that activated when targets came within range. She also went low-tech, towing asteroids into the jump arrival points to create obstacles and bottlenecks to fluster Imxi ships and protect their assets. The mass and gravity of the asteroids messed up the arrival of the Imxi ships, forcing them out of hyperspace *before* they got to their destination, exploiting the old engines their enemy used and the basic law of hyperspace that prevented a ship from jumping directly across a point of high gravity in real space. That reached into hyperspace, and older, weaker engines would get knocked out of hyperspace by the distortion gravity put into that domain.

Hyperspace travel was line of sight unless the engines were of the quality the Faey and other races in the sector had or better. Only engines

like that could pass through the effect that the gravity well of a star had on hyperspace without getting knocked out, because they had enough hyperspace “velocity” to get through the area before the gravity altered their hyperspace inertia. Engines could only hold the ship in hyperspace if the conditions didn’t change by a large degree, it was that principle the interdictors exploited, creating so much distortion in hyperspace that only powerful engines like the Karinne or Kimdori engines could withstand the constant flux...and even then only with their mathematical expression of hyperspace allowing the jump computer to sync the engines to the effect. Extremely old engines could get knocked out of hyperspace by a large concentration of mass in their direct path, like a rogue planet, but when a ship was preparing to drop out of hyperspace, the presence of mass close to the arrival point could cause the engines to drop out early, putting them a few thousand *kathra* away from their expected arrival point. In stellar travel terms, that was like a dropship landing a half an inch off the landing lines, but it was enough to make the Imxi ships face a good ten to twenty seconds of attack from automated weapons before the Imxi defense ships could arrive to protect them.

And in typical Legion fashion, as soon as the Imxi figured out what Maggie was doing, she changed tactics to keep them guessing.

But that was going on over on the other side of the galaxy. Jason was sitting in his office, his chair turned so he could look out the window, tapping his fingertips together as he proofread and edited a document in his gestalt that was going to make the Imperium go up in flames. He and Zaa had discussed it again that morning, with Miaari and Cybi listening in, and they’d come up with their strategy for what was going to be an unheard of maneuver. He and the legal team had gone around and around with the document, him sending it to them, them returning it with language changes or areas where he was going too far, but each draft came back with fewer and fewer revisions. This last one might be the one they approve.

It was the Karinne’s Declaration of Autonomy. To call it a declaration of independence would be correct, but *independence* wasn’t as technically correct in his mind as *autonomy*. He didn’t want a complete and irrevocable split with the Imperium, what he wanted was to be as much a part of the Imperium as possible without being subject to Dahnai. He intended to retain the military alliance, retain the trade agreements, keep his ties to Merrane to

keep that house on the throne, even keep his IBL team. The only thing he wanted was for the House of Karinne to be outside of Dahnai's ability to command. That was the only way that the Karinnes would be safe, because he couldn't trust Dahnai anymore.

Which *sucked*. He loved that woman, and it killed him to know that he couldn't *trust* a woman that he *loved*. But he was too wise now to let his emotions rule him, where they might have just five scant years ago. He had truly settled into the role of the Grand Duke Karinne.

He finished the revisions and sent it back to his legal team to let them read over, confident that they'd approve it without doing more than just pointing out grammar errors.

He sighed and looked back over his chair as Chirk clattered in on her four legs, carrying a handpanel as she kept her blade arms behind her back, mainly to keep them out of the way. He wouldn't know what he'd do without her. She was a Kizzik, with an alien, insectoid personality, but she was the best damn administrative assistant in the entire Imperium. She was probably the most powerful person on Karis, truth be told, because Jason more or less did what she put on his schedule, and he rarely if ever questioned it. He trusted Chirk nearly as much as he trusted his own wife, because she was *worthy* of that trust. "Is the cabinet in the meeting room?" he asked.

"*They are,*" she answered using her translator. "*I assume you are telling them your intent?*"

"They need to know as soon as possible," he replied, turning his chair around and taking the handpanel she offered. He read over the bit of busy work, an authorization for the infrastructure department to begin work on a new broadcast power hub and signed off on it. Ever since the power failure, Rund and Harvann had been tweaking the power grid so that didn't happen again. and it took both of them, since Rund was secretary of power and Harvann was secretary of communications, which had authority over an aspect of the broadcast power system in that it was his communication frequencies the broadcast power used. "Yeri and Kumi aren't not the only ones that are going to need time to be ready for it." He handed the panel back to her. "What do *you* think of it, Chirk?"

“It is not my place to proffer an opinion, revered Hive-leader.”

“Be that as it may, I’d still like your opinion, from a Kizzik perspective.”

“I think it has potential,” she answered, fanning her rather useless wings absently. *“The Karinnes have operated in an autonomous fashion since the return of the house six years ago. This proclamation only makes it official. For the house to truly prosper, it needs release from the Imperium.”*

“Why do you say that?”

“Because most of the plans you make for the house involve a peaceful and prosperous sector, and that cannot come about so long as Empress Dahnai exists as an overwhelming threat to all our neighbors,” she answered. *“The Imperium seeks to conquer and rule, even when such things are not necessary, even when those actions are harmful to the Imperium itself. The Kizzik are not afraid to make war, but war is waged as a last resort. It is harmful to the hive as a whole, and only when the harm of not making war overcomes the harm war causes will the Kizzik enter battle. This is the way you think, revered Hive-leader. In many ways, you think as the Kizzik think, which is why two separate colonies have moved here. We are inclined to being part of a house that thinks as we do, a house that thinks of the group over the individual. The Faey and Empress Dahnai see war as the solution to problems that can be corrected by far less drastic means. So long as the Karinnes are chained to Empress Dahnai’s bloodlust, they will not achieve their true potential. The Karinnes are not the Imperium, even if they are subject to it, much as we Kizzik are.”*

Jason digested the mechanical words of the translator but saw the wisdom within them. He gave her a single nod and leaned back in his chair. “Thank you, Chirk. I value your opinion. But I must ask, will the secession of the Karinnes cause any discord between the Kizzik and the Faey?”

“I would guess not,” she replied after thinking about it a moment. *“We Kizzik move very carefully within the Imperium, revered Hive-leader. I would venture to guess that half the reason that the Most Revered Hive Leaders have not yet moved on your translator offer is because they are pondering the ramifications of the Kizzik becoming more involved in Imperium affairs. So long as we had the language barrier, we had an*

excuse to keep ourselves separate. And the Faey, they would not like our opinions in many matters."

Jason just had to laugh. That *was* a good reason why the leaders of the Kizzik were being so slow about accepting his offer to sell them the rights to manufacture translator units. "Well, at least you can speak your mind here," he told her lightly.

"Which is why so many Kizzik are here, revered Hive-leader. Here, we feel as if we belong. That is the true gift of the House Karinne, that all races and species may come here and feel they are an important part of the group. Here, all matter equally. And to the Kizzik, this is a good thing."

He gave her a smile, then stood up. "That's what we're aiming for around here, Chirk. The country where I grew up, America, had a similar mindset. Its unofficial motto was *give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free*. That means that in America, everyone was welcome, because in diversity there is strength, but it also meant that *anyone* could come to America and have a chance to make themselves better, if they worked hard enough for it. That's how I try to do things around here."

"And there is wisdom in that approach, revered Hive-leader," Chirk agreed. *"The Kizzik are not xenophobic as many believe us to be."*

"I've noticed," he nodded, then he stood up. "Well, let me get in there and shock the hell out of everyone."

"Good luck."

Jason went down the hall to his cabinet meeting room, and saw all his members at the table talking, and it was a curious mirror of the conversation he'd just had. He looked at the three Faey, two Kizzik, and three Makati as they talked with each other, with a Terran leading it. That was the four most active races in the Imperium. And he could only wonder if there might be a Shio or a Skaa or an Urumi sitting at that table in the next ten years. "Settle down, guys," Jason called as Dera and Shen came in behind him, then took their positions by the door. "Boy, do we have a lot to talk about."

"I've been hearing some strange rumors, Jason," Trenirk said. In these informal situations, they all used first names.

“They’re true,” Jason replied. “I’m dropping the mother of all antimatter bombs on the Imperium, Trenirk. The House of Karinne is going to declare autonomy from the Imperium.” Jason settled down the explosion of gasps and started exclamations, then sat down in his chair. “I didn’t come to this decision lightly,” he said as Miaari came in. She wasn’t technically on the cabinet, but as his chief of intelligence, she often sat in on the meetings. “In fact, I really didn’t want to make this decision at all, but we found out that it’s *Dahnai* sending most of the spies we’ve caught. We can’t trust her anymore, so we’re removing ourselves from her authority.”

“Holy shit,” Kumi breathed.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Jason grunted as Miaari sat down. “This is the only way we can protect ourselves from the Imperium, because if Dahnai can’t steal what she wants, eventually she’s gonna just come out and *order* us to open our doors. And we can’t do that,” he finished. “So, there it is, guys. I’m going to give you the same option I’m giving every member of the house. You can hand in your resignation and return to the Imperium if that’s what you want, because I’m not going to hold you here. This house has *always* been about people being here because they want to be.”

“You’re not going to see *any* of us get up from this table, Jason,” Yeri declared, to which they all nodded.

“So, no takers?” Jason asked, then he blew out his breath. “Thank God. I’d be lost without you guys.”

Jason spent nearly six hours discussing his plans and debating them with his cabinet, discussing the impact of independence on the house’s economy, the reaction of the citizens, and the problems that it was going to cause. The people of Karinne didn’t sign up for the house as being *independent* from the Imperium, though many did come because it was *separate*. The people of Karinne had to choose what to do, he owed them that much, give them the chance to leave before the house split away. Plans to handle that were made, as well as military contingencies with Myri in case the Imperium tried to fight. That would be the most unlikely scenario, since all they had to do was delink the Stargate to protect themselves and recall all KMS units within reach of the INS. His legal team finally got back to him after those six hours and approved the final draft of his proclamation.

It was ready. There was nothing left to do but tell Dahnai, because he didn't want to drop this on her at the summit. He steeled himself on his walk back to his office, Shen and Dera following closely behind him, his gestalt assembling the rest of the language of his proposal to Dahnai about the split for her to read, at least after she got over the explosion and she got her temper back. He closed off his office and sat in his chair, then turned it around to look out the window for a moment of quiet contemplation before he initiated the call to Dahnai.

There was a soft light behind him as a hologram of her shimmered on the far side of his desk, and that light made him close his eyes and bow his head slightly. Cybi's hologram shimmered into being in front of him, and she leaned down and put her hand on his shoulder. He nodded and sighed, then turned around and faced Empress Dahnai Merrane.

And she was *not* happy. She stood before him in formal robes, obviously just coming from court, her hands on her hips and a stern look on her face. "Oh, so *now* you want to talk to me? After I've spent the last two days trying to get past that fucking Kizzik you used to stonewall me?" she asked angrily.

"The House of Karinne no longer recognizes the authority of Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Faey Imperium," he said in a cold, quiet voice. "Due to acts of espionage against us by the Imperial government that demonstrates the unwillingness of the Imperium to respect the agreements and treaties formed between the Empress Dahnai Merrane and the House of Karinne, the House of Karinne officially and immediately withdraws from the Imperium. A written copy of this declaration is being transmitted to you as we speak, as well as a written treaty to maintain all legal contracts and obligations that the House of Karinne has legally entered."

She looked absolutely *stunned*.

"The House of Karinne will honor all its obligations to our trade agreements and military alliances. The House of Karinne will also honor its commitment to keeping the House of Merrane on the Imperial Throne by being at the service of the Empress Merrane should she issue a general call to arms. The House of Karinne will remain as closely tied to the Imperium as we possibly can be, but we will no longer recognize the right of the Empress Dahnai Merrane to rule over us, not after the Empress Dahnai

Merrane *personally* ordered acts of espionage against the House of Karinne. The Karinne Military Service will continue to aid and support the Confederate navies against the Consortium, though with us being autonomous, the House of Karinne no longer expects or demands that the Imperium or the Confederacy continue to protect the planet Karis. The farms of Terra and Exile will continue to supply food to the Imperium, and the House of Karinne will continue to administer the four Urumi systems as per our agreement. We will honor our treaties and our obligations to both the Imperium and the allies of the Confederacy, but we will no longer submit ourselves to the will of an Empress that has broken her word and violated our trust. And that is all I have to say,” he said, staring her right in her holographic eyes. “I’ll give you one standard day to read my proclamation and the attached treaty offer. Then, and *only* then, will I talk to you, Empress Merrane.”

And he cut the comm, causing her shocked face to dissolve into nothingness.

He bowed his head, feeling cold inside. Having to do that in the face of a woman he loved, it was like stabbing himself in the chest and then twisting the knife. Cybi put a comforting hand on his shoulder and patted it, and he looked up at her with emotional eyes.

“I know, Jason. But it had to be done.”

“Sometimes I hate this job,” he said in a bare whisper.

Kaira, 27 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 14 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 27 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House

Jason had given Dahnai a full standard day to read his transmitted documents, and he never got out of his office before he and Dahnai had their reckoning.

When he wasn't in conference with about everyone on Karis that was important, he was preparing his public declaration. And while he was doing that, the word had rippled through the entire *Confederacy* of Jason's shocking move. Something that momentous wasn't going to stay a secret long, not after Dahnai threw what could only be called a raging fit in the throne room immediately after he cut her off. She actually threw her crown across the room before storming off into her private hallway, causing a startled guard to pick it up and hurry after her. Rumor quickly spread, someone leaked the confrontation, and then it swept through the Imperium like wildfire that the House of Karinne had declared independence. It was all over the news within two hours, and Chirk was being absolutely assaulted with demands for conference from every Confederate ruler, the Emperor of the Veruta, the High Archon of the Haumda, even the Magister of the Imbiri.

Jason was too busy to do anything but make plans and prepare his public announcement, but he also got two very shocked visitors in the form of Frinia Foralle and Yila Trefani. Both were still on Karis, and unlike anyone else, they had the ability to park themselves outside his office and demand vociferously to talk to him. After the fourth hour of them trying to bull their way into his office, he finally let them in. He explained things to them as calmly as he could, both what he did and *why* he did it, then sat with them for nearly three hours to discuss his intention to remain more or less in the Imperium in everything but one aspect, and that was that he would not recognize Dahnai's authority over him.

Frinia was an old warhorse of the *Siann* and was quite savvy and intelligent. After she read his proposal to Dahnai which basically let her keep all the benefits of the House of Karinne while only having to accede that Karis was sovereign territory she didn't control, she tapped her finger to her chin for a moment and gave her opinion. *It does bait the trap*, she finally answered. *Your document makes it clear you don't want to do this, and you want to stay as close to the Imperium as you can. Dahnai doesn't lose very much out of the agreement except the ability to order you around...not that she was ordering you around in the first place. It just makes what we all suspected official.*

What did you suspect?

That you didn't answer to Dahnai, she replied. She's let you get away with more than she'd ever let any of the rest of us get away with.

That's because she needs Jason, Yila injected, her thought contemplative, pondering. The Merranes aren't as strong as they used to be, Frinia. If she didn't have Jason's Karinne ships scaring the piss out of Emae and Semoya, we might be in a civil war right this minute. It's hard to boss around someone you need to keep your own throne.

Be that as it may, Jason drew her away from that train of thought, do you see anything in my proposal that the Siann might get pissy about?

Not really. The document makes it clear that the Karinnes will all but be part of the Imperium except that they'll be equals, not subjects. The only possible problem I see is from some opportunistic Grand Duchess that tries to take over Terra or the Urumi systems under the reasoning that they're Imperium systems, yet under the control of a rebel house. Semoya would probably kill her own first-born daughter to get her hands on Bellar. She'd make billions off that planet.

I worry more about how the Siann will see Dahnai allowing me to secede.

What can she do about it? What can the Siann do about it? Frinia replied. They can't do shit, Jason. You have all the koba nuts in the pod in this game. Without your interdictors, the entire sector would be slaves to the Consortium, and we all know it.

There might be some minor grumbling, but I don't think anyone's gonna do anything crazy, Yila agreed. The Karinnes have been separate from the rest of us since you restored the house, Jason. And they were before the Third Civil War, for that matter. After everyone reads this, they won't think Dahnai is weak. In fact, if I didn't know what I know, I'd almost say that this was a brilliant move by Dahnai.

How so? Jason asked.

There are some major opportunities here for the Imperium, Jason. The Confederacy, I mean. With the interdictors up all over the sector, it makes the other governments rely on Faey Stargates or Karinne freighters just to get access to their planets. As long as you keep those interdictors in place, they have to pay us to move their own goods, but the problem is, it also

represents a significant risk because, well, it's us, she sent with a quirky smile. If I were Dahnai, I'd have kicked you out of the Imperium myself and set you up as an independent client state, neutral in the eyes of our neighbors, then used that neutrality to gain an unbreakable monopoly on all transportation in and out of every major planet in the sector. Not to conquer, but for the money. Charge the Confederacy a set rate to use the Stargate that makes it just slightly more expensive than standard freighters and logistics, and the money would be rolling in so fast that the Moridon banks would explode from the deposits. All of them would pay that little bit more to get their goods to their destination in real time, in just hours, where it could take a takir to get a shipment from one place to another without us. It would also make all of them totally protected by the interdictors, she added. The only threat would be from the Karinnes with their ability to jump the interdictors, and I'm sure that more than one ruler has worried that Dahnai will order the Karinnes to do just that someday. If the Karinnes are independent, that threat is removed, and it'll make them more willing to keep the interdictors and bargain agreements. That's what I'd do if I were Empress.

I think I see what you're saying, Frinia nodded. Dahnai uses Jason as a money mint and rakes in the Stargate usage fees.

With that much money in the treasury, Dahnai could build a system that would make Merrane's dynasty all but eternal, Yila declared. Every house would be rolling in credits, to the point where nobody would want to try to take the throne from Dahnai, they'd be making way too much money. It would be an economic boom of epic proportions. Nobody would want a house war when everyone's making so much money.

I wouldn't allow a house war anyway, Jason supplied. I made an oath to keep Dahnai on that throne, and despite her breaking her word, I'm not breaking mine. Dahnai being on the throne ensures that the Imperium remains stable, and that's what's most important to me. The only reason I'm doing this is because it proves that I just can't trust anyone, girls. I mean, they attacked Saelle in the palace, and it's Dahnai herself sending the spies to steal biogenic technology.

Dahnai sometimes doesn't know when what she has in her basket is better than what she sees on the vine, Frinia snorted. The interdictors make

us absolutely unattackable, and with the interdictors up and Dahnai in control of the Stargates at Draconis, no house could even manage to get a fleet there to attack Merrane even if they did try to dethrone her. For that reason alone, she was totally insane to try to steal from you. Even after the Consortium and the Benga are dealt with, having those interdictors up in conjunction with our Stargates would give Dahnai an absolute stranglehold on the Imperium.

That's true, Yila agreed. After the interdictors went up, I had to come here and suck Jayce's dick to get my operations back up and running, she added with a wink at him.

We've always wondered why you spend so much time here, Frinia sent dryly, which made Yila laugh.

The honest truth is, we have quite a few profitable and entirely legal joint business operations going on, she answered. The Paladins are only the tip of Demir's sword, Frinia. All this honest money is almost making me reconsider crime. Almost.

That'll never happen, Jason sent with dry amusement, which made Frinia laugh.

[Jason, Myri needs to talk to you,] Cybi cut in.

[Go ahead and patch her in.] He glanced at the two Grand Duchesses. Excuse me a minute.

[Jason,] Myri's voice touched him. [We have a problem.]

[What?]

[Empress Dahnai is aboard the Feyari's Spear and is all but threatening execution to anyone who doesn't bring her to Karis right now,] she told him. Jason winced, he'd completely forgotten about the three Karinne ships at Draconis. The Feyari's Spear was one of the new Mark II cruisers, only commissioned two months ago.

[I totally forgot they were picketed there. Go ahead and order Haya to bring her to Karis and arrange her to get to my office. I'm not going out to meet her.] He looked to the two Faey women. Dahnai's on her way here. I suggest you two don't even let her know you're here, or she might think you're a part of this.

That's a good idea, Frinia agreed with a nod. I'll be over at the Paladin offices. I need to talk to Jyslin about a few things anyway.

And I have a few things to check on with Kumi, Yila added. I'll be in the building, but I won't leave Kumi's office until it's all clear.

Sounds like a plan. Thank you for your input, ladies, it does make me feel a little better.

You should have talked to us about this before you told Dahnai, Frinia scolded him. I've been in my chair longer than you've been alive, young buck. I could have helped you break the news without a pissed off Empress coming over here to kick your ass. And don't think that she's not coming for any other reason, she warned with a slight smile. I suggest you greet Dahnai with your armor on.

That might be a good idea, Jason chuckled aloud. Good thing I have my armor here. Aya lets me take it off as long as I don't leave my office.

The two Grand Duchesses stood up, and Frinia came around the desk, leaned down, and kissed him on the cheek. Go put the armor on, Jason, you're going to need it. Let me know what happens.

I will, he nodded. He stood up and opened his armor stand closet as the two walked out, then Aya and Dera came in. Aya would let him be alone with those two. Dahnai is on her way here, and from the sound of it, she's breathing fire, he told them as he started taking off his shirt.

I think she has a good reason for it, Aya sent dryly.

I have to ask you something, Aya.

If we'll leave? No, she replied. I've told you before, Jason, we were dispatched here. All of us will remain on Karis until we pension, and not even Empress Dahnai can recall us.

Even with me openly defying her?

The Imperial Guard does not involve itself in politics, she replied simply. We are here because Rann is betrothed to Shya, and I don't think anything is going to change that.

I think we agree there, he nodded as he unbuckled his belt. I'm giving Rann the choice if he wants to keep the betrothal. My boys get to marry who

they want to marry. I think we all know where he stands in that particular matter.

He'd kill you if you revoked the betrothal, Dera noted lightly.

Exactly.

Dera helped him get his armor on as Aya monitored the arrival of the *Feyari's Spear*. Captain Hariya must have run at flank speed once they came out of the Stargate, because Dahnai was on a dropship coming down by the time Jason got his gauntlet on. *This is bound to get ugly, Aya,* Jason sent as he weighed whether or not he wanted to wear the helmet. *I'd like you and Dera to stay in the office, to keep things calm if nothing else.*

I'm not putting a hand on my Empress, Jason, Aya retorted.

I don't want you to. I want you to stop me, he sent pointedly. *I still have an almost overwhelming need to punch Dahnai in the mouth. I don't think that's a good way to start this off.*

Aya smiled. *No, that would start things out on a bad foot,* she agreed. *Sit in your chair and don't get up. As long as she stays out of reach, you won't be tempted. And I mean lock your armor in,* she added.

That's not a bad idea. Now I just have to resist using my talent to punch her in the mouth.

Dera gave that voiceless, wheezing laugh. *Maybe we should remove all unsecured objects, Captain.*

So neither of them can use them, Aya nodded. *Her Majesty is a fairly strong TK herself. Jason, make sure you stay back inside the radius of the panic shield. If Empress Dahnai looks about ready to get violent, activate it.*

That's not a bad idea. That way we can't throw things at each other, he agreed as he sat back in his chair. Like Dahnai's throne room, there was a hard shield in his office that activated as a wall that bisected his office, the line running just at the front edge of his desk. If he were ever attacked, the hard shield would activate both in front of his desk and over the window behind him, protecting him. *[Cybi, you'd better be out for this,]* he called. Cybi's hologram shimmered into being, that nude yet formless silhouette, this hologram complete with feet which she placed on the carpeted floor daintily.

“Don’t worry, Jason, I will protect you from her,” she said with a light expression as she sat on the edge of his desk, in her favorite spot.

“I may need it,” he replied aloud.

It took Dahnai only about ten minutes to get on the ground and into the building, and she was all but running. She had six of her guards with her, hurrying behind her, as Dahnai stormed into the White House, and Jason made sure that everyone got out of her way and let her get to his office unchallenged. He mentally steeled himself when Chirk opened his door, and Empress Dahnai Merrane stormed into his office. She was wearing the armor Jason gave her, the helmet locked behind her head, her tousled bronze hair pulled back in a ponytail that dangled halfway down her back. “Get up!” she shouted as she came in. “I don’t want to hit a man who isn’t ready for it!”

“Sit *down*,” Jason snapped in a tightly controlled voice as she stomped up to his desk.

“Don’t you order me around, Jason Karinne!” she shouted in reply. “I reject your ridiculous declaration! You *are* part of the Imperium, and I won’t let you go!”

“What are you going to do, Dahnai? Declare war on me?”

She slammed her hands down on his desk, glaring hotly at him. “If I have to,” she replied in a seething hiss.

“Well, it’s *your* fault it came to this,” he told her bluntly. “You made it clear that I can’t trust *anyone* past this solar system, and I have a solemn duty to protect my people, even from their own allies,” he said flatly.

“Bullshit!” Dahnai snapped, pointing an armored finger at him. “I have no idea what game you’re playing, Jayce. Did Yila suck your dick so hard that now she’s got you doing what she wants?”

“What, you think I *wanted* to do this?” he shot back, getting to his feet. “They attacked Saelle *in your palace*, Dahnai! And it was your own people! Do you think the IBI’s the only one with a crazy idea and the determination to give it a try? This is the only way I can protect the Generations, because if you can issue orders to me, then I can’t guarantee that they’re not being twisted by the people using them to try to get access to us!”

“I took care of that,” Dahnai snapped, her lip curling into a near-sneer. “I swept the IBI out.”

“And who’s to say that the next time it’s not the Bureau of Science? Or Semoya using falsified decrees? Do you *really* think that we’re going to be safe so long as someone else can force themselves into the system?”

“*Yes!*” she screamed, slamming her hands down again.

“I’m so glad that *you’re* so confident, when you’re the one that has the most to gain,” he retorted, sitting back down. “It gives you more opportunities to try to steal biogenics. I’m amazed you didn’t have them try to take apart your armor. Or did they?” he asked pointedly.

She flushed a tiny bit.

“They couldn’t figure it out, could they? Not without the failsafes in the armor warning me, anyway.” He glanced at Cybi, then leaned back in his chair. “I didn’t just decide to do this on a whim, Dahnai. I thought about it very carefully for *days*. I tried every way I could think of to stay in the Imperium, but I couldn’t find any way to do it that guarantees the safety of the Generations. I don’t want to see a few hundred thousand clones of Saelle running amok in the Imperium and trying to take your throne. The simple fact of the matter is, Dahnai, the *only* way that the Generations will be safe, and the rest of *you* will be safe from *us*, is if we’re separated.”

“That is such a weak excuse!” she raged. “Let’s get down to the root of it, Jayce! Just how far are you willing to take this just to punish me for what I did? Let’s get it out in the open now, so we can bypass all the typical male torturing! Yes, I tried to steal biogenics. Did you think I *wouldn’t*? I have as much a duty to the Imperium as you do to your house, and part of that is ensuring it is strong and secure! Biogenics will make the Imperial military unstoppable!”

“So, you don’t mind at all destroying everything my house stands for so long as you can conquer more worlds,” Jason snapped. “Thanks for justifying my decision all over again, Dahnai.”

“What?”

“You don’t *care* about me, my house, or what it stands for,” he replied hotly. “All you care about is power, that Faey need to conquer and rule.”

What's next, Dahnai, are you going to sacrifice Kellin to Demir just so you can borrow his sword?" he asked, giving her a vicious look. "If you don't care about me, then I guess you don't care about him either."

"How *dare* you!" she screamed.

"You once told me a long time ago that I'd have to stop the Faey from being what they are to prevent a war, but I see I failed," he replied, standing up himself. "You don't truly love me, Dahnai. You *think* you do, but you love your power more. When you had to choose between me and it, you chose your power, and the opportunity to get *more* power. I tried to save you from yourself, Dahnai, but you just smacked my hand away. You *want* that war, Dahnai. Not with Semoya or Emae, but with anyone you think you can crush under your heel. The *only* reason you wanted biogenics was so you could do what the Consortium tried to do, use *us* to conquer *others*. And that is the one thing that the House of Karinne will *never* allow. The House of Karinne will never, ever, by any means, allow itself to be used to inflict our will on another, or allow another's will to be inflicted on the innocent. That is the most sacred oath I have ever taken, Dahnai, and you *don't care*. You don't care that it would destroy me to see my biogenics used to conquer others. You don't care how I feel or what I think, you only care about *yourself*."

"That's not true!"

"Oh isn't it?" he asked, sitting back down. "If you cared about me, Dahnai, then why send sixteen different agents to Karis to try to steal biogenics? What would I do when I found out you were using biogenic technology to make war on the others? Huh?"

She was quiet a moment. "It wouldn't have mattered."

"Right, because you're the *Empress*," he said, tapping his armored fingers together in front of him. "And that's *exactly* why I did what I did. Because I have to do what you say, and if I don't like it, then I'm shit out of luck. Even if what you do goes against everything that my house stands for."

"Your house is part of the *Imperium*."

"Not anymore," he replied evenly.

“Bull *shit!*” she screamed. “We went to war for you, Jason, and this is how you repay us?”

“I trusted you, and you repay me by trying to steal my house’s secrets?” he countered. “And more to the point, I’ve *kept you on your throne* for the last five years, Dahnai, and then you go and bite the hand that holds up your throne?”

She turned an ugly shade of violet but said nothing.

“Let’s make it abundantly clear, right here, right now, Dahnai. I’m not changing my mind. It’s been proved to me by you and everyone else that the Generations are not *safe* so long as the House of Karinne is technically subject to the commands of an outsider. And we’re not safe *anywhere* off this planet. They attacked Saelle under your *fucking* nose, Dahnai. Under your nose! I have a duty to protect what few of us are left, and I can’t do that so long as you can up and decide at any time at a *fucking* whim that you want the Generations for yourself, or you or one of your descendants decides on a whim to demand me or my descendants to give you access to everything Cybi knows. That’s not gonna happen. So, to save the future civil war between the Imperium and House Karinne, we’re making the split now, as peacefully and amicably as we can. I have to protect my house, Dahnai, and you proved that I have to protect it from my *friends* even more than I do my *enemies*.”

“You about done making speeches, Jayce?” she asked hotly. “Cause I don’t care if you fucking diatribe for ten hours. I don’t *care* what silly-ass reason you use to justify breaking your oath of fealty. I *do not* accept it. There’s only one way you’re leaving the Imperium, Jason Karinne, and that’s over my dead body!”

“You want a war with me, Dahnai?” Jason asked pugnaciously.

“*Both of you stand down,*” Cybi barked, standing up and stepping around the desk, towards Dahnai. “*Jason didn’t make this decision without careful consideration and a great deal of consultation, your Majesty,*” she told her, putting her hands on Dahnai’s armored shoulders and making her turn towards her. “*Answer me this. After knowing what was nearly done to Saelle, can you honestly say that you feel that Raisha will be safe in the palace?*”

“Oh, you better believe she’ll be safe, even if I have to lock it down,” she seethed.

“So, Raisha will live her entire life imprisoned within your palace,” Cybi noted. “For she will not be safe anywhere else.”

Dahnai blinked.

“Jason isn’t thinking about you and him, your Majesty. He’s thinking about Raisha,” she said calmly. “That is why the treaties he sent make it clear that the House of Karinne will remain in very close and intimate political alliance with both the Merranes and the Imperium. The declaration of autonomy literally only applies to one thing, Dahnai, and that’s that it makes Karis sovereign territory where you cannot exert your authority. But you didn’t read the treaties, did you?” she asked pointedly.

Dahnai looked a tad guilty.

“I thought as much. Had you read the documents he sent, you would see the truth of what he’s trying to accomplish,” Cybi chided. “Jason isn’t abandoning the Imperium, he isn’t abandoning your house, and he’s not abandoning you,” she said in a reassuring tone. “But he feels he has a duty to the Generations, to me, and to the house to take steps to protect us now instead of starting a war in the future, when one of your descendants demands of one of Jason’s descendants the secrets we refuse to reveal. Look me in the eye and tell me that day will never come, Dahnai Merrane,” Cybi challenged, giving her steady, cool look.

“We, we could,” she said. “I can make it clear to Sirri where things stand, and she makes it clear to her daughter, and so on.”

“And you truly believe that.”

Dahnai gave Cybi a nearly helpless look.

“Your attempts at espionage only hurried a decision that he knew he must one day make,” Cybi told her. “It demonstrated to him that the Generations are truly alone in this universe, where everyone beyond Karis only wants to use them for the power they wield. Including you.”

“I do not!”

“If that were true, then you would have never tried to steal biogenics,” Cybi said simply. *“For they are useless without a Generation. What would you have done with a biogenic unit but no Generation to pair with it, your Majesty?”*

“They do more than *that*,” she challenged. “I once heard you slip that there’s biogenics in *this*, and I’m no Generation,” she said, rapping her fingertips on her breastplate. “I’ll bet my left tit that they’re more effective AI control systems than standard cybertronics or moleculartronics.”

“And that was worth destroying your relationship with Jason? To have a better AI system?” Cybi challenged. *“What use would an improved AI system be in any realm but military, your Majesty?”*

Dahnai was stonily silent.

“And there you go,” Jason said grimly. “When the one woman in this universe that I loved and trusted that *doesn’t* live on Karis turned on me, I knew there was no other choice,” he told her with a slightly cold look. “The only thing that was holding you back from what you *want* to do is the fact that you need me to keep the Imperium stable, and then you turned around and twisted that, used the fact that you need us to get close to us and try to steal from us,” he told her, crossing his arms. “Well, actions have *consequences*, your Majesty, even *yours*. Your interest in me and my house was never about anything more than what you could get out of us, just like *every other fucking house in the Siann*,” he said, hissing out every exaggerated word.

“That’s not true and you know it!” she barked in reply. “Damn you, Jason, you *know* how I feel!”

“And that’s what makes it worse, that the fact that I loved and trusted you *wasn’t enough*,” he snapped. “You *used* me, Dahnai, and if you didn’t think I’d do something about it, then you don’t fucking know me at all. If my love for you wasn’t enough to make you stop, then I can’t trust you with *anything*. “Not Saelle, not with rulership over my house,” he said, then he sighed. “And not with Raisha.”

“What?”

“I want Raisha, Dahnai,” Jason told her, staring her in the eye. “I have no faith in her safety and protection so long as she’s in your palace. No

disrespect to your guards,” he said, looking at her two white-armored guards. “They protect well enough from threats from outside, but it’s threats from *within* that concern me, threats they won’t see until it’s too late, threats they’d never consider because the attackers would be seen as *allies*. Unless she wants to spend her entire life a prisoner inside the palace, Raisha will never be safe anywhere but here.”

“There is *no way in Trelle’s garland* I will ever surrender my daughter,” Dahnai said vehemently, hunching over her hands which were on his desk and giving him a cold stare.

“Then you must ask yourself, your Majesty, if you are willing to be called to some warehouse one day in the future and find Raisha floating in a cloning vat. And another Raisha, and another, and another, and another,” Cybi said with cold, grim logic, looking at her. *“It is not who she is that they want, it is what she is, and they will not care that she is an Imperial Princess. That fact will only make getting to her more difficult. Raisha is a Generation, your Majesty, the only Generation not safely on Karis, and that will make her a target that both your enemies and your allies will never stop trying to get. And what happened with Saelle shows how easily it can be done. You would have to keep Raisha in armor and behind hard shields her entire life to protect her from those who want what she is and can get it without you ever knowing. Is that the kind of life you want for her, Empress Dahnai? Would you turn your daughter into a prisoner in her own home just to keep her, and face the threat of thousands of Raisha’s used against you if you fail?”* Cybi asked simply.

Dahnai almost said something, then closed her mouth, her expression turning a little worried.

“See what I’ve been trying to say, Dahnai?” Jason asked. “I’m not asking just to be an asshole. I’m not trying to punish you. I know how much you love your children, and I know you don’t want to give her up. But I’m thinking about *Raisha*, not about *me*, or even *you*. If Raisha is ever going to have a life outside of the palace, a life where she can feel in any way *normal*, she’s only going to find it here. And I’m not locking her away. If you’d have *read* those documents I sent, you’d see that you’ll have complete freedom of passage rights between Draconis and Karis, but *only* you and your family. *You* will be welcome here, to visit with Shya once she

marries and so Raisha always knows and loves her mother. Karis is the only safe place in this entire universe for us, Dahnai. If you want to visit one of us, you have to come here. You *are* family, Dahnai, and no matter how pissed off I am at you right now, I can't deny your right to come here, for your children, and hopefully to see *me* once both of us finally get over it."

"Alright, so, now that both of you are starting to see the truth behind things, maybe it is time to sit down and talk," Cybi said, urging Dahnai over to the chair and pushing on her shoulders until she sat down. She then went around and sat back down on the edge of the desk, leaning over on her hand and hip and regarding Dahnai calmly.

"I had no idea you were so obnoxiously pushy, Cybi," Dahnai complained.

"You have *no idea*," Jason drawled, which made Aya and Dera smile despite themselves behind his chair.

"Now, let's talk about how the Imperium can benefit from a neutral Karinne, your Majesty," Cybi noted, crossing her legs demurely.

"Benefit?"

"Oh yes, if you step back and look at things, your Majesty, the Imperium can make quite a lot of money with a neutral Karinne. Yila is already drooling at the very thought of it," she noted dryly.

Dahnai actually laughed. "If *she* thinks she can make some money out of it, then I'll listen to your proposal," she said, leaning back in her chair.

For nearly six continuous hours, they talked it out. Jason explained *everything* to her, and to her credit, she listened carefully to him, then she explained all of her own issues with it. They kept things civil and calm, debating the issues in a rational manner once the emotional outbursts were cleared out. She heard his reasoning for his actions, his plans for the assets under Karinne control, and his plans to keep the Karinnes closely tied to the Imperium while protecting Karis and the Generations. After he explained all that, Dahnai actually haggled with him over the finer points of the treaty he drew up, but most of her bargaining was trying to keep some kind of control over or hold on Jason and the Karis system. Dahnai *wanted* Jason under her command, and it was the one thing they kept coming back to over

and over and over and over again, because that was the *one* thing that Jason absolutely could not allow.

After discussing that, Cybi and Jason called in Yila, then the four of them discussed the ways that the Imperium could use a neutral Karinne to absolutely rake in the profits. Yila was intelligent, cunning, but one of her best assets was the ability to react quickly to opportunity and see the best way to profit from it. That was one of the things that made her so effective as a mob kingpin, able to navigate shifting legal and illegal opportunities to best benefit her house. Dahnai seemed honestly curious about most of Yila's ideas, using the neutrality of the Karinnes to form an Imperium stranglehold on all trade in the sector, mainly by leasing out Stargates to their allies in the Confederacy and charging both for the leasing of the Stargate and its use. Using the legendary neutrality of the Karinnes like a battering ram, Dahnai could work the Imperium into a position of being the most powerful, influential, and important empire in the sector, maybe in all the sectors bordering theirs as well, and she could do it without firing a single shot.

As darkness settled over Karsa, after taking a break for some food and to use the restroom, Dahnai returned. Her hostile posture had softened considerably since she arrived, but Jason's had as well, when she started *listening* to him. She didn't have to agree with him, but the fact that she was listening mattered very much to him. Yila flopped down on the couch on the side of his office, yawning a little, as Dahnai sat back down in the chair in front of his desk. "Alright, I need to get back," she said. "I'm going to read over those documents you sent, then send back my counteroffer."

"So, you're at least considering allowing us to separate?"

"On a *limited* basis," she stressed. "I can't deny a couple of your points, and that you need to protect Rann, your kids, and Raisha, and all the others. But I think we can reach a compromise that protects Karis without completely releasing the Karinnes from the Imperium. But I *do* like the ideas you had about Terra," she said, nodding at Yila. "Turning it into a neutral planet, a *protectorate* of the Imperium, could really rake in the credits, and it helps protect the Academy, which the Imperium *does* make money off of. As long as it keeps producing food for the Imperium, I think I

can change its status. I'll have to confer with some of my advisors before we reach an agreement on that."

"There is some Imperial precedent for the protectorate status, your Majesty."

"I'm a history nut, Cybi, I know," she agreed. "It was mainly used by the crown to sort out disputed territory between the houses, but we can apply the protectorate standard to Terra and make it legal. Hell, I'm using the protectorate standard right now for the four Urumi systems, since we don't technically own those systems."

She stood up, and Jason and Yila did the same. She came around his desk and actually dared to kiss him on the lips, and not very chastely at that. "I'll talk to you sometime tomorrow afternoon," she told him. "I'll read over your offers and send back my revisions as soon as I'm done."

"We'll save the arguing for after I see how impossible your ideas are," he said dryly, which made her chuckle.

"As long as you don't get too full of yourself, we *might* be able to figure something out. But there is one thing we can agree on."

"What?"

"As much as I hate the idea of it, Raisha *does* need to spend at least some of her time here," she acceded. "I think we can work out a schedule where she spends some of her time here, and some time in the palace. I want Saelle and Evin to stay her foster parents, and they can bring her back and forth. That way she gets to keep her title as an Imperial Princess, but she *also* gets to have a life outside the palace. She'll have to have that life here. I agree with you there, Jason. It would be too dangerous for Raisha outside the palace."

"Joint custody?" Jason asked.

She nodded. "Like a takir here, a takir in the palace. That way she learns about both sides of her heritage, and she *does* get the chance to be a child. Maer, Sirri and Shya certainly enjoy their visits here."

"No cameras, no intrigue, no etiquette, just the chance to run around and *play*," Jason said, and she nodded. "If we can make sure she stays safe, I wouldn't object to that."

“I’ll have my commander of the guard draw up some plans. They’re already reviewing security after that mindbender infiltrated the palace.”

Dahnai’s guards nodded.

“Alright. I’m going to go home and get some rest. I’ve only been here almost a full day,” Jason said, opening the door with his gestalt.

“I need to get back to Tamiri, I have some paperwork to do. If you want to talk about anything else, your Majesty, just call me. There are plenty of other business opportunities in a neutral Terra that Jason doesn’t necessarily need to know about,” she said with a sly smile at him.

“I will, Yila,” she said, looking to her.

“I’m about to yank on that leash, Yila,” Jason warned.

“Suuuure you are,” she replied flippantly, then she sauntered out of the office.

Jason sighed, which made Dahnai laugh. “You’re the one that gave her the *mey*, Jason.”

“I know. If she wasn’t so damn smart and useful, I’d pack her ass back to Tamiri myself.”

Jason took a moment to collect himself after Dahnai left, monitoring her return to Draconis from his office while he considered their long talk. He had some hope that he might be able to get her to agree to the core of his plan. He might have to give a little on some of the finer points, but as long as he could make Karis outside of Dahnai’s reach, he thought he could make some concessions.

But he was most glad that at least Dahnai was starting to see the truth about Raisha...and her idea of joint custody, that just might work. Raisha would be spending her time in the palace in armor and behind hard shields, but at least half of her childhood would be spent playing in the warm sun, laughing, and with her brothers, sisters, and friends on the strip.

Clearly, he had to build a house for Saelle and Evin. He wouldn’t tolerate his daughter being anywhere but on the strip. There wasn’t really any room, but he’d think of something.

A hand gripped the back of his armor and pulled. He turned and looked and saw a grim-looking Aya standing there. Holding a paddle.

And you thought we forgot, she sent, brandishing her weapon.

You're gonna get a fight this time, Aya.

That's why there's twelve of us waiting outside, she sent with a smirk, and indeed, twelve more guards filed into his office. Kaera smiled ominously when she closed the door. *Your reckoning has come, Jason.*

Put on your boxing gloves, ladies. This Grand Duke's not going down without a fight.

That'll just make paddling you that much sweeter, Hara grinned.

Ladies. Get him! Aya barked, and they all rushed forward.

Chapter 5

Chiira, 28 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 15 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 28 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was more than his pride that was injured.

Jason woke up feeling sore all over, and with a particular throbbing in his butt and around his right eye...that was where Aya punched him. He had little doubt that it was probably a pretty good shiner, since Aya was very strong, and he hadn't had much chance to dodge or block with Imperial Guards hanging all over him. But there were a few guards that would be waking up or going to bed with some bruises of their own.

At least all the girls had had the foresight to remove their gauntlets, or those bruises would have been broken bones.

It had taken all 14 of them to subdue him and strip him out of his armor, then Aya administered the chastisement. Usually Jason would have played around, given them their pound of flesh to keep the peace, but this wasn't one of those times. He occasionally had to remind Aya that her rulership over the strip sometimes had to be won in battle, that Jason wasn't going to just roll over when he thought he was right. Jason felt he did what he had to do, and Aya had to live with it. And while they were able to physically overpower him and spank him like a toddler, they had to fight for that privilege.

Jason was easy to order around, but hard to control.

He left Jyslin sleeping in bed and used the bathroom, then checked himself in the mirror. Sure enough, he had quite a shiner around his right

eye, courtesy of Aya's left fist. But, to be fair to her, she only punched him because he punched her first. He made it clear right off the bat that it *was* going to be a fight, and he struggled all the way to the bitter end. But when it was over, they shook hands, neither side taking it personally.

Business was business.

Nothing that Songa couldn't fix with her medkit. Jason put on a robe and passed by a sleepy Surin in the kitchen, who was preparing to make breakfast, and headed over to Luke and Songa's house. Songa was up, as was Jari, Songa cooking breakfast as Jari watched on. Luke was still asleep when he got there, having pulled some long hours over at 3D. There weren't very many new ideas being worked on over there because everyone was so focused on the war, going with what they had and just running with the current projects instead of starting new ones. Luke had been working with Leamon on the CMS meson cannon, but now that that was more or less done, Luke had been managing inventory production while waiting for a new project. He didn't feel he was ready to come back to 3D, since he didn't feel that he had all the education he needed, but Luke was a member of the Legion, a *critical* member, and he knew his duty when the Legion was reformed. Jason had been avoiding giving him his own major projects since he was in his last semester of the Academy and had a lot of homework to do.

Why on earth did Aya punch you in the face? Songa asked as she inspected his eye, letting Jari mind the bacon in the pan.

We had a little disagreement over my restriction to the strip, he replied, his thought amused.

Oh, so this had something to do with me seeing her coming out of Myli's house naked yesterday?

Mmmmaybe, he replied, which made her laugh.

And here I thought that maybe Aya and Myleena were having a tryst, she replied with a naughty smile, *though she looked awfully angry.*

I put her up there when she tried to stop me from leaving the strip, he explained. *Seriously, woman, come out of the annex from time to time. You're woefully behind on your strip gossip.*

Believe me, sometimes I wish I could, she replied as she wiped her hands on the base of her apron. *If I knew how much paperwork it is when you're the one in charge, I'd never have taken this job.*

Liar, he teased as she went to her carry bag, which was sitting by the kitchen door. He sat on the edge of the table as Jari carefully turned the bacon. Songa returned with her medkit, her traveling first aid kit that virtually every doctor in the Medical Service carried in case they happened across an emergency. She withdrew what looked like a metal pen, then stepped up and applied the tip to Jason's face, over the bruise. The touch of that device immediately produced a hot sensation in his skin, heat that quickly seeped into the flesh beneath. *I'll leech out the pooled blood, so at least you're not walking around with a black eye,* she informed him, her thought focused as she paid attention to her work. "Jari hon, I'm going to need a disposable hand towel," she said aloud. Jari hadn't expressed yet, who along with Temika's children were the only ones on the strip that hadn't.

"Okay, Mommy," she replied, hurrying over to the pantry.

Luke came into the kitchen, yawning. He was wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, which showed off his wide-shouldered physique. "Oh, hey Jayce," he said. "What's up?"

"Getting medical attention," he replied lightly without moving.

"What happened?"

"Let's just say that I had a spirited discussion with Aya over my travel restrictions."

Luke chuckled. "Why am I not surprised," he said as he went over to the stove. He put on his interface and checked the bacon, then stepped past them as Songa continued to use her device on his bruise. The device was heating the pooled, half-congealed blood that had leaked out of the capillaries after he'd been punched, and would draw it out, literally making the bruise bleed out its color. A bruise was nothing but subdermal bleeding that had nowhere to go, after all.

"How are the inventories looking?"

“Almost up to standard, which gives me time to study that stuff Myli keeps sending me,” he answered, tilting his head in Luke’s direction.

“Hold still, you silly man,” Songa chided, taking hold of his chin. Jari returned with a towel, offering it up to Songa. Songa went back to her bag and produced another probe-like device, then brought it up to his face. “Alright, this might sting a little,” she warned.

It did sting, as she lanced the bruise with a needle to give the bruise blood a means of escape, then used the probe to massage the purple towards the pinprick, which caused the bruise to bleed out. Jason held still as she drained the subdermal bleeding that colored the bruise, all but massaging the blood out using her medical device, wiping it away with the towel. “Jari hon, get the small white jar with the blue cap out of my bag,” she ordered as she finished up. Jason scratched his face, feeling a little tingly after Songa finished treating the bruise, then she came back with a little dollop of what looked like petroleum jelly on her finger. It was a topical bio-accelerant that would stimulate his body to heal quickly, preventing the bruise from reforming and repairing the ruptured capillaries that caused the bruise in the first place. She smeared the tingling gelatin all around his right eye, from eyebrow to cheekbone, and he felt the angry buzzing settle deeper into his skin, all the way to the tissue, as his skin absorbed the medical compound. “You know what you need to do, Jayce dear?”

“Eat a hearty breakfast and drink a lot of water,” he replied as he rubbed his eye and cheek. There was no greasy feeling there, because his skin and tissue had completely absorbed the accelerant. That was how the accelerant was designed to behave.

“Since you’re here, Jayce, mind explaining these wild rumors I’ve been hearing?” Luke asked.

“They’re true, and I’ll be going public with it later today,” he answered seriously as he looked down and tapped Jari on the nose, which made her giggle. “The House of Karinne is declaring autonomy from the Imperium. We actually kinda already *did*, but Dahnai didn’t take it very well.”

“I’m not surprised,” Luke said mildly as he removed the pan from the stove. “That’s a pretty serious move.”

“It was necessary,” he replied simply. “It’s the only way I can really combat all the spies Dahnai is sending here. I have to protect the house, Luke, and this is the only way.”

“Well, if you say it was necessary, then it was,” he said as he dropped the bacon in a basket to drain. “Just surprised you had to go to that extreme. What’s going to happen with Terra, and all the other stuff?”

“We have a plan for all that,” he replied as Songa returned to cooking, shooing Luke away from the stove. “Dahnai actually agreed with my plan to turn Terran into a neutral planet, part of the overall plan to keep the Confederation at least partially together after the war. We’re going to turn it into a major trade hub, where the other empires can use Stargates to move goods. Since everyone’s always honored the neutrality of the Karinnes, it kinda puts us in a perfect position to control the door everyone uses in and out of their home empires.”

Luke chuckled. “So, you finally did it. You got our home away from the Faey.”

“Sort of,” he replied with a smile. “Terra will be a *protectorate* of the Imperium. That means it’ll be like the Virgin Islands or Guam was to America. A possession, a territory, sorta like a colony, but not part of the system. The Faey will defend Terra in a military sense, but they’ll let Secretary Kim and the U.N. run the planet. All we have to do is keep meeting the farming quotas, and Dahnai’s alright with letting Terra run itself.”

“There must be more to it than that,” Songa noted as she packed her medkit back up.

“Of course there is,” he replied. “It’s a little hard to explain, but let’s just say that me and Yila showed Dahnai how a neutral Terra actually makes Dahnai more money than the way things are now. Oh yeah, Kim’s supposed to be here in a couple of hours,” he remembered. “I called him in to explain everything. Denmother stayed over as well to sit in on the meeting. Anyway, if Dahnai does things right, she can make quadruple off Terra what she’s making now, and all she has to do is let Terra run itself.”

“How?” Songa asked curiously.

“Trade,” he replied. “With the Karinnes neutral and Terra a protectorate that’s technically not part of the Imperium, Dahnai can turn it into a trade hub, using the TES and Stargates to allow the other Confederate empires to move their trade through Terra, you know, sorta expanding the system we have with the Collective to the others. As long as the interdictors are up, the Confederate rulers *need* some way to get access to their interdicted systems, and there ya go. The neutral planet of Terra serves as a nexus for Confederate Stargates, Confederate governments get real-time access to their systems on top of being able to trade without having relativity delay, and the neutrality of the Karinnes keeps everything above board. With *us* administering the trade hub, I have a good feeling they’ll go for it. After all, we’re already managing the entire Confederate freighter system, piggybacking allied freighters with Karinne ships that can jump the interdictors. This way, we just put a Stargate in the system instead and everything moves through it.”

“And Dahnai gets usage fees,” Luke reasoned.

“Among other things,” Jason agreed. “After Yila literally drew her a flowchart showing her how she could make insane amounts of money off the idea, she actually went for it.” He rubbed his face one more time, then stepped back a little. “Anyway, I need to get going. Thanks a bunch, Songa. Now I don’t look like Jyslin is beating me.”

Songa laughed. “Eat a big breakfast, and if you have any swelling, call me,” she replied as she dropped a slab of what looked like ham into the pan.

Jason did just that, going back home and raiding the fridge for what he could scarf down as Surin cooked pancakes, reading the reports as he drank his coffee. Maggie was still wreaking havoc in the PR sector, so much so that Consortium warships were now trying to break up her little operation, but only one or two ships at every major hyperspace jump point. Maggie could get around just one or two picket ships, so she was still annihilating virtually all Imxi freighter traffic, and that combined with capturing two critical Imxi systems was putting a major dent in the enemy’s war operation. The reports from the captured planets was also favorable, for the Marine Colonel that was put in charge of each planet had done what Sioa had wanted, just barricaded the occupation force behind armor and hard shields and told the Imxi to go about their business. There had been some

attempts to attack those headquarters, but after the Faey mindstrikers demonstrated for the newcomers how silly that idea was, the Imxi stalked off and started worrying about their daily lives. All three planets were either arable or food producing, so the interdiction wasn't starving them, but the local Imxi officials had to figure out who was in charge with the Faey blockading the planets, then organize things so they could feed their people. The Colonels weren't settling in, that was for sure. Sioa had made it clear to them that they were only there temporarily, that the Karinnes weren't *keeping* the planets, so the occupying Marines were living out of their packs and were staying in mobility status, so they could evacuate back to the ships within 30 minutes of receiving the order. The first wave of ships from the PR sector had arrived at Trieste, and according to the surveillance images, they entered close orbit around Trieste's moon, Go'jur'mi. So many ships, so many that the spiders in the area may not be able to infest them all. The spiders weren't programmed to self-replicate, to build copies of themselves, so they only had a finite number. Jason frowned when he did the math, and realized that with just the first wave, they had more ships than they had free spiders floating around the space around Trieste. The spiders wouldn't be able to infect every ship.

They might have to do something about that.

Despite the recent storm between Jason and Dahnai, it didn't stop the House of Merrane from doing their job. Jason looked over the initial colonization force that arrived at QMC-202 from Exile just a few hours ago, Merrane commercial ships and transports towed in by Meya and Myra's exploration squadron. They had an interdictor there and had just turned on, and Meya's report said that they were preparing to make diplomatic contact with the largest nation-state of QMC-202-2. Meya included some images of the planet and some aerial holos of several native villages, which had very practical architecture that wouldn't look out of place on Terra in the 1700's. The indigenous race on QMC-202-2 was classified as humanoid, but they were a bipedal canoid species like the Kimdori and Beryans, vaguely resembling jackals or coyotes, earth-toned shorthaired fur with narrow muzzles, where Kimdori resembled big, shaggy wolves and Beryans looked like small terriers. Like Beryans, these QMC canoids wore clothing, where the Kimdori usually didn't. Then again, the clothes wouldn't shapeshift

with a Kimdori unless the clothes were *made* from the Kimdori, so they usually didn't wear anything they didn't form out of their own body mass.

It was kinda creepy to touch a shapeshifted Kimdori's "clothes" and know that no matter how much they felt like wool or cotton or silk, it was actually made of Kimdori flesh.

The Merranes were already hard at work at planet 3. They'd moved into the perimeter that Meya and Myra had built in the equatorial belt and had already anchored the first of the water replicators, securing it to the underlying bedrock, and they'd be activating it probably tomorrow. They were setting up some modular hydroponic farms and ground-infusion terraforming bulldozers, which were farming tools that turned sterile soil into soil fertile enough for growing crops, most likely tough crops capable of handling the 39 degree Celsius average daytime temperature along the equatorial belt. Watering the fields wouldn't be a problem, since they'd have the water replicator right there. They were also bringing in mining equipment to get at those ore deposits under the initial site.

Outside planet 3, the Merranes were also hard at work. Exploration and survey ships were fanning out to scan the other planets and moons, looking for usable materials or potential sites for other colonies. Odds were, they'd set up a dome colony on one of the subarctic moons orbiting one of the gas giants to mine the gas giant for rare heavy gas compounds, and there were several asteroids that had some usable ores in them, according to the preliminary scans.

Good, that was why he gave them the system, so they could do just that. Jason sent a text message to Meya reminding her to get some samples of the indigenous food plants for the Karinnes as well, so they could see if they were worth growing. Meya had 15 *benkonn* of simple undyed wool, cotton, and silk cloth in the hold of the *Scimitar*, period-appropriate trade goods they'd offer in exchange for food. From the looks of the denizens of planet 2, they already had their own version of wool, and maybe cotton as well, so their cloth wouldn't be too exotic. The silk, on the other hand, *that* would be exotic.

He then looked up today's schedule up at Kosigi. Four Faey cruisers were being pushed out of the docks today, but a KMS ship was also being christened today, the next tactical battleship. That ship was being handled a

bit differently, because they didn't have a crew ready for it quite yet. So, Dellin was going to park it, and it was going to wait two days until a crew was ready to take it over, then it would be officially christened; in the KMS, a ship wasn't christened until it was operational, and a ship wasn't operational without a crew. Juma and Myri still hadn't decided on a captain for it yet. They probably wanted Sevi to move up but getting her to leave the *Arabax* was going to take an act of God. They'd probably go with Ravai, who was the captain of the heavy cruiser *Jefferson*. Ravai had been on the *Jefferson* more than long enough to satisfy the minimum duty requirement they'd instituted for ship captains, and Ravai was a damn good ship captain. And of course, that would create the captain carousel as captains were promoted up through the ranks so each chair was filled, until they put a new captain in place in the destroyer's chair that was ultimately freed up.

Looking ahead, he saw 5 more ships coming off the docks in the next three days, two destroyers, a cruiser, a tactical cruiser, and the second carrier. The next heavy ship coming off the docks was a full battleship, which was in four days, and the day after that, two more full battleships, a tactical battleship, two cruisers, and the third carrier was coming off the docks all in the same day. That was going to be a very busy day for Juma, trying to crew those ships.

Looking even more ahead, he saw that by the time the leaders all arrived for the conference, they would have 7 full battleships, 3 tactical battleships, 2 cruisers, 2 carriers, and 14 destroyers coming off the docks. Juma said she had crews in training for those ships, but he also foresaw a major shakeup in the command structure as so many big ships came off the docks in such a short time. They'd be promoting a hell of a lot of people up the chain to get experienced commanders in those big ships, then replace them on the ships they left, and so on and so on. They were going to have a *large* number of complete greenhorn captains in the destroyer fleet, as any destroyer captain with any experience whatsoever was going to move up to the cruisers to replace captains promoted up to the bigger ships.

Hell, at this rate, *Jyslin* might end up in a captain's chair, because she had experience commanding the *Sora's Pride*.

Right before getting dressed, he looked up the altered Gladiator production, which was now 216% what it was just ten days ago. Sioa was really cracking the whip down on the production lines, and they'd shifted some Wolf production over to Gladiator production. They were now at that point where they had more Wolf fighters than pilots to fly them, with some 4,500 sitting on a tarmac on the northern continent of Virga just waiting for a pilot. They'd built them projecting the need to fill the carriers with fighters without plundering fighter squadrons from other ships. At the height of production, there were 14 Wolf fighters coming off the production line every minute at the 26 different factories producing them. There were only 12 factories producing them now, the other 14 retooled over to building Gladiators, building up their numbers in preparation for the Benga.

And Symone finally had something real to do. All that time playing around in a Gladiator made her quite experienced, and with them needing so many riggers, Symone had been transferred from line testing to a spot in the military as a rigger instructor. She was now a Major in the Karinne Army, had just gotten her bars yesterday, who would be training new recruits in how to operate a Gladiator. She didn't *have* to be an officer to pilot a Gladiator, but she was Jason's *amu dozei*, sure was for *fucking* sure going to be an officer if she was entering military service.

Given the KBB themselves trained Symone, and she learned *frighteningly* fast, Jason had little doubt she'd turn out some top-grade riggers from her training platoon.

Gladiator service was something of a fast track in the army, though. All riggers were at least sergeants, so taking the path of the rigger was a guaranteed line promotion upon graduation. It was even faster for Wolf pilots. They didn't require Wolf pilots to be Academy graduates, it was based on the ability to be a good pilot, but all pilots were at least warrant officers in the Marines and Army and full officers in the Navy. If one could pass the qualification tests and become a Wolf pilot, it was a fast track to jump right over the enlisted ranks. But the restriction was that they couldn't ever leave the fighter service unless they did all the coursework and extra training to qualify to become full line officers. It still didn't require an Academy degree, but it did take about two years of classroom training, a minimum of four years of service in the KMS, and a recommendation from a commanding officer. A Wolf pilot would stay a Wolf pilot until he

fulfilled all other officer requirements, then he'd be eligible to transfer to another part of the Navy, like command or engineering or astrocartography, and retain his officer's rank.

That was why Jason thought that Sioa had the better system with her warrant officers. They could become officers the same as the Naval Wolf pilots by completing the officer qualification requirements, but until they did, they stayed warrant officers. It wasn't like a Warrant Officer was paid any less than a Navy Ensign, they had the same pay scale.

That did make him a bit curious. He jumped over to the Academy Annex and looked up the current crop of officer trainees. They had a dedicated two-year Academy course for officers, kind of like ROTC, and there were a *ton* of people enrolled in it. There was an alternate version for currently enlisted KMS personnel that had the same requirements as Naval line officers; enlisted had to serve for four years, academically qualify through testing, have an excellent record, and have a recommendation from their commanding officer to enter the officer training course. The third version of officer training was the induction program for officers from other militaries who joined the house, which was much shorter since those officers already had the basic training and skills required to be a good officer. The ROTC version was a two-year course, the OCS Academy for enlisted candidates was a 6-month program, and the OCS program for new house members who were officers in other militaries was a 7 week course. The ROTC course was one of the most popular satellite courses they offered. The vast majority were Faey and Terrans, but there were a large number of Shio in the first semester class, the fresh enrollees, and there were also a bunch of Shio military officers in the induction program, which took officers from other services and trained them in KMS procedures, like Ensigns Javra Blackstone and Mikano Strongblade. Both had been officers in the Federated Navy before joining the house, took the accelerated course as part of their basic training and PTS training, and graduated as officers in the KMS.

Those officers would also be on the fast track for promotions until they achieved the equivalent rank they'd held in their prior service. Javra had been a Lieutenant in the Federated Navy, so his first two promotions would come quickly, until he reached the same rank he'd once held.

After getting into his armor, Jason kissed Jyslin goodbye and headed in to work, with a very smug-looking Ryn and Dera along with him, and Shen and Suri already at the office waiting for him. The Marine Corvette *Thunder* landed at the White House, and to his surprise, U.N. Secretary Kim was standing at the landing pad waiting for him, nearly two hours early. Chirk was also standing by the platform, which was very unusual, the large Kizzik and Kim in conversation. Kim was a treasure for Jason, since he was highly intelligent, politically cunning, and he didn't scare easily. He greeted exotic-looking species all the time in his role as the ruler of the planet that held the Academy. Emissaries came to the Academy all the time to look it over, check on their people that were taking classes, and with Ayuma restricted to Karis, it was Kim that was greeting them with Ayuma's highest-ranking school officials. Kim had probably met more species in his role as the Secretary General than Dahnai had as the Empress, since Kim interacted with governments far beyond the home sector, many of which avoided the Imperium like the plague, either due to the telepathic Faey or their infamous bent for conquest.

"Kim," Jason said as he came out of the hatch, Dera and Ryn behind him. "You're early."

"I know, your Grace, but I thought it important to get here as quickly as I could," he replied, tugging a bit on the lapels of his very smartly tailored gray suit. "I've been having a beast of a time since rumor got out over what happened between you and the Empress. Many of the government officials are ringing my phone off the hook, because they can't get any answers out of you or her."

"I didn't think of that," he grunted. "I hope they haven't caused you much trouble."

"They didn't until the Brood Queen showed up in my office *herself*," he replied. "She can be very insistent."

"Ouch," he winced. "Alright, I'll call her as soon as we get to the office and grant her passage to Karis."

"I will contact the Urumi Majestic Hive-leader immediately upon return to the office," Chirk's translator called. *"I will see to it she has clearance to travel here."*

“Good, thanks, Chirk. Tell her I’m in conference with Kim or I’d have made the call myself.”

“Alright, Jason, tell me what’s going on,” Kim said in a much less formal tone when they got inside. Kim’s Korean need for propriety slipped a bit when they were in private, because they *were* good friends.

“Pretty much what you heard, Duk,” he replied, using Kim’s personal name. Jason often thought that with a name like Kim Duk Moon, he might have been teased a bit in school, but Kim had done all his schooling in Korea before the subjugation, and his name wasn’t *that* unusual in Korea. Much like several other Asian cultures, in Korea, the family surname always came first. “I’ve declared autonomy from the Imperium due to a bunch of crap I won’t go into in a public hallway,” he said bluntly. “I’ll be making the public declaration later today to be played over all Karinne-held planets.”

“What’s going to happen to Terra?”

“That’s what you’re here to talk about,” he replied.

“What about the Terran people? Are *we* part of this declaration?”

“No,” he replied. “The citizens of Terra are *subjects* of Karinne, not *members* of Karinne. But me and Dahnai are working something out for Terra I think everyone’s gonna like, Duk.”

When they got to his office, Jason sat Kim down and explained everything in detail, both why he declared independence and what they were trying to set up for Terra, and much as he expected, Kim *did* like that bit of news. “If Dahnai changes Terra to a protectorate, it’ll make the U.N. the final governing authority for the planet,” Jason told him. “That means that you’ll have to seriously expand the U.N. to start handling all those things that either the Karinnes or the Imperium handles right now. Dahnai will be sending you a list of quotas, and as long as the planet meets them, Terra is independent. That means *you* will have to handle diplomacy with the other governments, managing planetary security when the Imperial Marines leave, and you’ll have authority to make trade agreements for Terran goods. The only thing you won’t have to worry about is military protection. As a protectorate of the Imperium, Dahnai will be the one defending the planet if it’s attacked.”

“I...think I see what you’re after,” he said, tapping his finger to his chin. “You want the current agreement with the Collective to go sector-wide.”

“Exactly. We’ll be putting Stargates up all around Terra and leaving the TES as the only way in or out of interdicted space, which will mainly deal with outside governments not in the Confederacy. Terra will be the new hub for most commercial traffic in the sector, if we can get the others to go for it. But with Terra neutral and *all* Confederate governments allowed to park military assets in the system, I don’t think anyone will mind that much. A neutral hub system might be the incentive the others need to sign on to the deal.”

“They might, depending on the concessions that Empress Dahnai is willing to make,” Kim said after a moment. “The biggest worry for them will be the Stargates *inside* their territory. That would theoretically allow Dahnai to link those gates to other gates where Dahnai could send her fleet in and take over a system.”

“Not when I’m the one controlling the interdictors, she’s not,” Jason snorted. “She pulls that shit, I’ll shut off the interdictor at Draconis and all the systems of the government she attacked.”

“That’s just one of the things we’ll have to work out at the conference,” Kim said. “I think it might happen, but it’s going to take quite a lot of discussion. It will take a lot of concessions from Dahnai to make the others trust her with something like controlling the only way they have in and out of their own systems.”

“I know, that’s why I think the summit is going to be pretty lively,” he said dryly, which made Kim chuckle. “By the way, consider yourself invited, Duk. You’re about to become the executive authority of a neutral planet, so you have the right to sit at the table from now on. That includes meetings of the Confederate Council.”

“I’m sure I can manage the extra meetings,” he chuckled.

Sk’Vrae barged into his office, and she looked *pissed*. “Explain yourself, Jason Karinne!” she barked in hissing Urumi.

“I’d be happy to, your Majesty,” Jason said calmly, standing up. “Chirk, can you bring a chair suitable for her Majesty?” he called loudly. “Now that I’ve worked most of the bugs out of my declarations, I need your input on

how we handle the four systems the Karinnes administer. I had no intention of violating our agreement, your Majesty,” he said quickly. “I’m not moving on Aurigae or the others unless you fully approve of those decisions.”

She looked quickly mollified, taking a seat in the chair Chirk quickly brought in, a reinforced one with a very low split back to accommodate Sk’Vrae’s heavy tail. “Your Majesty, I’m sure you know Secretary General Kim of the Terran’s governing authority.”

“We know each other quite well, your Grace,” Kim said, even as he bowed gracefully to Sk’Vrae. “It is good to see you again, your Majesty.”

“I’m glad to see *you* here, Kim,” Sk’Vrae said firmly. “I respect your opinion on many matters.”

“I’m here for the same reason you are, your Majesty. The Grand Duke Karinne is moving faster than the rest of us would like, and maybe a touch faster than he himself would like to go.”

“And here I am, trying to catch everyone and everything up,” he said dryly in agreement. “But I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“Very well then, Jason. Explain this to me. *Everything*.”

And he told her everything. Jason gave Sk’Vrae *way* more information than he’d give anyone else, telling her exactly what he did, why he did it, and going over all his plans for handling the Karinnes splitting from the Imperium. “Me and Dahnai haven’t sat down and worked out the exact specifics of it yet, but one thing we both agree on is that a neutral Terra acting as a trade hub for all our Confederate allies benefits *everyone*. The Imperium makes money, the Confederate empires gain a fast and efficient way to move their goods from system to system, and it creates a web of quick access points that Confederate ships can use to respond to any Consortium or Benga attack. But those Stargates are going to be as much a worry for the others as they are a blessing. You know, because *Dahnai* is the one controlling them.”

“I had my own share of reservations, enough to limit the installation of Stargates only at Aurigae,” she agreed. “But your idea does have some potential. If the others truly believe that Terra is a neutral planet, and that the Karinnes will *not* support any aggression that Dahnai incites, they might just agree to your idea. My own trade revenues have increased by nearly

ninety percent since Dahnai placed Stargates at all Collective systems. The Entry Station has done everything that you promised that it would. Our goods move quickly, and the interdictors combined with the Stargates make the Collective an impregnable fortress which our foes cannot breach.”

“For now. They’re working on something to get around the interdictors, but their target will be Karis, not the Collective,” Jason told her. “I’ve got my people trying to figure out what they’re up to.”

“Do not forget that the Benga are only three years away. I do not, and neither does anyone else on the council,” she added. “Because of *them*, your idea of a network of Stargates and interdictors has a great deal of potential to become reality.”

“Good, because we need a better system than piggybacking freighters with Karinne transports,” Jason said. “It’s stretching my merchant marine fleet to its breaking point.”

“I am confident that the Shio and the Nine Colonies will accept your proposal immediately, which should take some strain off your freighter fleet,” Sk’Vrae ventured. “And the Alliance will accept the idea for all their systems bordering Trieste, which will give our combined militaries immediate response to any attack from the forces holding Trieste.”

“I’ve thought of that too,” Jason nodded.

“If I might interrupt,” Kim said politely, “I think Jason does have the right idea. If we can convince Empress Dahnai to put control of the Stargates in *Terran* hands, putting a neutral planet in control of the link status of the gateways into our allied systems, they might be inclined. The main fear that they will have is that Dahnai can use the Stargates to initiate surprise attacks. If *she* has no control over those Stargates,” he trailed off.

“That has potential,” Sk’Vrae agreed. “The Stargates would belong to her, but it would be the Entry Station that would have operational control of them. That is how it already works at the Entry Station, as well as at Aurigae.”

“The trick will be convincing Dahnai to do that,” Jason grunted. “Now, Sk’Vrae, how are we handling the four jointly held systems?”

“I am not backing out of our agreement,” she replied. “As long as the Karinnes continue to administer the systems, I will leave things as they are. Has Dahnai spoken of this?”

“A little, mainly hinting that she’d leave things the way they are. Since it involves you, I think she’s smart enough not to get creative.”

“Urumi adhere to a treaty to the *letter*, and we expect others to do the same,” the Brood Queen stated. “But with your house becoming an independent entity within the Imperium, new treaties must be made that reflect this change in status.”

“So, we dig up the old ones, replace *house of the Imperium* with *independent house* everywhere it shows up, then sign them again,” Jason shrugged.

“I was of a similar opinion,” Sk’Vrae nodded. “*You*, Jason, I trust. You have kept your word and are well known among all in our sector cluster to be honest and fair.”

“If they only knew that I’m as much a scoundrel as the rest of them,” he said blandly, which made Kim burst out laughing. Even Sk’Vrae gave a little hiss of a chortle.

“Do you intend to keep the profit-sharing system with the other houses, Jason?” Kim asked.

He nodded. “I do that to maintain stability within the *Siann*,” he replied. “With every house getting a cut, no house can complain. If they do, the other houses will smack them upside the head.”

“I do love your local colloquialisms,” Sk’Vrae mused. “I take it that means they would be angry?”

“A little bit. It mainly means that the large pack of minor houses would move to block any house that tried to change the agreement. For some houses, the stipend from the four Urumi systems is a significant piece of their yearly revenue. Bellar is a highly profitable planet.”

“As I know,” Sk’Vrae agreed. “I will be most eager to get it back when the time comes.”

With Kim and Sk'Vrae there, Jason had a seasoned politician and a sector ruler that could give him feedback on his public announcement. He read it to them and they debated it, mainly over how much he had to reveal that caused him to make the move, and how much he should say about how it was going to change things. Both of them agreed that he needed to be fairly descriptive about Karinne's goals in making the move, as well as lay the foundation for the idea of a trade system that would be controlled by the neutral Terrans and overseen by the neutral Karinnes. The main thrust of the announcement, however, was declaring all but in stone the Karinne's desire and intent to remain aloof from the Imperium, even as they maintained many of their ties to it.

Chirk came back in and politely made herself noticed, then looked down at Sk'Vrae. "*My apologies, majestic Hive-leader, but the meeting of the Confederate Council is in fifteen minutes,*" she told them. "*Do you require a room so that you may attend from here?*"

"Actually, it would be best if we all attend, from this office," she answered. "The others are just as serious about learning what Jason intends. They all know that he has declared independence from Dahnai."

"Yah, they should hear it from me before I make the public announcement," Jason agreed.

"Does Dahnai know this, Jason?" Kim asked.

He shook his head. "And I'm not clearing it with her beforehand. That's all part of *I don't answer to you anymore* that this is all about."

Sk'Vrae gave that hissing chortle. "This I want to see," she noted lightly to Kim.

Chirk helped turn Sk'Vrae and Kim's chairs around, then brought up the holograms after they all had something to drink. The others appeared along the back wall, free-floating two-dimensional holograms, with a rather surprised Dahnai in the middle. Zaa wasn't present, but that wasn't completely unusual, for she was a busy Kimdori. She had one of her aides sitting in, who would only listen, would not speak. "What are you doing there, Sk'Vrae?" Dahnai asked pointedly.

"Getting the truth out of the Grand Duke Karinne, *personally*," she answered bluntly.

“Speaking of that, let’s get all that on the table right now,” Jason said as Kim glanced back. “Yes, I *have* declared independence from the Imperium. Me and Dahnai are currently negotiating over the finer points of that declaration, but the basics of it is that she *has* agreed that Karinne needs a degree of autonomy.”

“Autonomy may be too strong a word,” Dahnai stated.

“I have several reasons for doing this. Mainly, it’s because Dahnai can’t keep her tits in her shirt,” he said, giving her an ominous look. “She’s sent sixteen different spies to Karis to try to steal biogenics, exploiting the fact that she *can* get them here.”

Dahnai flushed just a tiny bit.

“So, the main reason I made this declaration is so I can seal off Karis to prevent any other espionage,” he continued. “The finer points of my declaration involve how much interaction we have with the Imperium and what to do about the five planets that the Karinnes administer within the Imperium. But the main thrust of my intent is to turn Karis into an independent and completely *neutral* system where *no one* has any political authority but the Karinnes.”

“That much I’m inclined to give,” Dahnai told the others.

“Yeah, *now* you are after I found all your spies,” he replied waspishly.

“But I’m not just letting the Karinnes go. They have duties and obligations, as well as *contracts* with the Imperium.”

“And there’s also the fact that the Karinnes are a major backbone of our current logistics system,” Ba’mra’ei stated. “We *need* the Karinnes.”

“We’re not backing out of the ideals that created the Confederation,” Jason told her. “To the contrary, I’m *thinking* about the Confederation by making this move. The Karinnes just won’t be operating under the authority of Dahnai anymore. We’ll still be managing and operating the logistics operations to keep the interdictors in place, we’ll still be offering those interdictors to anyone who wants one, and the KMS will remain a part of the Confederate military alliance,” he explained. “The other thing that me and Dahnai agree about is what to do about Terra. Both of us want to turn Terra into a *protectorate* of the Imperium.”

“What is this protectorate?” Grayhawk asked. “What legal standing?”

“It means that it will be an independent planet being granted military protection by the Imperium, Grayhawk,” Dahnai answered. “Secretary Kim there will become the primary executive in charge of the planet, and while the Terrans will be considered Imperium citizens and have passage rights within the Imperium, their planet itself will be independent. They will be subject to no house and free to make their own laws, so long as those laws don’t violate the conditions of protectorate status. They will be an independent *colony* of the Imperium, basically a ward of the throne itself.”

“Yes, that is how it was explained to me,” Kim nodded. “I’m here on Karis discussing what the United Nations will need to do to take over operational control of the planet.”

“There’s a bigger reason behind doing this that all of you need to know about,” Jason said, turning his chair slightly and putting his elbow on his desk. “The Karinnes can’t hold the current logistics system together much longer the way it’s going,” he told them. “My merchant marine fleet is stretched almost to the breaking point, and we don’t even have all of our allies’ systems interdicted. Jrz’kii estimates that adding just five more interdicted systems to the schedule is going to start causing food and supply shortages. By turning Terra into a self-governed planet whose neutrality is *already* established, due to the Academy, we can turn Terra into a hub for trade and logistics using Imperium Stargates to open into strategic systems in each allied government’s territory, and from those strategic systems, Jrz’kii can work out new logistics schedules that won’t push us to exhaustion,” he said, using his gestalt to open a holo image of the system that he had in mind. “This is the initial rough draft of the idea me and Dahnai have been discussing. We create a hub of Stargates at Terra. These Stargates will be controlled and operated by the *Terrans*, not the Imperium, placing them under the control of a neutral third party. The Stargate on the other end will be set up so it requires a command code to be transmitted by the government on that side, giving that government the ability to remotely link or delink the Stargate, giving you a key to the door, as it were. From the hub system on the other side of the Stargate, we create a network of supply lines that services all systems surrounding the hub system, which is a much more effective usage of Karinne resources. We create a hub of centralized supply lines and logistics at Terra that services all allied

governments in the Confederacy, but also offering these services to the Zyagya and the Moridon, since they *already* have Stargates opening from Terra to their respective planets. In addition to being used for military purposes, Dahnai offers each government the use of the Stargates for all commercial traffic as well, for which you pay a modest transit fee for commercial traffic that would be equal to or perhaps even cheaper than trying to transport those goods by hyperspace, with the added benefit of being able to move your trade goods from source to destination in real time. Military use of the Stargates will carry no fee, since free passage through all Confederate territory is part of the Articles of Confederation we all signed.

“I know this is asking several of you to invest a lot more trust in Dahnai than she may be worth,” he said dryly, “but part of this idea is to place the main control and oversight of this system in the hands of a neutral party. The Terrans were conquered by the Faey some seven years ago, and let me tell you, quite a few people on my planet will do backflips of joy when they hear that the planet is being liberated. Every one of you here has been to Terra, and you’ve seen how the Terrans are. I think that *all* of you can agree that the Terrans *can* be neutral and objective, especially when their neutrality is the cornerstone of their independence from the Imperium.”

“Not independence, *protectorate* status,” Dahnai cut in.

“As far as the Terrans will care, it’s independence,” he retorted. “The Articles will apply to Terra for *all* governments, my esteemed colleagues,” he added. “All of you will have free right of passage to and from Terra for both civilian and military traffic. So all of you can park your fleets in Terran space freely, and you will have the right to defend the Stargate leading into your territory just as the Zyagya and the Moridon have those rights. And I’ll tell all of you, right here, right now, that if Dahnai does *anything* that I think goes against the neutral status of Terra, I’ll ram the entire KMS right down her throat,” he said bluntly, which made her glare at him a bit. “I know that the idea of the Imperium having Stargates into your territory might be a little worrisome, but with the Karinnes neutral, Terra neutral, and with me willing to sign individual dual protection treaties with all of you that will state that if the Imperium violates the agreement, the Karinnes will declare war on the Imperium, that I hope to convince all of you to seriously consider my idea. A trade hub like Terra can bring *all* of us profit and allow all Confederate forces the ability to rapidly deploy to any threatened planet

or system. I'm willing to put it in writing that I'll keep Dahnai in check to the best of my ability, which is half of what me declaring independence from the Imperium is about. I have so much hope for our sector, ladies and gentlemen, but we can only realize it if the Karinnes are an independent and *neutral* party."

"What about the Academy, Jason?" Empress Vizzie asked.

"It remains exactly as it is," he answered. "The Academy is, was, and always will be utterly and strictly *neutral*, in all things. It exists solely as a place to learn, open to *any* who has the desire to get an education. The main reason I wanted Terra removed from the Imperium is to put that fact in stone, to use a Terran idiom, to make it inviolate and absolute. The Academy is neutral, and it will be placed on a neutral planet whose only ties to the Imperium are the commercial contracts it has and the Imperium's agreement to provide military protection if it's ever attacked, which protects Terra's neutral status.'

"The Moridon are willing to recognize Terra's neutrality here and now," the Overseer declared. "The Academy's status as a neutral place of learning is too important to all governments in the sector to risk. The Moridon will pledge support for a neutral Terra, for it is beneficial to all of us in the sector."

"*As will the Jobodi,*" Field Marshal Grran's vocoder agreed, his nimble fingers dancing to produce his words.

"I think we all can stipulate to that fact," Assaba nodded. "The Academy is far too important to *all* of us, for it functions as much as a point of common operation as it does a place of learning. The War Room is placed within the Academy, for example."

"That will have to change, your Imperial Majesty," Kim said apologetically. "We cannot host a partisan military operation within the Academy and maintain its neutrality. With the planet itself becoming neutral, we need to move the military command center out of the Academy. I will consult with several Makati firms on Terra about building a Confederate military headquarters, where the current military cooperative effort can be centralized, yet remain on a neutral planet."

“I think that’s a good idea,” Assaba agreed. “Given we’re going to be cooperating until the Benga are vanquished, which is some years away, moving our combined military headquarters into a dedicated compound built specifically for that purpose is ideal.”

“I agree. I put forth we provide funding for a new headquarters to be built by General Secretary Kim, with our military commanders supplying the requirements,” Dahnai said.

“We won’t require funding, your Majesty,” Kim coughed politely. “The treaty of the Confederation states that the planet of Terra bears responsibility for all extensions of the Academy. Since the current headquarters is *within* the Academy, this technically means that Terra is responsible for constructing your new headquarters. The Academy will take care of it.”

“Then let us vote on moving the headquarters when the new building is ready,” Magran said. They all voted, and it passed without objection. “For one, Jason, I find merit in your idea,” he continued. “As long as suitable safeguards were in place to protect the sovereignty of the Colonies, I would be inclined to recommend this idea to the Grand Master and the council.”

“I’ll need more information before I consider it,” Assaba said.

“I’ll have that information for you once me and Dahnai iron everything out,” Jason said, to which Dahnai nodded.

“We’re having a bit of an argument over just *how* independent the Karinnes are going to be,” she said dryly, which made Grayhawk chuckle. “I do understand the need for them to have a measure of independence if this idea is going to work, I see what Jason is trying to do, but I don’t like letting him go.”

“What about the betrothal?” Grayhawk asked.

“That’s still in place,” Jason replied. He wasn’t surprised that Grayhawk would ask about that. “Rann has the right to choose his bride, and he’s chosen Shya. That particular matter is out of both our hands,” he said with a chuckle.

Dahnai actually laughed. “I’ll say. If I revoked the betrothal, Shya would tear out my hair. And I have no intention of revoking it anyway. If

the Karinnes are going to be neutral, having our two families joined by marriage warns the other houses of the *Siann* that an attack against the Merranes will bring the Karinnes into the war on *our* side.”

The other rulers nodded, understanding the value of such an alliance. “So, your neutrality will be more or less on paper,” Ba’mra’ei noted.

“No, it will not,” Jason replied. “The Karinnes *will* be neutral, but I’ve already promised Dahnai that the Karinnes will maintain stability in the Imperium by acting as a sledgehammer that smashes any house that gets any ideas of trying to challenge the Merranes for the throne. But that’s as far as it goes. She’s right that with the Merranes becoming part of my family, I’ll fight for them if they need me. But when they don’t, the Karinnes will keep to themselves and stay *way* out of Imperium politics. If the Karinnes are to be trusted to run the logistics operations for the governments of the Confederation, our neutrality must be established and beyond reproach. My allegiance to the Imperium will begin and end with Dahnai and her family and keeping them on the Imperial throne. If it doesn’t involve keeping Dahnai’s family in power, the Karinnes will stay the hell out of it.”

“I see the value of such an arrangement,” the Overseer of the Moridon stated with a slight nod. “The Imperium finally achieves complete political stability, and all it costs her Imperial Majesty is releasing a house that is already mostly neutral anyway. Quite clever, Dahnai, quite clever,” he said approvingly.

“That’s one of the very few reasons I’ve agreed to at least parts of this, Overseer Kruu,” she replied calmly. “With the Karinnes being neutral, it puts me in a position where my throne will *never* be challenged. The Merranes will hold the Imperial throne in perpetuity.”

“And we *all* want a stable Imperium,” Ba’mra’ei stated. “Send me the initial draft of your idea, Jason. I would like to read over the ideas you and Dahnai are developing.”

“I’ll have an initial rough draft ready in a couple of days. Me and Dahnai have a few more things to hash over, and I need to talk to Jrz’kii and get her to generate a new plan of moving supplies with Stargates in place. But, I’m putting it forward that Secretary Kim of the Terran United Nations

needs to have a chair at this table from here on, since he's the one in control of Terra, and Terra is the planet hosting a large majority of our coordinated interests. He needs to be part of the Confederate Council so he can better coordinate Terran operations to host Confederate operations and activities."

"I agree. I put forth the motion," Assaba said. In a brief vote with no dissent, Kim was added to the Confederate Council. "Welcome among us, Secretary Kim," Assaba nodded soberly.

"I extend the thanks of Terra and the United Nations to be granted a seat in this august body," Kim said eloquently, standing up and bowing in the Korean manner, then he sat back down.

"Now that that business is out of the way, General Lorna Shaddale is ready to give the military update briefing," Dahnai said dryly.

Jason drifted through the rest of the briefing, since it was all stuff he already knew yesterday, mainly since it was the KMS and the Kimdori that supplied most of that information. While they debated the motives of the Consortium by moving all their ships to Trieste, Jason pondered the initial reactions to his idea. In his opinion, it went better than expected. He expected skepticism from the larger empires and cautious optimism from the smaller ones, but he was pleasantly surprised that Assaba seemed willing to consider the idea, as much as he expected the Shio and the Nine Colonies to favor it. Grayhawk hadn't given a solid opinion either way, but his facial expressions showed intrigue while Jason was explaining it, and that was a good sign. Shio were so much like Terrans and Faey that it was very easy to read their facial expressions. The Moridon were enthusiastic about it, and that was always a good thing. The Moridon had a great deal of political clout in the sector, even if they didn't even have a standing military. They had all the banks, and that gave them considerable power. If the Moridon liked it, they could convince the skeptics to support the idea.

After the briefing, Jason, Sk'Vrae, and Kim spent another two hours discussing his plans and the political ramifications that a neutral Terra would entail, mainly revolving around the Confederation. Jason and Sk'Vrae went over that with Kim, since he was going to be the one that would have to hold his own against people like Assaba face to face, to deal with people with towering egos that would look at Kim like a fat yearling ready for eating. After Sk'Vrae started to get tired, she and Kim took their

leave, going back home, and they left him to finish revising his public declaration. They had counseled him to be as open and honest as possible, and he decided that that was the best course of action. His public declaration made it abundantly clear why he was breaking away from the Imperium, both because of the attempted espionage and to serve as a neutral party to manage combined Confederate operations like logistics. He included the plans for Terra in his declaration, and once he was done, he sent it out over galactic gravband to all diplomatic offices.

His declaration to the people of Karis was done via video, from his office. With Dera and Ryn standing behind him, he sat at his desk, in his armor, and addressed the people of Karis.

“Good afternoon. As I’m sure many of you have heard through rumor, I’ve made the somewhat radical move of declaring autonomy from the Imperium. These rumors are true,” he stated bluntly. “The short of it is that I’ve caught the Imperium in several attempts at espionage, trying to steal biogenic units and schematics. These acts just hastened what was going to be inevitable,” he said with a grunt. His public addresses to the people of the house were never very formal. “I knew this day was going to come eventually, but I didn’t think it was going to come this soon. So, to protect Cybi, the secrets of the house, and after the attack on Saelle Karinne in an attempt to clone her, I’ve decided that the only way the house can protect the Generations and biogenics is to be independent. It’s very simple, people of Karinne. So long as Empress Dahnai Merrane can *order* us to open our doors and hand over the secrets we protect, the house of Karinne is not secure, nor is it safe.

“For the lay citizen of the house, not much is going to change. We’re already independent in everything but name as it is, and this split shouldn’t cause any change in daily life on Karis. Everyone will still have their jobs, we’ll all go to work, trade will continue to flow back and forth between Karis and our trade partners, and those members of the house who are from the Imperium won’t find CivNet cut to the Imperium or telegrav service interrupted. What *will* change, and is already changing, is that all non-Karinnes are being moved off the planet’s surface. They’ll be confined to Kosigi, where we can keep tight control over them, and a hell of a lot of job openings are going to come open for what those guest workers were doing. They were building a series of factories on the untterraformed northern

continent of Virga for the war effort, and we'll take over building and operating those factories. So, if you're interested in taking those jobs, check the listings on the house employment agency site on CivNet and get your applications in quick. They'll be first come, first serve. There will be both factory positions and terraforming positions open.

"I'm going to release a much more lengthy written explanation about the specifics of what's going on. I'm not going to tie up the lunchtime viddy making you guys listen to me," he said, which made Dera smile despite herself behind him. "But I'll go over the basics of what's going to happen next. First off, me and Empress Merrane are currently in negotiations over just how the house is going to split from the Imperium. As just about everyone knows, I have a personal investment in the Empress, and the stability and prosperity of the Imperium is very important not just to me, but to every government in the entire sector. The House of Karinne is going to remain as close to the Imperium as it can without being subject to it, and that means we do what we're already doing now, keeping the Imperium stable and keeping Dahnai Merrane on the Imperial throne. We're also keeping all our military, commercial, and civilian contracts we've made with the Imperium. We're not backing out on our agreements.

"Now, the other half of what's going on, outside of the espionage, is that I've kicked around the idea for a while of declaring neutrality to try to create a much more cooperative atmosphere within the Confederation. Most every empire and government in our sector and the next sector over honor the neutrality of the Karinnes, despite the fact that we were at that time a part of the Imperium, due to the Academy and our policies. Ever since the house was reformed, we've stayed as neutral as possible. Well, with me declaring independence on behalf of the house, we're moving forward with those plans. With the Karinnes completely neutral, it's my hope that we can act as the primary agent moving through the various governments of the Confederation, mainly through the planet Terra. I've talked this over with Dahnai, and she agrees that we have a good idea with what we're planning. It's my plan to turn Terra into a completely neutral planet, the system becoming a protectorate of the Imperium rather than a subject system, that acts as a trade hub for all Confederate empires much the way it already operates for the Imperium and Collective. Our hope is that Terra becomes neutral space where everyone has the same rights of passage, the planet acts

as a trade hub to ship goods from system to system anywhere in Confederate territory, and it acts as a chokepoint to protect the Imperium, the Collective, and our Confederate allies from outside agents and enemy attack by forcing everything coming into Confederate territory to come through the Entry Station. It's our plan to interdict every system held by our allies in the Confederation and then put up a series of Stargates at Terra that open into all our allies' territory, and allow them to use those Stargates to move trade goods and military warships back and forth to Terra, and from Terra they can go anywhere in Confederate territory quickly. It promotes trade, it provides the fast movement of military assets, and everyone both makes money and has security. Most of our allies would never allow this if it was the Imperium managing the system, but they *might* do it if it's *us* who are holding all the keys to the doors. Dahnai isn't too happy that I've seceded, but she can smell the money that might be flowing into the Imperium with my idea.

“For the Faey and Terran members of the house. I know you didn't sign on with the Karinnes thinking we'd break away from the Imperium, and you have the right to make a choice about where you want to be. I don't have the exact specifics set up yet, but we're going to allow anyone in a non-secret job field that wants to return to the Imperium to do so. Clearly, if you're trained in biogenics or other designated top-secret technologies, you're stuck here because you know secrets we can't release. But if you're not and you want to repatriate back to the Imperium, you will be given that choice. Just remember this, friends, and be warned. That's a one-way trip. If you repatriate back to the Imperium, you will *not* be allowed to re-apply for admittance into the house. If you leave, you leave for good. So, think very carefully about what you want to do, and don't feel rushed. It's going to be a while before we start that process, because I haven't even ironed out all the details with the Empress and the Confederate Council yet,” he said with a slightly sour face. “What I can tell you is don't decide yet. Wait for us to have all the specifics in place, see where the house will stand in the new system, *then* make your choice. I want everyone to make a careful, informed, and well-thought out decision about what you want to do.

“Okay, I think that's about enough of interrupting the winter league batchi match,” he noted, glancing over to the side. “By the way, it's six to four, Draconis Pirates leading in the first division,” he said idly. “Everyone

keep an eye on the official Ducal CivNet site and also your own in-boxes. Some official declarations and more information will be sent to every vidlink and interface on the planet, and as always, if you have questions, get in touch with your local government information office. They'll always have the most current information available. I'll make a much more formal announcement at a press conference once I have everything finalized and we have an operational treaty in place with the Imperium. So, that's it. Everyone have a good day."

When the feed cut off, Chirk opened the door and looked in. "*Revered Hive-leader, consort Aura wishes to see you.*"

Dera and Ryn smirked.

"Yeah, yeah, push off both of you," Jason snorted, which made them give that wheezing, eerie voiceless laugh. Aura padded into his office, wearing her armor which was now painted in the uniform code and colors of a personnel transport pilot, working for the Ducal government. She'd just started her on the job training, flying in the copilot's chair on the smaller civilian skimmers. "Hey hon, what's up?" he asked.

Nothing of importance, she replied with a smile, putting her helmet on his desk. *I just finished my duty assignment and wondered if perhaps you'd like to go out tonight.*

Afraid I'm a bit too busy to go out, but why don't you come over and have dinner with us? he offered.

Am I staying for breakfast? she asked pointedly.

You are now, he sent immediately, which made her smile.

Well, that was easy, she laughed. *I wasn't sure if you'd have time for me with everything going on I've heard.*

We'll talk about that. I want a good idea of what the average citizen is thinking, and you're ferrying them around. I know you can hear them chatting.

Oh yes. There's all kinds of rumors flying around, she nodded. *Anyway, let me get home so I can change. When should I arrive?*

Whenever. Jys is home. She worked from home today, mainly talking over free agents with Frinia

Great! I haven't gossiped with her for a while, she sent brightly. Aura and Jyslin were very good friends, something Jason never failed to find a bit...weird, at least from a Terran point of view. His wife was good friends with his mistress...that was so Faey. I heard she's the one running the Paladins?

More or less. Frinia's the one making suggestions, and Jys is taking her advice.

Then we have much to talk about, we had no batchi on Exile and I find the game absolutely fascinating, Aura chuckled aloud, picking up her helmet. She came around his desk and gave him a kiss, then headed for the door. Don't stay too late, she ordered.

I won't.

With actual plans waiting for him after work, and wanting to have a short day after all the stress of the last couple of days, Jason whipped up the initial in-house press release, going into more detail about his plans for Terra and how they'd be interacting with the Imperium with Karis being a closed, autonomous system, as well as his future plans for fostering cooperation among the Confederate empires by acting as a neutral agent. He pushed it out as Shen and Suri called in a corvette to take him home, and the four of them walked with him through the halls of the White House, which now had many more guards at the hallway intersections, and they were all armed with external railguns or pulse rifles. It was lunch hour in the building, so the halls were thick with Ducal employees, many of which bowed or waved to Jason as he moved towards the landing pad. The Marine corvette *Ranger* landed just as he came out, the pilot skillfully parking the large ship on the pad in the only way it would fit, with its bow almost against the main building and its stern hanging over the perimeter fence. The ship still gleamed, betraying the fact that it was built and commissioned only a couple of weeks ago, and its captain had but bow art on her ship, a depiction of the Imperial Rangers from ancient Faey history. The Rangers were a legendary society of archers from the First Unification period whose aim was without peer and had never lost any battle in which they fought. The painting was a lithe female Faey, her hair tied back in a topknot, and an

elegant composite bow in her hand, drawn and ready to fire. Those composite bows, he recalled from Faey history, had been a technological breakthrough that gave the Rangers far more range and accuracy than other archers, and that attributed to their success. The Rangers wore no armor as a taunt to their enemies, were adept at firing their bows from a mount, even firing while moving, and they wore only a loincloth or short skirt with a headband that had the insignia of the Rangers stamped on it. All of them also wore a tight wrap around their breasts to bind them so they didn't interfere with their draw...which the bow art accurately depicted. Whoever painted that had gotten all the details exactly right. Marine Colonel Jaxira Karinne appeared in the hatch. She was the one of youngest command-level officer in the KMS, even younger than Jeya, having just earned her Colonel's bar last month.

Hey Jax, nice ship, Jason complemented as he came up the stairs.

The paint isn't even dry yet, she grinned, showing off her brilliant white teeth. Jaxira didn't look like a warrior, that was for sure. She was short for a Faey woman, only around 5'5", and had a slender, almost waifish build when not in her armor. But her slender little body was almost obscenely strong and durable. Jaxira ran a marathon a week and could do it carrying a battle pack that weighed half as much as she did. She was also very pretty, pretty enough to easily be a face model...but not a body model. Her short stature, slender build, and small breasts were not the ideal Faey build, not the Faey concept of ideal physical beauty...Jyslin was more or less the perfect example of what Faey found beautiful in a body. That was for the best, because Jaxira, or Jax as she was more commonly known, was one *hell* of a Marine. Highly educated, well trained, and with plenty of battle experience before coming to the KMS, Jax had been one of the girls captured in the Trillane attack on Terra six years ago. She'd been at the end of her conscription then, but re-enlisted in the KMS after coming into the house and served four years in the Karinne Marines, went to officer school and worked her way up to Captain, then she retired to pursue her dream of starting and running a business. But she rejoined the KMS when the Consortium attacked, barely four months after she retired. She'd worked her way up from Captain to Colonel in a bloody hurry, mainly because they were in desperate need of capable corvette commanders. She'd have easily made it there on her own the usual way had she stayed in, but they needed

her on the bridge of a corvette, so she was fast tracked to Colonel. Jax brushed her silver hair out of her face, which was thick, straw straight, and somewhat wild, giving her a primal kind of look, which was accented by her luminous amber eyes, eyes just like Pemai's, but she didn't have Pemai's darker skin color that really made them striking for Pemai. *Now, let's get our hooky-playing Grand Duke home for lunch.*

That's about the truth of it, Jason sent with a chuckle as he boarded the corvette, his guards filing in behind him. *I've had a stressful couple of days, so I'm gonna drink some wine, play a little piano, and have a nice dinner with my family.*

Always good to keep things in perspective, your Grace, Jax smiled as her helmet floated over to her. Jax was a telekinetic, and a fairly strong one...and like most Faey, she'd kept that fact a secret before she came to House Karinne. Everyone knew she was a TK, but like many Faey, she concealed just *how* strong she was. Jax had gone to the Academy course for telekinetics to further refine her ability, taking dedicated training in it, and it had been very successful. From what Jason recalled, Jax was capable of lifting upwards of 33 *konn*, or about 31 kilograms or about 70 pounds or so. For a non-Generation, that was *very* impressive. The training had nearly doubled her strength by helping her refine and focus her power, as well as learn advanced applications of it. Jax's natural talent was the use of her TK in short, powerful bursts, like a telekinetic punch, delivering a stunning blow at close range. It was like being hit in the face by a barbell, and armor was no protection since she could focus her power *through* the armor to strike the flesh and bone beneath. That was *not* easy to do, almost as hard as affecting liquids without resorting to manipulating the space they occupied.

For a Marine, being able to stun someone that couldn't be telepathically subdued from 40 *shakra* away was an *extremely* useful little trick.

Jason took a seat back in the tactical center with his guards, and Jax sat with him as the pilots ferried him back to the strip, just catching up with her. Jason knew most of the upper ranking officers in the KMS personally and had long friendships with many of the girls he'd captured from Trillane that had stayed in the KMS. She told him about her jeweler's shop, now being run by her manager since she was back in the KMS, where she bought and sold jewelry from almost every race in the sector. From Urumi

to Shio to Faey to Colonial to Skaa, if it was meant to be worn on the body to accent or emphasize, she either had it or could get it. She even had three craftsmen in her shop that did repairs and made custom orders, a Faey, a Terran, and a Shio, who oddly enough were the three races that had the greatest love of jewelry in the sector.

That made Jax a good woman to talk to about the commercial impact declaring independence might have on the planet's businesses. When he explained quickly what was going on, she pursed her thin lips and considered it, then leaned back in the chair at the sensor post, turned to face him. *Hmm, well, for me it won't impact my shop very much, she told him. The only problem I might have is getting offworld materials we can't replicate, like Urumi trimetal. The Urumi are the only ones that can make trimetal right, I wouldn't buy it from anyone else. If we're gonna run everything through Terra, I do think it'll cause a major bottleneck right at first, as the TES tries to deal with the massive increase in cargo going through it.*

The TES wouldn't be managing shipments within Confederate territory.

They'd better, she sent strongly. It has to go somewhere where it can be scanned, especially if it's coming here. They'd put fifty spy probes in every shipment if it just comes in here uninspected.

Well, we were planning on using a series of space stations for that, one for each government. If it goes through their Stargate, they have the right to inspect what's coming out or going in.

Okay, that makes sense. But that's still gonna slow things down a little, especially at first. Sounds like I'd better have Granall put in our orders now.

We're about to land, your Grace, the pilot sent politely.

Settle in when we land, grab some mess over at the Imperial Guard barracks, Jason called back. Jax, let's talk a little more about this.

Sure.

Jax ate lunch with him and Myleena, who was down from Kosigi to grab some gear out of her lab, and Jyslin and Aura were out at the shopping center just down the street from the strip. He bounced ideas off of her as an

entrepreneur and got her honest opinions about how things might affect the small business owner like her, an outlook that Kumi couldn't really extend since she looked at the big picture. Myleena listened in, just sitting down and getting some rest, and from the look of her, she needed it. She was still tearing that Consortium battleship apart, learning the differences in technologies they employed in their big ships compared to the destroyer they'd captured, and she looked like she hadn't had more than five hours of sleep in the last three days. She yawned quite a bit, and Jason almost had to force her to eat the *gral* flanks and *imi* beans that Surin made for them.

I'll have some detailed reports on the battleship ready in a couple of days, she told him as she spooned beans into her mouth, eating ravenously once Jason finally made her commit to the meal. *So far, it's both what I expected and a little surprising.*

How so? Jax asked.

She glanced at the Colonel. Myleena didn't know the officers the way Jason did, but since she was at the table, it was clear that he trusted her with whatever Myleena might say. *Well, they upscale their tech very effectively, at least until you get to their power generation. They use an entirely different type of striated power plant than they do in the destroyers.*

That's nothing like us. We just scale our singularity plants for the power requirements, Jax noted. *Or use standard PPGs for low power applications.*

Yup, Myleena nodded. *Their battleship plants have an entirely different configuration. It's not nearly as efficient as their destroyer class plants, because it seems they haven't figured out how to manage the striation decay when striated output goes over six terajoules. So they just ramrod it by using fuckin' massive plants and just outproduce the power loss from striation decay. Majorly fuckin' inefficient.*

It's the best they have, I suppose, Jax sent soberly. *We thought that metaphased plants were the combs in Trelle's hair before we came here and saw singularity plants.*

I'm not complaining, as long as they use striated, they'll never crack the interdictors, Myleena sent with a slightly malicious smile.

Jyslin and Aura almost bounced in, both of them in their armor and carrying a few shopping bags. *Hey love,* Jyslin sent with a smile. *Lunch,*

fantastic! I'm starving.

Where were you two?

Buying Aura some Paladin fan stuff, she winked. And some pretty sexy lingerie. Gotta keep you interested, she sent with subtly erotic undertones... not for Aura, but at the idea of Jason getting excited seeing Aura wearing what they bought. Lingerie was a Terran affectation, since Faey considered the nude body the pinnacle in natural beauty and thus were willing to show off what was under the lingerie, but it was starting to gain a foothold in the Faey romantic scene, as well as the stripping and prostitution scene. Sometimes, teasingly hiding something was more erotic than seeing it, and Faey women were starting to latch onto that fact...but in a weird way. Faey women had discovered that a man wearing male lingerie was strangely enticing, and "masculine lingerie" was spreading across the Imperium like wildfire. The Terran art of striptease was also getting really popular in the Imperium, for watching a man, or woman, teasingly undress while intentionally trying to incite desire in the spectators wasn't something that appeared in Faey culture, again due to the Faey love of the nude body. Faey striptease, if it could be called that, had always been about the dancer already being naked when they came out and dancing for the crowd. But some women did like to wear lacy, sexy bras and panties, Myleena particularly, so there was a market for what Jason would call more traditional lingerie.

Ah, so this is Aura, Jax sent lightly, giving Jason a sly look. I'm Colonel Jaxira Karinne, captain of the KMS corvette Ranger, she introduced.

Yes, I'm Aura, she nodded. It's nice to meet you.

You have good taste, Jason, Jax declared, which made Aura preen just a little bit.

You have no idea, he replied easily, which made Myleena grin.

Oh, I also got some steaks for the grill, I figured you'd want to barbecue tonight, Jyslin added, offering a bag to Surin.

You've been peeking in my head when I'm sleeping again, have you? Jason accused lightly.

Who needs you to sleep? I own you, silly boy. That pretty little head of yours doesn't have a single thought I don't know about, she teased with a smile.

Much as I'd like to hang around, I got a ton of work to do, Myleena sent, standing up.

You'd better be back down here for dinner, Jason sent emphatically.

I will be. I need to get my notes organized, and I do that better in my home lab. Can you watch Danelle 'til I get home?

Don't I always?

After he finished talking to Jax, she got back to her duties, and Jason deliberately avoided doing any work. He sat at the piano and just doodled in a musical sense as Jyslin and Aura got rid of their armor and lounged around the house in shorts and bikini tops, Aura's looking brand new, talking about batchi. Aya wandered in and joined Jason with her *tamirin*, sitting on a stool made for an armored sitter, plucking at her old instrument with casually masterful proficiency. Jason had found out that the instrument got its name because it was invented in the city of Tamirin, the capitol of Tamiri, which was Yila's seat of power. That was a surprise to him, since the instrument's design hinted that it was ancient in origin, like a Japanese *shakuhachi* wood flute or old medieval lute. In reality, the *tamirin* had been a mainstream instrument for only about 600 years and wasn't included in most traditional Faey orchestras, much like many Terran orchestras didn't include electric guitars...and 600 years wasn't long at all in Faey history. It was invented when the Faey were the most technologically advanced race in the sector, but its design was simple, basic, almost *ancient*.

It was really curious that someone in the Imperium "invented" something that seemed *old* by Terran standards. But that was life when one lived in a spacefaring culture.

Jason and Aya basically just piddled for nearly two hours, Jason getting more and more relaxed as the piano worked its magic on him, and when the kids got home from school, he scooped Rann up and sat him on his lap and both gave him a lesson and let him watch Jason play. Rann was professing early and earnest interest in the piano, and it looked like he'd learn the same way Jason learned, sitting on the lap of his parent. Jason had learned the

piano from his mother, who had been a professional concert pianist, first informally sitting in her lap, then taking more formal lessons from her. Rann had started down that same path. Memories of his gentle mother's fingers dancing over the keyboard making that beautiful music were some of Jason's earliest and fondest recollections. He treasured them even more so because she died when he was so young.

He did pause in his revelry to read some reports sent to his gestalt, as Rann and Danelle carried steaks, *hruga* roots, and corn on the cob out onto the patio with Surin, preparing to grill. Things over in the PR sector were getting...odd. The Consortium and the Imxi were *scaling back* their defense of the hyperspace jump routes, and two more convoys of ships had left Imxi space en route to Trieste, nearly 2,300 ships by the Kimdori's count. 70% of those were Imxi ships, being towed by Consortium destroyers and battleships that had been repaired after the mine attack at the start of the war. Those ships were manned by Imxi, Zaa's reports stated, replacing the insectoid crews killed by the mines. That meant that those ships wouldn't be nearly as effective in combat. Zaa had made sure her infiltrators marked those ships so they'd be able to identify them when the attack came—not if, *when*—and either ignore them in favor of taking out more dangerous ships or wiping them out quickly so they didn't do any damage, either way Myri and the generals wanted to take it.

Jason sat at the outdoor table, getting concerned. If the Consortium had convinced the Imxi to abandon its territory....

[Myri,] he called using his gestalt, and the communion network connected him to her interface. [Myri.]

[Yeah, Jason?]

[You read the last Kimdori activity report?]

[I'm reading it right now,] she answered. [I'm getting a little worried, Jayce.]

[Me too. When will that Stargate get to PR-371?]

[Fourteen hours, but I think I'm going to contact the towing team and tell them to take maximum jumps and minimum rest,] she answered. [I want it in place and linked back to Karis fucking now.]

[You've got my blessing as far as that goes,] he replied, bringing up the galactic map. It showed the location of the Stargate towing task force, a Kimdori battleship being escorted by the KMS *Jendra* and both Kimdori and KMS cruisers and destroyers, finishing a wide arc that sent them very wide of the Consortium's sensor pickets along their convoy jump path, which was why it took them five days to get there instead of three. The same Kimdori battleship that pulled the Stargate from that natural bubble of altered space around the quasar was currently towing the Stargate, trading towing shifts with the *Jendra* to reduce stress on both ships over towing something that big that far, but if both battleships had problems, the cruisers could team up and tow the Stargate in their stead. That was why they'd sent so many support ships, Jason wasn't *about* to risk losing that Stargate if its two towing ships both had breakdowns and left that *very* expensive piece of critical hardware stranded in interstellar space on the far side of the galaxy.

Natural bubble of altered space....

That had some possibilities. He'd have to think about that a little bit, when he had the time.

[They haven't gotten all their ships over here yet, so that gives us time to get our ships back before they finish moving their forces,] Jason noted. *[We can have the Stargate in place and linked in twenty hours if they go to maximum jump protocols. Ten to PR-371, two hours to anchor and power up, then eight hours to link it back to the home gate.]*

[Exactly. I've already sent a warning back to the PR sector to expect an emergency recall at any time.]

[Good thinking. How are you handling the ground occupation forces?]

[They do an emergency bugout,] she answered. *[It'll tip off the bugs that we know they're about to move, but that can't be helped.]*

[Yup. Get in touch with the Kimdori and find out when the last ship convoys leave Imxi space. When they do, recall our forces. Tell the War Room, and warn Maggie too, tell her to have everything in place around the Stargate within half an hour of it arriving.]

[Will do.]

That done, Jason supplanted Surin at the grill and tended the steaks and wrapped *hruga* roots and corn cobs himself, listening to Rann, Danelle, Zach, and Kyri tell him about their day at school rather than worry about things he couldn't do anything about for the next ten hours. Jason watched Aura interact with the kids, saw how easily she talked to them and how much they liked her. They knew exactly why she came over, however, knew that Aura was Jason's *special friend*, but Kyri surprised him when she looked right at Aura's muscular belly and put her hand on it. *So when will you give us a brother or sister, Aura?*

Aura looked a bit surprised. *I'm not pregnant, pipkin*, she replied.

Isn't that why you come over? Mommy said that Daddy had to have as many brothers and sisters for us that he could. And Daddy certainly enjoys doing it, she added clinically.

Aura laughed, and Jason felt a tad embarrassed. Kyri and Danelle happened to share that bad habit of speaking their minds. *Well, we're not trying, but if I do get pregnant, I'd be very happy to have another baby and quite honored that Jason is the father*, she replied easily, showing her political skills by replying with a straight face and an honest flavor to her thought.

You have a baby? Why haven't you brought it to see us?

I'm afraid my daughter passed away some ten years ago, Kyri, she replied, a touch somberly. *Back on Exile, before your father found us.*

Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. You must be really sad.

It's okay, pipkin, she sent gently, patting Kyri on the shoulder. *Thank you for your kindness.*

Jyslin gave Aura a speculative look, then glanced at Jason. *Oh hell no, get that right out of your head*, he warned privately.

What? Wouldn't it make her happy? she protested in reply.

That's between me and her, and you will keep your pretty little nose out of it.

She bobbed her head sharply upwards, which in Faey culture was akin to her sticking her tongue out at him.

After all the stress of the last few days, sitting around the outside table on a clear, warm, breezy afternoon, just hanging out with his wife, Aura, and a few of his kids, was *exactly* what he needed. The anxiety of making his agonizing decision that started easing when he sat at the piano completely unwound as he enjoyed a good steak, good conversation, and a little harmless fun down on the beach after dinner, making a sand castle the cheating way as Jason, Danelle, Rann, Zach, and Kyri used their telekinetic power to build a massive sand castle that buckets and shovels could never hope to duplicate. It was fun to do, and it gave his kids that weren't Kyri practice using their TK in a very subtle, delicate manner, shaping walls, carving out little windows, forming passageways and packing the sand by compression, sculpting parapets and battlements, turning a six *shakra* tall pile of sand into a huge medieval castle, complete with little pennants at the tops of conical-roofed towers Kyri fashioned out of toothpicks and napkins. Jason dug a moat as a final touch and brought in seawater to fill it, and they stood around and admired the fruits of their labor...at least until Kyri laughed and made the whole thing explode in a spray of damp sand and cries of alarm and dismay from her brothers and Danelle. They chased her all the way down to Temika's house before they finally caught her, and the five of them wrestled and pushed as the others exacted their vengeance for Kyri ruining their creation. Jason, Jyslin, and Aura just watched in amusement, letting the kids sort it out among themselves, at least until a huge column of water rocketed up from the nearby ocean, arced in a rainbow, and slammed into all of them. There was much spluttering and choking as Jason stood up, about to go down there and find out who did that—that was *dangerous*, it was way too much water and applied with way too much force.

But Cybi beat him to it. A camera pod that was observing from the walkway whizzed over and her hologram manifested, and she took all of them quickly in hand. Doing something that they kept an absolute secret, she used her *own* form of telekinetic capability—not *real* TK but not far from it—to split them all up and spread them out. She loudly and sternly barked that that was *way* over the line, pointing a stern finger at Zach as she did so.

Again, Zach was demonstrating *far* more telekinetic ability than his siblings.

She made Zach apologize, told him to *never* do that again, then marched them all back to the house, and as far as Jason was concerned, punishment was sufficiently meted. All his kids knew to obey Cybi as they obeyed the adults on the strip. Jason smacked Zach lightly on the bottom when they got back to the deck and addressed him with calm authority. *Don't do that again, young man.*

I won't. I didn't really mean to, he replied in honest chagrin. *It just sorta, happened.*

I think Ayama needs to accelerate your lessons. I'll talk to her about it.

'Kay.

"Nice save, Cybi, thanks," Jyslin smiled at her.

"A little late. Jason, we really need to discuss some advanced and specialized training for Zachary. His TK is developing far faster and more strongly than the others."

"I know. I'll talk to Ayuma about it tomorrow."

"You'll be busy, Jason. I'll discuss it with her in the morning, and give you a report afterward," Cybi offered.

"Sounds good. I'll let you handle it."

Zachary at least had the modesty not to strut, since all the kids overheard it. Kyri did look a tad miffed, however. She was used to being the top dog among all the kids, in both telepathic and telekinetic ability, and now Zach was challenging her for a spot at the top of the mountain. It would be interesting to see how she reacted to it, see if the lessons in grace and good sportsmanship both Jason and Yana were ramming down her throat were taking hold.

After that little adventure, Myleena finally joined them, as well as Tim and Symone as they got off work. They all lounged around on the beach and just relaxed, caught up on non-work subjects after Jason chastised Myleena for not making dinner by dunking her in the ocean. Symone was settling into her new job as a rigger instructor, and Tim was adjusting to the influx of employees in Miaari's office...and he was already having a torrid in-office affair with Kini. Tim just couldn't keep it in his pants, and Symone seemed to take nearly perverted glee in allowing him to run rampant all

over Karis. Tim would stick his dick in any woman he could get to spread her legs, and Symone not just allowed it, she *encouraged* it. Jyslin caught them all up on the transition to bring the Paladins to Karis, which was almost done, and they were already looking at next season. The first activity of the new season, what Jason would call the draft, would be in just a little over a month, so they had a month to settle in the team, look over the prospects from the lower leagues, and also look over the current pool of free agents.

The IBL's draft was a little different than any other sports league with which Jason was familiar. They didn't draft amateurs or college players, they drafted professionals playing in the lower pro leagues. IBL teams had farm teams like baseball did, but they didn't *own* those players. Any player from any team could be drafted by any team. the only advantage an IBL team had in lower league teams they owned and ran was that they saw those players in action much more frequently, so they knew much more about them. The Paladin organization, which they now owned, owned the Paladins and teams from all four pan-Imperium pro leagues, Developmental or D League, AAA, AA, and A, scattered across three star systems in the Imperium, and some IBL teams owned interplanetary or inter-system local pro leagues. When they sanctioned the Karis Planetary League as a draft resource for IBL teams, the Paladins would become consultants for the KPL to ensure the KPL upheld the standards required to retain its sanctioned status. But any player from any pro team in a sanctioned league could be drafted after playing a full season at the pro level, and that included the pro planetary and intersystem leagues like the KPL. Lower league pro teams did not draft, they competed with each other for batchi players from amateur development leagues and school leagues, all the way down to middle school. A batchi player worked hard to earn a spot on a pro team somewhere because they were exempted from conscription if they were on a pro team. And pro teams could take anyone as young as 18, the usual age a Faey graduated from middle school and entered primary school. Many planetary leagues had in-house primary school tutoring so a player could earn her primary degree, an Imperium requirement, and still play pro batchi. A girl could come out of middle school and go straight into a pro league, never spend a day in primary school, and end up a *billionaire* if she played her way up to the IBL and had a successful career.

IBL quality batchi players made pro baseball players look like paupers.

That was one of their weird rules. Another was that no player could play in the IBL unless she was drafted into the IBL. There were no “undrafted free agents” in the IBL. They became free agents after they completed their rookie contract, and those were IBL rules. The number of players drafted every year changed depending on the number of lower level pro league players but was usually around 500 players allocated to the 64 IBL teams. Given that a pro batchi team’s active roster was 31 during the season, that meant that a team usually had huge numbers of draftees, all of which they were allowed to keep. A team signed a draftee to a three year standard deal at a standard salary, called the draftee’s contract, and if they proved themselves, they went on the free agent market and got a better contract with either their first team or another team. Draft contracts were pitiful compared to free agent contracts, some D league batchi players made more than a draftee, but that was the price the IBL player paid to get the big credits. IBL teams were allowed to have an unlimited number of draftee contracts, they didn’t count towards the player limit, but draftees on the active roster *did* count towards the player limit of 31. The others were on practice squads or were farmed *back* out to lower leagues to work on their skills or rehabilitate an injury. Most IBL teams had two full team roster practice squads comprised of draftees, some 100 or so players *just* on the practice squads, and the rest of their draftees were sent down to the minors to fill holes or work on this or that.

And after those three years, 95% of draftees prayed they got a call from an IBL team once their draft contracts were over, while the other 5% were picked up during signing week. An IBL player never went hungry, though. If they weren’t signed as a free agent, most were picked up by lower league batchi teams, and there they continued to practice their skills and hope for a call from an IBL team.

In a way, the D league, the highest non-IBL batchi league, was even more competitive than the IBL because those players were trying to play their way back up to the IBL. The vast majority of the league were draftees that weren’t signed, and they worked hard to get the attention of an IBL team when they needed a new player. D leagues drew just as many spectators as the IBL on the planets where they played. The Paladin’s D league team was on Jerama II, the Jerama Mercenaries, and Jyslin was

kicking around the idea of either moving the Mercenaries to Karis or forming a brand-new D league team on Karis. That wasn't that hard, since there were 129 D league teams, and all it really took for an IBL organization to create a new D league team was to file some paperwork with the IBL organization, hire some coaches, buy or build some facilities, rent some stadium space, hold tryouts for players, and negotiate matches with other D league teams; every D league team negotiated for opponents on its own to fill its 12 match schedule. And with 128 other teams out there, it wasn't that hard to find an opponent willing to play one's team. After 12 matches, the D league had a rather involved playoff system that took nearly 10 takirs to finally whittle the initial 24 playoff teams down to the D league championship.

That was the path that Dara was likely to follow. She was *very* good, and unless Jason was mistaken, she'd be snapped up by a pro team ten seconds after completing middle school. Hell, they'd compete for her, allowing her to sign with the team in the highest league and for the most money, and Yila wouldn't have to lift a finger to make that happen. She'd be in the pros at 18—which was more like 15 in Terran years—tutor for her primary degree while playing pro batchi, and would probably end up drafted into the IBL by 20 if she turned out to be as good as Jason thought she was. In Terran terms, that was like a 16-year-old being signed to a major league baseball team. Then, after three years, she'd either make an IBL roster or play in the D league to try to play her way back to the IBL.

So, it was only the best of the best *of the best* made it in the IBL, but if they did, they would make so much money that they wouldn't be able to spend it all after they retired. And that was what made the IBL so incredibly competitive and fun to watch. Only the top .001% of batchi players made it to that level, and only 5% of those *stayed* at that level. It was like watching the Superbowl every match, where every team was filled to the gills with players that would run circles around players from even the next lowest league down, the D, and that made IBL matches intense. Even consistent basement dwelling teams in the IBL like the Paladins could totally annihilate the league champion teams from lower leagues. It made it even more intense in that the IBL was much like the NFL, where every single match *mattered*, and just one mistake by one player could end a team's

hopes of making it to the playoffs and could end a woman's IBL career. There were no "trash" games in the IBL.

The IBL played a 20-game schedule in a rotation of a game a takir for ten takirs then one takir off, stretching the season to 22 takirs, or about two thirds of the Faey year. Because of the 20-match season and the stakes being so high every single game both for a player and for a team, IBL players were some of the most intense and competitive women in the whole *galaxy*. Not even an elite special forces soldier could hold a candle to an IBL player when it came to intensity, preparation, and training.

And that was the vast sea of hyped-up estrogen into which Jyslin was so gleefully wading.

I think you should just start a new D league team here, Symone sent as she braided Kyri's hair. We could use another batchi team in Karsa, and that puts a D league team right here so you can keep an eye on the talent.

Another? *We already have the Knights, the Wolf Pack, the Whips, the Avengers, and the Crew,* Jason protested, ticking a finger off for each of the various local pro league teams that played in Karsa.

You can never have too many batchi teams, she replied airily, which made Kyri giggle. *What do you think, kidlet?*

I dunno, I think a new team would be nice, she replied. *Our team is called the Paladins, so we could have our other new team with a name like theirs. Hmm, Knights is already taken. What about the Warriors?*

The Paladins, Warriors, and Knights all playing in the same city. Poetic, I like it, Jyslin mused. *Think I'll talk to Frinia about it in the morning. We could have the Warriors up and running before D league season starts in Kiraa. Red Horn can build them a practice facility like that, and they can play over at Jeyalle Stadium. It seats 100,000, that's more than enough for a D league team. And since it's a D league team, all the profit is ours. We don't have to share it with Yila,* she sent smugly.

I knew there was a reason for it, Jason sent lightly. *It's up to you, hon, the Paladins are your baby. And expect Yila to smack you on the nose for cutting her out.*

That's her problem, Jyslin replied with a grin. She owns four D league teams; she can't whine if we start a second.

*I've found the game to be quite exciting, Aura sent as she took a glass of dark, hearty ale made by the Exiles, something Aura favored, from Ayama. The Exiles that brewed it were making a killing selling their product, since it *did* taste very good. Thank you, she nodded to Ayama, then took a slow drink. We didn't have batchi on Exile. They invented the game after the Third Civil War, after we were stranded on Exile. But we do play the old games, kinkai and juja. Sad that they don't play those the way they play batchi now. Juja especially used to be wildly popular, all across the Imperium, but now it's nothing but a primary school's sport.*

Times change, Aura, Jason sent soberly. Besides, juja isn't as physical as batchi. Terrans especially love batchi because it's so rough. We're into gladiatorial games, like football, hockey, and batchi

You mean we love watching hot women run around in tight shorts and sports bras, Tim sent with a naughty undertone to his thought, which made Jason laugh. That and we really get into catfights, and that happens often enough on a batchi pitch. Two girls fighting is hot, he sent shamelessly.

Doctors sure have their hands full every takir regrowing lost teeth, Jason agreed with a laugh. Imagine what those women would look like if they didn't have Faey medicine available.

Eww, Tim shuddered. Nothing but scars, eye patches, and dentures. Turn off.

Well, now I know how to cool your ardor, Tim, Aura teased. Just wear an eye patch.

At first, I was surprised that batchi players don't wear pads or at least a helmet with a facemask, but then I learned what Faey medicine could do, Tim chuckled.

Yeah. Anything the athletes break, tear, or lose on the pitch, the doctors can fix. Most IBL players have cybernetic eyes anyway, though, he sent absently. Guess after losing your fifth eye to a batchi stick, you stick with the one the techs can repair in a few hours rather than the one it takes two months to grow.

Meya says her cybernetic eye sees way better than her natural one. Guess they keep the cyber eyes for the better vision. That must help in a game, Aura noted

Jyslin laughed. You should see the IBL rules for cybernetic replacements and implants. They can't exceed natural Faey ability. Eyes can see with perfect vision, but no telescopic zoom options or natural glare reduction anything like that, she told them. No cybernetic replacement limbs allowed, they have to be cloned replacements or regrows, and no artificial hearts or lung boosters or cyber muscle enhancement implants either. The only full cyber replacements they allow are eyes and ears.

It's too hard to clone an ear replacement anyway, Myleena sent. It's way harder than cloning an eye.

They don't want the IBL players showing up with more cyber in them than meat, so they're really strict on it. And Trelle help you if you get caught with illegal implants, Jyslin chuckled audibly.

That's not a problem most Terrans are used to. Before the Faey showed up, the big scandal in sports were steroids, performance enhancing drugs, shit like that, not some guy with a cybernetic arm that was three times stronger than the average guy's, Tim sent.

I think the NFL adopted the IBL's rules about cyber implants, Jason sent musingly. Else they'd have freakin' cyborgs on the field.

You know, that's something I've been curious about, Tim sent. Why don't the Faey use cyber limbs?

Because a cyber limb is considered really, really ugly, Jyslin answered. It's not natural, and that means it looks ugly if it's part of our bodies. Having a cyber limb while they're cloning a replacement when your job requires you to have two arms or legs or whatever is fine, but when you can, you get rid of the cyber limb and replace it with what's natural.

Faey image consciousness, Jason chuckled. There are Terrans walking around with obvious cyber limbs. Some of them think they look cool.

Why not just get an endolimb and let them grow flesh over it? Tim asked.

Some Faey do that, Myleena answered. Because you can't tell if its cyber or not. I had an endohand for about a year, she said, holding up her left hand. Lost it when my experiment got a little out of control, she chuckled, rubbing her hand. I need my hands for my job, but I didn't want an artificial-looking hand, so I took a takir off and had an endo attached. They grew the tissue over it, and I was back on the job in nine days. I stayed with the endo because it was kinda useful, you know, being able to bend case metal and shit like that, at least until it malfunctioned on me after it got bathed in phased plasma from a broken conduit pipe. About then I realized that a girl doing what I do shouldn't have limbs that can be shorted out by phased plasma exposure, so I ordered a clone replacement and gutted it out with the repaired endo until it was ready. The other guys on my team were so glad when I did that, she laughed. Having a metal polymer hand covered by a layer of living tissue gave me a pretty nasty punch. It's like wearing those brass knuckles from old Terran mob movies.

Cool, I never knew you had your hand replaced, Tim replied.

That's the beauty of the Faey Medical Service, babe, they can fix almost anything, long as you're not already dead, Myleena smiled, wiggling her fingers. If you wanna get technical, this is hand number three. I lost my birth hand, ran with the endo hand, then had it replaced with this one.

Wish I could say that the arm I lost wasn't because I was an idiot, Symone laughed. I shot mine off in basic training during inscription.

Trelle, they never let you live that down, did they?, Myleena grinned.

Never, she agreed with another laugh.

Aura stretched, then she stood up. Well, I'm going to go inside for a while. I want to do a little reading and watch some viddy. Come over whenever you're ready, Jason, she told him.

Jason stood up immediately, which made the others laugh. Yeah, wear him out so he actually sleeps tonight, Aura, Jyslin sent crudely when he hurried up to Aura, took her hand, and walked with her towards the pool house.

Chapter 6

Daira, 31 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 18 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 31 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

Dahnai was *ridiculous*.

Just utterly ridiculous. For three days, the two of them had been locking horns over his declaration, and while she *talked* about understanding his position, she was doing absolutely everything in her power to basically turn his declaration of autonomy into “oh, I *guess* I’ll look the other way as far as Karis is concerned.” She was being almost silly in her stubborn refusal to budge when it came time to negotiate the actual terms. She wanted the House of Karinne to remain in the *Siann*. She wanted right of passage into and out of the Karis system for INS warships, as well as access to Kosigi for repairs and refits. She wanted the House of Karinne to continue to offer up its yearly tariff. In short, she wanted the declaration of autonomy to be a political machination, and she kept control of the house in every way but on a piece of paper.

Needless to say, the negotiations with her had been...spirited. Dahnai seemed to have forgotten how bullheaded Jason could be, and she had gotten pretty combative quite a few times during the sessions.

But that wasn’t the reason that Jason was in a bad mood.

Aya. Was going. To *die*.

He *knew* she did it. She was only one that had motive, means, and opportunity. That put her at the very top of a very short list, and as soon as

he got home, he was going to storm into her office in the barracks, rip her out of her armor, and spank her with a fucking *scourge*.

He inspected the damage in a mirror, and it was totally beyond any hope of covering it up.

Jason Karinne looked like a mutant smurf.

His skin was healthy shade of dark blue, at least healthy to a *Faey*, the coloring so deeply ingrained into his skin that there was absolutely no way to clear it. Not even Songa could do anything about *this*. She could use some medical tricks to revert his skin when it took on that dusky grayish hue that it got after brief exposure to the Draconis sun, but this was even beyond *that*, and she'd given him that professional opinion after rushing to his house after he told her he had a medical emergency, for he did indeed have second degree sunburn over most of his body and was a mere step below sun poisoning...then he heard her burst into laughter as soon as she got on the other side of his door.

So Songa got added to the list.

Jason did *not* look good with blue skin. It didn't suit him, and it didn't look right on him. But this was the full expression of his thousand year-repressed Faey genes, excited by the unique light wavelengths of the blue sun of Draconis, or in this case, excited by the artificially reproduced wavelengths created by the tanning bed in his basement. It had two settings, one for the Terran sun and one for the Draconis sun, and he *knew* that Aya had switched those settings when he conducted his twice weekly session of 90 minutes at low UV, to maintain at least a somewhat decent tan, so he wouldn't burn if he spent a couple of hours under the Terran sun. The Karisian atmosphere filtered out almost all of the UV bands that caused human melanin to tan, or burn for that matter, and all Terrans on the planet had to spend time in a tanning booth else they'd turn as pale as their natural melanin levels would allow. For Jason, who had some British blood in him, that could be rather pale, but the southern French and Spanish in him also made it relatively easy for him to tan. But that ease of tanning had turned against him in this case, where 90 minutes exposed to high-level Draconis radiation had triggered a rapid alteration in him, which also gave him a fairly nasty sunburn. The sunburn Songa could heal, but she couldn't do anything about the color.

The only ones that had been at home had been Aya, Ayama, and Surin, but his servants wouldn't *dare* do something like this. And Jason was *never* going to merge into the biogenic network to surf CivNet and play maddeningly addictive puzzle games in the tanning bed and rely on the settings and timer ever again. It left him unaware of his immediate surroundings.

But he was at *home*, damn it all, the one place he was *supposed* to feel safe and secure.

Jason set down the mirror in disgust and looked up at Chirk. Her compound eyes regarded him inquisitively, her small, useless wings fanning a bit on her back as they tended to do, wings that marked her as the noble cast, and thus among the most intelligent beings in the *sector*. It was an alien intelligence, insectoid, but Jason had come to learn and appreciate just how damn fucking smart the Kizzik really were. "*I see no reason to be upset,*" her translator intoned. "*It does not look entirely displeasing.*"

"It does to *me*," he replied with a grunt, pushing the mirror away with his blue-skinned hand. The tanning bed had done its evil work; Jason tanned nude, and *every square inch* of him was blue, even his penis and scrotum. "I'm gonna kill Aya, I swear I will," he snapped churlishly, then leaned back in his chair and threw his bare arms up. Jason was sitting in his chair naked after taking off his armor, to more fully survey the damage. "Alright, what's on the agenda today?"

"*If appearing thus in public disturbs you, Revered hive-leader, then this is not a good day,*" she warned. "*There are a large number ship christenings on the agenda today, two carriers, three battleships, and two tactical battleships, on top of two tactical cruisers, three cruisers, and five destroyers, and you have scheduled yourself to attend them all in person. The first, for the new carrier, is slated to begin in eighty-six minutes, with each christening staggered to begin immediately after the last. The daily meeting of the Confederate Council is in five hours twenty-one minutes. You have another negotiation session scheduled with Imperial hive-leader Dahnai in seven hours thirty-three minutes. You have the weekly meeting of the cabinet in nine hours two minutes.*"

"Oh yeah, they were set to come off the line today," Jason remembered. "And I guess they're ready to activate the tactical battleship they parked."

Dellin had jimmied the schedules around to get double the number of workers on the large ships to get them out of the dock early, shifting manpower to finishing the cosmetics, because he wanted those docks turned around to start on a new battleship as quickly as possible. The big ones had been the carrier docks, because he was ready to start construction of a battleship and tactical battleship in those bays. They had the keels and quite a few modular compartments parked around the drydock just waiting to get them in there to start assembling them. The tactical battleship they'd parked because the crew wasn't ready, well, they were ready now.

And boy, was there that major command shake-up he was expecting. With that many big ships in need of captains, it was creating a big shift in the command structure. As he expected, Ravai was being moved up from the *Jefferson*, but they had slated her for one of the new carriers instead of the tactical battleship...and as he expected, Sevi had turned down every ship they offered her. She was still too attached to the *Arabax* to leave it, but Myri and Juma weren't going to let her get away with that much longer. They were going to *make* her take another ship and do it soon. An admiral from the command staff, one of the high-level Admirals working in the command center as a tactician, analyst, and member of the Admiralty, the council of Admirals and Generals that advised Myri, Juma, and Sioa, was going to return to command and take over the second carrier. Staff Admiral Kirai Karinne was returning to the chair after spending three years in the command center, which worked since Kirai was in the INS before coming to Karinne and had real experience commanding a flag-level ship. Kirai was also in line to reach the highest rank anyone but Myri, Juma, and Sioa could achieve in the KMS, and that was Command Admiral or Command General, or what Jason would call a four star General in Air Force terms. His military heads were 5-star Generals, carrying the rank of Admiral of the Navy or General of the Army, and Myri was like the Secretary of Defense, but she had military rank, like a 6-star General, and was officially known as the Chief General of the KMS. Koye and the other heavy cruiser captains hadn't been there long enough to fulfill the new command requirements, but Juma wasn't about to put a flag-class ship in the hands of someone that didn't have experience with large ships. That meant that virtually the entire staff of heavy cruiser captains were being promoted to take over the larger ships, everyone but Sevi anyway. Farea and Koye would be promoted to the new battleships. But it still left them two captains short to fill the large ship

vacancies, and for those, Juma had to go down to the next rung on the ladder, the tactical cruisers. She selected Samantha Kerry of the *Raleigh*, a Terran telepath, and Rola Karinne of the *Revenge* to command the battleship and tactical battleship respectively. They had the highest scores of all the cruiser class captains, and while it was a gamble to move them up that far, Juma was also going to put them on defensive and picket duties until they got more experience. And that started the merry-go-round of promotions, mainly from the cruisers, to fill those holes. Three captains from the tactical cruisers were being promoted up to the heavy cruisers, cruiser captains were moving up to the tacticals, and destroyer captains were filling the holes. Naturally, the captain of the *Defiant* was moved up, and that was Drae. She was jumping over the tactical cruisers and going straight to a heavy cruiser, promoted to take the *Jefferson*, and Toiri Karinne from the destroyer *Loyai* was taking her place. Joni Suvalle and Hora Karinne from the cruisers *Demir's Sword* and *Shaivi* were being promoted up to the tactical cruisers *Katana* and *Herani*, and Inaba Takeshi and Toia Karinne were being promoted up to the *Temeron* and *Hailaeri* respectively. Gema Neyalle of the cruiser *Doyalo* was replacing Inaba on the *Katana*, and Joni Suvalle from the cruiser *Demir's Sword* was replacing Toiri on the *Herani*. The *Raleigh* was being taken over by Miya Foralle of the cruiser *Imai*. The destroyer captains...eh, he didn't know any of them as well as he should, because there were more and more captains every day. He was going to have to fix that soon.

And those were just the big ships. There were also 6 tactical cruisers, 4 cruisers (all new cruisers were now Mark II cruisers, so Dellin no longer differentiated on his boards), and 6 destroyers all within two days of completion, but all of those were being built in the smaller docks. Those docks would turn around and build the components for new heavy docks instead of starting on new ships, to increase their production capacity of large ships, to meet the demand for when they had to face the Benga.

So, they were going from four main battleships to seven, and adding two more tactical battleships, and that was on top of them getting the second capitol ship not long ago. Juma certainly had to be wearing a maxi pad today to prevent rusting the codpiece of her armor.

So, there was all that, and there was also something just as important today, and that was Rann's birthday planning. It was only six days away,

and Jyslin was handling that part of things since Jason was so busy. They were having his party on the beach at home in the late morning, and Yeri had arranged it so the leaders didn't start to arrive until later in the afternoon. It gave as much time as possible to Rann, which was only fair to him...a boy doesn't turn six every day, after all.

And he prayed to God that this blue faded out before then. He'd never been burned this deeply before, had his skin turn *this* blue before. It usually took four or five days for it to fade, like a sunburn, but the deeper the blue, the longer it took.

Just another reason that Aya was going to fucking *die*.

"Well, I guess I could wear my helmet with my armor," he mused, looking over to where it was sitting on its stand, waiting for him to put it back on. Since he had to go right back out again, there was no reason to go get a tee and jeans on. He then sighed, "or, I just bow to the inevitability of it." He activated his military PA, which would put out a message on the military command frequencies, right from the desk of the Grand Duke. "This is the Grand Duke Karinne. I'll be attending the christenings of the new ships on schedule today. But, since *someone* sabotaged my tanning bed, and as a result has made me turn blue as a Faey, the first person to laugh, giggle, chortle, grin, or even look even *slightly* amused in my general direction will be scrubbing the burn marks off the outer plating of the warships *without an E-suit*. That is all."

Chirk gave him the most amused expression that a Kizzik could. "*You know that will only incite the very reaction you seek to quash.*"

"Probably, but this way the first person to get a messy object lesson has plenty of warning."

Almost immediately, a holo winked on, from the command center. It was Shey. She took one look at him, then burst out into gales of laughter, literally falling backwards out of the picture. Chirk gave a clacking little sound that was as close to laughter as a Kizzik got. Juma, Myri, and Sioa crowded in over Shey's now-vacant chair, and they too burst into laughter. Jason gave them all a dirty look, then blew out his breath and laughed himself.

"Now you look *good*," Myri grinned. "Who did it?"

“I’m fairly sure it was Aya, getting back at me for the fight,” he replied with a grunt, which made them all laugh again. Faey loved a good joke, even it was on themselves. “I was surfing CivNet and wasn’t keeping an eye on the tanning bed. I didn’t think I *had* to,” he growled. “She must have snuck down while I was playing Banyer’s Maze and changed the settings. She also gave me a fairly wicked sunburn. I’m going to get her for that.”

“You always tease us about our vanity,” Juma winked.

“Mine isn’t vanity, it’s so I don’t turn white as a sheet,” he replied. “Terrans can’t tan here, the atmosphere filters out the UV bands that make us tan.”

“It does for us too, but our base coloration is a little darker than yours,” Myri grinned.

“So, I hope you four are really good at holding your breath,” he threatened, which made them all laugh again. Shey’s hand appeared at the bottom of the hollow, stiffened into a claw almost like a drowning woman thrusting it up seeking help, then it disappeared again. “And tell Shey that she just earned herself a double shift.”

“She’s working dayshift today,” Myri grinned.

“So, you really want to bump it up to a triple shift?” Jason retorted.

“Go ahead, I’ll just give her a day off for every shift you make her work,” Myri shot back playfully. “I see nothing wrong with laughing at what’s funny.”

“I’ll show you what’s funny,” he snapped waspishly, which made all three of them laugh even harder. “Now have Dellin get the ship christenings ironed out and send the final schedule to Chirk.”

“You gonna hide behind your helmet, wimpy boy?” Myri taunted.

“I know where you live, woman, and I have a key to your house,” he shot back ominously.

“You do need to rethink your policy of attending every christening, Jason,” Juma said more seriously. “Soon, it’s *all* you’re going to be doing.”

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed, leaning back in his chair a bit. “Maybe I’ll turn it into a revolving duty for the cabinet, have them attend christenings in

my place.”

“I’m sure Jyslin could manage to attend a few. She’s not as busy now that she’s splitting her attention.”

“She’s even *more* busy,” he snorted. “She still works for Myleena, and now she’s managing the Paladins. And trust me, that’s a full-time job.”

“Well, we’ll let you get back to plotting your revenge. And warn me, I wanna see it,” Myri winked.

“You’re now part of it,” he warned, which made her laugh again before the holo winked out. “*Faey*,” Jason sighed forlornly, throwing up his arms.

“A lamenting tone of communication we ourselves have conveyed many times, Revered hive-leader,” Chirk’s translator noted. *“I will finalize your daily schedule when Admiral Dellin sends in his report.”*

“Thanks, Chirk. I guess I should get my armor back on,” he sighed. “Oh, and track down Brall, I want to talk to him.”

“He is up at Kosigi. I will call him.”

Jason felt *extremely* self-conscious as he attended the first christening, and while he did get plenty of stares, and a rather snarkily funny comment from Ravai that earned her a swat, everyone took his sudden radical change in appearance rather well. Then again, by then the entire KMS knew that Jason had been pranked by one of his guards, and the Faey among them could appreciate it for the joke that it was.

But he did beat Ryn and Dera soundly about the head and shoulders when he got them back to his office for their constant sly looks.

He was about to settle in and plow through some of his paperwork before the Confederate Council meeting, but Zaa contacted him. He enabled the hologram from his side, forming that free-roaming full body hologram she preferred, which on her side was her in an open area of her main office with a hologram of his office, allowing full immersive interaction. Jason’s office wasn’t big enough to really allow that, at least from his side. The room the hologram on his side created had to be smaller than his office... and his office wasn’t really that big. “What’s up, Denmother?”

She gave him a curious look, then chuckled. “What by the ancestors happened to you?”

“Someone sabotaged my tanning bed,” he replied with a growl, pinching at his blue cheek. “And I’m gonna nail her ass to the wall when I get home tonight.”

She gave that same throaty, growling chuckle, then advanced towards his desk. “I have more information from my children within the Consortium,” she replied, sitting in the chair in front of his desk. “Cybi.” Cybi manifested her hologram by his desk, then immediately sat upon it, crossing her legs demurely and leaning on her hand. “The data sent isn’t as critical as the first packets. It mainly deals with Syndicate technology and tactics that my children have extracted from Consortium archives. Also, they now know about the string jammer,” she relayed. “They have not yet figured out *how* we are jamming their communications to Andromeda, but they know it is happening. They are no longer receiving the daily updates being transmitted from their main headquarters and are even now working to discover how we’re doing it.”

“Good luck with that,” Jason chuckled. “How far outside the galaxy is it parked? Five thousand light years? And just outside a sector of the galaxy they no longer control.”

Zaa looked to Cybi. “I’ll have all data transmitted directly to you, Cybi, for you to store, study, and disseminate as necessary.”

“I will keep an encrypted channel open for your transmission.”

“Any word about Trieste?” Jason asked.

She shook her head. “But I now have two children *inside*, in the moon itself,” she replied with a slight smile. “It was quite a feat for them to manage it, and I am very proud of them. We must wait a few days for them conduct their investigations, but they will ferret out the truth.”

“Outstanding,” Jason said with relief. “I still can’t figure out what they’re doing. They’re moving all their ships there like they’re about to start a major operation, but *how*? We destroyed their quantum phase device.”

“I know, but our foes have demonstrated ingenuity. I have little doubt their engineers have a plan.”

“Amen,” he grunted. He was about to say something else, but Miaari’s face appeared on a holo behind Zaa. She almost laughed, but when she saw Zaa’s hologram, she got control of herself almost immediately. “I have extremely critical news, cousin,” she said. “*Extremely* critical.”

“What, Mee?” he asked.

“We have intercepted the latest reports the Consortium are sending to their forces here. It’s not good news,” she declared. “They’ve dispatched a massive relief convoy to our galaxy, both military and civilian assets, in response to the Consortium forces here having extreme difficulty defeating Confederate resistance. The report warns the Consortium here to prepare the Imxi territory for colonization by a force of ten million Consortium civilians and *one hundred thousand* military warships. They’re moving to colonize our galaxy in force, Jason,” she said grimly. “The reports don’t say it, but it’s the opinion of several of my staff that have reviewed these missives that the Consortium are starting to execute a controlled retreat from Andromeda. The war is turning against them, and we think that they are starting a plan to build a fortress of sorts in our galaxy in case they lose the war. That way they can retreat here.”

Jason looked down at his desk... a *hundred thousand* Consortium warships. “Fuck, they’ll come in behind the Benga and just smash them,” he realized. “Even with two years of the Benga running amok in our galaxy, they’d still have an overwhelming advantage. The Benga couldn’t possibly conquer enough territory and set up in time to fight them off, especially since *we’re* here, and we’d be fighting them,” he reasoned. “The Consortium is *counting* on that fact now,” he realized. “They can’t beat us quickly, so they’ll use us to stall the Benga until their second wave gets here, then smash everything. And since they already have the Imxi and probably assets we don’t know about, they’ll be in a position to fight off a response if the Benga try to do the same thing.”

“I agree. The Consortium sending a large segment of their fleet here will most likely incite a response from the Syndicate, if they are indeed serious about conquering *this* galaxy,” Miaari added. “They may send a hundred thousand of their own ships to counter the Consortium reinforcements. But if they only sent their ships here to eliminate the Consortium presence here, they will not.”

“Denmother said it best when she first told me, Mee, the Benga are *conquerors*,” he said grimly. “If they think they can establish a foothold in this galaxy and try to conquer it, they *will*. So I’d bet my gestalt that the Syndicate will respond with a massive fleet of their own.”

“Yes, but only *after* they take advantage of the Consortium reducing their fleet opposing them and conquer as much Consortium territory as they can,” Zaa said. “For them, establishing complete domination of Andromeda is their primary objective. Once they have the galaxy under their control, they can pool their resources and then make the crossing to *our* galaxy.”

Jason leaned back and pondered a moment, then he asked Cybi a question almost out of the blue, just a random thought. “Cybi, can a Stargate bridge between here and Andromeda?”

“An intriguing concept,” she replied after a brief moment. “The mechanics of how the Stargates work actually require the Stargate to expend less energy to link to a sister gate that is further away, but the stumbling block would be the fact that the two gates must communicate to form a link. With a three-month delay between here and Andromeda, it would take two gates trying to link approximately 563 days to complete the process. It would take five years to get the gate there, then another five years to link it back to Karis. That is theoretically possible, but highly inadvisable”

“A CBIM could do it,” Miaari mused.

“I would venture to say that a CBIM would be the only one capable of it. If we strung high-power biogenic relays between here and Andromeda, a communion link could bypass the Teryon communications delay. Communion, like all forms of telepathy, exists outside of the common concept of time. I could communicate with a biogenic unit in Andromeda in real time, so long as my transceiver had the power to reach that far. My current one does not, it was designed to give me galactic coverage to contact or recall scout ships in case of a dire emergency, not intergalactic capability. It would take 35,240 Class XII biogenic relays set at optimal distance to establish a communion link to Andromeda. But once the gate was linked, the relay system would no longer be required. Communion can cross a gate as easily as other forms of communications using a directional peer to peer biogenic relay pointed at the gate”

“What do you consider, Jason?” Zaa asked.

“Nothing really, just a random thought. You know, like how we’d get over *there* if we had to.”

“As in, if we have to take the war to the Benga,” Miaari surmised.

Jason nodded. “But there’s no way in hell I’m jumping a Capitol class Stargate to Andromeda, that’s just begging them to take it. Stargates are the one of the few things that *nobody* has but us.”

“But it *is* within our technical ability. I will consider this,” Zaa said, tapping her muzzle.

“Easiest workaround. Can we build a biogenic transceiver capable of reaching Andromeda?” Miaari asked.

“Theoretically, yes,” Cybi answered. “But the transceiver itself would have to be placed at least 163 light years away from the current main array on Karis to prevent them from interfering with each other. They’d generate crossband interference if too close together.”

“Build one, park it the Kypan Void,” Jason shrugged, referring to the vast expanse of empty space behind Terra. Terra actually existed *within* the Kypan Void, an area filled with stars that had nothing worth anything to anyone that stretched halfway back to the very edge of the galaxy, unless they were asteroid miners. Terra was an island of life surrounded by a vast cosmic sea of wasted space.

“Actually, the best place to put it would be at SAR-12,” Zaa countered.

“That’s almost in the core!” Jason replied.

“Yes, which means that only Kimdori, Jakkans, and Generations could reach it without injury,” she replied. “It’s a blue supergiant cluster with a combined solar wind that actually deflects the radiation emitting from the galactic core. It’s still highly irradiated, but far *less* than most stars that close to the core. It is within Generation radiation tolerance.”

“Hmm...purely speculation here, Cybi, but how long would that take to build?”

“Approximately two months,” she replied. “What do you consider, friend?”

“Actually, having something like that might be handy, if only so we could track a biogenic unit or Generation the Consortium or Syndicate manage to capture,” he noted. “I wouldn’t be able to commune with it unless it had a working biogenic comm, but Cybi would be able to sense it, even from here.”

“That is one of the few things I’ve never understood about Generation technology. Why could you not commune?” Miaari asked.

“Communion from a living mind has many of the same restrictions as normal talent,” he answered before Cybi could. “And the main array is a transmitter, Miaari, it *modulates* the communion so it can exponentially boost its power to make it reach that far. The communal comm transmits communal telepathy. It takes another biogenic comm unit to *demodulate* it. If we didn’t do that, then Cybi would fry the brain of every Generation and burn out every biogenic crystal on Karis every time she communed with anything outside our solar system, because of the power she’d have to put behind it to make it reach that far. Now, if a Generation in Andromeda had a *gestalt*, then I could commune with him or her from this desk,” he explained, rapping his armored knuckles on it. “The power of the unit on the other side doesn’t matter. In that respect, the array acts like a telepath. As long as *one* has the power to reach that far, *both* can communicate.”

Cybi nodded. “*Just so. That’s why we have the biogenic network here on Karis, it doesn’t require ‘transmitting’ the communion over vast distances. It is a distinction between what you might call a local system and a remote system.*”

“Ah. I see,” Miaari nodded. “So that was why Cybi could sense and track biogenic crystals on Kindori Prime but could not communicate with them.”

“Not unless they’re connected to a biogenic comm unit, which if I remember right, you guys cannibalized to keep your biogenic computers operational,” he answered. “The array here on Karis gives her the power to reach that far, and those crystals would *know* that Cybi was reaching out to them, but there has to be something on the other side that can understand what she’s saying, to use a metaphor.”

“Indeed,” Cybi nodded. “But if those crystals were here on Karis, I could communicate with them without problems.”

“Yes, that was how we knew Jason had made contact with Cybi, because our biogenic units on Kimdori sensed her sweep,” Zaa told Miaari. “Which caused me to dispatch you to Karis to investigate.”

Miaari smiled shyly and put three fingers on her white band, the mark of a Handmaiden, almost unconsciously. “I have learned today,” she said modestly. “It is a good day.”

“I think the idea of building a multigalactic array would be a wise thing to do,” Zaa said, drumming her fingers on his desk. “Since it seems that we are graduating up to trans-galactic politics here, having a means of communicating with another galaxy in real time should they capture biogenics or a Kimdori would be useful.”

“Or a Kimdori...are you actually considering it?” Jason asked in surprise.

“I am now. We Kimdori can enter a state of hibernation not much unlike the stasis the Consortium uses for their insectoids, so that the crews are not affected by such a long time in hyperspace,” she said with a light look at him. “We can install Karinne food replicators on them for sustenance, since Kimdori don’t have to *taste* their food, and with the array here allowing real time communications, they could send back useful intelligence. I could send a brave and daring team of scouts and explorers to Andromeda and have them take stock, explore, and be our eyes on *their* side of the vast gulf between our galaxies.”

“That’s a five-year trip,” Jason protested.

“What is five years to a Kimdori, Jason?” she asked simply.

“Yeah, I guess when you’re ten thousand years old, five years doesn’t matter that much,” Jason said, giving Miaari a look.

She stuck her wolf-like tongue out at him.

“Getting a personal view of Andromeda might be to our advantage, especially when more and more Consortium and Syndicate ships cross over to our galaxy.”

“Well, that’s your area, Denmother. If you want us to build that array, we can do it. Hell, it’d be smart to have a backup to the one here, we never did get around to building another.”

“I will generate the plans and inform Myleena and Trenirk,” Cybi offered. *“Given the time before it is needed, it can be put on a low priority queue.”*

“Yeah, no hurry on that one,” Jason nodded at her.

“I find myself intrigued by this idea,” Zaa said. “Cousin, might you have a scout ship in your inventory you’re currently not using? They are literally engineered to be self-sustaining and capable of extended operation away from a base of resupply, as well as powerful engines and strong defenses. A Karinne scout ship would be the perfect vehicle to travel to Andromeda.”

“I have six of them, they’re parked over at Exile,” he replied. “They’re under Meya and Myra’s command.

“Could I borrow one, or possibly two?”

He chuckled. “Sure, you should actually take three, that way you have a backup for your backup. Send a Kimdori team over to look them over and see how you need to refit them for a five-year trip to Andromeda. We’ll call them the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*.”

She gave him a strange look.

“Terran humor,” he said with a dismissive wave and a smile. “Never mind. Anyway, I think we should all be thinking about the Consortium and Syndicate both sending massive fleets to continue their war over here, and what we’re gonna do about it.”

“Yes. We should keep this to ourselves for now, so my analysts can study the data without pushy, nosy rulers asking for constant updates.”

Jason laughed. “I know that feeling. We’ll tell them when we have more information to pass, that way they don’t worry too much about it. *We’ll* do the worrying for now.”

She nodded. “I would expect the Consortium in Andromeda to warn those here of a massive Syndicate fleet jumping here within six months, as

soon as the Syndicate detects the major shift in Consortium military resources and organizes a response. They won't let them go, but they'll also take advantage of the weakened Consortium navy. If they are a corporate plutocracy, it will take them time to decide on a major change in policy. A government like that will not be efficient, it will be filled with greedy corporate rulers, corporate bureaucracies, and sycophants all trying to get as much as they can for themselves."

"We might be able to use that against them, when the time comes," Jason grunted, scratching at his blue cheek. Then he frowned when he looked down at the back of his hand, which was a sea blue, almost like a Jeraman Faey. *Fucking Aya*, she was *so* going to die. "But at least we know they're coming, and where they intend to arrive. I might want to revisit my intentions with the Imxi," he frowned.

"Conquer them?"

"No, the Karinnes will never do that. But I guess I wouldn't much mind letting the Confederate rulers chop up Imxi territory among themselves and let *them* try to tame a highly hostile and resistant species. We leave the Stargate in place at PR-371 and the Karinnes hold that planet as the common entry point, maintaining neutral administration, and let them take it over. If the Imxi are that far in with the Consortium, then we have to do something about it. And we sure as hell can't have those Consortium ships have a place all ready for them when they arrive."

"It would not be advisable, since our allies would risk losing those systems when those ships arrive, if we can't stop them beforehand."

"Yeah, didn't think of that, just thinking of a little revenge, I guess," he sighed.

"We'll have five years to punish the Imxi before those ships arrive, Jason," Miaari said. "And we *can't* just let them stroll in and start setting up."

"No, but with so many of them, it'll be tricky. We'll have to pick our targets, go for maximum damage with minimum risk."

"In other words, send in the Legion," Zaa said with a smile. "This is not the venue for traditional warfare."

“Not when they have a hundred thousand ships, it’s not,” he agreed with a grunt.

“Look at the bright side, cousin,” Miaari said. “That’s a third of their fleet. After we destroy it, we’ll only have two hundred thousand to go.”

Jason gave her a look, then burst into helpless laughter. “Always the optimist, cousin,” he grinned at her.

“I need to get back to work, I have Tim and Kini working on the data. I need to ensure they’re actually *working*,” she said, biting her tongue a tiny bit, which made Jason laugh.

“We do need to rein him in a bit,” Jason agreed.

“Go with my blessing, Handmaiden,” Zaa stated, and Miaari’s hologram winked out. “I should go as well, Jason, I must consider this new information.”

“Yeah, we have the council meeting in half an hour,” he agreed. “You get the invite to Rann’s birthday?”

“Yes, and Denfather is quite excited to be able to attend,” she said with a smile. “Thank you. He so rarely gets to leave the Hearth.”

“You’re family, in a way, Zaa, and I look out for family.”

“Indeed you do, cousin. See you at the meeting.”

After her hologram winked out, Jason got up and looked out his window, his hands behind his armored back. So, things were coming to a head in Andromeda, and that meant that in five years, *they* were going to pay for it. The Consortium were ceding defeat and now doing what Miaari had once postulated over a year ago, establishing a colony over here that the Syndicate could not easily attack, and attempt to rebuild their empire. A *hundred thousand* warships. *Ten million* civilians. The logistics to manage to pack ten million people on civilian transports and freighters then jump them between galaxies, it must have been something they’d been working on for *years*. It told him that they’d had this plan ready, and when the Consortium ships here failed to take Karis, probably on their first attempt, well, they just got that information over in Andromeda not too long ago, given it took the message three months to get there. It also explained their leaders telling them to ignore Consortium law, do absolutely anything it

took to take Karis, because they'd need the secrets of biogenics and the Generations to protect the colonizing force they intended to send here all along.

They were never going to take it *back* to Andromeda, they were going to use it to defend *this* galaxy.

They were ceding Andromeda to the Syndicate and starting over in the Milky Way.

But even that wouldn't be enough. If the Benga were like what the Consortium's own records said about them, they wouldn't be *satisfied* with controlling an entire galaxy. Once they secured Andromeda, they'd start looking at the Milky Way, the closest galaxy to them, as well as the other galaxies bordering Andromeda as well. They would try to extend their influence throughout the entire galactic cluster, then the entire cosmic string, then to another cosmic string, and so on and so on and so on, until they either conquered the entire universe, or they were stopped.

Well, Jason wasn't about to let them stroll into *his* galaxy and try to conquer it. The Consortium was already executing a mass colonization plan. The Benga had a fleet that might be half a million ships that would come up behind them, but Jason was on his home turf, they had to travel five years just to get here, and he could be just as ruthless as Dahnai when the situation demanded it.

Well, this situation was going to demand it.

But this was *so* fucking typical. Every time Jason felt that they were getting the upper hand, he gets news like *this*, reminding him that compared to the Consortium and the Syndicate, the House Karinne was barely a speck of dust laying on a desert floor. Hell, the entire Confederation was barely a pebble, and the pebble had to prevent itself from being crushed by the boulder rolling towards it. They had the Consortium backed into a corner... they were about to *win*, and now he finds out that they were just the first wave.

Well, numbers didn't matter. He beat their advance force with barely any ships or intelligence. He would beat this colonizing force, because he had five years to get ready for it. And while they were getting ready for them, they'd gear up and smash the advance force the Syndicate had sent.

[Chirk. Assemble the cabinet, I want to talk to them immediately after the meeting of the Confederate Council. Tell Miaari I want her to actually attend this one, she always blows the meetings off. Have Myleena there as well, we'll need her opinion. Just move up on the schedule.]

[I will see to it, Revered hive-leader. I will contact Imperial hive-leader Dahnai's office and warn them that the negotiation meeting will be delayed.]

[Thank you. Tell her I don't know exactly when I'll be available.] He checked the time on Draconis and saw that their meeting was around noon Dahnai's time, so she could be flexible. *[I'll call her when I'm ready.]*

[I will pass it along.]

Jason continued to look out the window, his mind turning over and over as he pondered how they were going to deal with *this*. But they'd find a way. They *had* to.

Dahnai was *never* going to let him live it down.

She'd exploded into laughter when Jason appeared on her hologram, and after he explained what happened, that he'd apparently been pranked, she just grinned at him through the entire conference. Jason spent the time fantasizing about the various ways he could murder Dahnai and get away with it, from planting a bomb in her house on Karis to feeding her to a pack of *giruzi*.

It did cause some problems, however. Assaba thought that Jason had little or no control over his people if one of them could get away with playing a practical joke on him, and that took both Dahnai and Zaa trying to explain Jason's much less formal method of governing, as well as some aspects of both Faey Terran culture that made it alright for very good friends to sometimes play jokes on each other. If anyone ever did that to Assaba, he'd have them *executed*.

The conference revolved around Zaa's declaration that she had Kimdori inside Go'jur'mi, the moon of Trieste, and the speculation of what the Consortium had planned, and the theoretical ways they could launch an attack from Trieste on all neighboring Alliance systems as well as Karis.

Jason had the feeling that they had something in that moon that would let them strike at Karis, but he wouldn't know for a couple of days.

After the council meeting, Jason walked down the hall with Dera and Ryn behind him, grinning at him—he was going to get *them* too—and joined his cabinet. They'd been warned about his "mishap" with the tanning bed, so they at least didn't openly laugh when he came in, though Kumi did grin at him quite a bit. Cybi manifested her hologram and stood by his chair as he sat down. "Alright, bottom line," Jason said, putting his hands on the table. "The Consortium is sending a colonization force to our galaxy. They just left, and we have five years until they get here."

"How big?" Yeri asked.

"Ten million civilians and one hundred thousand warships," he said bluntly, which caused quite a bit of consternation around the table. He looked to Myleena, whom he was kicking around adding to the cabinet as the Secretary of Science...though she'd probably kill him for giving her even *more* responsibility. The poor woman was already run ragged running 3D and the research division, which sort of existed as an independent entity that answered only to Jason. "We have five years to come up with something, Myli. I'd like you to throw this at 3D for me today and have them start pondering the problem."

"Five years? No sweat," she replied confidently. "Give me five years, and I'll have something ready for them that'll make them wish they never left Andromeda."

"That's a fairly radical move," Trenirk said, to which Bunvar nodded. "Isn't that a major portion of their fleet?"

"We believe that they have reached the conclusion that the war against the Syndicate is lost," Miaari said for him, twisting a bit in her chair to get the pressure off her tail. "This is a retreating action, allowing them to colonize our galaxy well in advance of a Syndicate attempt to cross over here to continue the war, as well as try to conquer *our* galaxy. They will hold off the Syndicate as long as they can with the forces they have in Andromeda and evacuate as many as they can here, then flee Andromeda and surrender it to the Syndicate. While they are consolidating their hold on their newly conquered territory, the Consortium intends to set up in Imxi

territory, conquer the far side of the galaxy, and prepare for the coming of their ancient foes.”

“And we’ll be doing the same thing, because I have no doubt that the Benga will chase the Consortium all the way over here,” Jason nodded. “They’re *conquerors*, they’re not going to just walk away from a galaxy like ours, which is filled with a large number of small and easily conquerable civilizations. They’ll just send a few hundred thousand ships over here and sweep around the habitable belt of the galaxy. It may take them a couple of hundred years, but they’ll eventually do it.”

“The way to stop that is to paste their advanced force so utterly that they’d be scared witless to try again,” Bunvar snorted. “Make them think that the Consortium colonization force is flying into the jaws of the pit beast, and they won’t bother.”

Miaari chuckled humorlessly. “So, they have awakened the sleeping, angry god by burrowing down too deep under Undram Mountain,” she quipped.

“Yup. I’m surprised you know that old Makati myth, Miaari.”

“It is an engaging tale, even to us non-Makati, Bunvar,” she smiled lightly.

“That tactic does seem to hold promise. War is often a battle of deception,” Jrz’kii’s translator intoned monotonously. *“Frighten them with a tremendous show of force and deceive them into thinking that we can exert even more, should they enrage us.”*

“An age-old tactic used in the Hive Wars of our ancient past,” Grik’zzk agreed. *“The ranks of the warrior drones arrayed in plain sight, when in reality they are all the warriors. The tactics of the ancient times were to hide one’s reserves from an enemy hive, so they would be uncertain as to the true numbers of one’s warriors,”* she explained to the others. *“Only the active warriors that were to fight would be displayed.”*

“Actually, that does have some promise,” Myri grunted, rubbing her chin. “The Syndicate doesn’t *know* anything about us, only what they’ve spied from the Consortium. And the Consortium over there knows that we’ve kicked the snot out of the forces they sent here.”

“Well, we can’t depend on them not finding out,” Jason said. “But we *can* make it pretty clear that even if they send a million ships over here, they’ll take the pieces back in a garbage scow. We’ll need to just absolutely stomp the shit out of the incoming Syndicate fleet, and have the survivors send back horror stories that scares their superiors into leaving us alone.”

“*Promising,*” Jrz’kii nodded.

“I think I may have a few ideas,” Myleena said, rapping her fingers on the table. “Since we have three years before the Syndicate gets here, all of us over at 3D have been considering how to greet them. I think we could arrange something suitably traumatizing when they get here, a *welcome to our galaxy, your heads will look wonderful mounted on our wall* type of greeting.”

Several of them laughed. “We should just buy a few hundred thousand antimatter bombs from the Skaa,” Yeri said.

“That’s only half of it,” Bunvar said. “The other half is making sure there are survivors to limp away and warn the rest of the Syndicate that it was suicide to come here.”

Jason leaned on his elbow as he scratched at his cheek. “We’ll give Myri and the guys at 3D some time to think this over before we make any decisions. At least *this* time, we have plenty of warning and we know they’re coming, so we can plan out our response. But what it does mean is that we’re not going to move out of a war footing for a while. I’m going to have the recruiters open offices out into the Verutan and Grimja sectors,” he told them. “Basically, any race or government that has students in the Academy, we’ll send recruiters out there. We’re going to need at *least* five million more people to man the ships we have to build and work in the factories and yards that produce them. Ten million more would be ideal, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“That’s easily workable, Jason,” Rund said. “Power is only running at 7% maximum, and we’ve only colonized about a fifth of the Kargan continent. We have more room than we know what to do with. Bezar’s hammer, we have hundreds of cities the Kimdori built just sitting empty waiting for people.”

“I’ll speak with my father for more Kimdori screeners,” Miaari said, touching her memory band to make note of it.

“Can we afford the expansion, Kumi?” he asked her.

“Yup, easily,” she replied. “I’m running so far in the black that the Moridon are getting a bit antsy at how much credit we have in their banks. The trade ventures with Trefani had increased our profits by 48%, and given we’re running an income at 478% of our expenses, we’re stacking up cash hand over fist, to use the Terran saying. Don’t you worry about paying for anything, Jayce. We’ve got it covered.”

“Good. Expect some calls from the recruiting offices about an increased budget, probably tomorrow.”

“I’ll call them,” she promised. “They’ll get what they need, don’t worry. I’ll make sure they can pay for a recruiting office on every inhabited planet in our sector cluster.”

“Just don’t tell the Shio,” Yeri chuckled. “I’ve seen the recruitment numbers. They’re trying to take over the house!”

“I thought Faey liked the Shio,” Rund said with a slight smile.

“Of course we do, but we like being the majority around here. Keeps all you troublemakers in check,” she teased with a bright smile.

“Someone wants the power to her house shut off, Rund,” Bunvar noted, which made Yeri laugh.

“How are the summit preparations going?” Jason asked her.

“On schedule and so far, without any problems,” she replied. “We have five more days to get the rehearsals in, and you need to start attending them,” she said, a bit tartly. “You *do* intend to greet the rulers, don’t you?”

“Oh, speaking of that. Jason,” Miaari said, looking at him. “Sister Kiaari told me just an hour ago that the Grand Emperor Shakizarr is expressing interest in attending the summit. He’s made what you might call some informal inquiries as to if non-Confederate rulers can attend, primarily through his ambassador at the Academy. Sister thinks he might make more formal inquiries very soon.”

“The *Verutan* Emperor?” Jason asked in surprise.

“I think the Verutans are getting more and more concerned, as they also know about the coming Syndicate fleet,” she replied. “Sister Kiaari is investigating his sincerity, it might simply be a ploy to get onto Karis.”

“Well, that would depend on the council. I guess if they invited him, that would be that. I’d have no objection to him attending, as long as Kiaari clears him. Yeri.”

“I’ll make some contingency plans to house at least six more ruler-level dignitaries,” she said, touching her interface and no doubt sending some command thought instructions to it. “And I’ll research proper etiquette for greeting the Verutans. I’ll have it ready for you by tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

They discussed the news about the Consortium for another hour, debating possible responses, and grilling Myri quite a bit about how ready the fleet would be to fight against a hundred thousand ships. They even brought Dellin in to guesstimate how many ships they could build in the five years they had, which would be an absolute *ton*. Dellin was slowly but steadily expanding the number of drydocks in Kosigi, and his eventual goal was to have 15,000 docks of various sizes, capable of building or refitting ships. If they had 15,000 docks all in production at the same time, that was an average of 7,000 ships produced a *month*. 7,000 ships a month, 10 months a year, five years to build ships...they could have a truly *frightening* fleet ready for the Consortium when they finally got here. Of course, Jason had to *pay* for those ships, both to build them and also to staff and maintain them. While the military budget had barely scratched the GDP of Karis over the last couple of years, thanks to Kumi’s genius at selling for a nice profit what they could virtually make for chicken scratch *from* chicken scratch, if he was fielding a fleet of 50,000 ships...that was a *fuckton* of credits bleeding out of the house’s coffers every year. Even Kumi’s economic wizardry would be hard pressed to finance a fleet of that size.

That was why Dahnai didn’t have a bigger fleet, she had to balance the size of her fleet against her ability to pay for it.

After they finished up, Jason boarded the Marine Corvette *Lancer* and took the four-minute ride home. It landed in the water off the beach, and both Dera and Ryn made wheezing, voiceless laughs as Jason pulled the

long riding crop he'd had Colonel Fiyai bring him, bent a few times testing, then marched down the quay in search of his quarry. He went home first to see if Aya was at the house, as she usually was if she wasn't with him or in her office over in the barracks, but only Ayama was home. She was mixing batter for something and gave him only the fleetest of glances as he came in, Amber sitting on the table in almost breathless anticipation of getting to lick the spoon. *Good afternoon, your Grace*, she sent lightly...maybe a little *too* lightly.

He stopped and gave her a dangerous look.

By the way, Meya and Myra asked me to ask you if you enjoyed your tanning session, she sent pleasantly as she poured batter into a bowl, without looking at him.

YOU did this? he sent incredulously.

Let's just say that I was acting by proxy, she replied almost teasingly.

Ayama gave a wonderful little scream of surprise when Jason yanked her over to the kitchen table, bent her over his armored knee, then spanked her like a misbehaving child with the riding crop. He didn't hit her *too* hard, but the cries of protest were almost like music to his ears. She really had it coming, he realized as he spanked her, all her little games, her dangerous little maneuverings, always leaving him guessing, him never knowing quite where she stood...her and her damn quirky sense of humor. He gave her the chastisement she so richly deserved, and she skittered away with both hands on her rear, rubbing it vigorously as he stood up and pointed the crop at her. "I'm hanging this on the wall of my office as a little reminder of what happens when certain house servants forget that the twins are half a galaxy away, but *this is right here*," he said brandishing the crop like a sword. That only made Ayama laugh delightedly even as she rubbed her butt, but she quickly turned fully facing him when he took a step forward, protecting her spanked bottom from further retaliation. Her laughter all but chased him as he stalked out of the kitchen, leaving him fuming, and already plotting his revenge, both on Ayama and on those *fucking* twins. Meya and Myra told her to do this, she admitted it, so they were now the ones that were going to die.

At least when they got back. They were dispatched out on an exploration mission at the moment. But when they got back...God help them. Jason was going to be standing at the airlock with a paddle.

And when Jason got upstairs to his home office, he hung the riding crop on the wall right behind and to the side of his desk, since his window was directly behind the desk. A window with armored glass and a hard shield to protect against sniper fire, but still a window.

What he didn't expect was Amber trotting into the room, jumping up on his desk, and sitting right in front of him, her eyes flat and a little snarl on her face. He chuckled and leaned down to look at her. "She had it coming, she did *this* to me," he protested, pointing at his blue face. "And you're missing out on licking the spoon."

She blinked, glanced back at the door, then decided that getting a treat was more important than declaring war on him. She turned and scampered off the desk and back downstairs.

The main reason he'd come home solved, and with a growing list of nasty things he intended to do to Meya, Myra, and Ayama growing steadily on his panel, he decided to get the other major piece of business out of the way. He called Dahnai using their private line. She burst out laughing again when she saw him, then grinned impishly into the camera. "So, finally, my darkest fantasy is fulfilled...or at least my *bluest* one," she winked. "You'd better be that handsome when I get there, so I can see if that blue is full body or not."

"Don't get all kittenish before we start fighting like angry *kree*, Dahnai," he said urbanely, which made her laugh again. "It just ruins the whole thing."

"We're not fighting that much today. We have most of this ironed out," she said confidently. "We have Terra all put away, a plan for the Stargate system I can live with, and now it's just you conceding that I'm not completely letting you go."

"And that's why we're going to fight," he drawled. "For this to work, you *have* to completely let me go."

"Not *completely*."

“Our families are marrying, woman, sheesh! You don’t *need* the house in the Imperium! If anything, you can think of it as letting Shya start her *own* empire!”

And it went downhill from there, though they kept things much more civil than the last few days. Dahnai was still too amused over seeing Jason’s blue face to be serious about arguing. The main sticking point, and the last point they had to iron out, was the status of the House of Karinne within the Imperium. Dahnai did not want to let the house go, because, Jason suspected, she didn’t want to lose her rulership over Jason. That was a major, major point for her, and it was almost as if she thought he wouldn’t love her anymore if he was a theoretical equal instead of her subordinate. But that was her sexist Faey upbringing meddling in what should be a logical and rational decision. Dahnai was raised to believe that men were not the equal of women, that her husband and her *amu dorai* were hers to command, so that “cavewoman” part of Dahnai’s brain didn’t want to release her grip on him. Dahnai could be a very possessive woman.

They chased each other in circles for almost two hours, until Jason finally had enough. “Alright, this is the way it’s gonna be, Dahnai,” he said, blowing out his breath. “You’re going to accept my plan that makes Karinne independent. It’s just that simple,” he declared. “All of our plans for Terra and the Confederation depend on a neutral Karinne that our allies can trust, and no amount of whining is going to make that change. And we’re not going to go anywhere else until you *finally* accept that fact. So, this is the *last* time we negotiate about this,” he told her. She took on an insulted expression at the term *whining*. “You call me back when you’re finally ready to concede that point, and we can get everything all in writing and prepare to let the Karinnes take over the transportation network.”

“I am not *whining*!” she declared, stamping her hands on her desk. “I just don’t want to let you go! I *love* you, you silly man!”

“Then take your personal desire out of this,” he shot back. “I don’t entirely want to do this either, but it’s what’s best, Dahnai. Not just for the Karinnes, but for the Imperium, for the Confederation, hell, for the entire sector cluster. The Merranes end up with *two* empires when our families marry, I’ll still be your *amu dorai*, the Imperium makes a lot of money, the Karinnes keep everything nice and peaceful, and everyone works together

to beat back this attempt by invaders from Andromeda from taking over *our* galaxy. Everyone wins, Dahnai, can't you see that?" he said in exasperation. "I know you just don't want to give over on this silly idea that me not being one of your subjects means I won't love you anymore, but that's just ridiculous! Sometimes being a ruler means you do what's best for your *people*, not what's best for *you*," he told her.

She took on a highly stiff, affronted expression, then the comm cut out before she could reply. And that was probably for the best, before she said something that both of them would regret.

Jason himself gave a sound of exasperated irritation, a kind of growling sigh, then leaned back in his chair and put his hands over his face. Sometimes being in love with that woman was a god-damned full contact sport.

Aya, he called.

Yes, Jason?

You can stop hiding now, he replied. *I know you didn't do it.*

I should have. I'd never thought of that before, she replied teasingly, amusement bleeding into her thought.

Yeah well, I'm installing safeties on my tanning bed from now on, he warned. *Now, I want you to do me a favor.*

What?

You can give over here and now that I'll be going to Exile in two days.

She was silent a moment. *I think I can live with that. It's one of our planets, and it's so remote and isolated that it's relatively safe. We control the only means in and out. I'll send an advance team of Karinne Guard under Sergeant Ivi to inspect the planet and make sure, however. As long as you stay inside approved and controlled areas, I'll allow it.*

Good, because when those fucking twins get off that ship, I'm gonna be standing there with a fucking paddle and the biggest grin they've ever seen, he sent with an ugly kind of eagerness that made nearly everyone on the strip explode with laughter.

Well, now we know how to get under your skin, Jayce, Aya sent cheekily. Even Terran men have their vanity.

If anyone ever does this to me again, they're going spend a whole year chained to the top of Karkai Tower.

Brista, 33 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 20 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

Brista, 33 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Jason almost couldn't believe it.

He read the text that Dahnai had sent him while sitting at his desk on a lazy early afternoon, rain pattering on his armored window, in which Dahnai *finally* capitulated to his demands. She didn't do it live over comm, which wasn't like Dahnai. Dahnai wasn't the sheepish type, afraid to look someone in the eye, even in a situation where she had to give ground. The reason it was a text was that Dahnai was stating in that text in no uncertain terms that she would be on Karis *today* to finalize the agreement with him in person before the summit, and she was going to stay through the summit. She was also bringing Kellin and her kids, and she wanted her guest house prepared for their arrival in *two* hours. She was trying to ambush him for some reason, but he wasn't going to have any problems. He sent Ayama and Surin over to make her house ready, and her own servants would take over the house and see to Dahnai's needs once they arrived. He sent back a missive telling her that he wasn't going to be there when she arrived, that he was going to Exile to pay a little *visit* to Meya and Myra to get revenge for what they did to him.

For the Faey, that was a valid reason for Jason not to be there to greet her.

So, after getting that all organized, Jason boarded the Marine corvette *Invari*, which didn't just take him to the White House or Kosigi, it instead

ascended up into space and landed on the brand new battleship *Shiani*, Koye's new command. Once they were aboard, Jason stayed in the corvette as the battleship turned towards the Stargate leading to Exile. Aya and six other guards were with him, both to help him and to laugh both with and at him as he took it to the twins, filling up the tactical and filling the ship with amused and eager sendings about what was about to happen. They joined quite a bit of other traffic running the gate, mainly Karinne transports moving goods and supplies to the planet for both the Karinnes and the Merranes or bringing back harvests, for both the Karinnes and the Merranes. The smaller traffic gave right of way to the gleaming battleship, which just had its hull art finished, a Faey woman with flaming red hair so long it dragged the ground, wearing nothing but a short skirt, wielding a two-handed sword. Shiani was a figure out of Faey mythology, something akin to the old fable of Hercules, supposedly the mortal daughter of Demir and a Faey woman, a supernaturally gifted warrior of the Faey bronze age who had all kinds of victories and exploits accredited to her.

Since there were only three gods in the Faey pantheon, there was a decided lack of "divine shenanigans" that were so prevalent in many bronze-age Terran mythologies. The majority of divine promiscuity came from Aris, the Child Goddess, though that was *only* a reference to the fact that she was the daughter of Trelle and Demir. Aris was every bit the adult in Faey theology, with all the same adult appetites as mature Faey women. She was the prototypical Faey woman, in fact, open, honest, a little bandy, decidedly bawdy, and always looking for a good time, particularly with handsome men. Since she had no divine husband, Aris consoled herself instead with mortal men. Aris slept her way through a good percentage of the male Faey population in the classical period from which the myth of Shiani originated. According to the old myth, Shiani was the result of a spat between Trelle and Demir, when Demir went out among the mortal women in retaliation for Trelle's dalliance with the most handsome Faey man in all of history, the Adonis figure from Faey mythology who was named Embarren. Embarren was so handsome that not even Trelle could resist him, and Demir cheated on Trelle out of jealousy, after he cursed Embarren in a rather unique way. Instead of making him ugly, of following the old train of thought that created Medusa in Greek mythology, Demir instead made Embarren so absolutely irresistible that he could never find a moment's rest or a moment's peace. His beauty became his curse, and he

spent the rest of his days running from and hiding from women who would travel thousands of *kathra* to chase him down, to have the man that had had both Aris and Trelle, a mortal man even the goddesses had to have. Shiani was loved by her father but hated by Trelle, and much of the story revolved around Trelle trying to humiliate or outright kill Shiani while Demir did everything in his power, and behind Trelle's back, to help his daughter triumph over the many challenges Trelle threw at her. Shiani eventually won Trelle's grudging respect, but never her approval, and was eventually left alone.

It was a window into the Faey mentality even back then. It was perfectly alright for Trelle to cheat on Demir because she was the woman, and Demir showed his displeasure in a typical male way, indirectly and rather sneakily. Faey men were subtle and exceedingly cunning little bastards when they were wronged, and Demir was no different than his mortal counterparts.

The entire bridge crew couldn't stop looking at him. His blue coloration was fading steadily, it was much lighter now and Jyslin actually rather liked it, melding with his natural melanin to produce a "smoky blue" color, as she called it. He just sat on Koye's chair, his fingers steepled as he watched the main view holo and the ship prepared to traverse the gate. *Did you bring everything, Aya?* He asked.

She held up the large bag slung over her shoulder. *Right here.*

And just what is in that bag, Jason? Koye asked.

Utter humiliation, he replied, which made her burst into laughter. Everyone on Karis knew that Jason had been pranked, and now Koye knew that Jason knew who did it and was coming for revenge.

Koye and the Exile traffic control played their part. The arrival of the battleship wasn't announced, allowing them to sneak up on the main orbital station where Meya and Myra now had their command offices. They were the commanders of the Karinne Exploration Service, the official exploration and scientific investigation arm of the house that surveyed new star systems and conducted scientific analysis of what was found there. They were like the Coast Guard from back home in that they were their own service, sort of outside the usual chain of command, for combat was their means of last

resort. But the operation needed military structure and discipline to work efficiently, and the ships themselves were armed and armored, which classified the KES as a military organization. Meya and Myra loved the work, loved to explore new star systems, loved doing something *important*, and they were diplomatic enough to handle contact situations. And were they ever important. Jason's policy of colonizing strategic locations throughout the galaxy to give the Karinnes pan-galactic capability was a fundamental pillar of his overall strategy, and it was Meya and Myra's job as the commanders of the KES to find the planets for them to colonize. They were currently busy fully exploring the QMD and QME sectors, so they had detailed scans and data of all the sectors surrounding Exile, which was in the QMB sector. They'd already catalogued the QLY, QLZ, and QMA sectors, and once they were done, they'd be deploying literally on the other side of the galaxy, a six day hyperspace journey to the RG sector; the Karinnes had a weird way of doing their sector designations. They didn't name their quadrants in a rotational, "clockwise" fashion, and Jason had never bothered to change it. The P quadrant was literally the opposite side of the galaxy from the home quadrant, which they called the S quadrant, and the Q quadrant was immediately to the right, the "north" quadrant of the galaxy. The home quadrant was the "east" quadrant, and the P quadrant was the "west" quadrant. They'd be going to the R quadrant, the "south" quadrant, to survey some systems in the Karinne archives and find a suitable arable planet to become their foothold in that quadrant.

That effort was starting to gear up. Twelve Karinne Scout Ships were docked at the orbital station, with the modified military escort ships in orbit close by. There would be many more exploratory task forces like this one in just a few months, once they built the KES-specific cruisers and destroyers, fanning out to explore. Meya and Myra would slowly migrate to desk jobs as they had to manage more and more task forces and organize and coordinate scouting missions with the Ducal office and Myleena's science division, but they'd still find the time to jump on a scout ship and head out to some unexplored star system and see what was there. It satisfied their need for action and adventure.

But it wasn't going to save them now.

Jason and his guards managed to get onto the orbital station without attracting attention, because Aya was throttling all communications and

sending by stern and carefully controlled sending. She warned everyone *not* to tell anyone they were there, then Jason navigated the cookie-cutter station, a standard CT-3700 Orbital Cargo Terminal built by 2M, and managed to get all the way to the headquarters of the KES without alerting his prey.

It was almost poetic justice that as soon as he got to the doors, they opened, and Meya and Myra were walking out, laughing and talking with each other. They both came to an instant halt when they saw Jason standing there in front of them, the most malevolent smile they'd ever seen on a living being in their entire lives gracing his features, and an old fashioned hickory paddle in his hands. He slapped the polished, flat board in his free hand with a loud *smack*, and Meya took on a horrified expression as Myra summed up their situation in two eloquent words.

“Oh crap.”

The entire command staff of the KES Headquarters were delighted witnesses to the dispensation of justice. His guards tackled the girls, stripped them out of their armor, then literally held Myra down as she thrashed and struggled as they brought Meya to him first. She was thrown over his armored legs, and then received the paddling she'd been needing probably since she was ten years old. They then held Meya like a mass murderer while Jason blistered Myra's backside, and once he was done, Aya handed him the bag and he stood up. He handed the paddle back to her, then reached into the bag. “So, you thought this was funny, huh?” he asked as they glared into his blue-tinged face. “Well, two can play this game, girls.”

He pulled out a large aerosol cylinder.

“What's that?”

“Liquid Justice,” he replied with a nasty smile. They both struggled as Jason used his power to set his helmet back on, then he advanced on them. They squealed as he sprayed them with the aerosol, a grayish cloud that instantly started making their hair sizzle. Meya screamed in horror when her hair started to melt, dropping to the carpeted floor in smoking clumps as the office workers scrambled away from what they all could now identify, that chemical compound Jason had invented that melted hair if Faey ate a certain fish. Jason made sure to get every single hair on their bodies, even

making them gasp when he sprayed their pubic hair from close range—the spray came out very cold due to the chemical’s endothermic properties—and once he was done, Aya and the guards cleaned off the smoking detritus that had once been their beautiful bluish-white hair. It left them with shining pates of hairless, gleaming skin, lighter in tone than the rest of them. Not done, Jason then pulled out another large cylinder that was a converted fire extinguisher of Terran design, a large black cone on the end. “Wh-what’s that?” Meya asked fearfully, pulling against Dera and Inavi’s grip on her.

“Bottled Payback,” he replied as he stepped up to them.

They both screamed when he blasted them with the contents of the extinguisher, which created a smoky gray cloud of fine dry particles, almost like a storm of chalk dust, but Jason contained it carefully with his telekinetic power to keep it from spreading. Both of them coughed and wheezed as the powder got into their mouths and noses, but it was harmless if it was inhaled...but the effect it had on *skin* was dramatically different...or specifically, skin containing Faey melanin.

Never give Jason two days to plan his revenge.

After spraying them down, Jason pulled the powder away and contained it as a ball over them. They looked at him with confusion, since the dust didn’t stick to them or burn them or anything, but to those who could see them, the effect of that dust was blatantly apparent. Giggles started to spread through the room as both Meya and Myra both started to turn grayish, their skin color starting to alter, then eruptions of laughter echoed through the room as Jason watched, taking off his helmet and giving the two a nasty smirk.

For their bodies were changing color in random patches and splotches and lines and streaks, the dust containing a chemical compound that bonded with Faey melanin and caused it to undergo random pigmentation changes based on the body chemistry *of that particular skin cell*. The result was that the twins slowly started to resemble the results of a mad painter’s temper tantrum. Meya had a blue series of dots under her cybernetic eye and a streak of magenta coloring the faded scar from the old injury that was above and below her eye. There was a triangular patch of brown just to the left of her nose, and her lips had turned a sickly shade of green. Myra’s face turned

almost completely solid black, except for a white spot just to the left of the corner of her mouth, and her eyelids, which were a kind of burnt orange.

Meya looked down at her arm, then screamed in shock and consternation. The twins screamed again as they looked at each other, their hands going to their faces when they were released, and the entire office was almost rolling on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. Almost as an insulting final touch, their hair started to regrow at a phenomenal rate, but growing back in the same mottled calico fashion, their short hair a riot of almost every color in the spectrum that scintillated like a kaleidoscope of color every time they moved. Their hair regrew back to its original length, and as Jason used his power to return the powder back into its carrying cylinder, they almost jumped up and down in horror as they looked at themselves and each other.

“What did you do to us?” Myra gasped, looking at her fingers, which were all five different colors.

“What you did to me, just a little more...creatively,” he replied with a mean smile. “You’ll be like that for at least a takir, and your hair won’t grow back out its normal color until the effect fades. You’ll have to dye it or cut it off,” he smiled ominously. “You turn me blue, I turn you every color in the spectrum.”

They looked at him, then they both burst into rueful, helpless laughter.

“Remember girls, I’m a *hell* of a lot meaner than you. Think about that the next time you get the bright idea to talk Ayama into pranking me by proxy,” he told them as he turned his back to them, then strode out resolutely. The guards followed him, but only when they got on the other side of the closed door, did the twins hear the explosion of telepathic mirth from them.

This isn’t over, Jason! We’ll get you for this! Meya’s sending boomed once the door was closed and she had a feeling of security and power again.

You can try, he replied calmly. *Oh, by the way, the viddy of your new look is going to be broadcast to every vidlink on Karis.*

You wouldn’t!

You made me appear in public like this. You made me appear before the Confederate Council like this, and that was far more embarrassing than you can ever imagine Now you get the same privilege, he replied cheekily, which made Aya wheeze in that voiceless laughter behind him.

Damn you, Jason! Myra raged. *That's not funny!*

Oh yes, it is, at least to me, he replied shamelessly, which made all his guards explode into that voiceless laughter.

With the righteous dispensation of justice meted out, Jason returned to Karis just in time to meet Dahnai's dropship as it landed on the pad behind her guest house, the shower having passed by and leaving shafts of sunlight pouring through breaks in the clouds. Dahnai was over an hour early, and Jason had had to push them to get him there before Dahnai left the dropship. Jyslin was there with Rann, Tim and Symone hurrying down the walkway, Symone taking the time to change into a bikini top and a pair of shorts, and Shya raced out of the hatch the instant it opened and literally tackled Rann to the ground as she hugged him. Jason came up from the beach and got there just in time to give Dahnai a hug, feeling *much* more amenable now that she'd finally conceded. *You made it on time, Jayce,* she smiled. She was wearing a very Terran-like tank top that ended about a finger under her proud breasts, showing off her washboard stomach, and a pair of skin-tight spandex-like shorts, almost like running shorts, that were black with a white vertical stripe along each outside hip, and very simple sandals on her feet. Just a glance back at the others made it clear she was *not* greeting him in any way formally, since the entire Imperial family was wearing clothes more suitable for a beach than a ceremony.

Just barely, he replied. *You're early.*

Only an hour or so, she replied, smiling at him as she patted his blue-tinged cheek. *Not as dark as I hoped, but it'll do,* she winked.

Bitch. Kellin, he sent happily, clasping the Prince Consort's forearm warmly, then giving him a careful hug, since Jason was in armor and Kellin was a little...vulnerable. Much to his usual style, Kellin was wearing only a robe-like garment that wasn't large enough to wrap all the way around him, which left a visible strip of his chest that went all the way down, allowing his garment to all but showcase his penis as if the hip-length red garment

were curtains. In Faey society, men did tend to go bottomless quite a bit, especially if that man had an impressive package, and Kellin liked to show off for his wife. Jyslin hugged him, pulling their hands apart, and he laughed and put his arms around her.

Hi guys! I'm so glad to see you! he sent, then he hugged Symone when they got there. *Hey Symone, how have you been?*

Busy. I have a real job now, Kellin!

Really? Doing what?

She's a rigger instructor for the Karinne Marines, Jason replied as he reached down and picked up Sirri. *Goodness, Sirri, you're even bigger now than the last time you were here! How have you been?*

Okay, Uncle Jason, she replied, kissing him on the cheek. Sirri was only wearing a pair of panty-like shorts, which for her was normal. Sirri didn't really like shirts and preferred to go topless whenever she could. *You look kinda funny blue, but it's sorta neat.*

It won't happen again, that's an absolute guarantee, he sent darkly, which made them all burst out laughing. Maer was definitely the most clothed of the three kids, wearing a knee-length white robe-like upper garment that only had a right sleeve, but that sleeve came all the way down to his wrist, with light tan leggings on under the robe that looked to be made of a very thin fabric. Jason sometimes admired Maer's taste in clothing, he was definitely more fashion-conscious than his sisters...but then again, he was a male, and his appearance was *extremely* important. *Maer, I like the new haircut.*

The eldest of Dahnai's children put a tentative hand to his very short haircut, almost a buzz cut, and smiled sheepishly. *I wanted to try it but wasn't sure how it would look.*

I bet it's a lot cooler.

Oh yeah, and I don't have to comb my hair anymore, he chuckled aloud.

I think it looks a touch silly, but he's old enough to make his own decisions about his hairstyle, Dahnai sent, her disapproval swirling as an undercurrent to her thought. She'd liked him *much* better with shoulder-length hair. *Besides, it'll grow back.*

As fast as his hair grows? Give it a month, Kellin agreed as he shook hands with Tim. You still work for Miaari?

Oh yeah, she'll never let me go now, he replied lightly. The whole office would fall apart without me.

So, how did the revenge go? Dahnai asked with a grin.

Meya and Myra will never do it again, he replied bluntly, which made them all laugh. They all almost fell down when Jason put up a hologram using one of the hovering camera pods of what he did to them, the riot of colors all over their bodies, the hair with every strand a different color than the hair beside it, the looks of absolute horror on their faces when they realized what he'd done. Songa helped me whip it up. It's a variation of the medical compounds they use to incite melanin growth in newly grown skin, just highly accelerated, he sent with amusement. Accelerated like that and used on skin that already has developed melanin, it randomly alters existing pigmentation instead of inciting normal melanin development. They'll look like victims of a paint factory explosion for about a takir, as the effect slowly fades. The hair, well, they'll have to either dye it or cut it off and wait for their normal hair to grow back.

Jason, that's awful! Dahnai protested, then she burst out into new gales of laughter.

I'm a moderately awful person, Dahnai, he replied smoothly. Ayama and Surin have your house ready, so you can call down your staff and settle in.

Can we go to the beach while you're doing all that stuff, Mommy? Shya asked. That's boring, and I don't wanna waste a second with my Ranny!

Of course, pippy. Where is Saelle? I specifically told you I wanted her to watch the children while we're here. We're preparing a bedroom in the guest house for her and Evin. Evin himself disembarked from her dropship, just in front of a dozen of Dahnai's guards, who formed a loose semicircle around the group.

Hey Evin, good to see you, Jason nodded.

I wish it was under better circumstances. I feel awfully foolish that those mindbenders managed to dominate me.

That wasn't your fault, Evin, and everyone here knows it, Dahnai told him sharply. You aren't trained to resist a mindbender.

Saelle's just a little busy at the moment, I have her working in the White House since I recalled her. She'll be here in about an hour, he answered. You guys are early, and I didn't think you'd need her as soon as you got off the dropship.

Well then, is Ayama and Surin available to help Evin watch them? I trust them with them.

You shouldn't, Ayama is a treacherous bitch who will get hers in time. She's the one that sabotaged my tanning bed, at the behest of Meya and Myra, Jason retorted, which made Dahnai giggle.

Aya, have a couple of guards with them, just in case Ayama tries to turn my children purple.

Aya smiled slightly and nodded.

First, you get out of this, Dahnai ordered, rapping her knuckles on his armor. Then we'll sit down and talk, then have a nice dinner. Then you'll be spending the night over at my house, and Jyslin will be hosting Kellin, she declared.

Stop ordering me around on my planet, woman. I'm the one in charge here.

She gave him an adorably dirty look. Now, Jason.

He laughed and reached down to pick up Shya. *What do you think, Shya? Should we tell your mother to push off?*

Don't drag me into this, Uncle Jason, she protested.

Good point. Go ahead and go down to the beach and have fun while everyone gets everything settled in but stay out of the water until Ayama gets there. Understand?

Yes, Daddy, Rann replied, taking Shya's hand and hurrying towards the beach. Sirri and Maer followed them with Evin and four guards following. The damp sand would keep them entertained as Dahnai's servants and staff brought their things down and got their rooms ready to Dahnai's satisfaction. Ayama and Surin were mainly over there just to stock their

pantry, prepare some snacks, make sure everything was working properly, and get the climate control where Dahnai liked it. Two more water-based dropships descended and landed at the pier beside the corvette, and Dahnai's small army of maids, grooms, pages, and more of her guard began to disembark, carrying crates, bags, racks of clothes, and boxes up the walkway and heading for Dahnai's house. Aya met with the commander of Dahnai's guard, then they started deploying Dahnai's guards along with Aya's guards along the strip, securing it for the Empress' visit. Kyva and two of her KBB strode into view down on the beach, which caused all the kids to run over and gawk at the sleek black Gladiator, the heavy railgun holstered over her mecha's right shoulder. Jason watched musingly as Kyva had her Gladiator kneel down, forearm on knee and looking down at the excited kids, who didn't get to see a Gladiator from that close very often, and Jason had a strange image of a green-skinned Benga in a similar pose, looking down from his 18 feet tall frame at the puny humans.

Jason was a bit surprised when he looked at the wooden walkway and saw Kumi hurrying towards them, along with Yila Trefani. Both Kumi and Yila were bare-ass naked, not even wearing sandals, and both were dripping wet; the two of them must have been in Kumi's hot tub...and of course, neither bothered to put anything on to come see what was going on. She hurried up past the guards and bowed sinuously. "Great Trelle, I had no idea you'd be here, your Majesty!" she said with honest surprise. "You're days early!"

"What is *she* doing here, Jason?" Dahnai asked.

"She kinda has free right of passage to and from Karis," he chuckled. "Sometimes I don't even know she's here, like *right now*."

"I just got here a few hours ago. Me and Kumi closed a few new business deals with the Haumda and the Ogravians and were taking a soak in Kumi's hot tub to celebrate." The Ogravians were a small empire in the Verutan sector, way on the far side, which just *had* to somehow be related to the Goraga. They were both a bipedal bovine species, though the Ogravians were actually highly intelligent and a little smaller than the Goraga and lacked the Goraga's violent tendencies. Jason had once mused that the Goraga might be the basis of the old Minotaur legends, but the Ogravians were probably the more likely suspect, since they'd had hyperspace jump

engine technology for the last 1,500 years. “We’re expanding laminated titanium sales deeper into the Verutan sector.”

“As long as I don’t get any angry missives accusing you two of swindling them,” he said, which made both of them grin a little.

“Oh come now, we’re undercutting the closest competitor by nearly five thousand credits per *benkonn*,” Yila tutted. “How can that possibly be swindling them?”

“How are you pulling *that* off?” Dahnai demanded.

“Easy. We can *replicate* laminated titanium,” Kumi grinned, flicking a little water at Yila. “We don’t have to *make* it like other metal companies do. That lets us sell it at nearly a quarter of the price of anyone else. But we only undercut by 10% so we can rake in pure profit,” she added with an outrageous smile.

Dahnai crossed her arms under her breasts and gave Jason a cool look. “I hope you realize you’re undercutting Merrane Mineral and Metal Fabrication?”

“That’s business, your Majesty,” Yila said smoothly, giving her a dangerous little smile. “Besides, 3MF doesn’t do business in the Verutan sector.”

“We will soon,” she said. “And I think we’re going to have a little talk about Karinne replicator accessibility,” she said, poking Jason’s breastplate.

“I’m sure you can talk about it, your Majesty, but House Trefani has already secured exclusive partnership rights with Karinne Metals,” Yila declared, admiring her manicured nails.

“Someone needs her ass taken down a couple of pegs,” Dahnai noted to Jason.

“I’ve come to that conclusion myself a few times over the last couple of months,” Jason agreed, the two of them looking at the totally unrepentant Yila.

“Don’t hate me because I’m a step ahead, your Majesty,” she grinned, then winked outrageously, which made Dahnai laugh despite herself.

“Jason, your Majesty, would you mind terribly if I brought Dara here for dinner?”

“I don’t mind, but it’s up to Dahnai and her security,” Jason said. “Guard Commander Jiva has control of the strip for Dahnai’s visit.”

The daughter of a Grand Duchess is acceptable, the commander sent easily.

“It’s alright with me,” Dahnai agreed. “Isn’t that the one that plays batchi, Yila?”

“That’s her,” Yila nodded, then she patted her bare belly. “I think we’d better go get our clothes, Kumi,” she smiled. “Not that what I was wearing covers much more up than what you’re seeing,” she added.

“The old negotiating clothes, eh Yila?” Jason asked, which made her laugh.

“What?” Dahnai asked.

“Anytime she wants something from me, she makes sure she has nothing on below the ribcage and above the knees,” Jason said dryly, which made Dahnai giggle a little.

“He thinks I have a sexy ass, so I like to let him look at it,” she said with a sly smile. “And no, I don’t *want anything*. I happen to *like* wearing very little from here down,” she said, chopping the side of her hand lightly against her ribcage. “Think back, Jason. I started in belly-baring tops and panties and moved quickly from there to, well, this,” she said, patting her bare hip.

He laughed. “So you did,” he admitted.

Yila and Kumi wandered back to her house, and they all went into Dahnai’s guest house as she oversaw the staff bringing her travel things in, from clothes to equipment to even a few pieces of furniture she rather fancied. Her domestic staff was only 6 servants, but they moved quickly and efficiently to get everything just the way Dahnai wanted as she gave them orders, had them set furniture, hang pictures, all but moving in for the seven days she’d be on Karis. The summit wasn’t for four more days, and the summit was expected to last three days. Jason just had the feeling she wanted to get her personal time in with him, be there for Rann’s party

without having to rush over beforehand, and maybe just take a little break. She saw coming to Karis as a vacation for her and her family, a chance to spend time with her kids, a place she could go that was outside the constant spotlight...a place where she could truly *relax*. Here, she wouldn't have an entire army of reporters and cameras following her everywhere, so she always enjoyed her visits.

After Dahnai got settled in, Jyslin took Kellin, Tim, and Symone downtown to visit the Paladin offices, and Jason and Dahnai went back to his house. He changed from armor to tee and jeans, and they sat down in his office. "Alright, let's get this on the table," Dahnai said, putting her elbows on his desk. "I'll grant the House of Karinne autonomy from Imperial rule and officially release the Karis system to Karinne control. The Karinnes will continue to administer Terra and the four Urumi systems and maintain all current contracts and quotas. Karinne citizens will be considered to have passage rights within the Imperium, able to travel freely, and the Karinnes maintain the contracts with Merrane over exploration opportunities beyond Exile. That's what you get. Now, what I *want*.

"First. I want the same exploration option for *any* Karinne held system beyond the home sector, and that includes access to Karinne exploration charts of those far-flung areas. I know how you work, babes, you're gonna spread out across the galaxy just a system here and a system there, so you have access to the far stretches of the galaxy. I want the Merranes to expand past just the Imperium, establish colonies far beyond our territory, then slowly and carefully expand out from those outposts. It's the only way we can really restore the Merranes to be on par with the Shovalles and Dorranes, since we have nowhere else to expand."

"Within certain restrictions we set," Jason countered. "No conquering. You can settle planets with no sentient species that has an organized society, and you can't claim more than one system for every Karinne holding. We claim a system, you claim a system."

"Done," she said, almost entirely too fast for him not to get a little suspicious. "Second. I want complete right of passage to Karis at any time for the Imperial family and granted land to build a vacation palace here, which will be considered sovereign Merrane territory. I like my house on the strip, but I want something a little more fitting for an Empress of the

Imperium,” she declared. “This estate will belong to the Merrane family, handed down from Empress to Empress, and serve as the private retreat of the Imperial family.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with that, as long as you don’t mind us making sure it’s not being used as a spying outpost from time to time. You want a nice beachfront area, or maybe your own private island?”

“A private island? That sounds nice,” she said with a smile. “And I’m sure the guard will find it much easier to keep secure.”

“I know of a few nice options in the tropical belt, I’ll let you look over some pictures.”

“Part and parcel of this estate is the right to staff it with Merrane servants and protected by a detachment of the Imperial guard, and I have the right to invite anyone I wish to my estate. My guests will be given right of passage through Karinne territory so long as they travel to and from my estate.”

“Again, nothing wrong with that, but you can only have guests when *you’re* there,” Jason said.

“I don’t see a problem with that, I wouldn’t want anyone there if I’m not there anyway. Done. Third. I want favored trading status with the Karinnes for House Merrane. I’m tired of that bitch Yila raking in the credits because she has a fast track straight to your door.”

Jason laughed. “I think I can work with that, at least in some ways. I *do* have some business agreements with Yila I can’t break, Dahnai. But we can work together on other ventures. Just give Kumi a call and have your house’s trade team discuss things with her.”

“Really, Jason, the *Trefanis*?” she flared. “*We’ve* been much better to you!”

“It’s a mutually beneficial agreement, Dahnai. Yila doesn’t *only* make trade agreements with us. She has eyes and ears everywhere, and she’s been invaluable exposing plots against my house. It was Yila that uncovered the plot to clone Saelle. The trade agreements are her reward for helping me keep the House of Karinne safe. A partnership just kinda evolved from that.”

“Ohhh, so you and the Trefanis are spying on everything.”

“More like just listening to what’s being said,” he replied. “We don’t actively spy, but like I said, Yila hears almost *everything*, and when she digs up something that’s important to my house, she shares it with me. And you should just let that keep going, Dahnai. You can use the Trefanis as an under the table way to get information to us that you don’t want the rest of the Imperium to know about.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” she agreed, tapping her cheek with a fingertip. “I’ll get together with her and talk about it. Now, fourth. Raisha. I want it in writing that we share custody of her. She spends five months on Karis, and five months in the palace until she’s ten, then she moves to Karis permanently. While she’s in the palace, *I* want agents from the Karinnes there to consult with the Imperial Guard to help protect her. And I want Saelle back, Jason,” she declared. “I miss her, she’s a great advisor, and as far as I’m concerned, she’s the official ambassador to the Imperium from your house. And I don’t want anyone else. She saved my life, Jason, and I want that kind of protection around both me and my children,” she said with intensity. “I absolutely *guarantee* you that I will keep her safe, because you’ll be allowed to send your own people to the palace to make sure of it. When Raisha is in the palace, I’ll have it locked down if I have to.”

“You *will* have to have it locked down,” he grunted, thinking it over. “I can send security experts to the palace?”

“Yes. This isn’t a pissing contest, Jason. I want both my daughters protected,” she told him, putting a hand on her bare, muscular belly.

“Then I think we can agree to that. I’ll have Miaari build a consulting team, and we’ll have them get together with your guard and do a thorough overview of the palace and its defenses. You might have to reveal some secrets.”

“I don’t care. The guard has already agreed to bring on your people, to help them find the holes so it *never happens again*,” she said, almost hissing the words. “That’s *your* daughter in there, too, Jason, even my most stubborn commanders have to admit that you’ll do everything you can to defend her, given what she is and what that means outside the palace. And when Rann and Shya marry, we’ll all be *one* family.”

Jason was honestly surprised that Dahnai was willing to go that far, but perhaps she finally understood just what kind of danger Raisha was going to be in if she wasn't on Karis.

"And that brings us to my final demand. Before I allow the Karinnes to separate," she said, then she blew out her breath. "I'm exercising my option on Rann immediately."

"What?"

"He and Shya will be married before I sign the final treaty," she said. "And since he's the heir apparent of the House of Karinne, then Shya will move here. Shya will live with you, Jason, in Rann's room. That is her right as a married woman, and it is my gift to her. She'll have the luck of living almost her entire life with the boy she loves, Jason. A mother can't give a daughter much more than that."

"Are you serious?"

"I have the legal right to do it," she told him. "Their ages don't matter. As Empress, I can marry them even if they were both in cradles. I want that unbreakable bond between our families formed *before* I allow the Karinnes to separate from the Imperium. With Rann and Shya married, it makes us a single family, and that forms bonds that words on a piece of paper can never match. With Shya married to Rann, I *know* the Karinnes will be there to protect my family and the House of Merrane, because *we are family*."

"But, but Shya's an Imperial Princess! She can't move here; she'll have to abdicate her title!"

"She's already agreed to this, Jason. She's willing to give up her title to marry Rann. She doesn't *know* I'm going through with it yet, I didn't want her to completely spaz out, but I asked her if she'd be willing to give up her title if it meant she could move to Karis and be with Rann. And that's what she wants, what she wants more than *anything*. You know how much she wants him. And she becomes a powerful voice in the rulership of the house after Rann takes the throne. Shya will be fostered by *you*, Jason, but I reserve the right to observe how you raise her and put a hand in where I see fit. And as I have right of passage to Karis at any time, it also means I have the right to see Shya whenever I want. Either I come here, or you send her to Draconis to visit. And I'll want to visit her often, Jason. You know how

much I love my children. I want to see her the same as I see her now, one day out of every ten, but after she turns ten, we share joint custody of her exactly the same way we will Raisha, so I have time with her the way a mother should have time with her daughter.

“This is the best of both worlds for Shya. She will be the Empress of her own empire, Jason, because I have no doubt that by the time you and I have passed, the House of Karinne will have nearly as many systems as the Imperium does right now, spread to the edges of the galaxy, and your house will control most of the commerce in our sector cluster thanks to the interdictors. That *is* an empire, and it will be *her* empire. For a second daughter, that’s far more than they usually get. Miyai will become the second in line when she’s born, and Raisha will be third. Raisha will keep her title, Jason, until she’s old enough to decide for herself if she wants to keep it.”

He gave her a shocked look. For Dahnai to do that, to give away her daughter...*holy fuck*. She was serious about this! Of course, that put her listener daughter right in Jason’s house...but Jason could work around that if he had to. Obviously, Dahnai had seriously thought about this, had considered what he’d said and understood what he was driving at, and he had to admit, she *was* doing something for Shya. Shya was going to be the mother of all the rulers of the House of Karinne beyond Rann, and that did put the Merranes as having a pivotal position in both the Imperium and the House of Karinne. She was giving Shya the choice to abdicate her title and move to Karis to be with Rann, and it said much for Dahnai’s desire to make her daughter happy, even over her own sadness for never having the chance to live with Shya as a *family*. Yes, marrying Shya and Rann had political gains for the House of Merrane, but those gains paled in the personal loss Dahnai was willing to accept, the loss of a daughter she loved more than life itself. Dahnai was giving up a very piece of her own soul to Jason and the House of Karinne, and Jason was one of the few that could truly understand and appreciate what she was doing and what it meant to her.

Jason reached over his desk and took her hands. *Dahnai*, he sent tenderly, and she gave him a brave, proud look. *Is that truly what you want?*

It's what's best, Jason. For the House of Merrane, the House of Karinne, and for the Imperium.

But is it best for you?

To see my daughter happy, Jason...yes. It's what's best for me.

He gave her a gentle smile. *I think we can work it out, love. But before we get to all the wrangling over language and the lawyers, why don't we take a walk on the beach? I think I want some time with my amu dorai and feel like a family for a while.*

She gave him a deep, loving look, then stood up and offered her hand. Silently, he stood up and accepted it, and they walked towards the door. She stopped them at the doorway and crushed him to her, giving him an intense, passionate kiss, and when she pulled him through the door, instead of taking him left, towards the stairs, she took him right, towards the door to his bedroom.

Chapter 7

Vesta, 35 Demaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 22 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Vesta, 35 Demaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

They had the agreements in place, but getting the language exactly right was taking a little time.

Jason was working his way through paperwork as he kept a passive eye on a holo of Dahnai, Kellin, and their kids sitting on the beach back on the strip, Jyslin and Symone hanging out with them. All of Jason's children had taken the day off from school as well, running around playing with Shya, Maer, and Sirri under the watchful eyes of the guards, Saelle, Evin, Ayama, and Surin. It was definitely a glorious morning for sunbathing, warm and sunny and with a gentle wind coming in off the ocean, and Jason was almost a little jealous of them. But this was something of Dahnai's rest and relaxation after what was a very stressful few days for her, making critical decisions that impacted both the Imperium and her personal life, so she needed the time to decompress. But while Dahnai had the time and opportunity to relax a little, Jason didn't. He had some serious work to do, some very important paperwork to finish, and he'd been taking short days the last week or so to deal with negotiating with Dahnai, and also dealing with his little coloration problem. So, while he was out playing, some very important paperwork had stacked up on him, and it was time to clear his inbox.

That was half of the reason he was at work. The other half was that he was expecting—more like hoping for—a report from Zaa anytime now. She'd said it would take her infiltrators two days to find out what was going

on inside Go'jur'mi, and when Zaa made a statement like that, she was usually right on the mark. He wanted to be in his office so she could get that information to him the instant it was available.

The last couple of days had been far less stressful than he'd anticipated. With Dahnai more or less conceding all his main points, and even going further than he expected, they'd spent the last couple of days just drawing up the formal treaties, working on the language with both his legal team and hers, trying to get everything *just so* because it was going to be a *very important* treaty. Jason and Dahnai were drawing up the official separation of Karinne from the Imperium with an eye not inward, but outward, so the language of the treaty had to make the autonomy of the Karinnes ironclad. If the other governments wouldn't trust the Karinnes to be neutral, impartial, and fair, then the whole plan was basically worthless. That plan would have the Karinnes more or less running all transportation and logistics for the entire Confederation, Stargates linking the neutral system of Terra to hub systems in Confederate allied territory, with Karinne freighters servicing other interdicted systems around the hub system. The interdictors were critical to the protection of Confederate systems, and Assaba, Vizzie, Ba'mra'ei, Magran, Grayhawk, everyone had to *trust* the Karinnes that they would run the system fairly and not allow Dahnai to use her Stargates as a means to try to use military force against the linked systems. If that trust wasn't there, then it wasn't going to work. But if they did trust the Karinnes to run the logistics in interdicted systems, as they were doing *now*, then *all* the governments in the Confederation were going to prosper. Other governments would be moving their trade goods in real time using Terra as a trade hub, which would reduce costs, increase profits, and what was most important, give all participating governments secure trade routes and protection for their planets and their people.

He still wasn't entirely sure if it was going to sell, but Dahnai agreed with him—*finally*—that they had to prove to the others *before* they made the official offers that they were serious about keeping the Karinnes a neutral administrator of the system. When they saw the treaties before Jason put the first written proposal to create a network of Stargates and transportation hubs on the table, they'd know that both Jason and Dahnai were serious about wanting to make it work. Grayhawk and Magran were openly favoring the idea as Jason presented it, but Assaba and Vizzie were

openly skeptical. They wanted to see the specifics, they wanted to see it in writing, before they made a decision.

That writing was what he was reading at the moment, reading over the latest draft of the treaty that would create the transportation network. His legal team had done a fantastic job spelling out exactly what the House of Karinne would do, what Dahnai *wouldn't* be doing, and keeping everything under the control of the neutral planet of Terra and the House of Karinne, with extensive oversight from *every* government that signed on. Everything would be transparent. Every ruler would have operational control over the Stargate leading into his territory, have control over the entry station that served that Stargate to inspect every single cargo container coming into his territory or leaving it. He could see what was going on inside his territory, and if even one ship was out of place, he would have the power to shut everything down in his territory until they figured out what was going on, including the ability to delink the Stargate into hot standby with nothing but a command code. While the Terrans and the Karinnes would be running the system, the individual rulers would have control over access to their territory and all materials and people moving in and out, and would see every ship moving around in his territory in real time. And since Terra was going to be considered free passage space, every ruler could park the bulk of his military forces around the Stargate leading into his territory if that was what he wanted to do.

He finished it up and made a few notes to send back to his people, then he leaned back in his chair a bit, turned, and looked out the window. Since it looked like the House of Karinne was going to become independent...he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to keep it as a *house*. He'd never really liked the feudal system the Imperium used, it was completely against his American upbringing, and if he was going to be the one in total power here, well, he could make a few changes. Not immediately, since they needed the way things were now while they were at war, where Jason was the commander in chief and had the power to bend the entire house into the war effort. But after all the wars were over, when both the Syndicate and the Consortium had been sent back to Andromeda with their tails between their legs, then he was going to make some significant changes.

But one change was being implemented as soon as the treaty with Dahnai was signed. Jason was going to seat a unicameral congress that

would propose, debate, vote on, and then pass up to him ideas and propositions for changes to the way things worked on Karis. It wouldn't have any binding power—at least yet—but it would let the Faey mainly start to get used to the idea of representatives getting together, debating laws, and then voting on them. The congress would be an advisor to Jason that would bring the ideas from the common man to his desk for his consideration, allowing a common citizen to get an idea, tell it to his representative, and have that representative bring it up and debate it in the congress. If it was a pretty good idea, it might make it all the way to Jason's desk. Jason still had his open CivNet box for suggestions, and common citizens could still come to the strip and submit their ideas to him, going from the guards straight to his desk. Since Aya locked down the strip, the common citizens weren't allowed on the strip anymore. Jason didn't entirely like it, he felt like it separated him from the people he served, but he couldn't fault Aya's decision.

He was starting to consider conducting town hall style meetings a couple of times a month to get feedback from the common man, which Jason felt was the true ruler of the House of Karinne.

The Faey would need some time to get used to the idea of a *republic*, it was a completely alien concept to them...but he was pretty sure they'd get to like it after they got a taste of it, as the common citizen discovered that in a republic, he had real power and a real say in how his government worked. Hell, if the Skaa could embrace the concept of a republic, *any* species could.

Jason looked over the proposed districts for the congress, each district forbidden to be gerrymandered and based on population, not land area, where one representative was elected by democratic vote from a district that held 100,000 people, and whose term would last for two years. Given that the current population of Karis was 6,483,002, that would create a congress with 64 representatives, and would bump up to maybe as high as 83 next year with the huge influx of applicants and cause a redrawing of the map after the yearly census, which was conducted the first day of Toraa every year. That took about 15 minutes, since the mainframe in the Interior Department knew exactly where everyone lived. The mainframe would take the census and then automatically redraw the districts as equitably as possible, but the representative wouldn't have to be re-elected unless there

were two whose houses were redrawn into the same district...and that was only if one refused to move to the empty district bordering theirs. If two representatives were drawn into the same district, the junior member would have the option to move to his old district to keep his seat. But if he refused to move, then the two representatives would have to go head to head in an election.

And Jason wouldn't allow the formation of any political parties. Best not to even go down that road.

It would be a good experiment for Jason to see how the house approached the idea, and good practice mainly for the Faey in the house to get some exposure to the idea of a *congress*.

After reviewing those plans, he worked through the latest reports from Myleena and Myri. Myleena was almost done with the Consortium battleship and was about to do her final report on its technology, analyzing it and searching for any weaknesses they could exploit. There was also a lower-priority status report from 3D about the implanted jacks that would allow non-Generations to have direct connections to computers. Songa and Olan had finished the expanded trial phase, and the results were *very* favorable. Their 300 test subjects had finished their training, and the results were *impressive*. They had only slightly slower response time compared to a Generation in a merge, and roughly the same response time as a highly trained interface driver, like a rigger or Wolf pilot, but with the added advantage of *receiving* data as well as transmitting it. One of their test subjects was a Terran who was a professional pilot, just like Aura, and when they put him in a jack-capable skimmer, he flew it perfectly, with the same subtlety and skill as an interface but with the bonus of being able to receive data from the flight computer right into his brain instead of having to look at gauges and displays. Songa and Olan wanted permission to expand their trial to 1,000 test subjects and place the original 300 in military training programs, mainly for Wolf fighters and Gladiators, to see how a jack-enhanced pilot could handle military hardware. Jason signed off on that on the spot and sent a missive to Myri to get those jacked subjects into fighter and rigger training courses *today*. Songa added in her report that she had finished mapping the synaptic patterns of the Urumi for jack enhancement procedures and was currently working on the Colonists and the Skaa. The report also included a 3D hologram of the new interlink unit

that Olan had designed, which looked exactly like the current interface model, just with a little extra functionality to let it communicate with the brain to which it was jacked in. The main difference was the male jack at the rear of it, where it would socket into the jackport anchored to the bone behind the left ear.

Jenny and Eraen had also started their job to develop the diffuser. They weren't about to put anything important in a report, that wasn't how 3D did things, but the flowery wording of the report told him that they were settled in and now working on the problem.

Myri's report was more numbers than progress, but those numbers *were* progress. 12 more small ships had come off the docks today. Four corvettes, three gunboats, and five destroyers were all finished and parked, not ready to be commissioned yet, but on the other side, two cruisers, a tactical cruiser, and the first new heavy cruiser in a while was coming off the docks later today as well. Those also weren't ready to be manned quite yet, so their commissioning was being put off until the crews were ready and the captains were chosen.

Myri also solved the Sevi problem, in a rather cute way. Myri's report said that she wasn't giving Sevi the choice to pass up another command. She was getting the next tactical battleship, which was due for completion tomorrow, but she would be allowed to transfer the name *Arabax* to her new ship. The current heavy cruiser *Arabax* would be renamed when a new captain took the chair, and that captain would have the option to transfer the name of her old ship to the new command. Myri was testing out the idea of dynamic ship names, like simply slapping the same name on a mothballed ship as the ship it was replacing in the main inventory, and she was testing out the idea with Sevi and the *Arabax*.

Given how Sevi fought in battle, a bulldog was the best choice for her. She could be *seriously* brave when she was in battle, completely confident in the durability and firepower of her beloved *Arabax*. She loved her ship more than her own husband, but she also wasn't afraid to ram her ship down the throat of an entire enemy formation either. She wasn't afraid to scratch the paint on her ship. That kind of aggressive attitude was perfect for the captain of a tactical battleship, where she had all those particle

beams to throw at her opponent. So, Sevi was being told today that she *would* move up to the tactical battleship, and she *would* do that tomorrow.

Jason almost wished he could be in Myri's office when she dropped that ultimatum on Sevi. It would be very amusing.

After working through the military reports, he skimmed the cabinet reports, dealing with infrastructure projects, land grants, how many people were graduating from orientation and about to enter the general population of the house in the next week. And like the last few weekly reports, the Shio were heavily outnumbering everyone else, by nearly 50%. The Shio were definitely flooding into the house, but as far as Jason was concerned, they were more than welcome. And since the word got out that the house was seceding from the Imperium, the applications for house membership had jumped 78% just over the last week. It seemed that quite a few people out there were much more interested in joining the House of Karinne if it wasn't part of the Imperium. The recruiting division had started opening offices in every civilization that had representation in the Academy as well, a wave of fresh office openings scattered mainly in the Verutan sector, with twelve offices opening in the Grimja sector, in the Grimja Union, the civilization for which that sector was named, at least to the Karinnes. The Grimja were the largest empire in their sector, way out past the Skaa and Colonists, because the Grimja and the two Skaa empires had a neutral zone between them. It was the result of the peace treaty that ended the last war between the Skaa and the Grimja, some 450 years ago, and the peace had held over the centuries. There were no habitable planets in that neutral zone for them to fight over, so it was considered a demilitarized zone that neither military was allowed to enter. Commercial traffic was allowed to pass through along defined routes, but no other ships moved around in there.

The Grimja themselves had a pretty ugly-sounding name, but they were actually a rather pleasant-looking species. They were rodent-like creatures, bipedal but with big feet and large round ears, big front teeth that they had to file down because they grew over the entire lifespan. Despite the buck teeth, they had very anthropomorphized faces that made them weirdly cute to Terrans and Faey. They looked a little like chinchillas, with fur that ran from white to gray to several earth toned shades, only the females had hair in the classical sense, large round ears on top of their heads, very long tails with long, silky fur, and they had whiskers. They were about 6 feet tall on

the average and from a slightly lower than average gravity planet which gave them a slender bone structure and sleek body, so they weren't *cute little things*, they were actually *cute really tall things*. While they had slender bones, those bones were reinforced with naturally occurring iron compounds, literally giving them metal-laced bones like Wolverine from the old *X-Men* comics, and that made them heavier than they looked and made it damn hard to break a bone. It also made them much, much stronger than most low-gravity species, because of those metal-laced bones and the strength required to move it around. Like the Parri, the Grimja breathed nitrogen instead of oxygen, and their diet was purely vegetarian; they were physically incapable of digesting meat.

Like the Skaa, the Grimja reproduced at a very high rate, but they didn't have a huge population like the Skaa did because of strict restrictions on family size to prevent overpopulation and famine, and the fact that the reptilian Skaa consumed much less food per capita compared to the Grimja. Skaa ate much less than the Grimja did, who had fairly fast metabolisms and a higher than average internal body temperature that took lots of fuel to maintain. But thankfully, unlike the Beryans, Grimja females didn't have four pronounced breasts. They actually had no pronounced breasts at all unless they were nursing young, but then they displayed six temporarily pronounced breasts that went back to normal after weaning the young. Grimja females could produce up to nine children in a single pregnancy and could produce a litter of young twice a year. If not for their very strict population controls, the Grimja could reproduce so quickly that they would totally consume the resources of the planets in their empire. They heavily relied on imported food as it was, they couldn't afford to let their population get any larger.

Dahnai knew it very well, no empire that could not feed itself was ever entirely secure. To be reliant on trade for a basic staple like food put any empire in a weak position, because the trade partner had them by the proverbial balls. The Grimja paid inflated prices for the food they imported...and Jason was of a mind to do something about that. It would utterly piss off the Prakarikai, the race that traded the most food with the Grimja, but Jason didn't entirely like the Prakarikai anyway. They were a race of snobs, and they ripped off the Grimja to shameless degrees, because the Grimja had very little choice. To feed their people, they had to buy food,

and few civilizations *exported* food in large quantities. Only the Alliance, the Prakarikai, and the Imperium—at least now—exported food in any large quantity in the nine sectors that made up their sector cluster.

That was defined by simple geometry. The home sector and the eight bordering sectors were defined as the sector cluster, but the edge of the home sector and the three sectors bordering that side were dominated by the Kypan Void, so there was little population back towards the edge of the arm of the galaxy. Terra was a lone island on the edge of the home sector, surrounded by a whole lot of useless star systems.

Jason made a note to Kumi to investigate the possibility of selling food replicators to the Grimja Union. That should help stabilize their food situation, and not have to give over almost all their GDP to the Prakarikai just to feed their population.

Jason reached the last report, which made him sigh in relief and gaze wistfully at the beach holo. Dahnai and Jyslin were teamed up against Kellin and Symone in a game of beach volleyball, the natural athleticism of the Imperial family letting them hold their own against grizzled beach ball pros like Jyslin and Symone. The kids were all playing in the ocean right along the waveline, letting the waves crash over them, with Ayama, Surin, Saelle, and Evin in the water with them, both to play and to keep watch. Two KBB Gladiators stood guard at each side of the beach, giving them plenty of room, Kyva in one and Jyvli in the other; Jyvli was Kyva's usual partner when she opted to have one. Twelve Imperial Guard also stood watch in staggered positions both along the walkway and on the beach itself, keeping casual watch over their charges, Dahnai's guards wearing their brand new, gleaming, snowy white Crusader armor. Dahnai's guards almost strutted a little bit and played with some of the armor's features instead of paying strict attention to the Imperial family...but that was alright, the strip was completely locked down and the hard shield was up. They could afford a *little* relaxation themselves.

Outfitting the entire Imperial Guard with Crusader armor was part of the deal Jason had struck with Dahnai, part of the new security measures for Raisha and Saelle. Those guards would be watching over his new family and a woman that was as close as a sister, he was for *damn* sure putting them in the absolute best armor he could find. Jason would be sending two

sets of armor for every one of the 426 Imperial Guard that protected the palace, a primary suit and a backup suit. The guards here could be sized, so they got their armor the next day when Jason and Dahnai worked that out. The guards back on Draconis had sent very detailed sizes to his armor factory via holo recordings, and they were cranking out the armor at that moment to send back to the palace. They'd be in that armor before Dahnai returned to Draconis. The only difference between the armor for the Imperial Guard and regular armor was that the guard armor was outfitted with MPACs instead of pulse cannons, but that wasn't much of a downgrade. On the small arms scale, MPACs were just as powerful as pulse weapons, since small arms pulse blasts didn't explode the way MPAC charges did. Pulse blasts would go through absolutely anything, however, they ignored armor the same way Torsion bolts did.

He watched Rann and Kyri ride on body boards for a few minutes, then got back to work. He went through the long list of land grant applications that were important enough to hit his desk, including proposals from the Interior department to open three new cities in the center of the Kargan continent, old designations Olania, Faerdalle, and the old provincial capitol of the Teria Province, Teria City. Teria City was rebuilt to house up to 5.2 million residents, and the department wanted to go in there and start preparing the city for inhabitation. That was mainly activating power uplinks, removing plas-shielding from needed buildings that protected them from erosion and animal invasion, installing computer mainframes to manage transportation and infrastructure, and moving in mass transit units to provide transportation for city residents. 16% of the old Teria Province was inhabited along its northern edge, and the opening of the new provincial capitol would open the rest of the province to large-scale settling. With the estimated number of new house members joining the house, Jason could admit that it was time to open a new province, and the Teria Province was quite lovely. It had rolling grasslands along its northern half and old, weathered mountains like the Appalachians back on Terra that ran from east to west through the southern half. It wasn't far enough south for skiing in the winter, but some people loved to live in those kinds of low, rounded mountains. The mountains were a mix of grass and forest, since trees just looked *right* on a mountainside, the trees a mixture of restored native Karisian trees, Terran trees, and trees from Draconis, all carefully analyzed

by the botany department of the Academy annex to make sure they could cohabitate in the ecosystem.

Jason sent back permission to his Interior director to activate Teria City, but to hold off on the others to get some population in what would become the province capitol first. Besides, Teria City was large, so it had plenty of room for any kind of housing someone may prefer, be it high-rise apartments in the city proper or houses out in the suburbs. Jason wrote back that once Teria City hit one million population, to open one of the other cities. He also told his department to go in and establish some parks and nature preserves.

He finished up the last of the reports and had to smile a little at the big “0” at the top of his inbox. It took him almost four hours, but he finally worked through all the paperwork that had backed up on him over the last few days. He watched Shya replace Kyri on the body board, then leaned back in his chair and pondered how it was going to change life in the house. Jason had agreed to the idea that Shya would move in with Rann, but the idea that they’d be *married*, well, that was a little weird to him. After all, Rann was almost six and Shya was five. It was extremely unusual for a marriage to happen so young, but Dahnai was right that she had the power to do it, and there *was* some precedent in Imperial history. The youngest marriage ever happened before the lucky couple were even born, literally married in the womb. These marriages, called *Imperial contracts*, were completely secular in nature, but legally binding as true marriages. To be truly married in every sense of Faey culture, couples married by Imperial decree were married again in the conventional way on the younger’s 15th birthday, which was the age of majority in the olden times. This would be the way Rann and Shya would also do it. They’d be married by Imperial decree, but when Shya turned 15, they’d have a big state wedding befitting a future Grand Duke and an Imperial Princess...or at least a daughter of the Empress in Shya’s case. Shya would always be a princess, but she’d have to abdicate her position in the line of succession to move to Karis immediately. Instead of being an Imperial Princess, she would simply be called a Princess. But still, the idea that Jason would more or less have a new daughter that happened to be married to his son living in his house, that would take a little adjustment. He certainly wouldn’t mind, because he loved Shya very much and found her to be intelligent, inquisitive, funny,

and delightful, but the idea that Rann and Shya would be in his room as a married couple...that was the weird part. They'd be sleeping in the same bed, a brand-new queen size that Jyslin had ordered yesterday morning, sharing space and their lives not as a brother and a sister, but as a husband and a wife.

Rann certainly was happy about it, just as happy as Shya. They knew now that Shya would be moving here permanently. The screaming and jumping for joy lasted for nearly ten minutes when they were told. But Jason wondered how enthusiastic Rann was going to be when Shya's things arrived from Draconis, and he found out that living with Shya wasn't the same as her just sleeping over. He was surrendering complete control of his room, would have to share all his things, share his time, share his *life* with Shya, but to be fair, Shya would have to do the same thing. Shya was leaving behind her foster parents, her mother, her siblings, her school, everything she knew, her entire life, and was moving to a new planet to live in an entirely different culture, a culture that didn't revolve around *her*. Jason foresaw a few spats between them as they worked out just who was in charge once the bedroom door was closed. Rann was no pushover, and Shya was conditioned to think that everyone had to do what she said. She was going to be a little shocked to find out that Rann wasn't just going to follow her orders. And part and parcel of agreeing to this was to let the two of them work that out for themselves.

He was just glad he was getting his hands on Her Little Imperial Listening Highness before Dahnai could brainwash her into spying for her mother.

He lingered for nearly an hour in his office, hoping that Zaa would contact him, but an empty belly convinced him to put his armor back on and head down to the cafeteria—Aya wouldn't let him out of his office without his armor, even if he wasn't going to leave the building. Jason was much unlike most other rulers in that he didn't dine in a private dining room, didn't have chefs preparing his meals, didn't wall himself away from the people he ruled. Jason ate in the cafeteria like most everyone else and had sometimes jaunted out to one of the many restaurants surrounding the White House before Aya put restrictions on his movement. He favored the open grill where he liked to order deli style sandwiches. The deli cook was a Terran and had run a sandwich shop in Philadelphia before moving to

Karis, so the man knew how to make killer cheesesteaks and other specialty deli sandwiches, but he also experimented with off-Terran meats, cheeses, and vegetables, mixing them all together to create his own unique sandwich flavor combinations. Everything was cooked on the flat-top grill, right in front of the customer, in the classic Philly style. Jason, Shen, and Suri made their orders, then they sat together in the corner of the eating area discussing how having Shya in the house was going to change things. Aya really didn't have to do anything else, but she added one more guard to Rann's usual detachment to keep an eye on Shya, and today Ryn was in that detachment. Ryn was the one that gave Rann his lessons in telepathy at school most of the time, since she was probably the most skilled telepath on the planet, and first grade didn't have organized telepathy classes. Rann got special tutoring every day in telepathy, along with most of the Generation-born kids. Outside of Jason's own children, 51% of all the new Generation-born in the first wave of births had expressed, right around the age of 5.5 years on the average. Cybi had told him that that was about right for a Generation, so that didn't make Rann or any other others too unusual, at least in the perspective of the House of Karinne and the history of the Generations.

Jason was moving in the other realm of Generations, and that was telekinesis. He'd secured some tutoring for Zach's surprisingly strong abilities, adding him to Rann's lessons from Ayuma, and had Ayuma track down another accomplished telekinetic to give lessons to those Generations that had expressed their TK in school. Ayuma was too busy running the Academy from her office in Karis to teach a formal class. Not all of them had; Aran and Sora still hadn't expressed their TK, and about 77% of the other first-wave Generation kids hadn't either. Kyri, Rann, and Zach were in the minority in that regard, and they were all indications that the three of them would be strong TKs.

How can you eat that? Jason protested as Shen picked up her *bakru* meat, banana pepper, and *ruga* root sandwich, the banana peppers and *rugas* put on the grill with the meat much as onions and bell peppers were chopped and set on the grill with a cheesesteak, dressed with lettuce, tomato, *aruga* sprouts, and pickles. Jason wasn't a big fan of *bakru* meat, a big ostrich-like bird thing from Goraga, it tasted almost rancid to him. Connoisseurs called it *bold*, but Jason called it *half-spoiled*. The fact that

they aged *bakru* meat before serving it just backed up his personal view that they didn't serve it until it was starting to rot. That particular sandwich was one of Tony's own creations, and it was fairly popular with those that liked *bakru*. Somehow, the banana peppers and *ruga* roots were supposed to really bring out the flavor of the meat. The really weird thing was that Jason actually liked the *smell* of *bakru* meat, but he hated the *taste* of it.

The same way you eat those disgusting sandwiches with cheese in them, she replied lightly as she took a bite.

You must not have taste buds.

I could say the same thing about you, she retorted lightly as she took another bite.

Miaari sat down on the other side of Jason at the table, with a tray of what looked like brown chutes of bamboo. It was some kind of fleshy water plant from Menos whose name escaped him, cultivated by the Menoda, that wasn't all that bad. It tasted like a cross between an almond and a squash. The fact that the stalks were a golden brown and were nearly a half a foot thick almost made it look like Miaari had bought a plate full of wooden dowels. "I'm surprised you're still here, cousin," she said as she picked up one of the chutes, then bit off the end of it. She sucked out the juice trapped inside it, then took another bite.

"I'm actually more or less done for today. I'm sorta hanging around hoping the Denmother will call," he replied, picking up his cheesesteak.

"Well, I'll have a couple of reports ready to send to you by the time I finish lunch," she told him. "Further analysis of the missives we're receiving from Andromeda."

"Anything earthshaking?"

"Not really. Just some analysis and projections."

"So, the typical guessing?"

"Educated guessing," she corrected primly, which made Jason chuckle. "By the way, I'll be going to Kimdori Prime after the summit to see my cubs. I don't expect to be gone more than two or three days."

"Good for you," he told her sincerely. "Bring back some pictures."

“Only infrared ones,” she smiled. “It will be some weeks yet before my cubs can tolerate the light.”

“I’ll be looking forward to when you bring them home, that way I can turn them against you,” Jason grinned.

She laughed. “Good luck with that, cousin,” she retorted.

“Has Graal seen them yet?”

She shook her head. “He won’t have any contact with them until their second birthday, when he is officially introduced to them. But he has sent several messages conveying his pride at their birth and his hope that they will be fine cubs.”

“Well, that’s good, I suppose,” Jason said. “I’m just glad I’m not a Kimdori. I couldn’t take not seeing my kids until they were two.”

“It’s how we do things, and it works for us, cousin,” she replied. “The females are the ones that raise the young. The males have no say in the matter.”

“Well, that explains why the Kimdori are so messed up, letting the females mold the young,” he teased, which earned him a kick on his armored shin. He laughed at Miaari’s adorably annoyed look, but that was her fault for kicking a man wearing armor when she had bare feet. “You know, maybe I should actually go with you,” he mused. “Denmother did invite me to Kimdori Prime, and I’m kinda curious.”

“I would be happy to take you, cousin,” she said. “But Aya might object. Only a Generation could tolerate the radiation for more than a couple of hours. Your guards would have to stay in their armor at all times when not in a shielded building. It would be best to simply leave them here and go alone, but Aya would never permit it.”

“Probably not,” he chuckled.

Definitely not, Suri affirmed.

“Not even a Generation could stay for an extended period,” Miaari added. “I believe that six days is the maximum exposure level before the radiation starts doing physical damage.” That was the threshold for Generations when it came to radiation. Generations could tolerate radiation

until the energetic particles started doing physical damage to their bodies, because Generations didn't suffer damage to their DNA from radiation exposure and their cells were much, much more resistant to damage from radioactive particles. Low energy radiation was very easy for a Generation to handle, but something like Polonium-210 would shred a Generation's body as easily as it would about anything not a Kimdori or a Jakkans. Generations didn't suffer from radiation sickness or get radiation-caused diseases. The only way radiation could hurt them was high-energy radiation punching molecule-sized holes in their bodies, as high-energy radiation did to just about anything but Jakkans and Kimdori.

That aspect of the Generations made them highly unusual among most known life in the galaxy. Only a handful of species known were either highly tolerant of or outright immune to most forms of radiation. Only Kimdori and Jakkans had more radiation resistance than a Generation, and they were both immune to about any radiation except that which would rip their bodies apart in a matter of seconds. Not even *they* could stand up to radiation of that intensity, because when it got to that point, it was more about the physics of being bombarded with high-energy particles than it was being exposed to radiation.

The radiation resistance of the Generations even played a role in the defense of the planet. There were radiation emitters set up around Kosiningi as a last resort defense in case of invasion, set high enough to kill anything but a Generation after about half an hour of exposure, at the very limit of Generation resistance to radiation.

Jason did find it a bit amusing that a species that could withstand radioactive bombardment could still get sunburn...but UV rays were a *slightly* different kind of radiation than playing hacky sack with a lump of Uranium.

Songa hurried up to him and took a seat on the other side of Suri. "There you are, Jason, Chirk said you were at lunch," she said. "I need you at the Annex as soon as you finish eating."

"What for?" he asked.

"I just got back your last screening, and you've developed a malignant malformation on your liver," she replied. "It's just a bundle of about a

hundred cells, but it *is* cancerous, so we need to cure it before it begins to spread.”

“Woah, I have cancer?”

“Only for about two more hours,” she smiled. “The procedure will take about half an hour, and the worst we’ll do is stick a few needles in you,” she winked. “It’s very easy to deal with malignant growths when they’re at this stage. It’ll be even easier as soon as Myli’s engineers finish the project I asked them to do.”

“Which is?”

“Using spiders to deal with internal problems like cancer,” she replied. “The medical spiders she programmed to help perform the jack implantation were a fantastic success, so we’re exploring other ways these nano-machines can help us doctors do our jobs. If it works right, the new treatment will be to inject the patient with spiders, which will then search out and destroy cancerous tumors and cells from the inside. Under strict medical supervision, of course,” she said quickly. “I’m even in consultation with some geneticists to build spiders that can deal with genetic defects, revert spontaneous cell mutations like the ones that cause cancer and some other diseases, repair radiation damage, and to regenerate and repair malfunctioning organs.”

“Well, Myli *did* say that the spiders would have some serious potential in the medical field,” he recalled with a nod. “Well, if you say you need me, I guess I’ll be there as soon as I finish eating,” he told her, then he took another bite of his cheesesteak.

“That smells good. What is it?”

“Philly cheesesteak. They make them right there,” he said, pointing at Tony’s booth in the cafeteria. It had 14 different booths or stalls that sold a variety of food, from just about every tradition of cooking in the Imperium. The newest stall was a Shio couple who were selling Shio open-flame grilled fare, one of the oldest and most popular styles of Shio cuisine, and they were doing a brisk business. The Shio preferred to cook over an open flame, even if it came down to boiling water. They believed that cooking food over an open flame infused the food with the elements of the flame itself, which Jason agreed with. The kind of wood used in a grill affected

the taste of the food cooked on that grill, and since wood wasn't used much anymore by the common citizen due to its high cost, the Shio made nearly a science out of developing affordable compounds to add to gas-fed grill burners that infused certain flavors and textures into the food cooked upon the grills they fed. That was on top of the many spices that the Shio had invented and used in their cooking. The Shio reminded him of New Orleans, where people didn't even boil water without adding spices to it, but those spices never covered up or dominated the taste of the food, they only enhanced it. Faey liked Shio food and vice versa, but the Shio were much like the French in that they had a passion for fine food and fine wine, so they took cooking much more seriously than the Faey did. In Shio society, being a successful and accomplished chef was a *big fucking deal*. It was like being a lawyer or a doctor in Terran society, at least where social standing was concerned.

That Shio grill stall was yet another indication that the Shio were slowly taking over the house.

Songa returned with her own cheesesteak, and after a testing bite, she smiled and attacked the sandwich. After they finished eating, Shen and Suri packed him and Songa aboard the Marine corvette *Honor*, and they flew over to the Medical Annex. Haeri met them at Jason's more or less private examination room, Songa's own exam room just off her office, and since Jason was her only patient, it made that Jason's own exam room. Haeri took the gauntlet that Jason took off. *You don't need to strip completely, you Grace*, she told him. *But you do need to take off your breastplate.*

Not a problem, he replied as Shen and Suri stepped up to help him. *What's going to happen?*

We're going to give you a local anesthetic, then use a probe to remove the cancerous cells on your liver, she replied. *Usually we'd just use cancer eradication drugs, but you're a Generation and cancer is much more volatile for you. Generations don't respond well to Amotho-Stantivates, the family of drugs that kill cancer cells, so we have to use more direct methods to deal with cancer that's already there. We'll put you on an anti-cancer drug regimen, though, a drug called Hemocythrin-dimethycilicide. You'll be on the regimen for about a month or so to prevent a relapse, then you'll be done.*

Sounds good, he nodded. Any side effects I should know about?

The regimen? Nope, she replied. You'll take a pill every morning with breakfast, and the drug will actively prevent any cancerous cells from forming, you being a Generation doesn't interfere with this kind of drug. After about a month, we'll discontinue the regimen and see how you do without it.

Outstanding, he sent as Shen helped uncouple his arm greave and remove it, while Shen unlocked the seal between his breastplate and backplate.

I'm going to add a cellular analysis of your liver to see if there's any unusual cells forming, if you're prone to a recurrence, Songa sent as she set pieces of his armor on the table by the exam couch. But that's an external scan, so it shouldn't take but a few minutes.

Sounds good, doc.

The local didn't hurt at all, since Faey medical science was a series of little units attached to his body in a rough ring around the affected area that prevented pain signals from being generated by his body within the affected area. Songa then produce what looked like a long needle, and he watched with some curiosity on a monitor after he laid back as Haeri slid that long needle into his upper abdomen, just under the base of his ribcage, and pushed it all the way in to his liver. Songa then took over from a remote board, using the probe to literally scoop away the malignant cells, then the probe treated the microscopic cut on the surface of his liver with bio-accelerant. After making sure she got all the malignant cells, Haeri took out the probe, and they sent the cancerous cells over to the lab for analysis, calling in an intern to run them down to the lab. He stayed on the table as Songa ran an external scan, the scan sensor over his abdomen and chest as Songa studied his liver on a holo. Jason lost interest and played a quick game of Banyer's Maze by merging to his gestalt, and when he finished the first map, Songa was almost finished.

Looks good, dear, she sent to him. It looks like this flare-up of cancer wasn't due to any changes in your liver. Just a Generation being a Generation, she smiled.

I'm not complaining. Odds are I'd either have cancer or be dead of cancer by now if it wasn't for Faey medicine, he sent honestly.

Your father lived a long time, there's no telling how long you'd have lived without us, Jason, she smiled.

My father lived the longest of anyone he knew from his family, he replied. Just about everyone on his side of the family was dead by 35, and almost all of them died of cancer. Dad only lasted six years past that. I can pretty safely say that odds are, the entire Terran line of the Generations would have been extinct by now if the Faey had never come. Rahne had cancer when we found her, and now I get cancer, and I doubt I'd have had kids by now if I'd never have met Jys. It woulda killed us both, and that woulda been it. No more Terran Generations.

Well, you have us to keep you up and running, your Grace, Haeri smiled warmly. And at least you can say that the subjugation did have one good thing come about because of it.

More than one, Jason admitted ruefully. I'd say that it had eight good things come from it.

Nine, Songa replied absently.

Nine? I only have seven kids, Songa. Granted, Raisha and the twins aren't born yet, but they're still my kids.

I'm counting you, silly man, she winked.

Me and Rahne don't count.

So you say, she replied as she pushed the scanner up and away from him. Okay, since we pumped some bio-accelerant into you, I want you to go eat again as soon as you get back to the office, she ordered. Drink at least three glasses of water before you eat. I'll have the pharmacy fill your prescription and send it over to your house. Just take one pill every morning with breakfast, and eat breakfast, she commanded. You need to take that medicine with food for the best effect.

Got it. Breakfast for the next month. Make sure those instructions are in the package so Ayama reads it.

I'll tell her myself when I get home tonight, Songa replied. *That's it, dear. As soon as you get your armor back on, you're free to go.*

Only one needle this time? Man, did I get off easy, he sent in relief as Shen picked up his breastplate and backplate, still connected at the shoulders so he could put it back on quickly.

You're still here, your Grace, and we have lots of needles around here, Haeri teased.

I still have a whole cylinder filled with that pigment alteration compound Songa helped me make, woman. Don't tempt me, Jason warned, which made all four women in the room explode in laughter.

After getting his armor back on, he returned to the office. The beach back home was empty now, everyone had gone inside, so he shut that off and checked his inbox...and naturally, Chirk dropped a couple of things in there for him. He first had a talk with Brall over New Teria, giving him marching orders to go out there himself and look around in addition to a few stops in Kosigi and the Shimmer Dome to check up on some things. Brall traveled more than just about anyone else in the White House, and he loved it. Brall was not the desk jockey type, and that was why Jason hired him. Brall kept his eyes on what was going on out there and brought his observations back to Jason. Thanks to Brall, Jason knew what was *really* going on out there, in places he didn't have the time to visit himself. Once Brall had his marching orders, he headed out to finish off his rounds, passing by Miaari as she walked in. She handed him a handpanel with the latest analysis of the communications from Andromeda; those kinds of things were never *transmitted*; they were hand delivered on dedicated devices. She sat in one of his chairs as he read it, then set it down and leaned back in his chair. "So, about what we first thought."

She nodded. "Our initial impressions are supported by the in-depth analysis," she said. "The Consortium intends to relocate to *our* galaxy, because they know they are going to lose the war with the Syndicate."

"Sooooo, we do what we were planning. Analyze, study, and prepare for them to get here," he grunted, looking out the window. "Where is that report from Denmother?" he asked impatiently.

“The infiltrators at Trieste may have run into unforeseen problems,” she replied. “It does you little good to wait here, cousin. Go out and *do* something, that will take your mind off of it.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said, standing up. “I don’t want to go home because I won’t want to come back to work. So, why don’t you come with me?”

“Where are we going?”

“One of the places I like to go when I need to stay calm,” he replied.

Miaari was a bit curious as they boarded the corvette, then headed well out to the west, to the northwestern edge of the continent. It wasn’t *too* far from Karis, since it was on the northeastern edge of the southern continent of Karga, going to a coastal area of low, gentle hills with sandy beaches... and massive trees with huge canopies that shaded entire acres of land. The corvette made a ground landing at the outskirts of the Parri village, in an area they roped off for visitors, and the Parri *shaman* and her two apprentices approached as Jason Karinne came down the stairs, his two guards glaring a bit because he was in a tee and jeans rather than his armor.

In this place, there was nothing to fear.

“Welcome to our village, your Grace,” the *shaman* said, rising up on her hind legs and taking his hands. “It is a pleasant surprise. What brings you to us this day?”

“A little too much nervous energy,” he replied with a rueful smile. “This is one of the few places on Karis where I always feel calm.”

“Then our trees are doing what they should, though you could have gone to your *own* tree,” she said with a fanged smile

“If I go home right now, I won’t want to leave. Besides, my tree lacks a wise *shaman* to speak with,” he replied.

“Come, come! We shall drink tea together and talk of affairs.” She gave a slightly surprised look when Miaari came down the stairs behind him, her amber eyes taking in everything. As far as Jason knew, it was her first visit to the Parri village.

“*Shaman*, you remember Miaari?”

“Of course. Welcome among us, Kimdori,” she said with a simple nod.

Miaari sat with them as they sat close by the small fire that held a kettle over it on a stand, quiet and observant. The Parri *shaman* talked a great deal about their trees, how they were growing, how they were maturing, and how they expected them to bear fruit earlier than anticipated. “I wonder, *shaman*, does that mean that the soul of Karis is healing faster than you first predicted?”

She gave him a gentle smile. “In a way, Jason, yes,” she replied. “The soul of the planet has shown marked improvement over the last months. The spirit of the people who come here bind his wounds as much as the return of nature across the land. With every passing day, he grows stronger and stronger, and his progress is reflected in our trees,” she said, looking to the closest *oye* tree and smiling that gentle smile. “And how is your tree? I haven’t visited it in a while.”

“Growing taller and taller, and starting to worry my next-door neighbors that it’s going to overgrow their houses.”

She chuckled. “Then you should speak to your tree and ask it to consider slowing its growth,” she replied. “I’m sure that it would listen to you. It doesn’t want to discomfort your neighbors.”

“I’m not sure how much it listens to me,” he chuckled.

“Oh, it listens, Jason Karinne,” she replied with a mysterious smile. “It listens to all of you who live around it and tries to keep you happy. I’m sure if you explain that it growing too large may make your neighbors unhappy, it’ll take the necessary steps.”

“Well, I’m not exactly used to asking a tree to not grow so tall,” he said ruefully. “It must be one of those lessons you talked about, you know, about seeing more than what’s there.”

“If you love your tree, Jason, it will listen,” she told him, then she took another sip of her tea.

After a little tea and some conversation, they took a walk among the gigantic *oye* trees that dominated the coastal plain. The *shaman* walked on all fours, her hinged neck shifting to a horizontal orientation quite easily, because they were walking a little too fast for her to feel comfortable on her

hind legs. Jason was a little surprised at how easily he could accept something like carrying on a conversation with what looked like a giant bobcat, mainly because she came up to his ribs walking like that. It made a man feel a little humble walking among trees with trunks wider around than some houses, towering hundreds of feet into the air, their wide canopies merging above to dot the grass beneath with dapples and beams of warm sunlight. The *oye* trees truly did seem to thrive here on Karis, the only other planet known to the Parri that would grow them, and Jason could see the buds of the flowers that the *shaman* hoped would bear fruit this time. Eventually, Jason did bring her up on the state of the war, both their hope to defeat the first wave of Consortium warships, and the grim reality of what was coming.

“Often, those with no love in their hearts seek to fill that hole with other things,” she told him, rising back up onto her hind legs and walking over to the base of one of the trees. It came straight up out of the ground, no roots to block access to the trunk, which leaned just slightly to the right and was about 20 feet across...one of the *smaller* trees. “Some fill that void with riches and the decadence that it brings, seeking to cover the emptiness within with indulgent excess. Some fill it with the need to control others, finding fleeting pleasure in the power such control brings. Some fill it with the raging emotion of their desires, abandoning control to fulfill their every impulse, and spiraling ever downward into darkness as their need to satisfy their darkest fantasies overtakes their will to control it. You, Jason, seek not any of those things. You carry the burden of leadership with humility. You understand that the allure of riches is a pleasure that leads only to emptiness. You maintain control of your desires, supplanting them in favor of the needs of others. These, *Benga*, they seem to me to be the most extreme example I have ever heard of of those who seek to fill the emptiness within with both greed and power. The loveless ones already here at least seem...*reluctant*,” she said absently, caressing her hand over the smooth bark. “Perhaps after so long fighting these *Benga*, they have succumbed to despair and have embraced the very emptiness they once opposed, and the light of love that once illumined their hearts has faded into darkness. That is far more sad than those who have never held love within them at all,” she sighed, then she looked back at him. “But the true tragedy is that they have gone beyond the hope of redemption. They have allowed fear to twist them into the mirror image of those they oppose.”

“Well, I’m glad you agree with me there, *shaman*. I know that if *you* insist we oppose the loveless ones, then fighting them is justified.”

“Raw force is rarely the answer, but it can often lead one to the right path,” she told him as she turned around. “Sometimes, one must communicate with those who will not listen on a level they can understand, so you might take their ear and force them to see the truth. True wisdom is understanding when the spear is to be put aside, and words take their place,” she smiled as she knelt down. Jason gawked a little as she pushed her hand *directly into the tree*, then pulled out a small disc of the rich wood that made up *oye* trees, like a polished mahogany. “Sometimes, it is not what one says, but how they say it that matters the most.” She caressed her furry, short fingers over the dark wood, almost as if she were brushing dust away from it, and Jason looked back to the trunk and saw no hole, no scar in the wood, the bark smooth and unblemished...how did she *do* that? “But if you trust in your heart and the love that speaks from it, you will find a way. And often, those who can hear the song of your heart will help you, even if you don’t know it,” she added, leaning down and patting him on the shoulder “A gift for you, Jason, from the trees. They are very proud of you.”

He looked down at it. It was the crest of the Karinnes, but it wasn’t etched into the wood. The wood itself was colored, the black lines ingrained directly into the wood, as if it were *grown* that way. The wooden disc was about nine inches across, about an inch thick, and shined as if it were varnished and waxed.

“Your love is your strength, Jason Karinne. Your heart sings of its love, for your women, for your children, for your people, for your world, for us *all*, and it makes others listen to you. The song of the love in your heart brought the Parri to Karis, to help heal the soul of this world. Your heart called to us, Jason Karinne, and we came to you.”

“I always wondered,” he said quietly, soberly, tracing a finger over the wooden disc, along the circular border of the house crest, just over the star and phoenix. “Why you just...*showed up*.”

“It was because we heard the plight of your heart, and were moved to aid you and Karis as we could,” she told him, stepping past him, around him, then putting her large hands on his shoulders. “Because the love in

here sings across the void, pure and strong, reaching all the way to Imbria,” she added, reaching over his shoulder and patting his chest. “You would be a strong *shaman*, if you desired to be so,” she added lightly, stepping away, then dropping down to all fours. “If there is one thing that you can teach Rann, Jason, it is the power of love. It is the greatest force in all of creation, the brilliance against which the darkness of those who have no love in their heart cannot abide. The light of love banishes the darkness, spreads warmth and happiness among any who can believe and uplifts them. And I think it is time for us to return you to the world outside, Jason Karinne. The trees have allowed me to speak that which they wished to say to you, since you cannot yet hear them yourself. And very soon, you will be needed back in your world, so you should consider returning to your large house of white. They will be looking for you.”

She padded off, leaving him standing there, looking down at the disc in his hands, his mind both chaotic...and oddly *calm*. The Parri were so *different* from any other race or species Jason had ever encountered before. They were mystics. They rejected technology. They rejected modern education. Their ways and their culture were among the most unusual of all of known sentient life...but looking down at that disc, Jason Karinne wondered that between the two of them, which of them was truly the more advanced.

He pondered a long moment, then gave a sigh, clasped the disc tightly in his hand, and started back towards the village.

When he got back to the White House, he again marveled a bit at the Parri, because Denmother Zaa was coming out of hyperspace and was about fifteen minutes from landing. Somehow, the Parri *knew* that she was coming. Zaa intended to deliver the report in person, and Jason had time to get back to his office and smack Suri on her armored butt when she threatened to bring the paddle for him leaving the White House out of armor. But Jason felt as safe among the Parri as he did anywhere on Karis, probably even safer, and their remote village was so far from the beaten path. Besides, he would not offend the Parri by coming to their village looking as if he expected to be attacked. That would be an insult to them,

and while the Parri were very wise and calm and tolerant, they had their little customs. Jason would not offend those customs.

He brought a cup of coffee and some danishes to the office and sat down just as Zaa strode into his office. She was wearing the full white bar of her station, starting under her chin and down her neck, flaring out as a wide triangle of white across her shoulders that narrowed down to a white bar just below her breasts, then trailed all the way down to her crotch. She didn't always show that white, since the Denmother was the Denmother and didn't have to *prove* that she was the Denmother, a ruler that was comfortable *not* demonstrating the visible trappings of her power. But today she was in her full "formal coloration," and it made her seem even more regal than usual. She sat down without a word as Jason put the office into secure mode, Miaari and Cybi in quiet attendance. Miaari stood behind Zaa's chair, attending her, while Cybi sat in her customary spot on the corner of his desk, leaning on her hand. "I hope you have news."

"I don't have the full report, but I have enough," she replied, touching her memory band. A holo of the Trieste system appeared behind her. "As you suspected, this is the first stage of a strike against Karis itself," she reported.

"Alright, how are they going to do it?" he asked.

"By doing something desperate," she answered. "I would ask that you bring Myleena into this, Jason. Her expertise may be needed."

"Sure, hold on a second." It took about a minute to get her on a holo. She was up in Kosigi, up in the ultra-secret 3D drydock, and that had a secure area from which she could attend via holo.

"What's up, Jason?" she asked, and he took a moment to explain the situation to her. "Okay, got it. Now why do you need me?"

"We may need your technical expertise, Myleena," Zaa replied, then a series of 2D holo pictures of the interior of the Trieste moon appeared. "What the Consortium is going to attempt is to create an artificial wormhole, somewhat akin to a Stargate, but with some significant differences," she began. "They intend to try to generate a temporary wormhole from only one side and hold it open long enough to get their fleet through it."

Myleena whistled. "That's crazy."

"They are out of options and nearly out of time, Myleena," Zaa replied. "As one of the foremost authorities on hyperspace technology, is it feasible?"

"Theoretical? Yes? Practical? Trelle no," she replied. "A gate with an unanchored terminus is highly unstable. To do something that nuts, they'd have to write off half the fleet to being lost in transit before it even leaves Trieste."

"Yes," Cybi nodded in agreement. *"With no terminal controlling device, it opens the exit point of the wormhole to wild flux. It may shift its position by millions of kathra in a matter of seconds, expand or contract, it might even become unstable and hurtle the ships trying to traverse it into hyperspace. For that matter, it might destroy them in a singularity rift. There is no guarantee that any ship that enters a single-sided gate will survive to reach the terminus."*

"Okay, that does more or less define desperate," Jason grunted. "But it's possible."

"Very possible. I could do it with the translation engines on any of our ships, Jason, though the wormhole's origin point would be *inside* the engine. That doesn't make it all that useful."

"But they have *hundreds* of jump engines inside that moon," Jason realized.

"That's how they're going to do it," Myleena said. "You put the engines in a spherical configuration and focus all their power at a common point in the middle. The engines behave similar to a Stargate, and they form a one-way wormhole. That wormhole will insanely unstable, and they're gonna lose a large number of ships in transit, but they don't care about that, I'd wager."

"Me either," Jason grunted. "If they have twenty thousand ships, they're fine with getting ten thousand here. But the other half of that is that they must think they have a way to get past Cybi," he said as he patted Cybi's hand, rubbing his chin between his thumb and index finger, looking at the holographic hand resting on his desk. "They know that the most powerful

defense here is Cybi, that she'll attack any fleet that gets here herself. She can wipe out half a fleet on her own."

"Not on my own, it takes both of us, my friend," she corrected, sliding her hand out and patting his shoulder.

"If they can get ten thousand here, and you and Cybi can take out half of them, then that leaves five thousand ships for us to deal with," Miaari speculated. "That's not impossible. If the entire Confederate Navy were parked here, we could defeat them in a decisive battle. With no way to escape from here, we would be assured to completely defeat them. There would be no retreat."

"And that will make them dangerous," Myleena said simply. "How long 'til they try this stunt, Denmother?"

"My children inside report that they are about three weeks from executing the operation," she answered. "Since they have never done this before, they are being exceptionally careful. The math must be absolutely *perfect* for them not to form a black hole within Go'jur'mi and destroying themselves and all of Trieste, then unleashing a dire threat on this entire side of the galaxy."

"Could they really do that?" Jason asked.

"Theoretically, it's possible," Cybi answered. *"But given the power technologies the Consortium employ, it would be exceptionally improbable. Even Karinne power technology would be hard pressed to create an artificial black hole that would last once the effect that created it was removed."*

"Yup, because it has to be self-sustaining, and that's tricky if it doesn't have the mass to generate that much gravity," Myleena nodded. "That takes an absolutely insane amount of power to produce a permanent spatial effect with the power of a black hole. I'm talking the combined output of two or three average *stars*. I can create a black hole in my lab, but it dissipates as soon as I turn off the power," she told them.

"Okay, we know what they're doing and when they're doing it. The question is, do we allow them to try, or stop them before they do?"

“That is the other part of what my children reported. Jason, the Consortium have discovered the spiders,” she warned. “They have never seen their like before, but as you know, they *are* highly advanced. They are studying them as we speak and seek a way to neutralize them without alerting us that they know about them.”

“Fuck!” Jason snapped, smacking the table. “How did they discover them?”

“My children didn’t report *how*, just that they have,” she replied. “They reported that they discovered the spiders about two weeks ago and are still actively studying the devices. My children theorize that they don’t know how many there are. They haven’t discerned a way yet to scan the ships to find them *inside*.”

“I think we’d better activate them, Jayce,” Myleena said quickly. “If they find a way to stop them, then they get us nothing. But if we hit them with them *now*, we’ll do damage that they have to waste time and energy to repair.”

Jason didn’t waste a second. “Do it,” he replied quickly. “*Right now*, Myli.”

“I can’t from here, I’ll have to call the shop. Gimme a couple of minutes,” she said, then her holo vanished.

“Well, there goes our ace in the hole,” Jason said in disgust. “I’m just amazed they discovered them. They read as microscopic space dust to sensors when they’re not active.”

“They might have detected the ones that *were* active,” Miaari postulated. “If I remember right, they activate when they attach to a ship or platform, then enter the structure, anchor themselves inside, then hibernate again. They may have detected the drain on their own broadcast power network.”

“Yeah, that might be how they did it,” Jason grunted. “That means that at best, we’ll knock down the number of attacking ships. At worst, they fix them all without losing much time.”

“I will tell my children to make sure that no research about those devices leaves Trieste,” Zaa noted. “We don’t want them to start

experimenting with nanotechnology. It will cause *us* far too many problems.”

Myleena’s face blinked back on about a minute later. “They’re jumping the activation unit in now, Jayce,” she told him. “The spiders will be online in about four minutes. We’ll start getting back reports in about six.”

“Alright. So, while we wait for that, the question remains. Do we attack them now, or let them try to get here and face them here?”

“Without consulting the rest of the Confederation, my opinion would be to let them jump,” Zaa said. “To attack Trieste would cause untold destruction, where if we let them jump, they have to assault a heavily fortified position, we have weeks to prepare, and they will lose a large portion of their fleet just getting here. But, that’s not a decision we can make alone, Jason. The others must be allowed to voice their own opinion, as this is a matter that affects us all, even if the attack is directed at Karis.”

“True,” Jason grunted. “That means we’ll have to let them bring in their ships. Cybi, get hold of Myri and Rund, and tell them to start the preparations to raise the planetary shield, and *keep* it on,” he told her. “And tell Dellin to activate all of Kosigi’s defenses and start drills in preparation for an attack. Tell him to specifically prepare to fight off a surface attack. If they can take over Kosigi, they get their hands on every ship they’re building inside of it. Oh, and tell him to prepare to evacuate all foreign workers out of Kosigi. I don’t want anyone in there that’s not house in the middle of a fight. They make advantage of the confusion to steal something.”

“Understood, Jason. I’ll relay the orders.”

“Wise,” Zaa nodded. “With the planetary shield online, nobody can drop any spy devices onto the planet’s surface.”

“It’s gonna throttle our transport traffic down to two lanes where we can turn the shield soft so they can go through it, but that’s life,” Jason said. “And we’ll have plenty of time to make sure the shield is in good working order.”

“There’s little else in the report for us to discuss, Jason,” Zaa told him. “I suggest we release this information to the rest of the council immediately.”

“Yeah, good idea. Let me get Chirk on it,” he said, picking up a danish.

It took about twenty minutes to get all the rulers into council, including waking up Sk’Vrae, Assaba, and Grayhawk, and Dahnai attending from Jason’s own study, wearing a bikini top. Once everyone was in attendance, Zaa gave the report to the others, explaining what the Consortium is doing at Trieste. It took her barely ten minutes to lay it all out. “We’re currently waiting for the first reports about the success of the spiders, since the Consortium discovered them and we had to activate them immediately,” Zaa finished. “The question we must debate is what to do. We can attack Trieste before they try this operation, or we can allow them to go through with it, suffer the losses trying to form a single-sided gate, then confront them at Karis.”

“That would be best,” Assaba said immediately. “I don’t need to consult my military leaders to know that. We could move our entire fleet to Karis and engage what remains of their fleet with the defenses of Karis itself reinforcing us.”

“Still, we need to consult the general staff about this,” Grayhawk said. “This is a military matter, and few of us here are military experts. I would like their opinion on the matter before we vote.”

“That is a prudent course of action,” Graa’s vocoder intoned monotonously. Given he *was* the resident military tactician on the council, his voice carried weight in military matters. *“Let us bring in General Shaddale and the War Room’s staff”*

While they got the generals into the conference and explained everything to them, Myleena communed him. *[The spiders are active, Jayce,]* she told him. *[We’re getting back the first reports.]*

[What’s going on?]

[The spiders are doing their jobs,] she replied. *[We turned them on before the Consortium worked out a counter. They’re taking control of the Imperium-made weapon platforms, they’ve already acquired penetration into the planet killer, and they’re attacking the computer cores on infected ships. The spiders are programmed to attack Consortium ships with the platforms and to destroy the cores in the ships they’re infecting. Getting*

back some images from the infiltrators watching the system. Sending you a feed.]

“My team just told me that the spiders are attacking as we speak,” Jason declared. “They’re getting a feed in from the Kimdori spy ships that are watching Trieste.” When the feed came up, Jason transmitted it to the council, to the War Room on Terra, and to his own command center. They watched as Imperium-built weapon platforms fired on Consortium ships as a huge fireball bloomed on the planet’s surface under them, visible from space as a small dot of bright light. They saw a Consortium destroyer get turned into Swiss cheese by the Torsion weapons on the platforms, the ship on fire and spiraling down into the atmosphere.”

“What’s that explosion on the surface?” Sk’Vrae asked.

“It’s the planet killer, the spiders were designed to overload its core and blow it up,” Jason said. “That one was built out in the middle of nowhere, so we weren’t worried about a fusion explosion destroying a city. We figured it was the best way to completely eradicate the unit and everything the Consortium had around it.”

“Good move, baby,” Dahnai said as she adjusted the strap of her bikini. “That looks like a major explosion.”

“They were using the equivalent of a class three industrial power plant in that thing, Dahnai. That explosion is about a fifty *kathra* wide.”

“Ouch,” Dahnai breathed. “I hope it doesn’t cause any lasting weather problems.”

“Better to scrub the air of dust and deal with some bad weather for a couple of years rather than have the entire population eradicated.”

The platforms moved away from the planet, searching for Consortium ships, then they started to explode one by one, as the Consortium activated failsafe’s they must have installed on them. But according to the telemetry Jason was getting in on his gestalt, the platforms had destroyed 589 Consortium ships that had been in orbit around the planet...but not as many as they could have, since they’d been moving their ships inside the moon over the last couple of weeks. The platforms also didn’t attack the Imxi ships at all, since they weren’t programmed to be hostile to them. They were programmed to *only* attack Consortium ships. Telemetry told him that

an additional 2,822 Consortium ships had had their computer cores destroyed, which rendered them dead in space, at least until all telemetry suddenly stopped.

“Those clever bastards, they introduced a cascaded power spike into their broadcast system,” Myleena reported when she got back on her holo. “That killed our spiders, they’re designed to use *their* power system, but weren’t designed to deal with something like that. I can’t put that kind of tech in them and keep them that small.”

“Guess they did find a way to counter them,” Jason grunted.

“Yeah, at a cost of some of their own equipment,” Myleena answered. “That blew out some of their own systems, but better to lose some of their own than have the spiders rampage all across the planet.”

“Oh, by the way. Council, this is Myleena Karinne, my primary technological expert. Myleena, the Confederate Council and members of the general staff,” he introduced.

“An honor to speak before you,” she said smoothly, bowing a bit before her camera.

“The spiders were her invention,” Jason told them.

“Then congratulations to you for your genius, Myleena Karinne,” Assaba said with a nod. “How much damage did your surprise do?”

“Not nearly as much as I’d hoped, but we got the planet killer, removed those weapon platforms, and disabled or destroyed 3,418 Consortium ships. That’s going to cost them time and resources to get those ships repaired. Replacing a computer core isn’t easy, or cheap.” She drummed her fingers on the table under the camera. “Given the kinds of facilities they have there, though, they’ll probably get a good number of those ships back online after three weeks. But hey, any damage we can do is good, it keeps them on their toes.”

“If the planet killer is destroyed, we could feasibly attack Trieste,” Ba’mra’ei suggested.

“They don’t need a planet killer to destroy the planet, High Staff,” Lorna told her calmly. “All they have to do is crash a crippled battleship

into the planet at high speed. The impact explosion will cause an extinction event.”

“That’s one of the things we need to discuss with you, General,” Dahnai told her. “We need to decide if we want to attack Trieste *before* they try to attack Karis or allow them to jump and face them at Karis.”

“Speaking for myself, I’d let them attempt the jump,” she said. “Given how dangerous it’s going to be to try, we very well may see them lose their entire fleet just *getting* there. That’s a battle we can avoid, when we have the Benga coming in just three years. I don’t want to risk our ships now when we’ll need them then. Karis is probably the most heavily defended planet in this entire quadrant. With those defenses sitting behind our fleet, we have a much better chance of dealing with them once and for all with a minimal loss to our own fleet.”

“I’d have to agree with that assessment,” Shio Admiral Jarik Furystorm nodded. “If trying to execute this wormhole jump is so dangerous, we should let *them* take that risk. If we’re lucky, we won’t have to fire a single shot.”

“And even if we’re not lucky, we’ll still have the entire combined Confederated Navy sitting in orbit with the Karinne planetary defenses backing it up,” Skaa Admiral Frazzil added. “If we have three weeks, we can pull in a huge number of Skaa defensive picket ships. That’s thousands of ships. We can match *their* numbers with *our* numbers,” he declared strongly. “In that kind of fight, every ship will have value, even our older and obsolete picket ships.”

“We can’t pull the entire fleet,” Lorna said. “We still need to maintain a defensive presence at Stevon, the Stevaki are in a very vulnerable position at the moment with their Budding coming soon. They need complete protection, both interdicator and warships to discourage an attempt to attack.”

Ba’mra’ei almost looked like she was going to kiss Lorna for that declaration.

“Alright, so we deploy everything we don’t need at Karis to Stevon and rely on the interditors to protect all other nearby systems,” Jarik offered. “We consolidate our fleet at Terra and drag as many Skaa picket units to

Terra as the gods will allow, to have them ready to deploy to Karis at a moment's notice."

"A wise idea," Lorna agreed. "With the Stargate there, we can deploy that force to Karis in a matter of hours."

"That brings up a point. Due to the very real threat against Karis, it might not be best to conduct our summit there," Sk'Vrae said. "Not that I would fear being on Karis, but if the Consortium attacks early, then we may all be trapped on the planet until the battle is over. This may put undue stress on our forces if they know their rulers are on the planet being assaulted."

"That's a fair point," Assaba agreed. "I think we should move the summit to Terra."

"I can arrange that," Kim declared. "It may be short notice, but I can manage."

"Actually, I think it best if we simply reschedule the summit until *after* the Consortium attacks Karis, so we might meet and discuss the next phase after we have neutralized the threat of the Consortium," Zaa said. "It should still be held on Karis, but not until after the Consortium are repelled and defeated."

"I think that's an even better idea," Dahnai agreed. "Let's just put off the summit until three days after we mop up the Consortium. That gives the Karinnes time to recover, but also lets us *see* the aftermath of the battle with our own eyes."

"I concur, Dahnai," Assaba agreed. "I would very much like to see the results."

"So it is the opinion of the commanding generals and admirals that executing a defensive operation at Karis is more strategically sound than a pre-emptive assault on Trieste?" Grran's vocoder intoned as his fingers danced before him.

"I believe it is, Field Marshall," Lorna answered. "The three of us agree, and we're nearly a third of the command staff. I'll call in the full command staff and pose the idea to them, if you wish."

“I think we’d like to get the opinion of the entire military command staff on this, General,” Vizzie spoke up. Grizza was also in attendance, them sitting side by side in front of their holo camera. “It shouldn’t take them very long to discuss the problem and offer an official recommendation.”

“About an hour,” Lorna agreed. “If the council wishes, we can do that right now, and report back our opinion.”

“We should still be in session by then,” Magran told her.

“Yeah, go ahead and do it, Lorna,” Dahnai said commandingly. “I don’t think any of us will object.”

There was silence.

“Then we’ll be back in contact in an hour. Esteemed rulers,” she said with a bow, and the three holos of the military commanders winked out.

Myleena stayed in the conference as the rulers discussed the issue, from bringing supplies and defensive equipment to Karis to discussing evacuating the Stargates to protect them from capture or destruction, which they’d have to do. They couldn’t leave the gates there at Karis, they’d be prime targets. Jason took a lot of notes in his gestalt as they discussed it, listening to the rulers, who had more experience than him, discuss the best way to go about defending Karis. They asked Myleena more questions than he expected, mainly concerning defenses at the system they might not know about, but it was Jason himself that brought up the main defense...Cybi. “How strong our defense will be is directly proportional to how close they are to the planet,” Jason told them. “Talent is our main weapon, and that’s limited by range. If they’re within one hundred kathra of the planetary shield, they’re in range.”

“I thought the insects were resistant to telepathic attack,” Magran challenged.

“They are. I’m talking about getting in *telekinetic* range,” he answered. “That’s much shorter than telepathic range. “Once they’re within TK range, we can directly attack the ships, not the crews inside them. Outside of that range, it’ll be more conventional warfare.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Assaba grunted.

“I’ve seen it in person, Assaba. It’s what the Consortium is after, if you don’t recall,” Dahnai said. “Biogenics can let a Generation reach out from the planet surface and crush a ship in orbit.”

“We can do that, if they’re close enough,” Jason affirmed.

“That was why the first attack on Karis failed, they had no defense against Jason destroying their landers using his telekinetic ability,” Cybi nodded. *“Unable to land on the planet’s surface and complete the mission, the Consortium ships were repelled, and most were destroyed.”*

“They’re in a rather bad dilemma. What they’re after is the very device that attacks them when they try to take it, and there’s no defense against telekinesis,” Jason said, patting Cybi on the hand. “But I never think of Cybi as a *weapon*, even if what she can do can be used to defend herself.”

“Self-defense, that is the perfect description,” she smiled in return.

“I’m surprised you’re being quite so forthright, Jason,” Grayhawk noted.

“If you’re going to trust me to run the logistics for the Confederation, I have to be as honest as I can. And knowing what *you* will face if you ever try to attack Karis will keep you from getting any bright ideas,” he said bluntly. “The Generations are no threat to anyone as long as you don’t come picking a fight. We all live on this one planet, and by God, we’re gonna defend the only home we have with everything we’ve got.”

“Down, boy,” Dahnai said lightly, which made Jason laugh despite himself. “This is all information that our War Room knows, the KMS has been surprisingly honest about their capabilities when it comes to the defense of Karis. The Generations using their abilities is part of their overall defensive plan, and Lorna knows most of it very well.”

“Yup,” Myleena intoned. “3D will also put a hand in. We have a lot of toys that we’ve saved *just* for an attack on Karis. These are the extra-nasty toys,” she said with a vicious smile.

“And if they manage to get the majority of their fleet here, we’ll need every one of them,” Jason said.

When the command staff rejoined the conference, Lorna related their decision. “We unanimously agree that allowing the Consortium to try the

jump to Karis is the best course of action,” she told them. “Further, since it’s apparent that they don’t know that they’ve been compromised, we should conceal our fleet movements to prevent them from trying before we’re fully ready. We keep the fleets in place around Trieste and make no overt moves, while we move assets where they can’t see, mainly in the systems where their clairvoyant being is blinded. We’ve been keeping the majority of our reserves in those systems, primarily Terra. We stage them at Terra and bring in as many Skaa pickets as possible, then when Denmother’s infiltrators know the timeline our enemies intend to use, we make our moves. We deploy our fleets to Terra and jump the Stargates around Karis back to Terra but keep enough ships there capable of jumping the interdictors to get them back to Karis to start the linking process as quickly as possible. However, as a purely last ditch defensive measure, we want to move one Stargate away from Karis, about four hours’ distance by sublight, and link it to a gate to Terra to serve as an emergency evacuation point for our forces should they be overwhelmed. The Stargate would need to be left relatively unprotected, which is admittedly a risk, but we want to keep towing ships with the gate capable of jumping the gate out of the Karis system if it comes under attack. Denmother, do the Kimdori have any *civilian* ships capable of towing a Stargate through hyperspace?”

“It won’t be necessary to use a civilian ship, General. My battleships can simply jump back to Karis in real time. It’s not even a millisecond’s jump from four hours away by sublight.”

“We’d thought of that, but having ships with towing beams already locked on and ready to jump at a moment’s notice would be best, just in case the Consortium somehow manages to aim that directional wormhole with enough precision to drop a fleet of ships at the gate’s location.”

“Now that is a prudent observation,” Zaa nodded. “A gate can be emergency delinked and unanchored in two minutes. If the towing ships are already locked onto it, it means that the gate can be evacuated with great haste.”

“I’d say that’s a damn good idea on both sides,” Dahnai said. “It gives us an emergency means of escape if things go bad *without* having to turn off the interdictor, and it protects the Stargate. Those things are *dreadfully* expensive,” she said emphatically.

“Myli,” Jason said. “Is it possible for other ships to sync to the outbound interdiction waveform?”

“HMMMMMM,” she said after a moment. “I know that Faey and Collective ships could do it.”

“What does this mean?” Assaba asked.

“Before we developed a means to jump the effect, we found a way to jump *away* from an interdicator without being knocked out of hyperspace,” Jason told him. “There’s a way to sync a ship’s jump engines to a segment of the interdicator’s waveform effect that allows the ship to, well, to use a Terran idiom, to *surf the wave* all the way out of the interdiction effect. It allows ships to jump *out*, but not *in*. If all Confederate ships are capable of jumping out, then we won’t need the Stargate.”

“It’ll depend on the engine power of the ships,” Myleena declared. “Not counting the INS or the Collective Navy, I’d say that the computers on any of our allies’ ships would be capable of managing the math and the timing. They’d just need the engine power to handle the microflux while riding the wave out. There’s still some hyperspace flux, even when you’re riding the trough of the interdiction waveform effect. If they give me the specs of their engines, I can crunch the numbers and get an answer to you in a few hours, as well as suggest any required refits and whip up a generic computer program any of our allies can use to execute an outbound jump. I already know enough about Urumi ships to say that yes, they *can* jump out. They’ll have to tweak their engine power couplers a little bit, shunt almost all their power to their engines for the jump, and install a tertiary power plant to help govern the engines through the flux, but that’s a six hour upgrade. I even have the program they need for their ships already written. It was a little something I worked up in my spare time,” she said, smiling at Sk’Vrae.

“Send the instructions for the refit and the governing program to the War Room so it can be disseminated out to the Royal Navy,” Sk’Vrae said.

“I’ll have it over there five minutes after I’m done here, your Majesty,” Myleena promised. “It’s an easy refit, and I wrote the program using Urumi algorithms, so your computer should have no problems with it.”

“I find it slightly disturbing that you know so much about my ships, Myleena,” Sk’Vrae said dryly.

She laughed. “I’m just too curious for my own good, your Majesty,” she said with a bright, adorable smile. “I take *everything* apart.”

“Why did you hold onto this?” Grayhawk asked. “This could have been useful before now.”

“Well, because I wasn’t sure if *everyone* could do it, your Highness,” she replied. “I’ve had my hands in the guts of a Collective warship, so I know a lot about them. But I haven’t done that with anyone else, so I don’t know if they’re capable of it. I didn’t want to give just a *couple* of governments in the Confederation the ability to do outbound jumps. It would create an unfair advantage. That’s why I didn’t release my work to the Urumi, or even the Imperium. If they could jump out, but it turns out that the Shio can’t, well, that’s not fair. And the Karinnes are trying to keep everything as fair as possible here, so we’re all equals. As I said, I didn’t even give this to the *Imperium*, Prince Grayhawk.”

“Well, that’s reasonable,” he said in reply, a bit mollified.

“I hope you have a refit procedure and program waiting for the INS, Myli?” Dahnai asked.

“Already covered, Empress,” she answered. “INS ships using SD-2663 or better jump engines along with an MPD-16 or better primary power plant will require a class XV ID-PP installed to augment engine power against flux, and I already wrote the governing program. As far as I know, all INS ships were upgraded to at least those units three years ago.”

“Then send that to the War Room as well.”

“I’ll take care of it, your Imperial Majesty.”

“I would highly suggest that we send Duchess Myleena the necessary technical specs, your Highness,” Jarik urged.

“Yes, release it to the Karinnes, High Admiral,” Grayhawk replied.

“You will have the cooperation of the Skaa Navy,” Assaba declared. “I will have those technical specifications sent to you immediately.”

“I’ll have my High Admiral release that information to you as soon as possible,” Magran agreed.

“If it turns out that all of our ships can jump out, then we won’t need a Stargate to serve as an emergency escape,” Zaa said. “That will let us keep them safely out of reach of our enemy. The Stargates are our one critical advantage in this war. We cannot allow them to fall into the hands of our enemy, at any cost.”

“I concur. Let’s see what Duchess Myleena can work out with our allies’ ships before we decide whether we have a Stargate available,” Lorna agreed. “But, the one thing that everyone here must remember is that the Karinnes *will not retreat*,” she said intensely. “Cybi cannot be moved, and the Karinnes will not abandon her. They will fight, they will fight to the last woman to defend Cybi. They will not abandon her, no matter the cost.”

“Never. *Never*,” Jason said with even more intensity, grasping Cybi’s hand.

“So we must all understand the cost that will come with a retreat. It means the complete destruction of Karis and the loss of everyone on the planet, particularly the death of the most unique life form in this galaxy,” she said, looking directly at Cybi.

“Not everyone, I’ll try to evacuate as many civilians as I can off the planet,” Jason said. “But actually making them leave might be tricky. When I announce the incoming attack, most of the civilians will volunteer for the defense militia. They did the last time, we had so many volunteers we didn’t have anywhere to put barely a quarter of them.”

“Yes. I am humbled beyond words at how fervent the members of our house are about protecting our home.”

“So everyone must understand right here, right now, that for the Karinnes, this will be a fight to the death,” Lorna continued in a grave voice. “That is the level of their commitment to this war. We must honor that commitment in our decisions. If we retreat, they die. It’s that simple.”

“I’m glad you pointed that out, Lorna,” Jason said with a sober look.

“When I signed the treaty that entered the Empire into this joint effort, I agreed to defend all of you against the Consortium as I would defend my

own,” Assaba declared in an august voice. “And I will honor that commitment. If the Karinnes will not retreat, then neither will we. Every Skaa ship engaged in that battle will have these orders. No retreat. No surrender. Hold the line, no matter what it takes. We will not dishonor the gallantry of the Karinnes by fleeing, even should it cost me my entire fleet.” He looked to Lorna’s holo. “General Lorna, get those technical transmissions to Duchess Myleena as fast as possible. My comrades, we should adjourn for a short time and assess our domestic resources to see how we may be of aid to the House of Karinne in their time of need, to repay them for the aid they have provided us in our time of need. I will order the immediate redeployment of all available picket forces to Terra, as well as domestic and humanitarian supplies to help the populace recover in case the planet surface suffers damage. The general staff also needs time to allow Myleena to do her research and further refine our battle strategy. I propose we meet again in six hours, to give her Majesty Sk’Vrae time to rest, and to give our people time to being formulating plans for our consideration.”

“I think six hours is good,” Dahnai agreed, getting back into the conversation. She and Assaba often vied with each other over who got the most attention in council. “Lorna, you have six hours to get your initial plans ready for consideration.”

“We’ll have them ready in four,” she replied confidently, to which the other two officers on the holos nodded.

After the council broke up, Jason looked at Zaa with a bit of surprise, but what she gave him in return was a mysterious smile. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “I can’t believe that Assaba would order his fleet to hold the line or die.”

“Assaba admires the House of Karinne more than you understand, cousin. He knows that his own empire might be in flaming ruin now if not for you, and he will repay that debt as best he can,” she told him, turning in her chair. “Miaari.”

“Yes, my Denmother?”

“I depart immediately for home. Call a meeting of the Clan Council so they are waiting for me when I return to the Hearth,” she declared. “You

speak with my voice as I travel back to Kimdori Prime. Our cousins are threatened, and we must respond.”

“It will be done, Denmother,” she said immediately. “The clan leaders will be awaiting your arrival.”

She stood up, then reached over the desk and put her hand on Jason’s neck. “Have faith, Jason Karinne. The faith you invested in others is about to return to you. You heard them, cousin. They will fight with you.”

“You have no idea how relieved I am to see that,” he replied.

“Cybi, you must prepare,” Zaa told her.

“I am already running level one diagnostics on all primary systems to ensure that the planetary biogenic network is in optimal condition. I will be in fighting trim, Denmother.”

“Very good. I return home, Jason. There is much to do, for both of us. I will send all reports from my children as soon as they send them.”

“Thank you, Zaa. For *everything*,” he said, putting his hand over the one on his neck, looking up at her with earnest eyes.

“You are our cousins, Jason, and as you are well aware, we have a pack mentality,” she smiled gently, almost playfully. “I will return tomorrow with Denfather, so we might rest before Rann’s party.”

“With the summit being delayed, I guess we can reschedule things a little,” Jason noted as Zaa pulled her hand back. “Yeri’s gonna kill me.”

Both Zaa and Miaari laughed. “That is the risk when one enters the realm of diplomacy, Jason, that all your careful plans might be changed by but one person’s whimsical fancy. Though, in this case, the summit *does* have good reason to be delayed.”

“Yeah, I don’t want all of them here while we prepare,” Jason grunted. “And I wouldn’t want them trapped here. If someone got killed, it might start a war we’d never recover from.” He looked to Cybi. “Do me a favor and assemble the cabinet, 3D, and the command staff. Have everyone go to the ops center, it’s big enough to hold everyone,” he told her. “Myli too, she needs to be there. She can get that work done from the council after we’re finished.”

She nodded silently, then her hologram winked out.

Jason and Miaari walked down to the ops center, which was in the military command building, Jason lost in thought. He knew this day was coming since Siyhhaa had told them about the fleet of ships coming to their galaxy. This was it. The reckoning, the battle the Consortium had worked for since they left Andromeda five years ago. They were coming to try to capture Cybi and the Generations, to use them as weapons against the Syndicate, who was coming here as well to both continue their war with the Consortium and to start conquering a new galaxy. And behind that first wave of Syndicate ships was the Consortium's master plan, the colonization force that would establish the new Consortium empire in their galaxy and use the vast distance as a shield to protect them from their Andromedan enemies. He knew that eventually, it would come down to a battle over the planet Karis itself, as the House of Karinne protected Cybi, the Generations, the planet, their hopes and dreams, and ultimately their secrets from what had become their most bitter enemy.

This was what almost all of their planning had been for, to protect Karis from attack from an enemy that wanted nothing less than to turn them into living weapons.

Everyone was either there or represented by hologram by the time he arrived. The ops center's regular workers also looked on, Shey sitting at her usual place, turned to look in the center of the room, Myri, Juma, and Sioa standing beside her. Navii sat in a chair near the main holo-display, which Jason used to display a graphic of what they had coming. They all listened intently as Jason laid it all out. "If they can make that one-way wormhole stable enough, they'll get the majority of their fleet literally right on top of us," he finished. "The other members of the Confederation have pledged their support, and they're mustering their navies as the War Room formulates a plan. Now, that's what *they* are going to do. What are *we* going to do?"

"I think we start with that wormhole generator," Tom said via hologram from 3D. "If we can't stop it, we attack it from *this* side. If it's that unstable already, I think we can make it even *more* unstable with a little 3D elbow grease."

“We can do exactly that,” Myleena agreed from Kosigi. “If we put some background gravometric flux throughout the entire space around Karis, it will make that wormhole even more unstable. That’ll destroy more ships trying to come through.”

“You think you can come up with something in ten days?” Jason asked. “Zaa said three weeks, but I don’t think they’ll wait that long. The instant they get all their ships there, they’re gonna do it.”

“If nothing’s changed, they should have the last waves of ships from the PR sector in nine days,” Miaari supplied.

“Then ten days is our target,” Myri agreed. “Palla’s engineers have been working on the nebula problem, and she now thinks she can take the Consortium’s command center despite that nebula protecting it. If they’re stripping the PR sector of ships to attack Karis, this is the perfect time to let her try. They’ll pull defensive pickets from that command center to attack Karis, they don’t have much of a choice if they want to succeed. We should strike at their command center after they pull those ships but before they try to hit Karis, both to get rid of the threat it poses and try to destabilize their chain of command.”

“Does she have enough there to do it?”

“The Stargate is up, we can hit that nebula with our entire fleet if we have to,” Juma answered him. “If we can get rid of that command center and those last two breeding queens, it cripples the Consortium after we repel the attack on Karis. It’ll make it almost child’s play to mop them up.”

“Do it,” Jason said immediately. “Two hours after the last wave of ships leaves the PR sector and they commit, attack the nebula.”

“I’ll have a battle plan ready by tomorrow morning,” Juma replied with a nod. “But we’ll need Maggie to stop using up the 3D inventories. We’re going to need them to hit the nebula.”

“Tom, call her right now, tell her to stop and consolidate,” Jason ordered, and Tom nodded and turned away from the camera. “We can’t let the attack on the nebula damage too many ships, Juma.”

“I know, that’s where Palla’s engineers come in. They think they can get the entire fleet on top of the command center without losing a single ship.”

“Then we’ll give them the chance to prove it,” Jason agreed, turning to Yeri. “Yeri, I hate to tell you this, but the summit is being postponed until after we fight off the Consortium,” he told her.

“Are we still hosting it?” she asked.

He nodded. “Three days after we repel the attack on Karis. So you have more time to get things ready.”

“I’ll expand the guest list. I have little doubt that more than *just* the Confederation will want to attend, since the summit will be more about preparing for the Syndicate at that point.”

“That’s not a bad idea. But, Rann’s birthday party is still on,” he said, which actually caused a few cheers in the room. “Myri, when I announce the attack, we’re going to form another civilian militia, just like last time. What I want you to do is coordinate that with Sioa’s army units. We have a ton of Raptors parked up on the Virgan continent just waiting to be used.”

“We have a plan for a planetary guard system already in place your Grace,” Sioa told him, causing a holo of the planet to appear, along with dots and marks that denoted caches of weapons and equipment. “We’ll mobilize the planetary guard and form a militia from any new volunteers, who will mainly be there for emergency response. Firefighting, damage control, that kind of thing. The guard units will reinforce my army to deal with any ground forces that get past the shield. I’ll have the KBB and the Red Warrior elite Gladiator platoon stationed at Kosiningi to defend Cybi, while the main bulk of the Gladiator platoons will protect critical military, civilian, and governmental assets in and around Karsa.”

“Did we ever get the Crusader project finished? I haven’t seen any reports on that lately.”

“At current, 63% of all Karis residents have a suit of Crusader armor, and that includes almost everyone who registered as a volunteer for the planetary guard,” she answered. “So the vast majority of our volunteers will already have armor. Anyone who doesn’t have armor will be put in secured bunkers or evacuated off planet. If we can get them to evacuate,” she added dryly.

“Rund, how is the power system?”

“It’ll be able to handle powering the defensive systems,” he replied. “We haven’t had any more problems since that substation failure.”

“Did they finish those defensive upgrades to the power nodes?”

“Yes, we got it all done,” Bunvar answered. “Every critical power unit has its own hard shield and defensive weaponry.”

Jason looked back to Tom. “What else do you think we can get ready in ten days, Tom?”

“Well, if we’re talking about ideas instead of inventories, how about going after their broadcast power system? Gerann’s been tinkering with that jammer.”

“Well, he has six days to come up with something. Give him some help.”

“We can do that,” he chuckled. “Outside of that, give us a few hours to brainstorm. We’ll have a list of proposals on your desk in a few hours.”

“Good, I’m looking forward to it. Dellin, how many ships will we have coming off the docks in the next ten days?” Jason asked.

“Including Faey and Urumi ships, 37,” he answered. “We’ll have 12 of our own ships coming down, including a battleship and two tactical battleships. We’re kinda in a dock-building cycle at the moment. Kosigi itself is going to be ready. All our weapon systems are in perfect working order, but I doubt we’ll get to fire a shot. If they can direct that wormhole, they’d be insane to drop their fleet in on *our* side of the planet. They know we have GRAF cannons on the moon’s surface. They’ll keep the planet between us and them if at all possible.”

“I’ve already prioritized crew training for the big ships,” Juma chimed in. “Given we’re going to need those ships immediately, I’m going to pull just a couple of experienced crew members off every ship to crew the new ships and mix them in with graduates, that way we have experience on those ships.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jason said. “Anyone else have anything to add?” he called. When everyone was quiet, he nodded. “I’ll make the official announcement to the house about what’s coming. Miaari, I think it’s time we also told the Confederation about the second wave coming in behind the

Syndicate. I don't think I want them to start thinking that this is the last we'll see of the Consortium."

"I can do that, I'll send it out as a priority text report," she replied.

"Oh, that reminds me. When is the second string jammer going to be ready, Dellin?"

"Five days," he replied.

"Outstanding. We can have that up and in place before they attack, so they can't easily coordinate with their command center," Jason said with a dark smile.

"If it's that important, then I'll have it ready in three days," he said confidently. "At this point, anyone working on something that won't be ready in ten days can be moved to something that will. I can triple the manpower on the jammer dock."

"You're in charge up there, Admiral," Jason told him. "I have faith in you." He turned and looked at all of them, both those there and those represented via holo. "This is it, people. This is what we've been preparing for. We didn't know *how* they were going to do it, but we knew it was coming. All I can really say is how proud I am of everyone in this room, everyone on this *planet*, for sticking it out. This won't be easy. They'll throw everything they have at us, because their backs are against the wall and the survival of their government may hinge on the success of this attack. That will make them zealous and determined. But *we* are just as determined. Remember, all of you, that there is no retreat," he said in a grim tone, starting to walk around the central holo display. "Cybi can't be moved, and I won't abandon her, even if I have to stand in her core chamber with a pulse rifle and hold off the entire Consortium. But this is about more than Cybi. This is about *us*," he declared intensely. "This is about everything we've built here. This is about all of our hopes and dreams. This is about our *future*, and I'm not surrendering that to the Consortium. I will fight for that future with every fiber of my being, and I will *never* retreat.

"They're going to be desperate. They're going to be utterly devoted. Well, *so are we*," he said in a low, intense growl. "If we fail here, if they take Karis, then this entire *galaxy* will be open to invasion and conquest by the Consortium and the Syndicate. They're *all* counting on us to stop the

Consortium here, now, and protect planets and peoples who will *never* know about what happens here from the day a Consortium or Syndicate cruiser appears in the sky of their world. This isn't about just *us*. This is about protecting everything we know, everything we are, everything we *will be*, from being taken away from us. Remember that when you're making your plans. Remember that when you're putting on your armor. Remember that when you pick up your pulse rifle. We fight here to protect not just us, but our friends, our families, our allies, even our rivals. We are the line holding back the darkness, and *we cannot yield*," he said, clenching a fist. "And we will succeed," he declared. "Not because we have better equipment, or better training, or better ships, but because we fight for more than territory or conquest or spoils. We fight for *our children*," he said in an intense, powerful voice. "And there can never be any better reason than that. And that's all the speech I'm giving," he said, which caused a few chuckles. "Everyone knows what to do, so let's get it done. Let's make sure that when those bastards get here, they *never* forget the ass-kicking we gave them."

Loud cheers rose up from the ops center as Jason turned and stalked for the door, his guards following him. There was a lot to do, and there wasn't all that much time. Thoughts of laying out on the beach with his family and Dahnai were long gone from the forefront of his mind as he headed back to his office, to do everything he could in service to the House of Karinne.

Chapter 8

Kaira, 1 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 24 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaira, 1 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Kaishwain, Karsa, Karis

There was no better place to have a birthday party.

The park was simply known as *Kaishwain*, which was one of the most recently opened entertainment complexes in the city. It was on the western edge of Karsa, actually not very far from the strip, further down the coastline and built on a gentle bluff overlooking the ocean. *Kaishwain* was Shio for *unbridled joy*, and it was a recently formed Shio investment group that had built and operated the park, numbering some of the first Shio to come to Karis, before the mass Shio invasion after the Consortium attack. There had been a few Shio that had joined the house before that, mainly investors and entrepreneurs that fit in with the goals of the house, and they had worked for over a year to build *Kaishwain*. It was a theme park much akin to the many that could be found on Terra, but it was mainly a water park. It had games, rides, shows, and attractions, but what it had more than anything else was pools, slides, and water-based attractions. Aquatic animals from 17 different planets were on display in the aquariums, including Terran animals like sharks, and there were water shows with some of the animals. There were acres and acres of different kinds of pools, from wave pools to waterfall pools to roundabout water canals that pulled people floating on tubes or mats in a loop around some of the inner pools. There were slides that were four stories high, some of them twisting and looping, some arrow straight and designed for speed, even a slide that ended in a cliff that sent the rider plunging 45 feet into a pool of water below, which would be suitably frightening for anyone that wasn't a pilot, but the pool

below actually employed technology to make sure the free-fallers weren't injured. Their water landing was always very soft thanks to density diffusers that took the "concrete" feel of falling into water out without reducing its density to the point where someone couldn't swim through it, so it was more like landing on an airbag rather than the water's surface.

Like Terrans and Faey, Shio adored water parks and considered water activities among their most enjoyable hobbies and entertainments...just another curious way that the three species were so similar. Then again, the Shio were from a very hot world compared to most. Shio physiology gave them a core body temperature that averaged around 104 degrees Fahrenheit, but could fluctuate between 98 degrees and 110 degrees safely; the Shio body was built to be able to handle very large swings in core body temperature, something a Terran body could not do. A six degree increase in a Terran's body was potentially life-threatening, and an eight-degree increase was fatal. the average temperature of a Shio summer in the temperate belt was around 100 degrees, so they liked activities out in the open air and near the water. It was even worse in the equatorial belts, where temperatures hitting a sweltering 130 degrees were relatively common. It was like living in Death Valley back on Terra, with tropical humidity. The Shio were a species that liked the heat, tolerated it much better than many other humanoid species, but they also loved a good swim.

Shio was a planet Jason *never* wanted to visit during the summer. He hated heat.

But Jason couldn't deny that the Shio could build a *damn* fine water park...and today, it belonged exclusively to Jason Karinne. Jason had rented out the entire park for the party, then had turned around and invited close to 13,500 people to the park to enjoy it for free, who were the families of KMS servicemen and government employees, giving the families of those working so hard a day at the most popular water park on Karis, with no entry fee, only having to buy food and pay for any souvenirs they bought. They were the families of his military and government workers, so the idea one may try to hurt him was almost laughable. But Aya was eternally suspicious and had instituted security screenings for the family members and their kids to get inside to ensure no weapons got inside the park. It was hard for any of the parkgoers to get in hiding a weapon in a bathing suit, however, and the entire park was enclosed in a temporary

mobile infantry hard shield for the duration of the Grand Duke's stay, which throttled all traffic down to the one entry point. With those precautions in place, Aya had *grudgingly* agreed to allow Jason and his family to run around without armor. After all, when it came to bare hands, nobody was going to hurt Jason Karinne, not when he could tie just about anyone in a knot in hand to hand combat. In addition, the guards *were* in armor, and they were very close to their charges and keeping a close eye on absolutely everything. But she'd also put restrictions on the movement of the Grand Duke, the Empress, and their families, creating a moving security bubble around them as they enjoyed everything the park had to offer. Jason had to almost fight Aya hand to hand for the privilege to actually *have fun* at Rann's party, then fight Dahnai's guards to let Dahnai come into close proximity to commoners in a non-secure location. But even they had to admit, since everyone was in bathing suits or even less, and it was *Karis*, it wasn't like there was a whole lot of danger.

While Jason was making sure Rann had a good time, outside the park, it was almost insanity. Everyone on the entire planet was running around like crazy to prepare for the inevitable Consortium attack. All cities were being hardened, mobile hard shields brought in and installed, infrastructure reinforced, while Karis Guard units and Emergency Militia drilled in open areas to prepare for the possibility that they may have to fight. Just like last time, nearly 75% of the population of Karis had volunteered for the militia, and this time, Myri was employing them. Many of them who were already registered for guard service had been trained to fly Raptors, pilot Gladiators, or man mobile artillery pieces, and they were put to use as civil defense, stationed in their home cities and tasked to defend them. People without that training or brand new volunteers were instead put in Crusader armor if they didn't have it, handed a pulse rifle, and started emergency drill training to form a home-guard infantry that would repel any surface attack. These militia volunteers would reinforce Sioa's army units and would defend low-priority locations to allow Sioa to move her trained units to more critical areas, which gave the entire inhabited zone of the planet complete defensive coverage. They were being put where nobody expected any fighting, but their presence there would discourage any Consortium ground units from trying to make a landing there and attack those locations. After all, the Consortium *didn't know* that those ground units had no training. Their armor was the same as the regular infantry, they were

carrying the same weapons, they had Gladiators, mobile artillery and gun platforms, and Raptors reinforcing their ground positions. They *looked* just like regular army, and that deception was going to be convincing.

Up in space, the KMS was mustering its fleet around Kosigi, and inside Kosigi, Dellin had shifted all manpower to finish any ship that could get done in six days while leaving the rest until after the battle. All foreign workers were still there, though, helping as best they could, mainly because Miaari didn't want to send them home and let their sudden influx into the Confederate systems tip off the Consortium that the Karinnes knew they were coming. They'd be evacuated in six days, just before the first windows of opportunity for the Consortium to jump their assembled fleet into the Karis system. Until then, however, they were working as madly as the Karinnes were to build everything they could get off the docks before the deadline, be it KMS, Imperium, or Collective vessels. Every ship had already been checked over to ensure it was in peak operational condition, and they were now preparing for the battle using the battle plan the War Room over on Terra had come up with, and one of which Myri and Navii approved.

The plan was actually fairly simple. Every Confederate military asset they could gather together was being done so in the Terran system, and in eight days, they'd deploy to Karis. They would ring the planet like a defensive phalanx, using the planet's hard shield and its orbiting cloud of automated weapon platforms like a wall to protect their rear. Lorna's entire strategy revolved around forcing the Consortium to fight the Confederation within range of those orbital platforms, which nearly tripled the firepower that the defenders could bring to bear against their enemies. If the Consortium tried to fight at range, well, that was what the 3D toys and *millions* of missiles were for. The KMS wasn't the only ones that heavily employed missile technology. Both the Skaa and the Alliance had highly advanced missiles and utilized missile cruisers akin to KMS gunboats, ships designed to launch a withering hail of firepower to overwhelm an enemy quickly. The defensive phalanx would be lightest around Kosigi, because that moon was a bristling armada of firepower all by itself and the Consortium would be insane to try to attack the side of the planet where Kosigi had line of sight on the attacking ships. There were 29 different GRAF cannons on the lunar surface laid out in a pattern that allowed 12 of

those cannons to fire on a single target no matter where it was, and the surface was littered with conventional pulse batteries, rail cannon batteries, MPAC batteries, plasma torpedo launchers, missile launchers, and even Torsion batteries. Kosigi was a bristling armada of firepower that orbited the planet, and no sane military commander would attack the side of the planet where that Death-Star-level orbiting military station could unleash that firepower.

The other key aspect of Lorna's strategy was the use of Skaa picket ships. The ships, which were corvettes and frigates mainly, were armed with as many Torsion weapons as the Skaa could refit onto them, and they were the basic staple of the Skaa's formidable military strategy concerning defense of their own systems. The ships were ancient, obsolete, but they were ships that could fire weapons, and Lorna estimated that they'd have some 16,500 of them staged in the Terran system by the deadline. Those ships were not fun for the Skaa stationed on them, however. They were battered, broken-down, rusting hulks that suffered mechanical and operational breakdowns with daily regularity, where the ship's engineers had to use the ultimate in jerry-rigging tactics just to keep them going. Replacement parts were not made for ships relegated to the picket forces. Half those ships were held together with duct tape and super glue, because the Skaa method was to simply leave those ships to their own devices, where the engineers did what they could with what scant resources they had available. Any ship that couldn't be repaired was cannibalized to repair other ships, and that was the way they ran with it until every ship of that class was out of commission. But while they were all half-operational rust buckets, they had weapons, and they could use them. And while one shot would take out a picket ship, there were a few thousand more right behind it firing away with whatever weapons they had managed to fit onto the vessel. Jason did not in any way envy the unfortunate Skaa stationed on those defensive picket ships, it was a high mortality and high stress posting, but it was the only way a Skaa could get into the *real* Navy, in both the Empire and the Republic. A hopeful had to serve on picket ships first, where they were then "drafted" up into the regular Navy after proving they had the mettle by serving on picket ships. Skaa Naval recruiting was something of a trial by fire, where Skaa serving in the defense forces tried to attract the attention of Naval officers by taking useless old junkpiles and actually making them fly, making them fight, and not letting them explode on a

daily basis. The Skaa that could handle those terrible conditions and still serve with distinction went on to the Navy. Those that didn't tended to die in engine explosions, accidents, or catastrophic system failures, if they didn't die in combat. But if a Skaa wanted to serve in the Navy, that was the only way in, by running the gauntlet and surviving five or six years in the defense forces, where blind luck played as much a part to one's success as skill, education, training, and ingenuity.

Jason couldn't refute the effectiveness of the Skaa's tactic from a strategic point of view, even if it did seem a little, well, *callous*. He'd *never* do that to his own girls, but the Skaa were the Skaa and they did things their own way, and in that same callous way, it did make the Skaa Navy *very* formidable. Even their greenest recruits were hardened by the precarious, dangerous duty of serving on a picket ship.

With the armada of Skaa picket ships reinforcing conventional Confederate warships, and with the nasty array of weapon platforms, 3D toys, drones, and missile batteries backing up the last but most powerful defense, which was Jason and Cybi, it was a ring of defensive firepower protecting the planet Karis from Consortium attack. Lorna projected victory over the Consortium even if they managed to get their entire fleet to Karis safely, though the projected ship losses and casualty rates went up almost exponentially the more and more ships the Consortium got to Karis in the simulations. It would be a complete brawl with high casualties on both sides if the Consortium managed to get their entire fleet to Karis, but Lorna was still confident of victory. That would be a costly victory, but in this situation, victory was absolutely necessary no matter the cost. Defeat meant the fall of Karinne, the death of Cybi, the strangling of the Confederation without a way to jump the interdictors, and the loss of the Generations, and it also meant that the Consortium and the Syndicate would be able to establish a foothold in the Milky Way and begin both their attempts at conquest and their war against one another.

Defeat was not an option. Not for Jason, not for Dahnai, not for the entire Confederation.

The first battle, however, would be in the PR sector. Myri and Juma had a plan in place to attack the main command center in the nebula, where the energy beings were suspected to be, as well as the two egg-laying queens. A

task force of 170 KMS ships were on the board to attack that nebula, led by the *Aegis* and Palla Karinne. That attack would take place two hours after the Consortium jumped the defensive ships they had in place in the nebula to their sector, when that station would be at its most vulnerable, and they estimated that that would be in six days, since the Consortium would most likely be towing Imxi ships and thus they couldn't simply go into stasis and make the trip in one continuous jump. To prepare, the Parri had sent a *shaman* to PR-371 to enact those mysterious, mystical protections to blind the clairvoyant among their enemy to their fleet size, and Maggie had scaled back all her operations in Imxi space to save their resources for the attack. That might hint to the Consortium that they were preparing to make a major move, but that couldn't really be helped. They needed the toys Maggie hadn't used yet to take that nebula.

Strangely, the Parri *shaman* had not left yet PR-371. According to Maggie, he had taken an interest in the planet, and was studying it more closely before returning to Imbria. Jason couldn't fault him, really. It *was* a fairly lovely planet, as long as one could withstand the extremely heavy gravity and double the average air pressure, right on the upper edges of both Faey and Terran tolerance.

But while all those things were extremely important, Jason wasn't allowing it to infringe on Rann's birthday. Jason had made it clear that unless the planet was in danger of immediate and imminent destruction, not to bother him during the party. Even with everything going on, Jason could spare four hours to pay attention to his son on his birthday...after all, about the only thing he really did was read reports and make sure everything was going according to plan. It was his staff and workers and military doing all the actual work, Jason was just keeping an eye on everything from his office or from his house. Jason had even gone so far as to leave his gestalt with Aya, so he could devote all his attention to his family.

While the park was built by the Shio, it had to bow to the fact that the park was located on a planet where Faey customs held sway, and those were *not* Shio customs. Shio were nearly as modest as Terrans were, though they weren't as morally outraged at the sight of a nude body as Terrans could be. Because of that, the lone Shio currently close to the Ducal family, Ensign Mikano Strongblade, was wearing a rather stylish if *very* revealing bikini while the Faey woman beside her, Duchess Jyslin Karinne, was bare-ass

naked. Mikano had won a raffle Jason conducted among KMS personnel to attend the party, her and 29 other KMS personnel ranging from Fleet Admiral Haema Karinne—who had declined the invitation and gave her winning ticket to an engineering officer on her ship—all the way down to Petty Officer Second Class Jevin Hemalle, who worked in astrocartography on the destroyer *Tikanne*. Mikano looked just a *little* uptight being surrounded by rulers, nobles, and dignitaries, but she seemed to be getting along fairly well with Jyslin, and Rann *really* liked her. Mikano was mixed in with people like Empress Dahnai Merrane, the Denmother Zaa and Denfather Grun, Grand Duchesses Yila Trefani and Frinia Foralle, Secretary General Kim Duk Moon of the United Nations—who looked much more athletic in his Bermuda shorts and no shirt than Jason ever suspected—and in a somewhat strange happenstance, Overseer Brayrak Kruu, executive leader of the Moridon. If anyone *really* looked out of place, it was Overseer Kruu, since he was an eight foot tall demon-looking guy with red skin, glowing red eyes, and menacing black horns, but he was wearing what Jason would call a speedo, covering only his genitals and showing off a *massively* buff physique. The guy looked like an NFL linebacker, not an ounce of fat anywhere on him and looking strong enough to roll a car. Brayrak had come to Karis at Kumi's invitation and Jason's permission to discuss some very important financial matters with her, things that could only be discussed face to face, and since he'd been here, Jason invited him to the party out of respect for him. Jason was quite surprised that the ultra-serious Moridon would actually show up, show up in a *speedo*, and look quite comfortable socializing with the other party attendees.

“Breathe, Mikano, breathe,” Jason said lightly as he handed Jyslin a pair of sunglasses. They'd just finished the almost mandatory cake-eating, they'd enjoy themselves in the park for a while, then Rann would be given his presents in the afternoon when they had dinner inside the park.

“Leave her alone, you bully,” Jyslin replied with a wink, patting Mikano on the shoulder. Mikano's skin under what she usually wore was paler than her face, indicating that the Shio tanned, and unlike Faey and Terrans, Mikano *could* tan and sunburn on Karis. Because of that, she was in the act of slathering sunscreen on her green-skinned arm, which was usually covered by either her armor or a shirt.

“What? I just don’t want her to pass out,” he protested as Mikano gave him a sheepish look. “This is a party, after all. It won’t be much fun for her if she spends half of it unconscious.”

“I’m sure you’d enjoy giving her mouth to mouth,” Jyslin teased, which made Mikano blush furiously.

“Now who’s teasing?” he retorted as Rann and Shya ran by, then jumped into the pool. Rann was a very good swimmer thanks to their own pool at home, so Jason wasn’t worried at all that he was in water over his head. Besides, Aya, Dera, Ryn, Suri, Kaera, and Hara were all watching him. They wouldn’t let him drown. *Don’t horseplay with Shya in the deep water, little man*, Jason warned. *She’s not as good a swimmer as you are.*

‘Kay, he answered as he came up for air.

“So, what do you think of being at the party?” Jyslin asked the Shio.

“Equal parts exciting and terrifying, my Lady,” she replied in an honest voice that made Jyslin laugh.

“Drop the *my Lady* shit while we’re at a party,” Jyslin chided with a smile. “I *love* that bikini, by the way. Where did you get it?”

“A little shop on the east beach pier called Doggy Dog’s,” she replied. “Weird name, but they had some really nice bikinis. I rather like this one,” she said, plucking a bit at the strap of her bikini top, which was a very narrow fiber cord of pale blue. It looked a little unusual against her green skin, but it actually didn’t look that bad. Besides, it didn’t cover up very much, and Jason found what he could see to be extremely attractive. Being in the military with its stringent fitness requirements, Mikano had a *killer* body, toned and trim, with nice breasts, a flat belly, long legs, and a really cute butt. And since she wasn’t afraid to wear a thong, it gave his eyes much more of her butt to appreciate. “This suit was only sixty-three credits.”

“Wow, that’s cheap for something that nice,” Jyslin said. “I’d expect a bikini like that to run a hundred at least. I just hope you don’t mind being the only one wearing one,” she winked.

Mikano both blushed and laughed. “I’m...adapting,” she said delicately, which made Jyslin laugh harder.

“We’ll have you out of that suit and looking entirely proper for a Faey water park in three hours,” Symone said swaggeringly, throwing an arm over Mikano’s shoulder, which made her go a shade of leaf green. “Now let’s find out if you can swim!”

Symone bullied Mikano all the way into the pool, and Jason felt she was in good hands. Symone was just too charismatic to let Mikano stay that uptight for long, and she looked like she was going to go out of her way to make the Ensign relax and have a little fun. Rann and Shya joined in, swimming over to Mikano and Symone, then Rann surprised the Shio by throwing his arms around her neck and holding onto her while Symone tortured Shya maybe just a little bit, picking her up and completely out of the water, dunking her all the way under, then repeating it four or five times as Shya giggled and laughed when she could breathe. Jyslin jumped in and joined them, and since Rann was the center of attention, all four of Jason’s other children and Danelle followed them into the pool. The three women found themselves surrounded by kids, and they all looked just fine with it. Dahnai and Kellin sat down on the loungers just by Jason’s lounge, both of them nude, but that was entirely normal for Dahnai where a pool or any body of water was concerned. Dahnai was Faey to the roots of her hair, and she took any chance she could to show off her sleekly muscular body, *all* of it. Maer sat on the edge of the pool and kicked his feet as Sirri leaned over his shoulders, showing a few things a grown man shouldn’t see on a ten-year-old. Sirri and Maer had a really good relationship, Jason had learned. They were very good friends on top of being siblings.

Come on, you coward, let’s go on the super-slide! Sirri taunted, pointing at the four-story tall fast slide that was only a couple dozen yards away, which dumped the riders into a receiving pool right beside the pool they were using.

You go ahead, I ate too much cake, Maer replied. *I’ll try it after my stomach settles a little.*

Aww, it’s no fun if I can’t get to hear you scream like a little boy, she teased, then she slid around him and dove into the pool.

You feeling okay, Maer? Jason asked.

Just too much cake and that soda pop they served.

Too much sugar too fast, Jason chuckled aloud. *Yeah, just give it a few, you should be okay.*

Maer watched the younger kids and Sirri play in the pool for a bit, joined by more and more kids from the strip. Latoiya and Jack Junior joined the throng, as did Sami and Yuri, and Riza and Miza. Min's daughter Zara was over in the shallower water with Myri's daughter Ryla and Jari, the three of them just chatting, doing it aloud since Jari hadn't expressed yet, and Sora was swinging back and forth about ten *shakra* off the pool's surface on a footboard, which was something like a flying skateboard. She was as good on that thing as she was on a hoverbike, showing surprising coordination and body control for a five year old, swinging around in a complete circle, going up about ten *shakra*, then scaring the life out of half the people in the pool and Jason by kicking off the board and divebombing the pool. She almost landed on top of Danelle, and Danelle showed her displeasure by splashing a laughing Sora when she surfaced. Jason didn't have to do a thing, Zora swooped down on their daughter and read her the riot act from the edge of the pool as Kyri retrieved the board with her talent, pulling it into her hands a little further down the edge of the pool. Jason saw his two sons Aran and Zach way down at the shallowest part of the pool with their mothers, Dara behind Zach with her arms thrown over his shoulders almost possessively, Vell, Sheleese, and Sheleese's daughter Bria. The rest of the residents of the strip were running around the park somewhere, probably on a slide or a ride, in one of the aquariums or sitting down to watch a show, out doing what they were supposed to do, have fun. They didn't need to be *right there* with Rann to do that.

And that was exactly what this party was supposed to be about, to have a little fun and at least decompress a *little* given all the high-stress crap going on at the moment.

Jason made sure to partake in that fun. He spent some time with Dahnai and Kellin, then after Rann got tired of a "boring" pool that didn't do anything, they went out and toured the park, Rann and Shya pulling their parents around by the hands as they rushed from attraction to attraction that caught their fancy. They rode the twisty slides, and Rann dared to try to high speed slide. They watched a show that had Terran dolphins doing tricks. They got in the wave pool and tried their hands at *real* surfing, using actual surfboards, then they rode a couple of the rides. Dahnai and Kellin

were more than happy to do everything that Rann and Shya wanted to do, even when Kellin got dizzy on the tilt-o-whirl and almost threw up. They got into the “petting zoo” pool where Rann and Shya got to swim with some large but completely safe and gentle marine animals from various planets, mostly large fish or ray-like creatures, then Jason got *really* surprised when Rann actually talked Overseer Brayrak Kruu into trying one of the high dives in the big pool...and Jason was *astounded*. He went all the way up the highest diving platform, some 40 *shakra* over the pool, then he did an amazing dive into the water from all the way up there.

These rulers and their hidden talents...never in a million years did Jason ever believe that a *Moridon* would be that good at diving! He didn't even know Moridons could *swim*! Jason was mostly shocked that those horns on his head didn't either break off or break Brayrak's neck when they hit the water, since they grew from his upper forehead, to the insides of and above his temples, and they extended forward before curling upwards. Horns like that hitting the water at that speed, and his neck didn't break? He had to have some *hardcore* neck vertebrae.

Zaa and Grun watched as Brayrak surfaced, to quite a bit of applause from people around the high dive, and she chuckled throatily. “That is something I did not expect to see,” she declared.

“You and me both,” Jason grunted. “How did he do that without those horns breaking his own neck?”

“Moridon are very tough,” she told him off-handedly.

“No fuckin' doubt,” Jason breathed as the towering red-skinned male climbed easily out of the pool. “You are an amazing fellow, Overseer,” Jason told him honestly as he approached.

“I selected competitive water sports as my physical concentration during my days in the Institute,” he said modestly in his sober voice. “Diving was but one of the events in which our team competed. It is a reminder of my days of scholastic competition.”

“I bow to your mastery of the diving platform,” Jason told him, actually bowing a little.

Brayrak regarded the two Kimdori. “It is my honor to greet you, Denfather. I am a lucky Moridon to meet the elusive mate of the

Denmother.”

“I am rarely allowed off our home planet,” Grun said with a modest smile. “And the honor is mine, though I’m sure the others are waiting for the explosions to ensue. A Moridon and a Kimdori being in such close proximity, you understand.”

Brayrak actually gave a very slight smile, which was about as much emotion as one would ever get out of a Moridon. “These are different times, Denfather, and we all must bow to change if we wish to continue to prosper.”

Jason ended up with Rann, Shya, and Danelle after parting ways with Brayrak, riding with them on a relaxing float that drifted down the canal. Rann and Shya were sending privately as Danelle dozed a little, getting a bit tired after all the running around. Jason had his arm around her, nestled up against his side as Rann maybe showed off a tiny bit, picking up a couple of juice bottles from a serving table and bringing them over to the float, then offering Shya one of them. The two of them were discussing what to do about their room, since Shya’s things from Draconis would be arriving tomorrow and they’d have more stuff than they had room. It was the first test, to see if they could work out what to keep and what to store, and both Jason and Dahnai had decided that it was something they had to work out on their own. The excitement over being together was still high, but soon, Jason knew, the reality of them living together was going to set in...probably the first time they had a disagreement. But that too was their business, and they had to work it out. Jason wasn’t going to interfere unless they came to blows or started throwing things at each other.

He was still waiting for the hammer to fall on Shya. Rann was a smart, well-mannered little boy, but Shya was going to expect him to act like a *Faey* boy, which naturally would mean that Rann did what she wanted. Rann did have some manners in that respect, since Jason had taught him how boys had to act when dealing with *Faey* girls, but Jason also taught Rann that a boy could be polite and still get girls to do what he wanted them to do...after all, Jason got *Faey* girls to obey him all the time. Rann had a strong will and was fully invested in the idea that *he* would be in charge someday, so Shya had her work cut out for her if she thought she was going to be the one ruling the roost when their bedroom door was closed. Just

because he had manners, that didn't mean that he was submissive. Shya had never seen Rann assert himself with any seriousness, and she was going to be in for a shock when she finally tasted Rann's temper.

Jason had every confidence that his son would tame Shya Karinne and do it without alienating her.

Danelle yawned and nestled against Jason's side a little more as they reclined on the couch-like float, drifting lazily along the canal, and Jason pulled her a tiny bit closer to him. *I can't believe she's sleeping*, Rann sent, doing so gently so he didn't wake her up.

She's been running around a whole lot today, Jason replied with a loving smile at the little girl he considered his adopted daughter. He stroked back her blond hair from her face, revealing her little pointed ear. *And she's been up since sunrise, where you two slept in. She wanted to be with her mother before she went back up to Kosigi.*

Why didn't Aunt Myleena come to my party?

She's been here for a while now, you just haven't seen her, he answered. *She just couldn't be here for the cake, she had something really important to do. She's with your mother and Miaari right now.*

So she'll be at dinner?

Yeah, she will, Jason assured him. Rann and Shya went back to their discussion about their room, letting Jason snuggle a little with Danelle, at least until she stirred and leaned up, her little hands on the back of the lounge. *Well, I see someone's awake.*

Wow, I fell asleep?

For a little bit, he answered, then Danelle rather boldly climbed onto his lap. Five years ago, he'd have found it *extremely* improper for a five year old girl to be sitting in his lap when they were both nude, but Danelle didn't think a thing of it, and after so many years of exposure to Faey culture, Jason didn't think much of it anymore either. He wrapped his arms around her and leaned over her back, and she looked straight up at him with a silly little smile. *So, with Shya living in Rann's room, do I stay with Ranny when I stay over with you, Daddy Jason, or do I get my own room in the house?*

That is a very good question, Jason replied, looking down at her. I guess that's up to Rann and Shya, but I do think it's about time you had your own room in the house, he decided. The room by Rann's room is open. So, I think from now on, that's your room, Danny. I'll even let you decorate it just the way you want.

Good, cause the furniture in there looks awful silly.

It's guest room furniture, it's supposed to give a guest somewhere to sleep but not make them feel too much at home, he winked. Don't want them getting too comfortable now, do we?

Danelle giggled as she looked up at him. You're so mean, Daddy Jason.

I like being mean, I'm good at it, he replied flippantly. Lemme break the bad news to your mom. He turned and looked in the direction of Myleena and Jyslin. They were together with Miaari and Mikano, whom Jyslin seemed to be dragging around with her. The two had been together most of the day, with Symone joining them off and on, at least when she wasn't flirting with men or trying to convince both Dahnai and Kellin to sneak off somewhere private with her...Symone was never going to change, and he didn't want her to. *Myli.*

Yeah babes?

I've decided it's about time for Danelle to have her own room in the house, he declared. With Shya moving in with Rann, she needs her own space when she's over.

Sounds like a good plan to me, she answered. I want her to be happy when you're babysitting.

She gets to decorate her room, and she doesn't like the furniture that's already in there.

Me either, it looks like something my great aunt and uncle would have in their bathroom.

Jason laughed. So much hate for my eclectic style, he sent cheekily. You and her can look at some furniture tomorrow and let her pick out her set, and we'll move it in.

Actually, I think Danelle and Ayama will be doing it, we're both gonna be too busy tomorrow.

True, he grunted as reality rushed back at him. With everything going on, both of them *were* going to be just a bit too busy to look at furniture.

That's okay, Mommy, I understand, Danelle sent seriously. *With the bad people coming, we have to get ready for them, and that means all the adults are gonna be really, really busy for a while.*

I'm glad that you do, pippy, Jason sent, patting her stomach fondly. *But we're not letting that stop us from living our lives either. So tomorrow after school, you are going to pick out your new furniture,* he told her with firm decisiveness in his thought and an encouraging smile. *Then we'll move it in, and you can set it up any way you want. After all, it's going to be your room when you're over with us.*

I'll be using it a lot, she sent absently, which stung Myleena a tiny bit. Myleena often felt guilty that she didn't have more time for Danelle. *I'll have to get all my stuff out of Ranny's room. I have a lot in there.*

Well, that just makes more room for Shya's stuff, Rann sent easily.

After the ride, Jason let Rann get swept up by most of the other kids and go back to the slides, going down them over and over while Jason and Jyslin sat with Dahnai and Kellin and watched. Others wandered in and out to talk to them, Symone crept over to try to lure Dahnai and Kellin somewhere secluded to do some naughty things with them, and they all militantly avoided talking about anything even *remotely* serious or connected to the upcoming battle. Rann and the kids stayed on the slides for nearly two hours, until it was time for dinner and Rann's presents. They all went to a dining area in the park just as they were, in various states of undress, Jyslin dragging a startled and nervous Mikano Strongblade along with her. The eating area was a series of long tables covered by a tent-like canopy roof with no walls, and music piped in on speakers in the ceiling. Park workers served a large dinner to the guest of honor and his friends and family, which filled up the entire two long tables under the roof. Another cake was brought out for the dinner, but Rann had his eyes on the table full of presents for him.

It was going absolutely wonderfully well...until nature butted in. A bank of clouds formed up to the west as they ate, and by the time they got to the cake, a pretty strong shower swept over the park, causing the workers to turn on the airskin in the canopy to keep the rain out. Everyone outside still having fun weren't all that worried about rain, since it was a *water* park, but people did put away those things they didn't want to get wet. The rain blew itself out to sea by the time Rann started opening presents, and he pulled in quite a haul of primarily toys and clothes, as well as a couple of knick-knacks and a few pieces of jewelry fit for a little boy. Shya inspected Rann's gifts with a critical eye as he opened them, really studying a small robot toy that Myleena had built for Rann that had amazingly fluid movements, built to look like Kyva's Gladiator, and it had amazing detail. It even had Kyva's name by the cockpit doors and a tiny replica of the Ducal Medal of the Champion. Amber, who had spent most of the day riding around in a basket carried by Ayama, inspected the little robot, then put her nose up and sniffed disdainfully as she turned her tails to it and marched back to her plate.

"I think Amber's a little jealous," Jason noted lightly.

"It's not a vulgar robot, that's why," Jyslin replied.

"It wasn't *supposed* to be," Myleena protested. "It's just a toy, Amber, it's not a replacement. Stop being so melodramatic!"

Amber flicked her tails in Myleena's general direction.

"What can it do, Aunt Myleena?" Shya asked.

"It's just a toy, Shya," she replied. "It can walk around, fly, and it has an attachable toy cannon that goes on the shoulder. It even has retractable arm blades like a real Gladiator. And it responds to voice commands. "Gladiator KBB one, attention!" Myleena barked, and the little toy snapped to attention.

"*Your command, General?*" the toy asked, speaking in Kyva's voice. Kyva, who was sitting further down the table, did a double-take when she heard her voice coming out of the toy.

"Why do I see a *Small Soldiers* moment coming," Jason grunted.

"A what?"

“Ancient Terran movie about robotic toys that go berserk and attack people,” he chuckled.

“My Gladiator go berserk? Push off, Jayce!” Myleena said indignantly. She then gave Amber a sly look. “I’ll upload a program that makes it chase Amber around, Rann, so she always gets enough exercise.”

Amber gave Myleena a glare, which made Jason laugh.

Zaa, however, seemed a little intrigued by the toy. She picked it up and inspected it carefully, and Jason saw how *detailed* it was. It was built exactly like a real Gladiator, just at a smaller scale. Jason could make out the parts, which were *Gladiator* parts, just on a toy scale. Myleena had literally built the toy using the real Gladiator blueprints...which meant that Rann could never let that toy out of the house, since anyone could take it apart and reverse-engineer the manufacturing process, even if they weren’t able to put the same technology in it. And since it was built to *be* a Gladiator, everything worked just the same way on the toy as it did on the real thing. The cockpit opened to reveal a little replica doll of Kyva Karinne, it had replica pulse weapons in the forearms, retracting replica monomolecular blades, and it even had the pod sockets in the back for external equipment pods. Even the monomolecular blades that extended on command were perfect replicas, outside of the fact that they weren’t sharp. “This is quite sophisticated for a toy, Myleena.”

“I built it for Rann, Denmother, it’s exactly identical to a real Gladiator, built of scale parts, and it has some extra features you wouldn’t find in the average toy,” she replied. “It’s even using a biogenic control computer so Rann can merge with it and pretend to be a rigger.”

“Oooo, really?” Rann asked in surprise.

“Yup,” she nodded. “I thought you wouldn’t mind practicing merging if you could do it with something *fun*. And the computer is designed to let you pretend to be a real rigger, to have the whole rigger experience. When it’s in rig mode, it’s exactly like if you were a real rigger, Ranny. Everything you’ll see in the merge is set up the exact same way that Kyva sees it when she’s driving her rig.”

“That sounds neat, I’ve always wondered what it’s like to work the Gladiators,” Rann said brightly as Zaa handed the toy back to him.

How'd you pull that off? Jason sent privately.

Not hard, just a standard rig interface visual projection paired with merge induction of motor control. It's part of the computer's interaction program for when he wants to pretend to be a rigger. When it's in rigger mode, it restricts his merge capability to the same parameters as a non-Generation rigger. But he can turn off rigger mode and enact a complete merge if he wants to.

Now that might be useful for more than a toy, Jason mused.

Way ahead of you there. I'll send you some reports, she winked.

Rann took nearly a half an hour to finish opening his presents, then the party started to wind down. Myri and Mikano returned to duty, Tim and Miaari went to the office to pore over the latest data, and Myleena returned to 3D to finish working on one of the ideas they were kicking around for the impending attack, a gravometric flux generator to wreak havoc on the wormhole they intended to open. The girls from the strip also left to get back to work, since they were all just as busy as the rest of them. Since they were all Marines, those that didn't have jobs like Zora did were acting as emergency trainers in basic military tactics for the militia volunteers, giving them a seven day crash course in how to use the functions of their armor, use a pulse rifle, use plasma grenades, work in squads, communicate with other units, and for the people with class 3 licenses, how to operate military transports. Marines were more than capable of training recruits, and Jason had seen the reports. Everyone was taking the training *very* seriously, even if the odds were very low that any of them would have to actually do any fighting. Zora, on the other hand, was being attached to the *Iyaneri* temporarily as its pilot. She was too good to sit out, and no matter how much Jason hated the idea of her fighting in combat, they were in desperate need of experienced navigators. Zora could pilot *anything* in the KMS, from a capitol ship all the way down to a zip ship. And if Zora was going to fight, she was going to be on the biggest ship they had, which would minimize the risk she'd get hurt. Symone too left, much to her irritation and disappointment at not luring Dahnai and Kellin into some secluded spot, since they were on a 29 hour schedule at the rigger school to get their most advanced students graduated and into rigs before the attack. Symone had

traded her usual dayshift for an evening shift, so she wouldn't be home until late.

The guards helped them gather up Rann's presents, and they headed home...in armor, of course. Dahnai and Kellin chatted animated with Jyslin, taking them back to a curiously empty strip. Maya and Vell were the only ones left, in the corvette with them along with the entire pack of strip children. Maya and Vell would babysit while everyone else was busy, which was both their usual role and their pleasure and privilege. Maya and Vell were nearly as loved by the kids as they loved their own mothers. Jason made sure to see his family into the house, then he went straight up to his home office, shut the door, and got back to reality.

And that reality was preparing for war.

Maista, 8 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 31 May 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 8 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Command Ship Aegis, Task Force Seven flagship, orbiting planet PR-371-2

Things were almost crazy.

Admiral Palla Karinne stepped out of her ready room and onto the bridge and accepted a handpanel from a yeoman. There were 117 other KMS vessels out there in a loose group orbiting the planet, and most of them had only just arrived. Corvettes, gunboats, destroyers, cruisers, and the heavy ships were lined up by squadrons and spaced so the combined mass didn't affect the planet's orbit, nor the orbit of its two moons. Shuttles, dropships, Sticks carrying cargo containers, and zip ships zoomed between them as supplies and personnel were ferried around in preparation for the attack. Nobody knew exactly when that would be, but they knew it would be soon.

The Kimdori would let them know. They were keeping close watch on the nebula, watching for that telltale action when their foes jumped parts of the defense force protecting the command center to the home sector. When they jumped those ships, then they would have two hours before the operation began. The attack had already been planned out, and everyone knew exactly what they had to do.

It was going to be a two-stage assault. The first stage, to think of it in medieval terms, would be the attack on the walls of the fortress...or in this case, an attack on the nebula itself. Her engineering team had gotten together with the 3D techs and had worked up a way to punch a hole in the nebula using the rail cannons, plasma torpedo launchers, specially designed concussion burst missiles, and the GRAF cannon on the *Aegis*. The nebula was nothing but a cloud of gas and dust held together by its own gravity, which meant that the particles that made up the nebula were vulnerable to external force. Grevkik and Grzz'kik had worked out a way to form a tunnel of sorts through the nebula, using the GRAF cannon to create an initial movement in the nebula gases, then reinforcing it with low-yield plasma torpedo bursts. If it worked the way her engineers predicted, it would create a shockwave of nebula gas driven before the fleet, a howling cyclone of gas and dust that would be pushed before the fleet to allow them to go much faster, penetrating into the nebula much faster than ships that size should usually be able to go, in effect moving the *nebula* along with them as they raced into its interior. The shockwave formed in the front of the effect would have the bonus of also protecting them from missile fire and act like a blind against visual detection. The shockwave, combined with the sensor-dampening effects of the nebula, would make it very hard for the Consortium to get any weapon locks, or even *see* the ships until after the shockwave went by, and by then Palla's fleet would be right on top of them. That was when the second stage would begin, the attack on the command center and its defensive fleet.

Even with the idea of building a shockwave that would carry them into the nebula faster than they could otherwise go, it wasn't going to be easy. Any kind of energy weapon except Torsion weapons had reduced range within the nebula, including their particle beams, caused by diffusion as the energy struck the gas molecules and dust particles. Because of that, they'd be relying on rail cannons, whose effective range wasn't reduced by nearly

as much. The gas and dust slowed the rail slugs down, but not enough to negatively impact their effectiveness at the range that they expected to be from the command center. In order to simply get close enough to see the command center to see it, they would be in rail cannon range. They would also have every single Gladiator in the inventory in bunker positions on the hull with their external rail cannons to provide additional firepower. The main punch from energy weapons would come from the Wolf fighters, who would be able to get close enough to use them, and the *Aegis* and its GRAF cannon. The main crux of the plan was simply getting the *Aegis* close enough to use the GRAF cannon against the command center. It would only take one shot to take it out, and her engineers projected that the gas density in the nebula where the command station was located would make the GRAF cannon even more powerful, creating a shockwave from the gas that would deal additional damage to the parts of the station that the main beam didn't hit. It was that same principle they were going to use to reduce the density of the gas around the fleet to let them move very fast, without suffering hull heating or ionization. That would let them sprint up to their target while running behind a blind, then blast the hell out of them before they had a chance to respond.

The Kimdori would play a role. The Consortium had sensor pods scattered through the nebula, and the Kimdori inside the command center were going to conceal the approach of the fleet, then escape just before the attack. Palla would have a dropship out there to pick them up, the location already determined, to get those brave Kimdori who had done so much for them safely back home. If not for those Kimdori who had managed to infiltrate the command center, they may have *lost* this war. Thanks to them, they had all the Consortium's encryption algorithms, fleet locations, plans, and communications. Palla *would* get them out of there, then probably kiss all of them squarely on the mouth.

The face of Maggie MacCleod appeared on the main monitor as she checked the latest status report. "Got some news, Admiral," she said.

"Go ahead, my Lady."

"We just intercepted a communication to our side of the galaxy. They're warning them that the last fleets here are about to mobilize."

"Time?"

“Three hours,” she replied. “But they’re not stripping the nebula. They’re leaving most of the defenses around the command center where they are. We’re gonna be outnumbered almost ten to one.”

“This isn’t going to be a battle, my Lady, this is going to be a hit and run attack,” she replied immediately. “Get in, hit the command center, get out. The increased number of defending ships means we adjust our strategy, that’s all. Are your automated weapons ready?”

“We have them reprogrammed the way you asked,” she replied. “We just have to upload some patches and bug fixes the new software.”

“Then I suggest you do so, my Lady. We’re going to need those weapons in five hours.”

“You got it, Admiral. We’ll get right on it.”

Her face vanished, and Palla wasted no time. “General quarters!” she shouted. “We are at general quarters! Recall all shift personnel! Comm, get me every ship captain and fighter squadron commander on conference in my ready room,” she said as she stood up. “And send down the warning that we jump in five hours.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” her comm officer called.

She returned to her ready room and brought up a tactical hologram of the nebula as icons representing the ship captains and squadron commanders began to appear as holos in the background. The nebula was roughly elliptical, and thanks to the scans they had of it, they knew the exact location of the enemy fortress. It was as close to the center as they could get it, offset about six degrees vertically and nine degrees horizontally from the nebula center. The exact center of the nebula had a forming proto-star in it, in the first stage of star creation, and as a result there were too many gravity and magnetic fluctuations to put the command center there. But that star formed a wall protecting that side of the command center from attack, since nothing could come in from that direction.

When the last icon lit up on her board, Justin Taggart of the 76th, she steepled her fingers together in front of her on the desk. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” she said, addressing them. “We just intercepted a transmission that gives us a timetable. We’ll be attacking in five hours,” she declared. She stood up and picked up a holopointer, then transmitted her

tactical holo to all parties. “This is how we’re going to do it,” she said. She used her interface to mark the arrival point on the map, which was high up on the inward side of the nebula, several thousand kathra above the command center. “In 38 minutes, a Kimdori SCM team will begin phase one, jumping an interdictor to this point. It will enter logarithmic mode and cover the nebula exactly two minutes before we jump in and begin phase two. This will entrap the Consortium ships within the nebula and isolate them and the command center whether our attack is a success or failure.” The image zoomed in to a closer view of the nebula. “Thanks to the internal scans, we have a way in,” she began, pointing at the edge of the nebula. “We’ll jump in at this point, then begin the operation my engineers and the 3D agents devised. We’ll build a pressure wave in the nebula using the GRAF cannon, low-yield plasma torpedo explosions, rail cannon slugs that will vaporize, and specially designed concussive burst missiles that Lady Maggie and Lord Jake made for us. The plan is to build an artificial current in the nebula that will let us go much faster than normal. The ionization, electromagnetic discharges, and gravometric disruption this shockwave will cause should hide us from the command center’s main sensors, while the Kimdori will both disable the sensor pods stationed along our planned approach and create false readings that will draw the defending Consortium fleet out of our path,” she explained, as sensor pods in the nebula appeared. “Our artificial shockwave will join to a naturally occurring large current of nebula gas right here, and then we ride this river of gas and dust literally right to the command center.

“Once we penetrate the nebula, we have three main objectives in this operation,” she continued. “First. This station is one of their honeycomb stations the size of a small moon, meaning that it can’t be easily destroyed. But thanks to the Kimdori we know exactly where and how to hit it. The *Aegis* can take out the main command center in the station and kill the clairvoyant energy being if we can get a weapons lock on it, and that’s the primary goal of this attack. Everything we do is centered around that one tactic. If we can see it, we can kill it, so the fleet will be deployed in a defensive ring around the *Aegis*. Once the main command center is destroyed, we turn around and run like hell. Intel of enemy plans is that they do *not* plan to jump their defensive fleet out of the nebula, so we’ll be coming in under fire. I expect that once they detect us, they’ll try to engage us here,” she said, pointing to an area inside the nebular, “where gas density

is at its highest. That restricts our speed and severely reduces the range of our particle beams and allows them to fire their Torsion weapons without interference. We'll be relying on rail cannons and Gladiators in bunker positions on the hulls of the ships, because our rail cannons will have enough range to hit them before they hit us. Our tactics will be designed to get the *Aegis* through that gauntlet with the GRAF cannon still operational, then the entire fleet bombards the station while the GRAF cannon takes out the command center, to do as much damage as possible. The battleships *Dreamer* and *Jenda* will have the additional roles of locating and destroying the habitat modules that hold the egg-laying queens. We'll be running the gauntlet into the nebula, taking out their command center, then we go right *through* the nebula, come out the far side, and jump back to PR-371. Ship captains, I can't stress enough that the one ship that has to get through the enemy ships and to the command center is the *Aegis*. You punch a hole in their lines, we go through, then you disengage and follow to keep them off my ass. Once we're in range of the station, we destroy the most important parts of it, do as much damage as we can to the rest in the time window we'll have, and then get out. If in the event the *Aegis* is unable to destroy the command center, we have ten Skaa antimatter bombs that will be employed. These bombs are concealed to look like battle wreckage and invisible to sensors, which we'll drop at the station during the attack. We'll detonate these bombs after we jump out of the nebula to destroy any Karinne equipment that gets left behind, but if the attack on the command center somehow fails, if they have some defense we don't know about or the GRAF cannon misses its shot, we will detonate those antimatter bombs. But, since we'll be detonating them *inside* a nebula and with us in close proximity, I don't think I have to explain to anyone at this conference the kind of damage it will do to our own ships. That will be our option of last resort. Our withdrawal from the nebula will be covered by 3D's newest automated weaponry to slow down Consortium pursuit, as well as a battery of drones and mines protecting our planned jump point once we're clear of the nebula. We let the machines cover our retreat and worry about getting back to Karis on one piece in time to defend the planet from the main fleet.

“Second. We need absolute proof and confirmation that the egg-laying queens are destroyed. The battleships *Dreamer* and *Jenda* have the responsibility to take out the egg-laying queens. They're in isolated habitat units not connected to the main station, because they have to be kept far

away from each other. Since those modules aren't connected to the station, they can and do move. Fighter commanders, *that* is your primary objective once we reach the station. You will find those habitat modules, call in the battleships to hit them while you attack them yourself, and make sure they're destroyed with visual confirmation. We fully expect the bugs to employ Imxi fighters, so deploy your fighters so some protect the fleet while others hunt down and destroy those modules if battleships for some reason cannot destroy them.

"Third. We have Kimdori in that station that we have to recover. They're going to escape before we get there, but they'll need extraction. Commander Taggart," she said, bringing up a picture of him, looking at his holo. He was in armor with his helmet on the desk beside him.

"Your orders, sir?" he said, saluting sharply.

"I want the Ghost Squadron to recover those Kimdori infiltrators. The Kimdori don't have an escape ship, so I need a heavy cargo dropship to go to these coordinates and pick them up," she ordered, creating a blinking point not far from the command center. "They'll be in some kind of worm-like form that can survive in the nebula, so we need a dropship big enough to carry them. Captain Marayi, you have four hours to refit a heavy cargo dropship to airskin the cargo hatch and make it as battle-ready as possible and put the best damn pilot you can find in the pilot's seat. That pilot is going to go out there and rescue those Kimdori. The pickup zone will be hot, ladies and gentlemen, so be ready to fight your way in and recover those Kimdori while under fire, then get the hell out of there. The 3D cargo freighter will be ready to jump to this location in case you can't get back to the fleet for some reason," she said, pointing at the edge of the nebula. "If you can't get back to the fleet, escape along this vector and rendezvous with the freighter. They'll pick you up and jump out."

"Understood, sir," Taggart nodded.

"That's the general overview of the plan," she told them. "Specific ship assignments and squadron deployments will be sent down by the usual channels. We generate an artificial current and shockwave to get us into the nebula, hit the command center with the GRAF cannon, destroy the egg-laying queens, Extract the Kimdori infiltrators, then retreat back to PR-371. Any questions?"

When nobody spoke up, she nodded. “Orders are coming down. While you wait for them, finish all preparations and go to general quarters. I want everything ready in four hours. This is it, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s do our Grand Duke proud,” she said, then she cut the conference.

She stood up and went back out to the bridge. “We have four hours to get ready, ladies and gentlemen.” *Department heads, report in every fifteen minutes with preparation progress and current status*, she sent across the ship.

Four hours. They’d be ready.

On board the *Dreamer*, Commander Justin Taggart of the 76th got up from his desk in his office and seated his helmet behind his head. He headed out of his office and headed straight for the main hangar bay on the port side, where they kept the heavy dropships, as well as Wing One of his squadron, where his own ship was parked. *All members of Ghost Squadron report to the port main hangar bay immediately*, his sending boomed across the ship as he waited for a lull in the sending chatter, as ship-wide orders were being sent and relayed. General quarters had just been issued, so everyone was calling in their people.

I have a maintenance team on the way there right now, Justin, Marayi sent privately to him. They should be there by the time you arrive.

Thank you, sir, he replied.

His 79 girls assembled within four minutes of his summons, all of them in armor. The 40 fighters of Ghost Squadron were split between the port and starboard main hangar bays, so there were only 20 of his squadron’s fighters in the bay, some on the deck, some hanging from racks on the walls, with a large shelf of assorted drones, missile pods, and spinners in the back for arming them. The last one to arrive was Iyoi, running in behind a pair of Makati wearing maintenance stripes on their armor. “Sorry boss,” she apologized.

“Gather in,” he said. His 39 pilots and 40 wizzos gathered in a loose semicircle as Taggart projected a hologram from a ceiling projector unit fed with data from his interface. “As you heard, we’re going to attack in five hours, but we have special orders,” he said as a holo of the nebula came up

between them. He explained the battle plan as it was delivered by the Admiral, then zoomed in on the pickup point. "After we breach the lines, we've been ordered to extract the Kimdori on the station," he said. "They don't have a ship, they're going to shapeshift into some kind of shape that can survive exposed to the nebula, so we're taking a heavy dropship out there to pick them up. This is going to be a rough ride, ladies," he said bluntly. "We'll be trying to extract those Kimdori in the middle of a dogfight with the station's defenses firing on us and any ships that chase us in. Iyoi, you're piloting the dropship," he ordered, which made her frown and put her hands on her hips. "Don't give me attitude, Lieutenant," he said flatly. "You have the most experience flying nebulae on this ship, and there's a chance we might get cut off from the main fleet. After they destroy that station, they're bugging out, and they *will not* wait for us," he said. "If we have to get out of the nebula on our own, I want the best nebula jockey I've got in the chair of that dropship."

"Aye-aye, boss," she said, a little less irritated.

"Amdara, you're second chair," he said to one of his Wing Four pilots.

"Aye-aye, boss," she said immediately.

"That's going to put us two fighters down, but we'll manage," he said. "Cheya, Rikirri, since you won't have a fighter, I want you two on the dropship to assist the Kimdori if they need it, and also run sensors and drones we'll assign to the dropship," he told the wizzos of those two pilots. "Once we pick up the Kimdori, we return to the fleet if possible. If not, we escape on this vector," he said, drawing a line. "The 3D freighter that's been carting their gadgets around will jump in and pick us up, then jump out."

"Do we have detailed scans of that quadrant of the nebula, boss?" Iyoi asked.

"No," he replied. "And that's why I need you in the dropship, Lieutenant. Alright, girls, I want you to get your ships ready," he said as the holo winked out. "This is a full-out attack, so there are no weapon or drone restrictions. Equip as you see fit. Iyoi, Amdara, Cheya, Rikirri, come with me. Joae, go prep our fighter."

"Aye-aye, boss," his wizzo said, then she turned and literally ran towards where Taggart's fighter was parked on the deck, on the far side of

the hangar.

Four Makati and a Kizzik noble with two drones were at the dropship when they arrived, commanding a maintenance unit of Faey and Makati. “Commander, this is the ship assigned to you,” the shorter Makati said. Like Justin, he had his helmet locked behind his neck. “We’re gonna install an airskin shield on all doors and ports, and we’re gonna reinforce the power system and install a shockwave generator to kill off missiles. This boat is just big enough to take a shockwave unit.”

“I won’t say no, Commander,” Justin said. “This is one of those KBK-90’s, right?”

“Yup, pretty damn tough,” he replied with a nod. “She’s the military variant. She’s got rail cannons in the bow and she’s sporting a class six Teryon shield, but you can’t use that in the nebula.”

“Armor?”

“This is the new version, so it’s a carapace.”

“Outstanding,” Taggart said. “Commander, can you rig up a hull cooling system in four hours? Something that will let the dropship put on some extra speed in the nebula without turning into a fireball?”

The little Makati’s eyes lit up. “I think we can, Commander,” he said. “We can rig up some Vandrilic heat sinks we use in the jump engines, those hyper-endothermic bastards that can freeze an entire lake in about three seconds, and seat them into the secondary hull to protect the crew. The hard part will be building the control unit so they don’t drop the entire dropship to absolute zero on you.”

“It can be done. The question is, can it be done in time,” the Kizzik’s translator intoned.

“Well, let’s find out,” Taggart told them. “I want this ship out of the nebula in one piece, even if it’s unescorted. After everything those Kimdori did for us, I want them out of there *alive*, they deserve nothing less for everything they did for us. If this dropship can outrun the enemy, it’ll make it.”

“I’ll make it happen, Commander,” the Makati told him confidently as he put a finger to his interface, then to Taggart’s surprise, the little Makati

sent. *I need engineering team four to the port main hangar bay right now! Bring the supplies I'm sending down to the computer!*

Yes ma'am, came a response.

"With all due respect, Commander, back off and give us space to work," the Makati grinned. "The honor of my family's hammer is on the line here. I'll have your cooling system installed, even if I have to stand on the bow and piss on the hull."

Taggart laughed. "It's all yours, Commander," he replied. "Girls, help out as best you can, but don't get in the way. Amdara, download a weapon module for the dropship computer so you can control drones. I'll get you some of the beast drones," he promised.

She grinned eagerly. "I *love* those things!"

"I'm the one that gets to play with them," Rikirri said eagerly.

"Bullshit, I have rank, Ensign!" Cheya protested. "You're on sensor duty, bitch!"

"You two work it out," he said dryly.

Steepling her armored fingers together, Palla watched a final checklist scroll by on the left tactical holo. The dispensation of the 117 ships under her command was complete, and the initial formation for stage one was formed. On the right, a countdown timer was running, showing that they had 6:12 until they made the jump to the nebula. The left holo's last two ships blinked from red to green as the destroyers *Zivoi* and *Grenira* settled into their places, forming a defensive phalanx around the *Aegis* without getting into the firing arc of its GRAF cannon.

"Six minutes," her navigator called aloud.

"The Kimdori infiltrators are sending the go signal," her comm officer called. "They're starting the sensor diversion now."

"Excellent. Begin the ignition sequence on the GRAF cannon," Palla ordered, accepting her helmet from her yeoman. She pushed her pink hair inside the collar of her breastplate and settled her helmet into place, sealing it. Her interface linked with her armor, and tactical data from the ship fed

directly into both her visor display and her front-sided interface hologram projector. “Gladiator units, take your positions in hull bunker emplacements and lock in for jump.”

“Begin GRAF cannon ignition sequence,” the order was relayed. Deep in the ship, the singularity plants that helped power the GRAF cannon came online, and a series of power distribution graph bars started to rise on the lower tactical holo.

“GRAF cannon ignition sequence initiated. T minus six minutes until primary couplers are engaged,” came the response.

“Jump coordinates locked, Captain,” her navigator called. “Hyperspace engines are staged and ready.”

“We jump by the clock, Lieutenant,” she answered calmly as she watched weapon inventories for stage two of the operation turn green on her tactical. “All squadrons report readiness.”

At 4:03, the last squadron reported in that it was ready to jump.

“Four minutes,” the navigator called.

We jump in four minutes. Prepare for jump, Palla sent.

All departments report jump readiness to comm three, her Ex-O added.

She locked herself into her chair at 1:22, as every department and ship section officer reported that they were ready to jump. *Remember, we have exactly 39 seconds once the Aegis drops out of hyperspace to begin the operation,* she sent through the ship, in a way that allowed everyone but the Kizzik to understand, and that would be relayed to them by their shipmates.

“GRAF ignition sequence at 71%,” an officer called.

“Engine compensators online.”

“Recoil absorption system online.”

“Power distribution system online.”

“GRAF system showing all systems nominal,” her engineering liaison called.

“All Gladiator units report they’re in position and bunker hatches are closed.”

“Thirty seconds to jump,” came the navigator’s voice, both in front of her and over the ship intercom.

“All weapons on GRAF standby,” Palla called, checking ship tactical to make double sure the Gladiators were in position in their recessed bunkers on the hull, mainly making sure those bunker hatches were closed and sealed. When the ship started into the nebula, friction heating would put intense heat on the hull, and those Gladiators needed to be protected from it. She took a deep breath as the navigator started a countdown, centering herself in preparation for the jump.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Jump engage!”

All of reality seemed to turn halfway towards eternity. The bridge warped, elongated, shimmer and wavered to her eyes, and there was a strange whistling sound in her ears as the upper dimensions of hyperspace warped the three lower dimensions to her senses. There was a painful burning through the left side of her body, like she’d passed through something scalding, and she winced in pain; it was going to be one of *those* jumps. Thankfully, however, before the pain became unbearable, all of reality snapped back to normal, and the pain instantly ceased. It was only pain caused by phantom nerve induction, and thus wasn’t real injury. She shook her head in her helmet, then the chatter of both voices and sending on the bridge reached her as the command center crew began the operation, without even checking over each other for jump shock.

“Thirty seconds!” Palla shouted as she ensured she was still locked in her chair, then his ship wide intercom “Everyone remain in jump restraints!”

“GRAF cannon primaries online, firing sequence engaged!” came her weapons officer.

“This will be a full power shot! This will be a full power shot! Remain in jump restraints! Remain in jump restraints!” Palla barked as the power readings started to climb rapidly. “Engine compensators?”

“Ready!”

“Recoil absorption system?”

“Ready!”

“Then fire at countdown zero,” she called, gripping the edges of her chair as she prepared for the shock of the GRAF cannon firing at full power, so much power that it required both the engines and the recoil system to handle the recoil. Without both, the ship would be violently driven backwards by the force of the blast.

Her weapons officer took over. “Firing in six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Fire!”

Simultaneously, the GRAF cannon unleashed an incandescent white bar of pure kinetic energy, fired at incredible velocity from the turret of the huge array built into the *Aegis*’ superstructure, and at the exact same instant, the engines spiked as they held the ship as still as possible against the immense recoil that firing the cannon created. Since the ship didn’t have the raw mass to hold against the recoil of the GRAF, they had to rely both on the spatial recoil compensation system and the engines themselves to absorb the recoil. The white blast raced away and into the nebula, creating a curious *pucker* of ionized gas where it made contact and hurtled inside. Since the GRAF blast was pure kinetic energy, it would race away until that energy was absorbed by the gas and dust in its path, both slowing down the blast and also creating a violent directional shockwave deep inside the nebula. The goal of the attack force was now to *catch up* to that growing shockwave, to arrive at the exact time when the shockwave was slowed to the point where it would peter out without additional reinforcement. That moment would be in exactly 2:17.

“Hull systems online! Gunboat and corvette squadrons begin phase two!” Palla shouted as she unlocked herself from her chair. “Stage two countdown begin!” She looked to her navigator through the faceplate of her helmet. “Flank speed, Lieutenant!”

“Flank speed, aye-aye sir!” she replied.

In perfect unison, the 171 ships of the KMS surged forward in the wake of that titanic blast of pure energy. Led by wide-winged gunboats and sleek corvettes, the ship barreled into the nebula with geometrically increasing speed. The gunboats and corvettes unleashed a blitz of small missiles and then fell back, concussive missiles that would shape their explosive force in a single direction, as dull, dim red plasma torpedoes sizzled through the gaps between the formations of small ships, the ships careful not to enter

those pre-planned firing vectors. A cascade of explosions erupted in front of the fleet, each explosion carefully calculated to maximize the building effect of the concussive force, each explosion reinforcing the movement of the gas and dust particles in the desired direction. Palla watched a tactical readout of the forming shockwave, beginning to develop *exactly* as her engineering team had predicted, with the GRAF shockwave far ahead of them, growing in size, but slowing down as the kinetic energy of the blast was absorbed by the fluid mass of the nebula. The destroyers, cruisers, and gunboats surrounding the *Aegis* continued to fire in that carefully planned sequence, then rail cannon slugs added to it, firing special “scatter” rounds that vaporized instantly on firing and spread in a cone of hyper-accelerated vapor in front of the advancing fleet, which added more mean velocity to the gas and dust surrounding the fleet, and that reduced the hull heating and ionization moving through the reddish haze caused. She kept an eye on the hull temperature, noting that it was well below danger levels, and they were increasing speed by leaps and bounds. A sheathe of fire formed around the bow of the ship, but the compressed Neutronium carapace from which the hull armor was constructed could easily withstand that heat.

“Hull ionization within tolerance!” her engineering officer called. “Hull temperature at 3,500 shuki!”

“Rate of increase?”

“Within predicted margin of error!” came the reply.

“Keep it under 5,000 shuki, navigator!” she called. “Reduce speed if hull temperature exceeds the yellow line!”

The fleet increased velocity without drastically increasing hull temperature or ionization. A glance to the side showed that a brilliant arc of lightning lanced between the hulls of two gunboats, but neither ship showed any indication that the discharge had done any damage. They remained in formation, and continued to launch concussive burst missiles in sequence, sending a constant hail of missiles, plasma torpedoes, and rail slugs into the reddish soup ahead of the fleet.

“Kinetic wake current forming, captain!” the engineer boomed with a bit of pride in her voice. “It’s *working*!”

“That’s it! Move the *Aegis* into the center of the current!” Palla barked. “Are we on schedule?”

“We’re six seconds ahead of projected intercept with the GRAF current, sir!”

“Engineering, adjust weapons pattern to get us back on schedule! Our current must merge with the GRAF shockwave *precisely* on time!”

Just as her engineering team predicted, the gas and dust movement around them was becoming self-sustaining, as a new wake current formed in the nebula. Gas and dust behind them was being pulled into the void formed by the shockwave ahead, as a river of flowing nebular particulates formed around the fleet. Hull temperate remained steady as the ship continued to accelerate, ionization rates actually began to decrease.

“Excellent! Tactical?”

“No Consortium fleet movements detected,” came the reply.

“Time to target?”

“Four minutes six seconds!”

“The Kimdori decoy worked!” her navigator blurted.

“Recalculate projected intercept point based on current Consortium ship locations,” she called. “Project they become aware of us when we destroy their outer scout destroyers!”

“Recalculating,” her tactical officer replied.

“All ships, prepare automated weaponry for deployment,” Palla called on command channel. “Remember, nothing can launch when exterior temperature is over 1,200 shuki.”

About 30 seconds later, the stealth was finished. “Sensor sweep! Enemy sensor sweep!” her tactical officer shouted.

“Consortium command frequencies just blew up, sir!” one of her comm officers called, tasked with monitoring enemy communications. “They know we’re here!”

“Redeploy fleet for counter-attack!” Palla boomed. “Time to the GRAF shockwave?”

“Twenty-one seconds!”

“Reduce speed to drop hull temperature to launch ECDs and fighters once we hit the GRAF current,” she called as she fidgeted with her left gauntlet.

When the fleet caught up to the slower-moving current caused by the GRAF cannon, which also swept anything large out of their path, the fleet slowed and redeployed. They no longer had to propel the current, it was now self-sustaining and moving on its own. Fighters and larger drones, called beast drones, launched from all the larger ships as the corvettes and gunboats took up defensive positions along the flanks of the formation. In a fleet encounter, the small corvettes would function mainly as fighters, since they were very fast and highly maneuverable, acting as roving “formation busters” that would attack large concentrations of enemy fighters, drones, or missiles, supporting the fighters by preventing the enemy from being able to threaten them, as well as be able to attack the enemy cruisers and battleships directly. Corvettes didn’t have particle beams, but they *did* have Torsion shockwave generators and some pretty hardcore pulse batteries and rail cannons.

“Enemy fleet moving to intercept,” tactical called. “They’ll reach us almost exactly when we’re within range of the station, captain!”

“Filter that down to the fleet,” she called to comm. “Prepare the GRAF cannon, I want to fire the instant we’re in position. Begin GRAF charging phase!”

“GRAF charging sequence, initiate,” came the response.

Ahead, they saw the enemy. Six Consortium destroyers converged on the wake current, punching through it to get a look at what was coming—sensors weren’t very reliable in a nebula—then immediately turned to get back out, to flee the vastly superior force. Not a single one made it, however, as they were torn to pieces by an absolute withering barrage of rail cannon fire, both from heavy mounts and from Gladiator units on the hull, able to come out of their protected positions when the temperature came down. Gladiators could safely tolerate external ambient temperatures of 1,050 shuki without the units overheating or the pilot being harmed, thanks to their extremely tough outer carapace and effective heat dispersion

system. Two of the six ships had their power plants explode when damage fed back into the power plants, or the power plants were hit directly as holes were punched deeper and deeper into the ships. Debris bounced off the hull of the *Aegis* as it stormed through the wreckage of the enemy, the Gladiators ducking back down into their covered positions to avoid damage, then she saw the fighters and other small units launch. They took up position in the vanguard of the fleet, a cloud of 2,225 Wolf fighters, their drones, ship-controlled drones, 3D automated weapons like Buzzsaws and flying guns, which were drones that weren't controlled. They were instead programmed with a task and they carried it out. Most of the 3D drones mixed into the fighter formations were tasked with protecting the fighters from missiles and Imxi fighters. Those drones were also equipped with Torsion weaponry, which made them expendable.

"Kimdori are broadcasting the extraction code, sir!" her comm officer barked. "They're evacuating!"

"Ghost Squadron, Ghost squadron, you are go. You are go," Palla personally ordered. "Sixty-one seconds!"

"Consortium fleet converging on the enemy station, sir!"

"Let's do our Grand Duke proud, ladies and gentlemen! Hit them hard!" Palla shouted, standing up in front of her chair.

"Visual on the enemy station!"

Palla looked at the external camera, and saw it, its size allowing them to see it even from that distance and through the distortion of the wake current. It was the size of a small moon, a honeycomb of units and large modules connected by round girders and struts, like a builder set created by some titanic space child. Tactical overlaid the primary targets with blinking red circles, the main command center and the two egg-laying queens' external habitat modules. The tactical map showed the vast majority of the Consortium's fleet, nearly ten times the size of their own, screaming from where they'd been decoyed to engage their 171 ships.

"Phase three begin! Phase three begin!" Palla shouted, sitting back down. "Navigation, get us in position for a shot! GRAF control, be ready to fire the instant we're ready! All KMS ships, attack! All KMS ships, attack!"

The 171 ships of the KMS slowed as the wake current they created literally went right through the enemy station, making it shudder a little bit, and the attack began. The first shots were fired by the heavy rail emplacements, as gunnery crews opened fire on the enemy station, mainly targeting their Torsion batteries and missile launchers, reducing their ability to fire back. A cloud of missiles launched from both sides as the Consortium launched defensive missiles, and the gunboats launched their *hira* anti-missile missiles, tiny missiles the size of an average Faey that would strike enemy missiles and destroy them. Fighters, drones, Buzzsaws, and beast drones streaked towards the station, as two particular gunboats moved into position and fired just one missile each, missiles equipped with those exceedingly nasty little Satan's Marbles, as they were called. The Consortium fleet emerged from the haze behind the station, coming around it and even *through* it, racing through enemy fire to get close enough to use their Torsion weapons.

Then the fighters got there. A cascade of small explosions erupted all over the leading edge of the enemy station as well as the fastest Consortium ships as the fighters engaged. Imxi fighters and enemy drones launched from the Consortium ships, quickly turning the area around the station into a massive dogfight of screaming fighters, streaking missiles, drones, and explosions. A Consortium destroyer's aft section exploded and sent the ship careening into the station, tearing through support struts and ripping out four different modules before the flaming wreckage wedged into the station and stopped moving.

"Time to target?" Palla barked.

"Sixteen seconds until we're stationary," the navigator replied as the KMS surged ahead, forming a blocking formation to protect the *Aegis* as it slowed to a stop.

"Do not open GRAF doors until the firing sequence engages! Do not give them any warning!" Palla boomed. She winced from a bright light on the side holo as the battleship *Dreamer* was struck by a multitude of missiles, but they all exploded against the angry red sheathe of light that surrounded it, as its shockwave generator protected it from what would have been crippling damage.

"Consortium fleet advancing! They're getting directly in our path!"

“Doesn’t matter, their ships won’t stop the GRAF blast,” Palla replied. “Squadron B, tighten up!”

More and more Consortium ships either had large sections of their ships detonate or they went dead in space, drifting helplessly as the 1,000 or more enemy ships charged the much smaller formation, seeking to overwhelm them in a single attack. All fire redirected to the incoming ships, more and more of them showing explosive breaches in the hull as the superior range of the rail cannons tore into them, made them pay for every shakra of space they advanced, then another volley of anti-ship missiles were launched from almost every ship in the fleet, followed up immediately with plasma torpedoes fired at full power.

“We’re getting pickup distress beacons from pilots in damaged fighters,” tactical called.

“Recover as possible, but keep up the pressure,” she replied. “Send destruct codes to any Wolf fighter disabled but still on telemetry once the pilots are clear. Antimatter bombs?”

“Ready for deployment,” she answered.

“GRAF status!”

“T minus 65 seconds!” came the response.

“Give us one more minute, friends, one more minute,” she breathed quietly as the ship shuddered from a missile strike.

Weaving expertly through six different missiles, Lieutenant Commander Justin Taggart locked in on the enemy Imxi fighter and mentally pulled the trigger. A series of angry white blasts fired from the base of the fighter’s wings, sizzled through the red soup, then hit, causing the entire aft section of the enemy fighter to explode. Jae was so busy up in the cockpit between using her talent to hit Imxi pilots and controlling the drones that they had to dogfight nearly half of the enemy fighters, as well as the slapdash drones the Consortium had been building. He saw a Wolf get hit directly in the cockpit by a missile, not one of his girls, but the burly fighter’s cockpit was only cracked once the fighter came out of the smoke, the wizzo clearly still

alive. That was why he fucking *loved* these fighters. They were fast, powerful, and *tough*.

Keep it tight, girls! He sent as they wove through traffic. *Iyoi, get ready to launch!*

In position and waiting for orders, she answered.

Taggart and his wingwoman sent a hailstorm of white pulse blasts into the side of a Consortium destroyer. The Ghost fighters were helping with the main attack while they waited for their own operation to begin...which Marayi didn't exactly know about. The Ghost squadron launched with everyone else and had been right at the very tip of the spear of attacking fighters...and there was nowhere else that Justin Taggart would rather be.

We got the go signal! his wingwoman, Kaia, called.

Ghost squadron, pull out! Justin barked. In a fluid movement, the 30 fighters participating in the attack pulled out of the dogfight and streaked away from the station. On tactical, Iyoi's dropship and its eight escorting fighters launched, then turned and raced directly for the rendezvous point. Justin wove expertly to avoid Torsion fire from defensive batteries that hadn't been hit yet along the outer shell of the station, and he saw that two Consortium destroyers were breaking off from the station to give pursuit. Two entire destroyers, *just* for them...he was almost flattered. *Give those destroyers something to think about! Iyoi, don't slow down!* Every fighter in the formation turned around and then unleashed constant streams of white pulse blasts at the two destroyers, their drones joining in. The destroyer in the lead took the brunt of it, its bow section all but disappearing in a series of greenish-red explosions as the internal atmosphere of the ships ignited from the explosions caused by the penetrating pulse blasts, coloring the explosions with elements of the internal atmosphere of the ships. The lead destroyer's lights went dark and it started to tumble, the trailing ship having to veer out of its path. It came around with its Torsion cannons blazing but scored hits only on four drones in the formation. The agile Wolf fighters were able to evade the fire, since the heavy mounts on the enemy ships couldn't track small, elusive fighters very effectively at such close range.

Bug out signal! Bug out! Bug out! came a nearly frenzied sending as well as coming over all STG channels. Taggart glanced back towards the

fleet, completely engaged against a force ten times their size, and he saw the doors on the *Aegis* begin to open.

Keep a tight grip on your stick, here comes the shockwave! Taggart sent in warning as every fighter and corvette in the path of the GRAF cannon turned and raced away.

It was pure light. A blazing bar of pure light nearly half a mile wide just *erupted* from the *Aegis*, and it raced across the red sky in the blink of an eye. Everything in its path turned to shadow and then just *dissolved*, shattered into dust by the impact, as that blazing column of pure energy slammed into the station. It went right *through* it, every part of it that the beam struck just dissolving into microscopic dust, the beam going straight through the exact center of the station, the beam then racing into the gloom and vanishing. The disabled destroyer and the attacking one between them and the station were driven both away and at an angle in the direction of the blast by the shockwave, and then the shockwave hit the Ghost squadron. Justin gritted his teeth and felt his ship shake violently as he turned his bow into the shockwave, letting the fighter's aerodynamic design mitigate the effect as much as possible, but he saw on his board that all four of his drones and all his spinners were torn apart by the shockwave. There were a series of explosions around the fighters as the on-board power plants on the remains of the 102 drones damaged or destroyed by the shockwave to detonate their cores, destroying the pulse weapons and denying them to the enemy.

It wasn't just drones that were damaged. Houri's ship had taken the shockwave fully against her port side, and it had ripped off both her port wing and stabilizer. Her ship was tumbling away, caught in the wake of the shockwave. *Eject, Houri, eject!* Justin ordered. She complied, and both she and her wizzo ejected from the fighter. Both had their external emergency packs, and the engines on them engaged. Both of them raced immediately for the closest rescue ship, which was moving towards them once the crisis beacons on the packs activated. Justin kept an eye on his two girls as the remaining Wolves joined up with the dropship, seeing that Houri's Wolf self-destructed once they were clear of it, denying it to the enemy, and he saw Houri and Yika's telemetry go green when they were picked up by the rescue boat. They were safe.

Iyoi looked at his fighter through the cockpit as the Consortium destroyer that had been chasing them recovered from the shockwave and turned towards them again. Iyoi just grinned and pointed up, and he saw the roof-mounted external rail cannon that the engineers had installed track onto the enemy ship. It fired, then fired again, and again, using its superior range to punch three holes in the black hull of the enemy, sending gouts of greenish-red flame out into the nebula. The engineers had done everything they promised for that ship, installing extra weapons, the airskin shields, and they even finished the cooling system that would let Iyoi go about three times faster than anyone else in that dropship.

Kimdori sighted! Kimdori sighted! Iyoi called.

Give Iyoi time, girls! Engage! Justin ordered, and the 37 remaining Wolves turned and rocketed towards the enemy ship. It opened fire not on them, but on the dropship, but Iyoi proved she deserved her place in Ghost squadron by evading the incoming fire, slipping the large but agile KBK-90 through the reddish beams with a delicate touch. The destroyer had 37 other things to worry about when the Ghost squadron got in range, and all of them opened up on it. The entire bow of the ship and its underbelly all the way to amidships was absolutely peppered with pulse blasts, then a violent explosion separated the slender neck of the bow section from its aft section, rendering the enemy ship dead in space.

Fighters coming in! Niira barked.

Fall back and protect the dropship! Justin ordered, and the 37 ships returned to the dropship. Justin saw the Kimdori, eight large worm-like creatures undulating in the nebula ahead of them. *Wing one, get between the Imxi and the Kimdori! Protect them!* Justin barked, and he and the nine other pilots in the lead wing, his own wing, raced ahead of the dropship. Behind them, nearly 200 Imxi fighters were screaming at them using their reaction engines, too many for the wizzos to quickly subdue, but they could get *some* of them...and without drones to control, they could devote all their time and attention to it. *Defensive missiles!* Justin ordered. Missile doors opened on all the fighters, and a swarm of Wasp defensive missiles fired from their pod bays. They were purely defensive weapons, anti-missile and anti-fighter missiles about the size of a man's arm, but in this case, they would break up that enemy formation and make them scramble

for cover. The missiles didn't pack much of a punch, but against the inferior Imxi fighters, they were effective enough. A couple dozen of them were either destroyed or knocked out of formation by the blitz of tiny missiles.

Wizzos mark dominated enemies on tactical so we don't shoot your puppets, Justin warned as the edge of that large formation got within Torsion range, then all hell broke loose in the Imxi formation when the wizzos did their jobs. The mindstrikers dominated enemy fighter pilots and turned them against their own, turning what had been an overwhelming numerical advantage into utter chaos in the blink of an eye as Imxi fighters started firing on their own. They'd tried to overwhelm his 38 ships with sheer numbers, but that trick didn't work against Faey. The wizzos had the Imxi fight among themselves as the fighters protected the dropship, and Justin's wing got in position to protect the eight Kimdori who were wallowing along. *Get up here, Iyoi!*

I'm here, boss! Opening cargo bay doors! Iyoi answered as the dropship raced up and then slowed quickly. The Kimdori immediately turned towards it as Justin took a glance at the rest of the action. The KMS was now directly over the station, engaged in a heavy dogfight against superior numbers as they fired on the habitat modules holding the egg-laying queens, then the GRAF cannon fired again at a much lower power, eradicating the largest ship in the enemy fleet in a single blast. Several of their ships were either on fire or dead in space, being towed by other ships—they *could not* leave those ships behind—then he saw a salvo of Buzzsaws rip into a Consortium battleship, making nearly the entire ship explode in a cascade of greenish-red eruptions, tearing it apart down to its superstructure. He got his mind back on the here and now as he opened up on a trio of Imxi fighters diving at them, aiming at the *Kimdori*. He destroyed one ship and then turned his own fighter into the path of a Torsion bolt to protect the helpless Kimdori under him. The ship rocked violently, and red lights came on all over the board. *Joae!*

Still here, boss, she replied quickly. *Direct hit on our port pulse autocannon We've lost primary port exchanger, switching to backup!*

Engines are still up, the bolt didn't hit anything critical, he called as the Kimdori he'd protected undulated into the dropship, vanishing into the door. Another one went right behind it, then another, then another.

We've got 'em all, let's get the hell out of here! Iyoi barked as the cargo bay doors began to close. *Call it, boss!*

He only had to take one look at his tactical to make the decision. *Take the escape vector! You lose your engines, you eject immediately and head for the dropship on exo-packs! Don't try to save your fighter if it means you get trapped here! Iyoi, broadcast the pickup signal back to 3D! [Dreamer, Dreamer, this is Ghost One. We're evacuating using emergency vector!]* he sent to the battleship, having his interface emulate command thought into gravband transmissions.

[Understood, Ghost One. Jump orders being sent to PR-371 immediately. The ship will be there waiting for you. Good luck.]

Iyoi took the lead, turning the dropship downward, and then she punched the engines. The 36 fighters followed it with a pack of Imxi fighters hot on their tails, some of them still firing on the other Imxi as the dominated pilots stayed in range of the Faey mindstrikers. All 36 ships turned and flew backwards and returned fire, red bolts and white streaks flashing between them. Jikri's ship was hit, an explosion tearing off its starboard wing, and the two of them ejected immediately. The cargo bay doors on the dropship opened, and the two of them raced for it using their emergency packs as Justin again got his fighter between the enemy and his helpless girls, protecting them like a shield as they flew into the open doors. Justin ordered the damaged Wolf to self-destruct just as the Imxi flew around it, and the ship shuddered and then bloomed into a massive fireball, consuming nearly 20 Imxi fighters, destroying them as he denied the bugs the chance to get their hands on the advanced technology in that fighter. That explosion broke up the Imxi formation, the numbers of them whittling down as the mindstrikers focused more on paralyzing all of the enemies rather than use them against each other. The mindstriker had them shut down their engines, and one by one, the Imxi fighters fell into the red gloom, until the only ones with them were dominated fighters. *Use those Imxi to shield us from the rest, then divert them at these coordinates so the Consortium can't use them to track us,* Taggart sent, using his ship to broadcast a coordinate in the nebula. *Anyone else hit?*

Just a couple of nicks, boss, Terivi called. *I think you took the biggest hit. You've got a nasty hole in your port side, and you're venting smoke into*

the nebula.

It didn't hit anything critical, he replied. Joae, get those damage control units on it.

Already did, boss, she answered. The Ghost squadron was testing damage control spiders, nanites running on a self-contained broadcast power system that didn't extend past the hull of the fighter. The tiny robots were supposed to respond to damage to the fighter and make mid-battle repairs.

He checked tactical again. He saw that the fleet was now past the station and back in the wake current with the entire damn Consortium fleet protecting the station hot on their tail, but the little toys they had to discourage pursuit would be set off anytime now. And sure enough, a series of visible explosions even from where they were flashed in the reddish gloom, as concussive burst missiles were fired behind the retreating fleet, both to damage enemy ships and disrupt the wake current *behind* them, slowing down the pursuing ships.

I'll be a Goraga's love monkey, that crazy idea actually worked, Houri sent with dry amusement.

Just goes to show you, Houri. Makati may be small, but they're devious little bastards, he replied, which made Joae laugh aloud over intercom. I'm showing 36 disabled KMS ships on my tactical and it looks like 14 other ships were self-destructed. They took a beating, but they got the job done.

Looks like they're all being towed out, Kaia noted.

Pursuit, Rikirri?

Just the Imxi fighters, trying to catch up to us, Rikirri replied. We're in the clear, boss. They can't go as fast as we can.

Wizzos, divert the dominated Imxi to draw off pursuit, they're following the telemetry from their own fighters, he ordered. Joae, keep an eye on damage control. If the engines even shiver, we eject. Understand?

Understood, boss, she replied.

Let's get these Kimdori back home. Great job, girls. But I expect nothing but great jobs from the Ghost squadron, he sent as his smoking fighter and

the rest of Ghost squadron disappeared into the reddish gloom of the nebula, leaving the Imxi fighters behind as they turned and decoyed their pursuit in a different direction.

“Taggart’s squadron is in the clear, captain!” one of Palla’s comm officers called as the ship shuddered again.

“If only we were so lucky,” she growled as she looked at tactical. 910 Consortium ships were hot on their tails as they towed damaged ships with them as they ran for the edge of the nebula. Defensive fire was keeping those bugs honest as rail cannon slugs, plasma torpedoes, missiles, and Buzzsaws fired in the gaps between explosions from concussive burst missiles, which were disrupting the wake current *behind* them, forcing the Consortium vessels to fly through shockwave after shockwave and forcing them to endure high friction temperatures and tremendous ionization on their hulls to match the speed of the escaping KMS.

The operation was a success. The enemy station was in flames and breaking apart after being hit by the GRAF blast, and the command center module in the exact center of it was nothing but molecular dust hurtling through the nebula. Both egg-laying queens were destroyed, fighters calling in precision strikes to the gunnery crews on the battleships, their entire habitat modules torn to pieces and making the probability of survival of those queens virtually nil, as disposable drones remained behind and fired on any escape pod ejecting from those modules. The antimatter bombs had been ejected into the remains of the station, and they’d be detonated as soon as they were clear, if the Consortium didn’t find them and disarm them first. But they were built into what looked like twisted space wreckage, so they had a good chance of remaining undetected, since the KMS had left the enemy station in ruins and there was no doubt that the entire chain of command of the enemy was in disarray. They had a confirmed hit and kill on the energy being that could see into their territory, unless that being left the command center in the two minutes between the Kimdori evacuating the station and the GRAF strike. The command center was completely destroyed, the station was heavily damaged, and the egg-laying queens were dead. Even if they missed the energy being, the attack was a success.

Now they just had to get out alive. Rail cannon slugs created corkscrew trails in the reddish mist of the nebula as they fired back at the Consortium fleet, but the *Aegis* had most of its power diverted to towing beams. They were towing six different disabled ships behind them, the largest being the heavy cruiser *Jefferson*, Drae and her crew fighting multiple fires raging through the damaged ship. The cruiser *Hanipae* was totally dead in space, was virtually destroyed with most of its aft section just *gone*, but they had to tow the remains out to prevent the Consortium from picking over the remains and acquiring Karinne technology.

She'd almost shed a tear when she ordered her plasma torpedo launchers to target and completely destroy the two sections of the cruiser *Jerrabai* back at the main station, but they *could not* allow any KMS wreckage to fall into the hands of the enemy. They couldn't recover the dead, but at least they managed to recover the survivors thanks to Crusader armor. As long as a crewman's armor was intact, they could use the grav engines in it to get to a rescue ship or another ship in the formation. They had left nobody alive behind, but the dead, sadly, were atomized when destruct orders were sent to the Crusader armor units with dead crewmen inside them.

The ship rocked again, and she looked to her tactical. "Far enough! Deploy the jacks!"

"Boomjacks deploy!" the woman mirrored.

Boomjacks were one of the new toys from 3D. They were mines much like the mines that 3D were very good at making, but these were defensive in nature, meant to discourage and prevent pursuit by enemy ships. Cargo doors in the stern of every ship opened, dumping thousands of small mines shaped like that Terran child's toy called a *jack*, hence their name *boomjack*. The cloud of small explosive weapons spread out in the wake current behind them, falling behind since they had no engines in them, but what they *did* have was a clever little system that caused them to be attracted to the broadcast power transmitters in the enemy ships, like a magnet attracting iron filings. This made the jacks totally harmless to anything *except* a ship broadcasting power using the Consortium microwave band system. The jacks would bounce off any other ship, but when they hit a ship broadcasting Consortium power, they exploded. Jacks did bounce off the

ships they were towing, spinning into the gloom, but she saw others start to turn in their paths towards the enemy ships, the broadcast power transmitters diverting the jacks right to them.

And since they had no idea how the jacks worked, they wouldn't know how to stop them short of firing on them...but since they had no energy signature, resembled pieces of hull metal to sensors, they wouldn't *think* of firing on them until it was too late.

That was 3D, always a step ahead of the enemy, Palla mused to herself.

Seconds later, the jacks made themselves noticed in spectacular fashion. The closest battleship behind them, almost in Torsion range, had its entire bow section vaporize when it was hit by a cloud of boomjacks, then the jacks hit all over the rest of the ship, a series of explosions that knocked the ship back out of the wake boundary behind them. The entire nebula behind them lit up as the Consortium was being introduced to the latest product of 3D, the small mines evading detection from their sensors and ripping into the lead ships of the enemy formation, causing subsequent chaos as ships behind them had to avoid flaming wreckage and started to understand what was going on. Torsion bolts fired in every direction behind them as the bugs realized that the jacks were sensor masked mines, trying to destroy them before they hit the ships, and that slowed them down for a critical moment. Gunboats fired a salvo of concussive burst missiles into chaos behind them, further disrupting the wake current behind as several missiles were fired ahead to prevent the drag of the disrupting rear to slow down the current overall. "Keep the rail cannons on the enemy until they're out of range!" Palla barked as she got up from her chair and stood before it. Gladiator units, return to protective bunker positions, we're about to accelerate!"

"Gladiators returning to cover," came the response.

"Get us out of here, navigator! Flank speed! If we're not running red on the temp gauge, we're going too slow!"

"Yes, sir!" she said enthusiastically. "Increasing to flank!"

She stayed standing by the navigation station, her hand on the edge and watching the navigator's holo intently as they accelerated. The fleet kept up with them, the *Aegis* in the lead as she watched both their progress towards the edge of the nebula, some 8:29 away at current speed, and the

temperature gauge, which was holding at 3,700 shuki, almost at the red line for protecting the Gladiator units in their bunkers, the armored doors closed over them to protect them from the searing heat that would have killed the pilots almost instantly. were those mecha exposed to it. “Get fire suppression up in the bunker positions! Hose down the Gladiators with heat foam!” she ordered. “More speed!” she told her navigator.

“Clever, Captain, clever,” her navigator told her quietly as they increased speed, getting up to 4,100 shuki on the hull.

“Are we passed the line?” she called back to sensors.

“Yes sir, they can’t keep up with us at this speed without damaging their ships!”

“Hold this speed, navigator,” she ordered. “Get all evacuated personnel into jump restraints! I want to jump the instant we clear the nebula!”

“The wake current is going to dissipate when we move into the less dense fringe of the nebula, sir,” engineering reminded her. “But we can hold speed without increasing temperature.”

“Get all ships directly behind us, let them ride in our slipstream,” Palla called. “Let’s take the pressure off them!”

“Redeploying the fleet, sir!” her first comm replied.

The fleet redeployed into a straight line, the ships almost stern to bow with tiny gaps between them as the other ships in the fleet used the massive *Aegis* like a lead blocker in Terran *football*, the huge ship taking the brunt of the heat and ionization while the ships behind rode in the slipstream formed by the wake of the huge vessel. Palla kept a close eye on the Consortium fleet, but they were falling further and further behind as the friction and ionization on their ships slowed them down as the KMS continued to race ahead, using the wake current like a Terran surfboard, riding it all the way out of the nebula.

“Status of Ghost Squadron?” she asked her tactical.

“Loading aboard the 3D freighter as we speak, sir,” she answered. “They had no pursuit. Telemetry reports they lost three fighters, but no casualties, all six fighter crews were evacuated. They’ll be jumping out any second.”

“Thank Trelle!” she breathed.

Five very nervous minutes later, the *Aegis* burst from the edge of the nebula. The bow, which was glowing reddish from the heat, immediately started to cool as the ship accelerated, and the ships behind fanned out in a triangular formation with the capitol ship in the lead. “Lock coordinates for jump back to PR-371,” Palla boomed loudly as she returned to her chair. “Prepare for jump! Prepare for jump!” she called to all ships. “And damn fine work, ladies and gentlemen. The mission was a success!”

The bridge crew cheered for a moment, then got right back to business. “Comm, relay success back to central command,” Palla ordered. “Lock towing beams on disabled ships, rig for tow jump. Medical, get all the injured ready for jump!” she ordered.

“Jump in 32 seconds,” navigation warned. “Coordinates locked, jump engines staged and ready. We’ll jump the second we’re outside the gravity field,” she called, looking back.

“Jump in 30 seconds! 30 seconds! Everyone in your jump restraints!” Palla barked. She locked herself into her chair and set it forward as she quickly looked over the tactical display of ships. 36 ships damaged, 14 destroyed, and the initial estimates were 639 casualties based on the cessation of telemetry from their Crusader armor, the vast majority of them from the 14 destroyed ships. 1,455 injured was the first figure from medical, scattered through the entire fleet. Given what they’d done, those were very low casualties. The Crusader armor *really* made a difference, gave every crewman an extra layer of powerful protection that saved their lives when crews from other ships would face certain death. Shrapnel, hull breaches, secondary explosions, they couldn’t kill a KMS navy crewman like they could others, thanks to the Grand Duke Karinne’s complete insistence on maximum protection for those who served in any branch of the Karinne military. His focus on their safety had saved many lives this day. Many, many lives.

From a strategic standpoint, they’d taken the Consortium *completely* by surprise. Not even the energy being had managed to figure out what was going on until it was too late, thanks to her engineering team coming up with a way to use the nebula *against* the Consortium. And she was going to put her entire engineering department in for every medal she could talk the

Grand Duke into bestowing upon them, and she could both get in front of him and nag him like a Barkan elder wife until she made him do it. If not for their creativity, they would have never pulled that off.

This was a victory for *science* as much as it was for gallantry.

The massive ship *Aegis* vanished from the edge of the nebula as it jumped out, leaving behind complete chaos from their surprise attack...and 12 seconds after the last ship jumped out, the antimatter bombs they'd left behind detonated, eradicating the rest of the enemy station, destroying any random pieces of KMS wreckage left behind and unable to be self-destructed to deny their enemy of *anything* they might be able to salvage. The Consortium ships managed to survive the shockwave of that explosion since they were so far from the station by that point, almost to the edge of the nebula themselves, but for them, it was now a moot point. The station was gone, and just as the light of the explosion started to fade, the newest string jammer was activated at PR-371, denying all string communications in the PR sector and beyond. If that wasn't bad enough, the interdiction effect from an interdicator set at the perfect distance washed over the nebula, trapping them inside. It would be three months at sublight to reach the interdicator, 19 days for gravometric missiles to get there, but the main reason for it was to trap those ships at the nebula to prevent them from participating in the attack on Karis. And that was exactly what the interdicator did. The 903 Consortium ships at the nebula were trapped there with no base, no queens to protect, nothing but to figure out how the hell they got outflanked and failed in their mission to protect the station and the queens from attack, and unable to make contact with other Consortium units to tell them what happened.

It was a total victory for the KMS.

Chapter 9

Vesta, 9 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 1 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 9 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

KMS Command Center, the White House, Karis

He guessed it was a bit cruel of him to be relieved that there was no name that he knew intimately on the list of casualties.

Jason stood by the main display table, looking over the lists and reports compiled and displaying over it along with his command staff. It could have been a hell of a lot worse. 17 ships were either destroyed or beyond any hope of salvage, and 33 ships had taken moderate to heavy damage. Some of them would be in drydock for weeks, like the *Jefferson*, which would have to have most of its power system replaced. Every ship that participated in the attack on the nebula had taken some damage, but the rest could be patched up and be ready for the Consortium attack on Karis. Those 33 ships were too damaged to be considered able to get back in service in three days.

Logs and video of the attack showed just how cunning it had been. Thanks to the Kimdori that had been inside, they'd decoyed the Consortium and allowed Palla's fleet to get right on top of the station before they could respond, and that gave them the opportunity to destroy it before the overwhelming numbers of the enemy would have wiped out his attack fleet. The entire objective of the assault wasn't a toe to toe slugfest, it had been a hit and run attack, and it had succeeded beyond even Myri and Navii's hopes. Both egg-laying queens and the clairvoyant energy being were dead, removing the greatest threat that the enemy posed to Confederate interests. The last two surviving energy beings were at Trieste, according to Kimdori intelligence, overseeing the preparations for the attack on Karis.

The casualties were within expected parameters. There were 639 dead and 1,488 injured, with “injured” classified as wounds that would put them in the hospital for at least one day. As was usual with Torsion weapons, the vast majority of the injuries were trauma; lost limbs, impact damage, concussions and brain trauma, and some decompression injuries from breaches in armor, where a limb or a part of the torso were exposed to space. The interior of the nebula wasn’t the icy cold of deep space, but it was still running around -50 degrees Fahrenheit in there, which also introduced some frostbite and cold-related injuries on top of bodies being exposed to the vacuum of space and kinds of injuries exposure to a vacuum could cause. Those kinds of injuries were never pretty, and it took longer than average to treat due to all the internal hemorrhaging. The most severe cases would require amputation and limb replacement, according to Songa. It was easier to just amputate the limb and grow a new one than it was to try to repair the space-exposed limb.

And that was why Crusader armor had an internal pressure system in it, which caused the internal gel backing to exert pressure on the body equal to Faey mean air pressure in case the armor was breached, limiting the exposure injury to that part of the armor that had the breach, to only the body that was physically exposed to vacuum. The armor also had pressure seals at all joints to limit breach air pressure loss to one area between joints, protecting the rest of the body from explosive decompression. It couldn’t completely stop pressure injury if the armor was breached and lost pressure, but it did drastically slow the effect on the victim. It also served to help reduce pressure trauma caused by high explosives, isolating the vulnerable body within from the concussive shockwave of high explosives detonating close to them, so it had applications even for his ground-bound army infantry personnel. The pressure system was standard in all military Crusader systems, since any member of the KMS might find herself serving on a ship, including army infantry, and it had use for army units as well. That system was not cheap, but it was worth the expense in his mind. Anything that further protected his people was a justifiable expense. Equipment could be bought and replaced, but a life could not.

But still, 639 was 639 too many. He hated to see anyone die in service to the house, but in this case, there was simply no other way...and it was going to get much uglier. The expected casualty count for the attack on

Karis was in the thousands, and that was *just* for the KMS. He almost shuddered to think of the casualty count for the Skaa, in those rickety picket ships that could be destroyed with harsh language. And he both felt thankful and felt like an asshole for being relieved that no command-level officer had been killed, that no name he *knew* was on that list. He was already steeling himself for the fight at Karis, and how much it would cost both the house and him personally, when names he *did* know were on that list. And it could be many, many, *many* names.

Palla had put her engineering staff in for about every medal she could think of, and he was inclined to grant all but the most outrageous ones. He felt that their exceptionally effective plan was worth the Order of Sora, the third-highest medal in the KMS, because their plan had saved many, many lives, maybe tens of thousands of lives if the impact of removing that command station was viewed in the big picture. They had found a way to breach the impregnable fortress, and their plan had given the Confederation the upper hand.

The repair report was promising. Outside of those 33 ships, they expected to have all the damaged ships operational in three days. There was going to be some duct tape and bubblegum in a few of them, though. The 17 ships they brought back that were beyond any hope of salvage would be parked inside Kosigi for dismantling, including cannibalizing usable equipment for other ships. The names of those ships, however, would be available when their captains got replacements, giving them the option of keeping the old name or giving a ship a new one.

Names. He glanced to the side, where Sevi's new bulldog, the aptly named *Arabax*, made a lazy orbit of Kosigi. It was in the lead of a squadron of the newly commissioned ships, undergoing shakedown and initial wargames to acclimate the crews to the ships. Sevi still wasn't *entirely* happy about moving off her beloved heavy cruiser, but the threat of her getting booted out of command if she refused had overridden her nostalgia. God were those ships so *fucking* mean looking. The *Arabax* was long, sleek, and thoroughly intimidating, its long body bristling with emplacement after emplacement of particle beam, pulse, MPAC, Kimdori stream weapon (an experiment), and even some Torsion and dark matter batteries, along with plasma torpedo launchers and missile batteries, all carefully placed along the gentle angled slope of the hull so they could all be fired forward, as well

as in just about any direction given there were batteries both on the top and bottom of the hull, and they were on mounts that gave them a lot of range of motion. Bulldogs were just that, heavily armed war machines meant to smash into an enemy formation with overwhelming firepower, with more armament than anything but a capitol ship.

And with their incredible success now a matter of record, there were a ton of them on the board for construction. The tactical battleship would be one of the three “holy trinity” ships that would make up a fleet, along with a carrier for fighter support and the line ships, destroyers and cruisers, for mobile firepower. Conventional battleships would serve as the flagships of the squadrons, and the capitol ships, when deployed, would carry the flag for the entire fleet in the operational theater. The regular battleships were nasty all by themselves, but the tactical battleships took it to a whole new level.

Dellin’s on the comm, General, Shey sent, turning and looking back at them. Do you want me to patch it through to the main console?

Go ahead, Myri answered. They all looked up, and Dellin’s handsome face appeared. “What can we do for you, Admiral?”

“I have some updates coming down on your board, I just wanted to give you a warning,” he replied.

“How do the repairs look, Dellin?” Jason asked.

“They look favorable,” he replied. “I’ve freed up some dock space for the more damaged ones, and we’re working on the rest out in the open space. I estimate we’ll have the most heavily damaged ship back on the board in two days, nine hours.”

“That’s very good news,” Navii said with a nod. “Well within our deadline.”

“How are crews looking?” Dellin asked.

“With the crews freed up by the loss of ships, we’ll have enough personnel to crew every ship we can put on the line,” Juma answered. “I’ll send up the new ship assignments as soon as we work through the openings. Just keep all the navy crews on Kosigi until we have the ship assignments sorted out.”

“Works for me, they’re out there helping my repair crews,” Dellin said.

“Are the repairs cutting into the projected ship completions?” Jason asked.

“No, I’ve got enough manpower to finish the ships we can get off the docks in three days and still get all the repairs done. Truth be told, I had too many workers to really man all those docks effectively. Too many hands working on the same unit can sometimes slow things down instead of speed them up.”

“I know what you mean,” Jason nodded.

A shimmer to the side made him glance, and he saw Dellin’s board change with updated estimated repair times and ship status.

“How is the Confederate fleet schedule looking?” Jason asked.

“On schedule,” Juma answered. “They’re staging the various fleets in Terran space, and they’re ready to start the transition to Karis as soon as Lorna gives the go. We already have all defensive positions mapped out, and everyone knows where they’re going to be and what they’re going to do. The battle plan is fully approved and disseminated to all the various militaries.”

“Who’s going to have overall command?”

“Lorna,” Navii answered. “She’s the ranking officer, and she’ll be in right in this room commanding the operation herself. All the command officers will also be here, in tactical command of various fleets and military assets. The Confederate command staff is going to be running this operation.”

“Okay, I can live with Lorna, she’s damn good,” Jason nodded. “And it’ll be nice to see her again. I know Jys will be happy she’s on the planet.” He looked to them. “Just don’t forget that *you’re* on that staff as well. Don’t let them push you out.”

“We won’t,” Myri chuckled. “We’ve already arranged it with Gemai to handle them running around the White House. She’s limiting the staffs that the commanders can bring to Karis to the bare minimum necessary to handle the operation.”

“Good, I was going to ask about that,” he said. “I don’t mind the command staff, but I don’t want a thousand military flunkies and sycophants from outside roaming around looking for trouble to get into.”

“Well said,” Navii chuckled. “Every military eventually ends up becoming a bureaucracy.”

“Not ours,” Jason said vehemently.

“A military can’t operate without *some* bureaucracy, Jason,” Navii told him lightly.

Cybi manifested in the room, hovering just across from Jason at the console. “Hey Cybi,” he called. “What’s up?”

“I have a request for you to come to 3D as soon as possible,” she told him. *“They were going to call you, but I was there discussing something with Myleena, so they asked me to do it.”*

“I hope it’s good news,” Jason said. “There’s any number of projects they’re working on over there that might save some lives on our side.”

“You’d better get over there then, Jayce,” Myri said. “We have everything under control here, and we were about to put you back in the corner anyway,” she added with a wink.

“Someday I’m gonna show you girls just who’s boss around here,” he threatened lightly. “C’m on, Cybi. You can come with me.”

“I’ll meet you there,” she replied, then her hologram winked out.

Dera, Shen, we’re heading to 3D, he called.

Cybi resumed her hologram when he and his two guards got to the Marine corvette *Tracker*, utilizing the holographic emitters inside the ship. She certainly had no problem accessing it, since Cybi could access any KMS ship via biogenics, something nobody else could manage. She sat beside him and in front of Marine Major Tremi Karinne, one of the non-flag rank officers that had command of a corvette in the Marines, while Dera and Shen took seats back on the gunnery deck. Tremi was a transfer from the Navy, and they put her in command of a corvette not for operational field control, but for combat. The *Tracker* was a dedicated fighting corvette, not a command and control ship that could fight when called upon. Naval

corvettes were exactly that, they were meant to be combat vessels that supported fighter and gunboat strike operations and functioned as high speed attack craft with considerably more firepower than a fighter, and the Marines had started to adopt the practice when they got some of the combat variant corvettes that would have otherwise been put in reserve. Tremi was one of the new generation of Marine corvette battle commanders, and her ship reflected that status. It didn't have the tactical deck in the back, it instead had two gunnery positions for gunnery officers to man the extra pulse and rail weapons, and much of the empty space that would be in a standard C&C corvette was taken up by a belly-mounted weapon rack holding pulse and rail cannon turrets. The change had come down for two reasons: they had more Naval corvettes than they knew what to do with, and the corvettes had proven highly effective as extra-large and highly durable fighters in space operations and powerful ground support and aerial supremacy for ground attacks. As such the combat variant corvette had a crew of four, lacking the tactical operations officers. The captain and navigator manned the cockpit, the captain doing some actual operational work, and the two gunnery officers worked from the gunnery deck and controlled the missile batteries and the universal mount pulse and rail weaponry mounted on the belly and tail, where the captain herself manned the forward guns. Combat corvette captains didn't just sit in a chair and issue orders, they were more like fighter squadron commanders, flying sorties with the squadron and doing actual fighting. The corvette cockpits still had the third chair, however, so Jason sat there. Tremi was rated to fly a corvette, so she was doing the actual flying when they took off, her navigator acting like the co-pilot. In combat, it would be the navigator doing the flying while Tremi controlled all other ship functions outside of the weapons controlled by the gunnery crew.

"I see they started sending down the combat variants to the Marines," Jason said as he looked around the cockpit. "How's the transfer sitting with you, Tremi?"

"So far so good, your Grace," she answered as the corvette picked up off the landing pad. "I've been doing more training of other Marine officers than any real work lately."

"Let's hope it stays that way," Jason grunted.

“Not me. I’ve been attached back to the Navy for the upcoming attack. I have too much experience for them to keep me behind the planetary shield,” she said, glancing back with a smile. Tremi was definitely a cutie, with pale blue skin—she didn’t spend much time in a tanning bed—and ghostly white hair that was tousled and shoulder length. She had very dark violet eyes and an impishly cute face, almost like she was a born troublemaker. The dimples certainly reinforced that impression of her. “I’m being attached to the Ghost Squadron as a support corvette. I’m certainly happy about that,” she chuckled. “If I’m going to be doing fighter operations, I’m quite content to be attached to the best squadron in the Navy.”

“Ah, so Juma’s carrying through on her idea to attach corvettes to fighter squadrons for extra support.”

“It is a good idea,” she said as they started the four-minute trip to the 3D warehouse. “And it sure beats being attached to a tactical strike squadron. They always get the shit missions.”

Jason chuckled as Cybi looked out the port window. “Too much firepower not to be used as tactical strike ships.”

“Yeah, I hate being a bomber,” she said, glancing back again. “That’s what gunboats are for.”

“Gunboats need support too,” Jason said lightly.

“I know, but if they want me to be a fighter, make me a fighter. Not this fighter mission one day, strike mission the next.”

“That’s why you get the big credits, Tremi, you’re just so good that they have you do both.”

“Flattery will get you all kinds of places, your Grace,” she said lightly, which made her navigator laugh.

She got them to 3D right on time, the shield protecting the Shimmer Dome and the 3D warehouse coming down long enough for them to pass through. There were 200 Wolf fighters, 20 corvettes, and about 100 ground batteries tracking them as they approached, and they’d fire without hesitation if they even *thought* that the *Tracker* had no authorization to be there. On the ground, there were over 15,000 ground infantry and 200 Gladiators ringing the site, along with ground pulse and rail batteries,

secondary shield generators to create a second hard shield over the ever-present hard shield that was kept on over the compound at all times to create a second layer of protection for the extremely important factory. The Shimmer Dome was one of the most important sites on Karis, the only place in the entire universe where biogenic crystals could be grown, so the compound of buildings holding the crystal factory, board assembly plant, shipping and warehouse facilities, and 3D warehouse would have significant resources allocated to its defense. Only Cybi's facility on Kosiningi would have more protection than the Shimmer Dome.

Cybi vanished from the corvette when they landed and opened the inner airlock-style door for him, then floated alongside as he entered the main work area of the warehouse, where some of the most cutting edge advanced technology in the galaxy was developed. The entire 3D crew was in except for Jyslin, Myleena sitting at her desk on the raised platform on the far end of the warehouse area, a large open area filled with benches, desks, prototypes, and equipment and supply racks and bins. He went straight to Myleena's desk, where she was putting lines of code up on her holographic monitor, her feet up on her desk as she wrote code with command thought, and doing it about fifty times faster than she could have ever done it by typing. Entire blocks of code appeared on the monitor and scrolled out of sight. *Cybi said you wanted to see me?*

Oh yeah, we do, she replied, putting her feet down. "Gather up!" she shouted over the continuous sounds of talking and machinery.

[What's going on?]

[Mainly a status report, but we've made some significant progress on some projects, enough to report them to you.]

[That's exactly what I wanted to hear.]

[Good thing you asked Cybi along, I was going to ask her to be here. You're always really handy to have at these meetings, Cybi, thanks to that computer brain and database of yours,] Myleena grinned.

[I'm happy to help, Myleena,] she replied easily and honestly.

They went down to the center of the work area, where they kept their conference table. Jason put his helmet on it as the 3D crew assembled, then he looked to Myli as he took a seat at one of the reinforced chairs. He and

his guards were the only ones in the building in armor. “Alright, Myli, surprise me,” he said.

She chuckled as she got down there, wearing KMS workout shorts and a skimpy sports halter, both white. She showed absolutely no signs yet that she was pregnant, but that time would be over soon. “The main thing we’ve got is some progress on the diffuser project,” she said, looking to Jenny. She brought up a schematic over the conference table that looked like a shockwave generator unit.

Jenny stood up and stepped over to the table. “This is what we’ve got so far. We haven’t gotten very far with the diffuser prototype Myli sent us, we haven’t managed to improve it very much, but Eraen had a pretty damn good idea,” she said, grinning at her partner. “We think we can modify a standard Torsion shockwave generator to act like a shield against Torsion bolts,” she said. “The sims so far look pretty promising. The modified generator creates a Torsion field so powerful it literally reflects Torsion bolts like a laser beam bouncing off a mirror. We’re converting a shockwave unit right now to test the math.”

“Sounds promising. The downside?”

Jenny laughed. “A big one. The unit can’t stay up long before it burns itself out. The units aren’t designed to handle the kind of power it takes to create the reflective field, so they don’t last long when we use them that way. We could probably build one from the ground up that can do the job, but it won’t be in time to do us any good against the upcoming attack.”

“It’s also a massive power drain on the ship, and I mean it sucks as much power as the engines do at full power,” Eraen added. “And no weapon can fire through the effect, not even pulse weapons. The field reflects energy fire from both directions, even pulse weapons, and atomizes rail slugs on top of arresting their momentum, making them useless. Firing with the field up would cause a pulse shot to bounce right back at the firing ship.”

“Ouch. But you think you can get it to work?”

“We’re pretty sure. We were thinking that this would be best for ground installations, working like a panic shield that comes up only long enough to bounce the Torsion bolt, then goes back down before it overheats and burns

itself out. Since we can hook them right into the planetary grid, we don't have to worry much about the power drain, the planetary power grid could run a freakin' million of these things at once. Anything that physically tries to pass through the field will get ripped into molecules by the effect, so it serves as a pretty nasty hard shield on top of being able to reflect energy-based weapons. If those mantis craft land and are about to attack the site, they can activate the shockwave generator and have it stay up as long as possible before it burns out, keeping the attackers at bay until ground units can get there to take them out."

"That's pretty clever," he said appreciatively. "And you're right, it won't be much good on a ship if it has a short uptime and you can't fire through it. Go ahead and see what you can get working, guys. You have three days. If you can get it working, install one here to protect the Shimmer Dome and 3D. This is probably the second-most critical location on the planet. If they take out the Shimmer Dome, we'll be fuckin' hamstrung for nearly a year before we get it rebuilt."

"You got it, boss," Jenny said.

"How's the work on that wormhole destabilizer going?" he asked.

"I'm working on that myself, and right now I have some equipment on order from the Shimmer Dome. As soon as I get the parts, I'll build the prototype and see what we get."

"What does the math say?"

"That it'll work, but it's also gonna screw with any gravometric engine while the disruption field is up. We'll be able to maneuver, but it's gonna slow down our ships and make them sluggish. Since our strategy is to back up against the planetary shield and make them engage our ships in range of the planetary defense system, I don't think the Navy will mind too much."

"What about Imperial ships?"

"They'll actually have less trouble than ours will, because the effect interferes more with translation engines than conventional grav engines," she replied. "I'll have some field data to analyze as soon as they finish building the custom boards I need and get them over here."

"Bottom line?"

“If it works, it’ll make the one-sided wormhole the bugs are building 36% more unstable,” she replied. “That will cost them a couple of thousand ships destroyed by the flux as they try to pass through. The effect can reach as far out as 400,000 kathra from the planet.”

“Damn, that far?”

“I never build anything half-ass, Jayce,” she grinned.

“Alright, call me as soon as you have some hard numbers. What else is going on? How are the inventories, Tom?”

“We’re gearing up and getting ready,” he answered. “We’ve got a lot of factory space now since ship production is off the queue, so we’re cranking out toys by the buttload every hour, both oldies and some of our new products.”

“How many solar collectors have you guys built and placed?”

Bo laughed. “About fifty,” he answered. “When they get here, the sun itself is gonna start kicking their asses.”

“Let’s hope we can use them,” Jason said. “If they’re smart, they’ll stay on the night side.”

“They’ll be on whichever side Kosigi isn’t,” Myleena noted. “If we’re lucky, they’ll attack when Kosigi is on the night side of the planet, which will put their ships in the line of fire of the collectors.”

“That’s a complete shit sandwich for them,” Jason said with an evil smile. “Face down the GRAF cannons on Kosigi or a few dozen solar collectors.”

“It’s gonna be over a hundred in three days, I have about sixty more of them slated for delivery by then,” Tom amended.

“Good. I think we should mass produce those things and add them to our standard planetary defense package. They sure as hell proved themselves when we used them in the PR sector.”

“Myri’s already ordered five hundred of ‘em for deployment at all house planets,” Myleena chuckled. “She had the same idea.”

“What about the new toys?”

“We’ve pulled them off the shelf and got factory space for ‘em,” Tom answered. “And we emptied the entire storage room, Jayce. Everything. Even the Hello Kitties and My Little Ponies. We’re specifically focusing on those, the high-power variants capable of damaging naval vessels.”

“Good. This isn’t the time to hold anything back, guys. If you have *any* idea that we might be able to use against the Consortium, you get it in front of Myleena as fast as you can. And I mean even if you build a fuckin’ slingshot out of rubber bands that shoots acid spitballs. If it’s viable in any way, I want it on the board and waiting to kick some Consortium ass.”

“I had something of an idea,” Bobby called.

“Shoot, Bobby,” Jason answered. Bobby was a Legion member, but he was more of a builder than a designer. He was like Luke in that he was really good with his hands, a great builder, but he didn’t have the technical skill that many others did. Where they all studied with Myleena, learned how to be engineers, Bobby just kept on building things, happy to serve the Legion as the guy that could build almost anything as long as he was given the plans for it. He didn’t invent or design toys, but he could build the fuck out of them when it came time to build prototypes and test their ideas.

“Okay, I think we might have a way to use the GRAF cannons on Kosigi,” he said, stepping up and touching his interface, bringing up a holo of the planet Karis and Kosigi. “Jayce, you once told me that telekinesis can affect space itself, and I saw that video of how Empress Dahnai was saved in her throne room. Lady Saelle deflected the MPAC shots into the ceiling.” He took his finger and traced from Kosigi and in an arc around the planet, his finger leaving a train of holographic light behind it. “Is there any way that you and Lady Cybi can do the same thing on a higher scale? Can you use the CBIM’s merge to twist space and change the path of a GRAF shot? You know, bounce it off some spatial warp around the planet and into the enemy, like using a mirror to detour a laser beam around an obstacle?”

Jason almost said something, then he clicked his mouth shut and looked to Cybi, a little surprised. He’d *never thought* of that! “*I think we could,*” she answered for him. “*We can certainly alter the course of the cannon shots, but we can’t do it as a single deflection, as the mirror you use in your example. The angles would put the GRAF shot out of range of our telekinesis at the point we’d have to deflect it and allow it to clear the*

planet on the deflection. But if we do it as a tunnel of warped space that loops around the planet in an arc, it should work. We'll have to keep our firing arcs clear, though," she said, touching her finger to her chin and looking at the hologram. *"The shots will have to pass very close to the shield for us to be able to affect them, and that might cause our fleets some problems given Lorna's strategy of drawing the enemy as close to the planetary defense system as possible. They'll have to clear out of the path of the shot and stay out of the area of affected space, else we'll damage them. Something like this,"* she said, tracing her own finger from Kosigi and right by the shield, almost scraping it, then curving it around to a straight line on the other side. *"We have Admiral Dellin aim all of his GRAF cannons at a common point, the entry point of the spatial tunnel, then we adjust the warping for each shot to account for the angular differences. Dellin will have to make absolutely sure that all cannon shots are exactly on target, since warping that much space will require our complete attention and we'll have no power to spare to create a large target for Dellin to aim at. If the GRAF shots are off by two degrees, the GRAF shot will miss the window, and they might hit the planetary shield if they're off target on the planet side of the window."*

"Holy shit, that's an awesome idea!" Myleena said with a bright laugh. "With Jason merged to Cybi, they *could* bank a shot around the planet and right into the enemy!"

"Cybi—" Jason started, but she cut him off.

"I'm already writing a targeting subroutine that will allow Dellin to aim the cannons at a point we choose, so we can wrap them around the planet, then we aim the shots when they come around the other side. I'm developing an algorithm that will allow us to cooperate with the command center to call in pinpoint GRAF strikes on their command."

"Outstanding, Bobby! That's exactly what I meant!" Jason said with a laugh. "You just proved you belong in this building!"

The others all cheered, and Bobby stood there with a foolish grin. "Well, it wasn't nothin'," he said, then sat back down.

"Well, I think I'll be spending more time at Kosiningi than I expected, learning how to aim GRAF shots," Jason chuckled, and Cybi smiled and

nodded.

“A little practice might be good for both of us,” she agreed.

“Okay, can anyone top that?” Jason asked, looking around. When nobody said anything, he slapped his gauntlets against his knees and stood up. “Alright then, I have to get back to the White House,” he said. “Jenny, Eraen, see what you can work up. Myli, commune anything important to me, since you’re in the shop.”

“Will do,” she replied.

They returned to the White House, and Jason went to his office just in time for the meeting of the Confederate Council. He sat down in front of the holograms, already on, with Lorna in the middle going over the most recent tweaks to the battle plan. “We’ll start moving ships in sixteen standard hours, starting with Skaa picket ships,” Lorna told the leaders.

“Lorna, expect some changes to come straight from Cybi in a few hours,” Jason broke in. “We’re working on a way to utilize the GRAF cannons on Kosigi no matter where the Consortium attacks, and it might require us to clear ships out away from close to the planet. She’ll send you some locations we want kept open.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she nodded.

“Some kind of deflector array?” Dahnai asked.

“Something like that,” he replied.

“After the picket ships are in Karisian space, we’ll begin shifting assets into the system based on planned fleet deployments,” Lorna continued. “The Kimdori inside Go’jur’mi are keeping us abreast of enemy plans, and if nothing changes, we’ll have all our forces in place a full Imperial standard day ahead of the Consortium’s planned attack. Our strategy for the defense of Karis remains unchanged,” she said as a hologram of the planet and dots representing Confederate ships in their planned formations appeared. “We’ll deploy our forces in a way that puts the heaviest firepower over the most critical targets on the planet, forcing the Consortium to run the gauntlet to get at Kosiningi, Karsa, the control center for the planetary power plant in the center of the Kargan continent, the Parri settlement on the northwest coast, and the Kizzik colony on Kirga. There will be ships

stationed literally all around the planet, however, deployed in a manner that will allow our forces to respond quickly if the Consortium attacks a less defended area. In a way, these less defended points are bait trying to lure the Consortium into attacking them,” she explained. “We’ll have our assets deployed so that we can attack any concentration of ships attacking these points very quickly. KMS ground forces will be defending those sites and all occupied cities and settlements. Anything inside the shield is going to be exclusively defended by the KMS, while everything outside the shield will be combined Confederate defense. If the KMS needs support, they’ll call us in, and we’ll enter the shield at two points where the shield can be turned soft to allow entry. We’ll concentrate ships carrying infantry and ground units at those points, so if they’re needed, they can quickly enter the shield and deploy to any location on the planet that needs reinforcements.”

“Is the interdictor outside the shield?” Overseer Kruu asked. “Is it being adequately defended?”

“No—yes, they’re being defended, and no, the interdictors aren’t outside the shield,” Jason replied. “The interdictors are *just* inside the shield, one in stationary orbit over each magnetic pole. They’ll be on the inside, and we have some major defenses in place around them to protect them. But even if they destroy the interdictors at the planet, we have the Karis system interdicted in a sphere far beyond the planet,” he explained. “We have two layers of interdiction, the planetary interdictors and a second layer a light year out, set so they’ll just reach the planet if the interdictors here are down or destroyed. That gives us two light years of interdiction in every direction from the planet for anyone trying to jump in. Just destroying the Karis interdictors won’t let them jump ships into the system, it won’t even let them jump ships *inside* the system. The second layer will stop that, because the edge of their interdiction ends and intersects right at the Karis star, completely covering the entire system.”

“I didn’t know you had that in place,” he said. “A very wise thing to do.”

“We thought ahead when we designed the defenses around the planet,” Jason said simply.

“Karis’ planetary defense systems are already designed into the defensive strategy,” Lorna continued. “The KMS is updating us with their

changes on an hourly basis, mainly revolving around the deployment of automated weaponry their factories are producing. As of right now, our fundamental strategy is unchanged. We keep our forces close to the planet and force the Consortium to engage us with the planetary defenses backing us up,” she said as the hologram changed. “Missiles, fighters, automated weaponry, and long-range weapons will be employed if they won’t commit, but we see this as highly unlikely. Their entire strategy absolutely depends on them taking the planet, so they will attack our forces immediately upon entering the system. While our strategy does play into the Consortium’s plans in that we’re allowing them to get close to the planet, given the powerful defensive systems in place at the planet, it’s still our best option for dealing as much damage as possible. To take the planet, they have to run a gauntlet, so we’re simply concentrating our forces to turn that gauntlet into an impassable barrier.”

“We still intend to attack the ships at range, though, correct?” Ba’mra’ei asked.

“Of course, High Staff,” Lorna nodded. “They’ll have to approach under a hail of fire, then engage our forces with the planetary defenses reinforcing us.”

“We’ve already got entire warehouses full of Legion toys ready for that,” Jason said, to which Lorna nodded. “The Consortium will have to get through everything we can throw at them to get within Torsion range of our ships. We have GRAF cannons, rail cannons, mines, missiles, assorted Legion weapons, and solar collectors set up to dish out some massive punishment if they arrive way out from the planet. When they get to the ships, they’ll have already taken a lot of damage.”

“Thus why we believe they’ll try to open that wormhole as close as possible to the planet,” Lorna nodded.

“I did want to ask how the Generations are being deployed for this battle,” Assaba asked, looking at him. “Are they going to fight?”

“Every one of us is going to be involved, outside of the children,” Jason answered. “I’ll be with Cybi, managing the main defense of the planet. Virtually the entire biogenic network will be put under my control for this, because it’ll take the combined power of nearly everything we have on the

planet to give me the power and range to take out battleships in orbit. Duchess Myleena Karinne will be with me, acting as a backup in case I pass out or something. The others will be deployed at every city and military position we have on the planet and in Kosigi with tactical gestalts, to form a second line of defense in case anything gets past me. The Generations will be defensive *only*,” he stressed. “You have no idea how hard it is to use your talent to a degree that can do damage to an armored military mecha, and do it from range. Even with the new tactical gestalts we have in place to boost range and power, they’ll literally be the last line of defense.”

“But it’ll be a formidable defense,” Dahnai noted.

“If things get to where they have to fight, then the shield will be down and everyone’s gonna be in a pitched battle on the planet’s surface,” Jason grunted.

“We have two plans in place to deal with what we expect from the Consortium, and what we don’t,” Lorna continued, putting up a holo of the planet. “Our likely scenario is that they set their one-way wormhole to bring their ships in as close to the planet as possible,” she told them. “We expect this because the enemy’s strategy hinges on taking the planet, and they’ll need as many ships as possible to get past the defense that both we and Jason will put up. But, in the event that they open the wormhole a distance from the planet and attempt to stage their forces, we have an alternate plan in place to deal with this. It involves the use of automated weaponry and missiles jumped in using a disposable freighter and hyperspace missiles, which are attuned to the interdiction effect so they can jump outbound. If the Consortium, say, tries to set their wormhole to near one of the other five planets in the system, we have the ability to hit them wherever they try to appear.”

“Don’t the Kimdori know where they intend to set their wormhole?” Dahnai asked.

“Not at this time. Only their overall commander has that information, and the Consortium knows that the Kimdori have penetrated their security,” Lorna answered. “So they’re keeping their operational plans secret, even from their own troops. The ship commanders in the Consortium have no idea what the plan is, and they won’t until just before they open the wormhole.”

“Why don’t you think they’ll stage somewhere, like at planet two?” Assaba asked.

“It’s simple, your Imperial Majesty,” Lorna answered. “The Consortium does know what kind of defense they’re facing at Karis. If they attempt to open their wormhole a great distance away and stage their forces, it means they have to bring them in under constant attack, and they’ll lose a sizable number of ships. They *need* those ships in order to breach the defenses at Karis, mainly because of the powerful defense of both the planetary shield, which prevents any bombardment or orbital attack, and that of Jason and Cybi, which will allow them to directly attack the ships in orbit using telekinetic ability. If they attempt to come in at a distance and then cruise in at sublight, they won’t have the ships to take Karis due to them coming in under fire. Their only real option is to open the wormhole as close as gravity will allow and attempt to blitz the defensive fleet, knock enough of a hole in our defenses that will allow them to get shield busters down to get ground attack units through the shield, and try to take the planet’s three critical points; Kosiningi, the planetary power control station, and the White House.” Those points appeared on the planet on the holo. “These three strategic points represent virtually all the critical systems on the planet. Taking either Kosiningi or the power station will stop Jason from attacking the fleet in orbit, where taking the White House means they take the military command center directing the defense.”

“I see. That does clear things up, thank you, General,” Assaba said.

“We also have a plan in place if they attempt to open the wormhole a medium distance from the planet and then rush in at sublight, but that’s the most infeasible of the three options available,” Lorna added. “It represents maximum damage to the enemy fleet with minimum advantage. But, since it *is* an option, we have a plan for it.”

“So, if they’re damned if they don’t and damned if they do, what do you expect them to do?” Ba’mra’ei asked.

“What we expect is for them to open the wormhole as close as physically possible to the planet,” she said, causing a swirl to appear the minimum distance from the planet Myleena calculated. “We expect some kind of defensive or diversionary tactic to be used at first, to prevent the first ships through from being annihilated, perhaps some sensor burst device

or some kind of physical defense, like a derelict ship or asteroid, that protects the first ships through. Then they'll send their ships through as fast as they possibly can, since the wormhole will be unstable and might be prone to moving large distances. Since this represents a possibility their forces might be scattered, they have to move them as fast as they can through the wormhole, so a ship isn't all by itself, and therefore easy prey. Our defenses are based on dealing with this tactic, of fighting a constant stream of ships coming out of the wormhole. We'll try to contain them as long as possible, but we already expect a breach, so we'll allow them to breach where *we* want them to, opening a hole in our lines and allowing them to break through. Where we allow that will depend entirely on where that wormhole appears, since it can appear *anywhere* around the planet. But, since they have three critical sites they have to take, we expect them to try to aim the wormhole so it appears over the Kargan continent, since all three critical points on Karis are either on Karga or off its eastern shore. Opening the wormhole over Karga gives their ground units the shortest distance to travel."

"The very fact that you know this would cause me to open the wormhole elsewhere," Field Marshall Grran's vocoder intoned as his fingers deftly typed out his thoughts. *"A very foolish military commander does what his opponent expects him to do, even when it seems that it is his only choice. I would expect them to open the wormhole a quarter of the circumference of the planet away from Karga, breach there, then use an angled controlled descent of their forces to those points."*

"We have plans for just that, Field Marshall," Lorna said. "As I said, what we do depends on where they open the wormhole. That's why we'll have our forces strategically positioned around the planet, to be able to rally to that point quickly, as well as bait points in our defensive lines to lure the Consortium into attacking the shield where *we* want them to."

Jason drifted through the next few minutes, not paying much attention as he made some notes, then he waited for Lorna to finish laying out what she wanted the rulers to know—which wasn't everything—then spoke up when she was finished. "I won't be attending these meetings until after everything's done," Jason announced. "I have too much work to do and too much to get ready for. Secretary Yeri will be sitting in for me, and she'll tell

me everything I need to know. In fact, I'll be leaving in just a minute. I have something extremely important to do."

"What is that?" Overseer Brayrak Kruu asked.

"Spend the last bit of free time with my family I'll have for the next week," he replied bluntly and honestly.

Dahnai chuckled, and Grizzie gave him a weird look. "A noble use of time. Family is important, especially in these trying times," she declared.

"Well, given I'll be actively participating in the battle, I'll just be too busy doing some last-minute training and drills to be able to make it to the conference," Jason replied. "If this is the last night in maybe two takirs that I have any free time at all, I'm spending it with the ones I'm fighting for."

And he meant it. Five minutes later, he was walking with his guards to the *Tracker*, and the corvette took him home. He'd timed it so he'd be there just as the kids were getting out of school, and his timing was almost perfect. Just as he got out of his armor, the guards were bringing all the kids in, herding most of them to Maya and Vell's so they could babysit, while a few got to go home because their mothers were home. Rann, Shya, and Danelle burst into the house with their usual exuberance, all of them in their armor—Aya's rule—and heading immediately up to their rooms to take it off. Danelle hadn't taken long at all to make the guest room hers, all the new furniture in and her "Daddy Jason things" all set up in her room. She had two completely furnished rooms, one in his house and one in her own. Jason helped Ayama cut green onions for a Terran food-only salad, catching up on the strip gossip—such as there was—while Surin prepared the grill. Jason had ordered a cookout tonight, their last chance to get a little rest, and had arranged it so everyone would have at least a few hours.

After a few minutes, Rann and Shya came back downstairs. Both of them were bare-ass naked, and Shya immediately put her arms around Rann from behind when they stopped by the counter. Going without clothes wasn't unusual for Shya, he'd learned over the few days she'd been living with them, but it *was* a bit unusual for Rann. He usually only took off his clothes if he was taking a bath or going to the beach. Shya was a little streaker, he'd come to learn. She liked being as unclothed as possible when she was inside her own house, probably a reaction to always having to be

perfectly dressed any time she went out into public for official functions. Those days were more or less behind her, but she hadn't had time to get used to the idea that she wasn't in the spotlight anymore. It was also one way that Shya was stamping her ownership of Rann on him, by convincing him to go without clothes in the house, but Jason wasn't too worried. Jason had it on high authority that Rann and Shya had had their first little confrontation over who was in charge, and her little Imperial Highness got the shock of her life. Rann made it clear that he wasn't going to do what Shya wanted all the time, and after her defeat, Shya had backed off a little to lick her wounds and try a different angle of attack. "Hey kidlets," Jason said aloud as he handed a bowl of chopped onions to Ayama. "How was school?"

It was okay, Rann replied. We got out early because of all the preparing. We don't go back 'til after the battle's over.

I know, Jason replied with a nod. I'm the one who ordered it.

Wow, could you like order it so we never go back?

He laughed and Ayama gave him a sly smile. *No, he sent crisply. You more than anyone else on this planet has to have a good education, Rann. How can you be a leader if you don't know anything?*

Sometimes being the next Grand Duke is no fun, Rann complained.

Welcome to reality, Jason told his son dryly as Ayama sliced tomatoes. Have you gotten used to the new school yet, Shya?

Uh-huh, she replied mentally, which was more a wordless affirmation which his own mind translated as that Terran slang word, one of the ways sending was more pure than speech. It's a little behind where my tutors had me, so it's really easy. But I like being around other kids. In the palace, the only other kids I really see a lot are my brother and sister.

I don't coddle my kids, Shya, and you're my daughter now, Jason told her easily as he started to shred lettuce.

I kinda like it.

I'm glad that you do. I bet that being an Imperial Princess is really annoying sometimes.

Yes it is, she sent seriously, maturely, which made him chuckle. *Can we go down to the beach?*

Of course you can, Jason replied. *Aya, can you send a guard down to watch the kids at the beach?*

Suri will be right there, she replied immediately.

Don't go in the water 'til Suri gets there, Jason told them. *And have fun.*

'Kay, Rann replied, and the two of them hurried towards the utility room where they kept the beach gear.

Danelle came down as Surin received a huge box from the local deli, filled with assorted grilling food, one of the guards bringing it in from the gate. Inside was everything one could want at a cookout, from Terran hamburgers and chicken to *grua*. Faey, Makati, and even some Alliance meats were in the box, all the favorites of the people on the strip, and Surin unpacked it onto platters to take it out. Everyone who lived on the strip would be home within an hour, and he'd also invited a few outsiders. Juma, Navii, and Sioa had been invited, Kyva and Aura had been invited, Miaari and Kiaari both would be there, Ayuma was going to get there when she could, Dahnai and her family were supposed to be there in about an hour, Anya Suralle was even now in transit to Karis, and Frinia Foralle and Yila Trefani were just getting ready to board ships to head to Karis. Those three were his strongest allies in the *Siann* now, and he rather liked them, so he didn't mind at all inviting them to a cookout. It was a last gasp party of sorts, one last chance to relax a little bit before things got nasty, and it wasn't restricted to the strip. Jason had declared that afternoon a holiday for everyone to take a break, take a breather, and join together in their communities with cookouts and building or block parties and remember what they were fighting for. The cookout that would soon begin on the strip would be mirrored all over the planet in one way or another.

I hope you remembered the barbecue sauce, Jason sent lightly. *Any's coming.*

I have her favorite sauce in the pantry and ready, he replied with a slight smile.

Jyslin hurried in, still in her armor, Saelle right behind her wearing a bikini top and a sarong-like wrap around her hips. His wife kissed him on

the cheek on her way upstairs, but Saelle leaned against the doorframe and greeted him. Jyslin had been over at the Paladin offices today, finishing up the paperwork to create a new D-league team, the Warriors, putting two D-league teams under the Paladin umbrella. They were also in the works to fold the entire KPL under the Paladin organization, where it was still operated by the KPL officials, but the status would allow IBL teams to draft out of the KPL. But, since none of their scouts would be allowed on the planet to check them out, it literally became a Paladins-only resource...and was already earning the ire of several other IBL organizations that a planetary league was being certified as a draft resource, yet their scouts weren't allowed to personally attend the games to scout the talent. They could watch over vidy, but that wasn't the same as being there.

Jyslin had settled into her new role as the CEO of the Paladins a lot quicker than Jason thought she would. She wasn't a total batchi nut like many Faey were, but she was a fan of the game, and Frinia was teaching her up with shocking speed on the intricacies of managing personnel and money and dealing with the towering egos and primadonnas that were most IBL players. They were the absolute best, they knew it, and they both acted like it and expected everyone else to treat them like they were the Empress' younger sister.

And that was the shock for the players. Jyslin didn't play that game. She'd already had a couple of impressive spats with Paladin players over their treatment, mainly how they weren't informed about the sale and that they wanted better quarters, more perks, even a contract renegotiation. Jyslin answered that last one by threatening to cut her for conduct detrimental to the team. IBL contracts were like baseball contracts in that they were guaranteed. If Jyslin cut the player, she'd still be paid what was on her contract. But there were ways to get around those contracts, and Frinia had made sure to put that language in all the contracts she signed, which were still binding both for the player and for the Paladin organization. Every Paladin player had it in her contract that she could be cut and the contract terminated if she acted in a manner that was excessively disruptive to the team, like throwing a temper tantrum, getting arrested for a crime, or doing something monumentally stupid. The other clause said that if a player played so badly, that if a player in the D-league at the same position had better statistics with the same minutes played, then

the player got her contract terminated at management's discretion. Good players who tried hard but were just in a slump could be kept, but those just showing up for the paycheck and didn't care how well they played or if the team won got axed. Frinia called it the "incentive clause" to prevent a player from just coasting after signing a non-draftee contract and raking in the credits, but this usually wasn't a problem in the IBL. Even players in basement teams like the Paladins were playing to hopefully get signed to a better team, so they tried their hardest. Besides, IBL players had pride, and they *didn't* want to be singled out on the IBL network as some of the worst players in the league. But despite the competitive spirit of the players, Frinia insisted on that clause, mainly after getting burned by signing a veteran at the tail end of her career who just wanted the easy credits before she retired. If a player wasn't performing better than someone in the D-league, then Frinia had the option to outright release the player, terminating the contract and not having to pay another credit.

Frinia was a hardass when it came to her batchi team. That was one reason why Jason liked her.

Going crazy yet, Saelle? Jason asked lightly.

Not really, I've been busy. I've been assigned to defend the Shimmer Dome.

I know. I ordered it, he replied. You and Jezzi are the strongest Generations that aren't me and Myleena, and the Shimmer Dome is the second most critical location on Karis. I want my strongest there to protect it. You, Jezzi, Evirin, Goli, and Hirika are stationed there. I'm sure the five of you can hold off anything that reaches you.

So, Jezzi's sitting in the big chair and I'm in my Gladiator?

Exactly, he replied. I didn't spend all that money installing that tactical gestalt in your Gladiator so you can do party tricks. You'll do the facesmashing while Jezzi handles protecting the grounds.

I do love to smash face, she winked. And with the upgrades they made to it, I'll smash a whole lot of face. The tactical gestalt in Saelle's Gladiator was a major investment and also an experiment in the viability of a mobile tactical gestalt, which they'd massively upgraded to nearly triple its output power since Saelle had been brought back to Karis. Saelle's Gladiator

training combined with that gestalt would allow her to move to where she was needed most, use her power when it was needful, but also fire rail slugs and pulse blasts at enemy mecha when that was more practical. The big static gestalts had more power, but Saelle would have range and mobility, and if the idea panned out, they'd be building a few more for Generations with combat training. Jason was of a mind to install a hardcore tactical gestalt on a Wolf fighter and make it his personal fighter craft, giving him all the speed and maneuverability of a Wolf combined with the powerful offensive and defensive capabilities brought by the gestalt. With a gestalt in his fighter, he could bend all fire away from him, making him all but invulnerable, and was free to fight back with both the Wolf's weaponry and his talent.

Speaking of Generations, I need to go talk to Myleena a bit, Jayce, she added, pulling on the strap of her black bikini top. *Be back in a while*. She turned and headed out, the large *jaingi* tattoo on her back blatantly apparent against her blue skin and looking as lovely as ever.

Kiaari strolled into the house through the kitchen door. Jason grinned and held his arms out to her, and she laughed as she jumped into his embrace. "Hey you! Thanks for the invite, I desperately needed a break," she said. "How you doing?"

"Just fine now that you're here, silly puppy," he said, which made her laugh brightly.

"How go the preparations?"

"They're on schedule," he replied. "I'll be meeting with all the Generations in the morning to go over their assignments with them, then I'll be spending the rest of the time up until the Consortium gets here doing drills and practicing with Cybi."

"We're buttoning up the Academy right now too, they'll be canceling classes on the day of the attack and the day after," she said. "But it's still the Academy. Plenty going on. I'm certainly never bored."

Jason chuckled. "I can imagine. What happened to the ambassador from the Prakarikai?"

"We have a new one now," Kiaari grinned. "The Grimja bit him on the face, and Grimja saliva is toxic to them. He had to go home after his face

swelled up like a beach ball, and they sent a new one after he had a temper tantrum in front of the High King.”

Jason laughed raucously. “I knew I had a reason to like the Grimja.”

“Jayce, are they *ever* pissed at you,” Kiaari said with a wicked tilt to her voice.

“Ohhh, so Yeri finally got that offer out to the Grimja, eh?”

“Oh yes she did, and you could see the explosion of Prakarika from Terra,” she replied, which made Ayama laugh. “You just completely hamstrung all their plans for the Grimja sector by offering the Grimja food replicators to help stretch their own resources.”

“As long as they don’t mind the taste, they can have at it,” Jason replied smoothly. “Besides, the Prakarikai are annoying little weasels. I never mind sticking it to them.”

“Well, that’s true enough,” Kiaari snickered.

“How about on the other side?”

“The Verutan sector? Same old same old,” she replied as she picked up a knife and started cutting celery. “Just the usual inter-Academy tensions between the Veruta and the Haumda. It’s almost silly. They like each other, but it’s the whole ‘our empires don’t like each other, so I just have to dislike you on principle’ deal.”

“I see that a lot,” Jason chuckled. “In fact, that’s the way I was back when I first met Jyslin,” he grinned. “Did you clear that Imbiri instructor?”

“Yup, she started two days ago,” she answered. “She definitely turns heads on campus. She’s one of the most unique species there.”

“I’ve seen pictures of Imbiri, I’m not surprised,” he nodded as Kiaari dumped her chopped celery into the bowl. “Now, enough talk about work. How’s it been?”

“Pretty good,” she replied. “I have the Academy all wrapped around my finger, and Father keeps telling me how proud he is. I’m about to test him on that.”

“Ohhh, really? How?”

“I’m a Gamekeeper, Jayce. I should be allowed to have cubs of my own.”

He gave her a sly smile. “Miaari got to you, did she?”

“Well, maybe a little, but I *should* have the right to breed,” she told him seriously. “If Father’s that proud of me, then he can give me permission to make myself available.”

“You’re awfully young,” he noted.

“I know,” she replied. “If he approves, I’ll be the youngest female given permission to breed in nearly three thousand years. But I’m fairly sure I can attract enough good quality males to have cubs the clan can be proud of,” she said, maybe a touch defensively. “If anything, sister Miaari proves that our bloodline is really up there. I’ll get inquiries just for that fact alone.”

“Still riding Miaari’s coat tails,” Jason teased, which earned him an elbow to the ribs.

“Hey Kee,” Jyslin called as she came back down in a pair of skimpy shorts and a tank top, both dark blue. “Glad you could make it.”

“Miss free food? Are you crazy?” she asked, which made Jyslin grin. “So, how do you like being the owner of an IBL team?”

“So far, it’s ton of work,” she replied. “I’ll be putting that on hold and letting Frinia handle the paperwork until after all this mess is over, though.”

“That sounds about normal all over,” Kiaari said as Kyva wandered in with Aura, Kyva in KMS workout shorts and a workout halter, and Aura still in her armor. But she had a drawer of clothes in the pool house, so she wouldn’t have any problems if she wanted to change.

“Kyva, Aura, I want you to meet Kiaari,” Jason introduced, nudging his Kimdori friend. “She’s the Gamekeeper of Terra.”

“I’ve met Kyva, you dink, but it’s good to meet you, Aura,” she said with a toothy smile.

“When did you two meet?”

“The last time I was over for a cookout,” she replied. “Sheesh, you need to have Songa check your memory.”

She was the one that got elbowed, which made her laugh.

“So this is the mysterious Kiaari,” Aura said with a gentle smile. “I hear so many things about you. Some are even good.”

“Then he’s spreading bad rumors about me,” she said cheekily, then she gasped. “Lunch!” she cried, then lunged at a gasping Danelle. She picked her up and licked her on the face, as Danelle giggled and squirmed. “How you been, tasty?” she asked.

“I’ve been okay, Kiaari,” she replied, wrapping her small arms around Kiaari’s furry neck. “How have you been?”

“Busy, but that’s normal for me,” she replied, bouncing her a little bit. “Where’s Rann and her Highness?”

“Don’t *ever* call her that around here,” Jason told her, which made Kiaari burst out laughing.

“So, you’re gonna beat it out of her like you did Dahnai,” she grinned.

“You bet your ass I am,” he replied. “And they’re down at the beach swimming.”

“Oooh, sounds like fun. How about a little swim, Danny girl?” she asked, giving Danelle a sly smile. “I’ll change into a shark and scare them, how does that sound?”

Danelle laughed, then gave an evil grin. “Do it, do it!” she said. “But what’s a shark?”

Jason laughed. “Don’t give my kids nightmares, Kee, or I’ll have to get out the newspaper.”

“Well, what *is* a shark?”

“It’s a Terran fish that’s really big and has all kinds of really nasty teeth,” Kiaari grinned. “I saw one last week when I went deep sea fishing with the ambassador of the Shio. They enjoy fishing as a sport.”

“Swimming good, scaring my son bad,” Jyslin added.

“Alright, alright, but you two are a lot less fun now that you’re all responsible and junk,” she said, which made Jason explode with laughter. Kiaari carried Danelle out the deck door, her tail wagging.

“And to think she’s responsible for one of the most important Gamekeeper posts in the galaxy,” Jason said to Jyslin, which made her laugh and nod vigorously.

“She just knows how to have fun, your Grace. Something you’re quite good at yourself,” Ayuma said mildly as she pulled a covered dish out of the refrigerator.

“Old enough to be responsible, young enough to know when not to be,” Jyslin said lightly.

Anya Suralle came in the deck door only a brief moment after Kiaari left, wearing her usual wrap-style robe of soft blue, the crest of Suralle embroidered on it. *Well, I got here early,* she noted.

I’m sure you’ll find something to do while you wait for the chicken to cook, he replied. *It’s good to see you, Anya. Glad you could make it.*

I never say no when you’re the one inviting, she sent with an audible chuckle. *Especially when it’s barbecued chicken. How are you, Jyslin?*

Just fine, Anya. Did you get that package I sent you?

Of course, she replied. *And it’s good to see you too, Ayuma,* she added. *Thank you so much for sending that detailed vidy on how you prepare barbecued chicken. It helped my chefs immensely.*

Happy to be of help, your Grace, she replied as she started shucking corn on the cob. *And you can be of help and peel the ruga roots. Jason always does a terrible job.*

Hey! he protested as he put his hands on his hips, which made Jyslin and Anya laugh. *At least I help out! I could be one of those stuck-up Grand Dukes and make you do everything, then complain about everything you do!*

Oh, he’s getting brave now, Ayuma. It might be about time to put him back on his stool, Jyslin grinned.

I’ve never peeled a ruga root in my life, Anya admitted. *I’m afraid I’m a real Grand Duchess, Ayuma. I’ve never done...kitchen work.*

Cooking is never work if you enjoy doing it, Ayuma replied immediately and honestly. *I see it as a hobby I get paid to perform.*

And you just got your pay cut, Jason sent teasingly.

The work comes when I have to clean up after you, she retorted. *I should get double pay for that, you messy man you.*

Anya burst out laughing, leaning against the doorframe. *Somehow I get the feeling I shouldn't be privy to this conversation,* she noted to Jyslin with a smile.

Why? You've never really seen those two go at it, Jyslin winked. *This is nothing.*

I've said it before, Anya. Ayuma's the biggest pain in the ass servant you'll ever find, but I put up with it because of her cooking, Jason sent playfully, grinning at Ayuma.

It's always nice to feel wanted, Ayuma sent dryly, which made Anya giggle in her nasal voice. *Now, since you need so much practice peeling ruga roots,* she added, pushing the bowl across the counter towards him.

Yes ma'am, he sent with a teasing smile.

After they got all the food ready, they moved outside to the deck. Both the grills were going, with Surin tending one and Ayuma the other, and they'd set up the beach furniture just off the deck, out on the sand, to hold everyone. Most of the strip's girls had arrived, hanging out in bikinis, tanks, tee shirts, shorts, or just going natural in Sheleese's case, and several guests had also arrived. Ayuma got there just as they put the first hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill, and Kyva and Aura came back from a walk up and down the beach. The two of them had struck up something of a friendship, which Jason saw as a good thing. Aura needed that kind of social interaction to buff the burr off her accent. Tim and Symone finally got home, changed into beach wear, and Symone more or less took over the beach while the guards kept an eye on the strip's kids as they ran around. They were joined by Dara, Sirri, and Maer when Yila Trefani, Frinia Foralle, and Empress Dahnai Merrane all arrived at the same time, having gotten on the same KMS ship at Draconis for the transit, and Dahnai's guards more than doubled the armored women prowling the strip.

It was quite the party. They listened to music and talked as the food cooked, the kids playing all kinds of different games on the deck and down on the beach, then once they had the first wave of food cooked, they moved

down to the picnic tables set up on the beach and dug in. All of Jason's closest friends sat at his table, Cybi hovering just behind and between him and Jyslin, with Dahnai, Kellin, Tim and Symone, Aura, Miaari and Kiaari, Maer, Sirri, Rann and Shya at his long table, with two spots saved for Myleena and Saelle. The other tables were set close to his, so nobody was far away from him, and that was just the way he liked it. Guards drifted in and snagged burgers, chicken, brats, and other more exotic foods and then returned to their posts or to their patrols as everyone studiously avoided talking about the upcoming battle...or at least almost everyone. Dahnai brought that up as she gnawed on corn on the cob, sitting with Kellin on one side and Sirri on the other. She'd been chitchatting with the girls and Myleena most of the time, but when they sat down across from Jason and Jyslin, she broached the subject. *Not that I'm complaining about this, but I'm a little surprised you're taking so much time off with so much to do*, she sent even as she ate her corn.

"It's very simple, Dahnai," Jason said aloud as he picked up a bratwurst off the platter. "With all the work we've done, everyone needs a few hours to rest and recharge to prepare for the next few days, which will be far more busy. Besides, this is what all this is about," he said, motioning his arm down the table. "It's not about territory or money or power. It's about friends, family, home, it's about our *lives*, and I wanted everyone on this planet to take a few hours and remember exactly what's at stake here, and what we're all fighting for. When the holiday's over, everyone will go back to work with a fresh reminder of what's most important."

"I doubt that'd work for us, but as long as it works for you. Besides, I'm glad I could come see my baby girl and see how she's settling in," she said with a smile at Shya.

"I'm doing okay, Mommy," she replied from her spot by Rann. "We're all moved into the room and I'm in school now, and I really like living here. I miss Nanna and Panna, but I talk to them every day on the viddy."

"I know, and they're very happy that you do," Dahnai said with a smile. "What's school like?"

"A little boring right now, they're doing stuff I already know."

“Then Aya should be giving you different lessons,” she said, giving Jason a look.

“She lives with me, she goes to school like every other child,” he said mildly but firmly. “She gets enough private lessons from the guards not to need more.”

“Oh? In what?”

“Sending. They don’t teach that in first grade. And how have your lessons been going, Sirri?”

“Nothing yet, Uncle Jason,” she answered as she looked a bit suspiciously at a hot dog. “Miss Saelle hasn’t been there.”

“She’ll be back in a couple of takirs,” Jason assured her. “As soon as we have everything all worked out and we’re sure that Saelle will be safe.”

“Where is she, anyway?”

“She’s around here somewhere,” Jason noted.

“She and Myleena are in her lab. I’ll tell them that they’re missing dinner,” Cybi noted.

“What about you, Maer? Anything new and exciting going on?”

“Afraid not, Uncle Jason,” he replied with a smile.

“He’s finished his regular tutoring and will start pre-primary courses next takir,” Dahnai said proudly. “Three years ahead of other kids his age.”

“It’s certainly not because of what *you*’ve been teaching him, Dahnai,” Jason said, giving Maer a sly wink.

“That’s what tutors are for. He has *fun* with me,” she said haughtily.

Myleena and Saelle hustled out of Myleena’s house and reached the table, taking the last two seats at Jason’s table, which were held for them. “Sorry, we got a little sidetracked,” Myleena apologized as she reached for the platter of hamburgers.

“And what mischief were you two planning?” Miaari asked. She was sitting beside Tim, with Kiaari on her other side, and Myleena had sat beside her.

“Not mischief as much as going over the sims and test results for the gestalt in my Gladiator,” Saelle answered, brushing her dark, charcoal gray hair out of her face. “The gestalt in my rig is a prototype, so we’re keeping a close eye on it.”

“Here’s hoping you don’t have to use it,” Jason said fervently.

“What good is a toy if you can’t use it?” Saelle asked impishly.

“Faey,” Jason sighed, to which both Miaari and Kiaari nodded. That got some laughter from the Faey at the table.

After eating far more than was good for him, Jason reclined on a lounge on the beach and simply watched as the others played volleyball, swam, built sandcastles, or just relaxed like he was. He wasn’t joking with Dahnai when he told her that this was to remind everyone just what they were fighting for. Out there on that beach was almost everyone that Jason loved and cared about. Wife, *amu*, children best friend, dear friends. The mothers of his children. Brave defenders of the ideals of the House of Karinne. They represented everything he had worked for five long years to create. The culture and society on Karis wasn’t perfect, but there was nowhere else Jason would want to live, and nowhere else many Karisians would want to live either. They had something special here, and it had little to do with Karinne technology. They were a *community*. In some ways, the citizens of the House of Karinne were all one big family, and Jason was not going to allow *anyone* to threaten that.

He got his rest now, because he knew that in just a couple of hours, he’d be in the merge chair at Kosiningi practicing so he could defend the planet and people he held so dear from an enemy that wanted nothing less than to enslave him and everyone like him and turn them into weapons to use against their enemies.

This was an all-in situation. They either won, or they died. And he had no doubt that the Consortium felt exactly the same way, which meant that the battle to come was going to be bloody and without mercy. He could only wonder how many names he saw on the casualty lists would jump out at him, names he knew, names that weren’t just numbers in a column, but *people*. But they knew what they were signing up for when they joined the

KMS, and much to his eternal respect and admiration, they were willing to fight for the ideals of the house and principles for which it stood.

It wouldn't be the only moment of truth the House of Karinne would face in the future to come, but what was coming was definitely the most stark. He either repelled the Consortium and defended Karis, or he and everyone he cared most about would be dead or enslaved.

When one thought of it in those terms, it made everything crystal clear. There would be no quarter. There would be no mercy. There would be no surrender, either offered or accepted. The Confederate forces in orbit around Karis would have orders to destroy the enemy invasion fleet to the last ship, even if they were powered down and motionless in space. Prisoners were a different story, but not a single Consortium ship was going to leave Karis.

Koira, 13 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 5 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 13 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Emergency Response Center, Kosiningi, Karis

They were coming.

They were nearly a full day later than expected, but the Kimdori in the moon at Trieste had just sent the warning that the Consortium were three hours from beginning their operation.

The extra day helped. Karis was literally surrounded by Confederate ships, some 19,934 of them, though the vast majority of those were Skaa picket ships. That let them theoretically outnumber the enemy, which according to Kimdori intelligence had 20,388 ships at its disposal and ready to attack Karis. Both sides couldn't really claim all those ships were all that, however. Not every picket ship in the fleet had Torsion weapons, which would literally make them targets, almost like a Russian soldier in the beginning of World War II, when there was only one rifle for every five

soldiers in the first major engagements of the Russian front. Those ships would be firing hot plasma, ion, and neutron weapons, which weren't as effective against Consortium ships. But numbers were numbers, and there was little doubt that the Consortium, remembering the pasting they received when they attacked the Skaa the first time, would see all those Skaa ships had have a bad taste in their mandibles—mouths, whatever. The Consortium had their own liabilities as well, since 2,107 of their vessels were Imxi cruisers, which were barely larger than a Faey frigate, but they were armed with Torsion weapons. But like the picket ships, the Imxi vessels would be very easy to destroy. Taking all those ships out, it left the viable Confederate ships heavily outnumbered by Consortium ships, and that was why Lorna was going to fight this battle with the fleet's ass backed up against the shield, so Karis' planetary defense grid could be brought into the battle.

They were already in position and ready. Lorna hadn't grouped the ships by government, she had instead mixed them into squadrons and fleets all around the planet, utilizing each government's battle tactics into the formation. Heavy, rugged Skaa and Urumi ships would anchor the formations with nimble Faey, Alliance, and Shio ships acting almost like cavalry. Command level ships were sitting in the largest formations, holding the fleet admirals that would be reacting to the battle and deploying forces, and there were quite a few of them out there. Jason had had no idea that the Skaa had so many command ships. Karinne, Kimdori, and Colonial vessels were deployed between the major formations, allowing them to respond rapidly to any heavy attack point, but the big KMS ships, the battleships and two command ships, were parked over the most important locations of Karis. The *Aegis* was directly over Kosiningi, and the *Iyaneri* was parked directly over Karsa, which included the Shimmer Dome since it was just on the edge of the city. Both ships were carrying the highest-ranking admirals that would be in the battle, the theater commanders who would be the first reaction to any Consortium moves. The KMS battleships were parked over the Kirgan Kizzik hive colony, the main power plant control station in the center of the Kargan continent, the six most heavily populated cities on Karga, and the factory clusters up on the Virgan continent. They'd gotten four more battleships off the docks in time to get them shaken down and into service, and those unfortunate crews would be doing their first

deployment as a pitched battle to determine the future and fate of the entire galaxy.

But no pressure.

Swarms of fighters prowled between the ships, and only a fraction of them of them were KMS. Alliance Warhawks, Skaa *Un'Dara* fighters, Urumi *Krissha* fighters, Raptors, Dragonflies, even older fighters like Starwolves, they'd pulled literally everything out of mothballs for this, filling the space between the cruisers and heavy ships with fighters, drones, and automated weapon platforms. Their own Raptors were behind the shield, mixed in with Wolf fighters to protect the planet from the ground assault they were absolutely convinced was coming.

Jason agreed with Lorna's analysis of Consortium tactics. The only hope they had was to get onto the planet and take both Kosiningi and Karsa, eliminate Jason and capture Cybi, and their strategy would be to get landers to the shield with shield bores to get ground attack craft past the shield. Lorna also believed that they'd go after the planetary shield generator and the power station, but not all of her compatriots in the command center were convinced they'd go that far. Jason did, however, so he deployed extra defenses to the planetary shield. The other admirals thought that they'd leave the shield up to form a barrier to Confederate ships that might be commanded to reinforce ground units, slowing down the response...but if that was the case, and it was that desperate, Lorna could just turn off the shield. The shield only had an 87 second cycle time to get it back up after it was taken down, so it was feasible to lower the shield, let reinforcements in, then raise it. It would take the reinforcements 87 seconds to get inside the shield anyway.

Jason sat in the cafeteria of the EMC, which had been rebuilt after the first Consortium attack, and the staff there was moving about with urgency. The EMC had a staff of about 40, and they did the same job the building was originally designed to do. Kosiningi was more than just the home of Cybi's core, it was the crisis center for the planet for dealing with a catastrophic event. The center did that job again, acting as the "FEMA" of Karis, the center that organized and deployed crisis response to natural disasters, industrial accidents, or major events. From the EMC, the Karis Emergency Response Agency, or KERA, managed and assigned disaster

recovery assets and personnel to any afflicted part of the planet. It was a civilian agency, but because Cybi's core was on the island, the EMC staff, consisting mainly of the higher-up executives within the agency, had to deal with heavy military presence as well as have a very high security clearance. After all, the door to Cybi's core room was in the basement of the building. Cybi had been designed to be the last line of defense for Karis, the emergency repository of all their knowledge, but her operational protocol as originally designed was to deal with crises and disasters, and that meant that Cybi was the one in charge of the EMC and of KERA. She commanded the agency, she hired her staff and field workers, she created and supervised the disaster response protocols, she managed the fleet of KERA's vehicles and disaster equipment, and she deployed those assets as required. She had definitely evolved past her programming as originally designed, but at her core, this was what Cybi was designed to do, and she did it well.

The alert had gone out, and the cafeteria cleared out quickly, leaving Jason alone with Cybi's hologram. His family was over at the house on the other side of the island, his "summer home" he used when he came to Kosiningi, but with the alert going out, they'd be moving to the revamped bunker deep, *deep* under the island. The Makati had built a new bunker that was in the upper mantle, nearly 32 *kathra* underground, so deep that the bunker had to run a cooling system else its inhabitants would be broiled. It was almost as deep as the receiver chamber that held Cybi's core when it was evacuated and ran off some of the same systems. The EMC staff had their own bunker that was fairly deep as well, which held their emergency command center, and from there they'd be managing and organizing emergency response to deal with battle damage after the fight was over. KERA would have control of all rescue assets in a time of emergency except for medical, from local fire departments to emergency engineering assets, and they'd work closely with the Medical Service to get all medical care to all injured as quickly as possible.

"It is time, Jason," Cybi intoned soberly as he put his fork down.

"Half of me is dreading this, the other half just wants to get it over with," he said aloud as he stood up, his appetite lost.

After four days of drills and simulations, he already knew exactly what to do. He went down to the core room and climbed into one of the two

merge chairs, making sure to strap himself in, then he took a few deep, cleansing breaths, closed his eyes, and allowed his consciousness to rise up to join with the biogenic relays in the room. His mind expanded as he made a connection to Cybi, the two of them merging, and all of her computer power, processing, and connections became his to command. In his mind's eye, several images appeared, several tactical maps of the planet and its surrounding space, and camera pods in important locations so he could see what was going on. There was a pod at Kosigi, in Dellin's command room, one at the command center, one at the Shimmer Dome, one in 3D headquarters, a few in the bunker that would hold his family, and there was a camera pod following almost every member of his family at that moment. They were all up on the island and were hurrying towards the bunker elevator now that the alarm had been sounded.

[Get in here, Myleena, we need to evacuate the core,] he chided as the cameras spied Myleena running from the landing pad.

[I'm coming,] she replied.

While she was getting there, he touched base with the military command center. Several Confederate generals and admirals were sharing space with Myri, Juma, and Sioa, while Navii sat in a comfortable chair in the corner, usually his "stay out of our hair" corner. Lorna was the officer in charge of this operation, and she was standing at the main display table studying a tactical map layout of all ships and assets. *"As soon as Myleena gets her ass in here, we'll be evacuating the core,"* he said through the camera pod.

"Good, I was about to ask if you were doing so," Lorna replied. "Is Jyslin in the bunker?"

"They're almost there as well. As soon as they're all on the elevator, they'll start down."

"We have all ships in position, now just comes the waiting," Skaa Admiral Frazzil grunted, his thick, heavy tail swishing a little behind him.

"Make sure the fighters are warned to get behind the ships with Torsion shockwave generators at the five-minute warning," Lorna said. "We don't want to lose any of them in the initial missile blitz. Are the missile shields in position?"

“Just a few more to go, General,” She called aloud from her relay station. The missile shields were a 3D product, disposable, one-shot Torsion shockwave generators built hastily and without most of the control and safety systems in the real ones. They’d burn out and explode after about ten seconds, like a Buzzsaw, but their only job was to destroy the missile attack everyone knew was coming as soon as the Consortium got enough ships into the system. Lorna expected that the first action of every ship that came through that wormhole would be to launch a salvo of missiles, and that’s where the missile shields came into play. They would protect Confederate ships without shockwave generators, at least for about ten seconds. They had 317 fully mobile and fully operations shockwave generators they could move around to protect ships, but those were the only ones they could manage to build in four days. The rest were built with only just what they needed to work, then they’d burn themselves out.

“Where will Kosigi be at the mark?” Lorna called.

“It will have line of sight to Karsa, General,” one of Myri’s other aides called. “But not Kosiningi.”

“Then we should shift some assets to Kosiningi, if Kosigi can use its line of sight weaponry to attack ships attacking Karsa,” Admiral Jarik Furystorm noted.

“It means that they’ll open their wormhole just below the horizon of Kosigi, as close to Karsa as possible,” Navii said quietly from the corner. “About halfway between Karsa and Kosiningi. That gets them out of Kosigi’s line of sight yet keeps them close to one of their primary objectives.”

“I’d agree with that assessment, Admiral,” Lorna said with a nod.

Back in the core room, Myleena ran in and took off her helmet, then climbed immediately into the second chair. *[Alright, I’m here, let’s get this party started,]* she communed as she gave a cleansing exhale, closed her eyes, and her face went blank as she merged effortlessly with the biogenics in the core room. A sense of her appeared within Cybi, as she too merged to the CBIM’s main core, but she was locked out from most of the highest-level functions due to Jason already being merged.

"I'm in position. Let's lower the core," Myleena's voice came from the same camera pod Jason had been using in the command center.

"Core evacuation commencing," Cybi's voice called both from the overhead speakers in the command center and in his and Myleena's minds. Jason had enough of a sense of himself to feel the entire core chamber begin to descend, starting its ten-minute rapid descent into the mantle of the planet. Without having to see it, he knew that above them, a series of heavily armored doors were closing and annealing and two hard shields for each door activated both above and below it to protect the shaft and the core beneath them from explosive backwash if enemies attacked the core shaft. Those 126 different armored doors and 252 individual hard shields would make it easier for an enemy to try to burrow through the rock to reach the core rather than try to go through those doors, which was exactly what the Consortium tried the first time they attacked. After about nine minutes, the core room began to slow, then the whole thing shuddered as it reached the base, where its independent singularity plant was located to provide power. He heard the final set of doors close over the ceiling, the thickest and most heavily armored of all, doors that were nearly sixteen feet thick and made of a compressed Neutronium, the strongest armor Karinne science had developed. The core room heated up quickly, but then as the environmental systems came online, it cooled almost as quickly. The temperature outside the core room was hot enough to melt lead. The network relays activated, and it put Jason and Myleena back online with the outside world. *"Core is evacuated, all doors are closed and sealed and all shields active,"* Jason told the War Room through the camera pod. *"All biogenic links are active. We have complete access."*

"Alright, have Cybi run a high-order diagnostic to make absolutely sure everything's ready, that nothing got jarred while the core evacuated," Lorna said.

"Diagnostic running now," Cybi's voice called.

With the core evacuated, there was little for Jason and Myleena to do but wait, just like everyone else. He watched as the fleet tweaked its deployments to take Kosigi's position into account, watched as the fighters drilled, as maintenance workers rushed about doing some last-minute repairs on weapons platforms, and watched as toys were deployed and

prepared. He checked on the stellar collectors and saw that they were deployed and ready. Jason focused on his duty, ignoring the trepidation and anxiety he felt. In just a few hours, his entire house would literally be fighting for its life. Everyone he cared about, everything he'd built here, it would all be in jeopardy.

And it was going to be just one of many such battles to come, once the Syndicate and the second wave of Consortium ships arrived in their galaxy.

"Getting a message from the Kimdori at Trieste," Shey said, putting a finger to her interface. Jason turned the camera to her even as he accessed her comm, and he read the message even as Shey did. "They're starting their operation."

"If Myleena's math is right, then we'll see the formation of the wormhole in about sixteen minutes," Lorna said.

"If *my math is right?*" Myleena challenged.

Lorna chuckled without much humor. "Alright, we'll assume that we'll see the wormhole form in sixteen minutes," she said. "Evacuate the fighters and small units behind the missile shields. Send out the alert to the fleet admirals."

"Activate the GRAF cannons on Kosigi, and bring up the solar collectors," Juma barked. "Drone status?"

Bo, who was one of four Legion members acting as the 3D operators in the War Room, looked back at her. "All 3D units are warmed up and ready for action," he answered. "Automated weapons are online, disposables are ready for deployment, and the spider cloud we seeded in high orbit around the planet is active and waiting."

"Here's hoping they didn't get enough research on the spiders to counter them," Maggie grunted from her seat beside him.

"We'll find out in about fifteen minutes," Tom said sagely.

"Planetary defense grid?" Lorna asked.

"Online, all weapons platforms and automated missile pods showing ready," The officer in charge of the automated weapons called.

“Activate all on-site hard shields,” Sioa barked. “Get our fighters in the air, our infantry in their positions, and our Gladiators on the line. Report readiness by sector.”

“I would hear that Kosiningi is ready now,” Lorna said.

“Ground units are in place and ready, Gladiators are in place, ground batteries are hot, hard shield system is up, and our fighter umbrella is in place,” Colonel Brekli, commander of the Kosiningi forces, said over gravband. “Captain Kyva and the KBB are literally standing in front of the building holding Cybi’s core.”

“And you have no idea how secure that makes us feel in here,” Myleena chuckled.

[Alright, Cybi, wire us in,] Jason communed.

[All comm channels are being monitored, all telemetry tracked,] she replied as Jason simply *knew* everything going on around the planet, and used that knowledge in his mind’s eye to build as detailed a tactical asset distribution map as they had in the War Room. Every camera Cybi could access was being monitored, giving him real-time, real-world views of just about everything on and around the planet, from the bridge of the *Aegis*, where Palla paced back and forth in front of her chair, to the large bunker that held his family and the strip’s women children not actively in the battle, which was fairly large to accommodate so many people. Maya and Vell were tending most of the kids, but most of the girls were outside doing real work. Zora was piloting the *Iyaneri*, because there was a critical shortage of navigators rated to fly a command ship...and Zora was still one of the best pilots in the house. It would be almost criminal at this critical time when the very survival of the house was on the line to make her sit in a bunker. And that was a mentality that the other girls from the squad shared, for only Jyslin and Maya were in the bunker, the two women the others were depending upon to protect their own children. Min and Sheleese were inside the Shimmer Dome, armored up and carrying pulse rifles, part of the last line of defense in case the Consortium got inside. Lyn, Bryn, and Ilia were in Kosigi, in Admiral Dellin’s command room, operating weapon consoles, and Yana was stationed at the power plant control center. Aura was also in Kosigi, piloting a cargo dropship running supplies, and Miaari was with Myri in the War Room, acting as an observer and liaison for the Kimdori

fleet. That left Jyslin, Symone, Tim, Maya and Vell to watch over the large pack of strip kids, along with most of the Ducal Guard. Jason had sent them there rather than have them sit around in the core room with him, for if the Consortium got to him, then it was all over anyway.

Nobody was too important to sit out of *this* fight, with one very sulky and vocally put-out exception, and that was Symone. Symone had wanted to fight in her Gladiator right alongside the KBB and the Red Warrior elite Gladiator unit from the Army. Half of the Red Warriors were stationed at Kosiningi, and the other half were inside the Shimmer Dome. There were 100 mecha and pilots in the Red Warriors, an elite combat unit attached to the 1st Gladiator Battalion, and they were the best Gladiator riggers in the Army that *wasn't* the KBB. The KBB was an entirely different animal.

"Ten minutes until mark," They's voice came in over one of the cameras. Jason separated himself from the merge enough to blow out his breath and look around the core room, with Cybi's main crystal core in the center of the rectangular room, the very heart of who and what Cybi was, which was beautiful in its own way. That core was protected by an elegant three rail fence and an invisible hard shield to keep out both curious children and contaminating dust. He marveled at that slender crystal spire for a moment, then sank back into the merge with Cybi, and to a lesser extent Myleena, since she was merged to Cybi's redundant backup system. They'd need those systems for *this*.

"Five minutes until mark." The Kimdori infiltrators at Trieste had managed to send a warning that the Consortium was past the point of no return; they were even now building the power in their system to create the wormhole. Jason studied the space all around Karis looking for the spatial flux that would herald the appearance of the terminus of that one-way wormhole.

[I don't see their terminus forming anywhere,] Myleena fretted.

[Let's pray the whole thing blows up on them before it forms,] Jason replied grimly as he kept scanning with the sensors.

At two minutes, Jason got sincerely nervous. With only two minutes, they should have seen *something* by now, would have recorded the Consortium's system making a connection to local space to breach the

boundary. He scanned all over the planet's immediate area, but nothing. He heard Myleena audibly gasp, however, and touched on where she was looking.

Well out from the planet, *behind* Kosigi!

"They're opening the gate 150,000 kathra behind Kosigi!" Myleena's warning barked over just about every audio speaker.

Behind Kosigi? What purpose did that serve? Kosigi was an orbiting armada of weaponry! To open their wormhole in a firing line with Kosigi was madness!

No...no, it wasn't. They were opening the wormhole out of range of everything but the GRAF cannons and rail cannons, and Kosigi's size broke line of sight with 12% of the combined Confederate fleet that was on that side of the planet. Kosigi was currently at its "twilight" point in its orbit, sitting to the left of Karis as one looked towards the star, and that also put the wormhole in a direct line of sight with the star, which meant it could be targeted by the solar collectors. But what it *did* do was put Kosigi between the wormhole and the fleet sitting over Karsa, which was a very large chunk of fleet. Only 17% of the fleet had a direct line of fire at the wormhole's opening point, if range wasn't considered. If it was, then only Kosigi and the solar collectors could directly fire on that area as soon as ships started to appear.

In a heartbeat, he saw what they had in mind. They were going to use Kosigi as a shield, enduring the fire from the moon to protect them from even *more* fire coming from the fleet.

He heard Dellin's voice from the camera pod in the Admiral's ops center. *"Get every battery on the far side of Kosigi pointed at that area now! Begin charging sequence on all GRAF cannons with line of sight! Fighters, stay behind Kosigi until they've engaged, they have to go past us to get to Karis!"*

Several cameras caught the first visual indications that the wormhole was forming. A zoom got a good image of space there distorting, shimmering, almost undulating like heat shimmers on asphalt on a summer day. A bright point of light appeared, and then the wormhole rotated into existence. But where Stargate wormholes were a swirling blue, smooth and

radially symmetrical, this wormhole was jittery, jagged, with borders that swirled between oval, circular, and elliptical, and the spatial flux energy within was *red*, similar to Torsion shockwave effects and Torsion bolts. That red coloration meant that it was too unstable to use for anything, that anything that came through would be destroyed.

“Redeploy the fleets around Kosigi to the moon! Fleets on the far side of the planet pull into the holes made by ships that redeploy!” Lorna’s voice barked in his mind. *“Keep Kosigi between the ships and the wormhole until the Consortium ships are through and in range! Let the moon take the initial missile barrage!”*

The wormhole continued to oscillate, but then it started to smooth out, stabilize, and the reddish swirl within started to darken, started to change color. The red turned dark purple, and almost immediately, the first Consortium ship came through. It appeared within the dark purple, but Jason watched as the entire ship just ripped apart as it emerged from the wormhole, a grayish puff from the explosive decompression of its atmosphere surrounding the twisted shards of black metal. The thing looked like a piece of black glass that had been shot by a pellet gun while in midair, and the pieces were “falling.” The wormhole shuddered and moved nearly 150 *kathra* laterally, then another ship came through, this one coming through intact. Almost immediately, it opened all its gunports, and a hail of missiles launched from the destroyer, all of them aimed at Kosigi.

“Phalanx systems!” Dellin barked, referring to the Phalanx anti-missile system. Since Kosigi was far too large for a shockwave generator, both it and the command ships used the recently developed Phalanx anti-missile system, which had just had the bugs worked out of it and installed on Kosigi two weeks ago, and had been installed on the *Aegis* and *Iyaneri* just a few days ago. Jason had named it after the U.S. Navy’s system of using an array of gatling guns firing thousands of rounds a minute at incoming missiles to hit them and make them explode before they reached a ship, and this system was almost identical. It used high-precision targeting computers and conventional small arms rail slugs fired from gatling-gun style multi-barrel weapons that fired 1,900 rounds a minute, which would let them fire on those missiles from extreme range. The Phalanx batteries opened up even as the missiles started to accelerate, firing only single rounds precision targeted at each missile at that range, but if the missiles got within 400

kathra, they'd open up with full auto-fire and saturate space in front of the missiles with rail slugs. Several more ships came through the wormhole and did the same thing, having to maneuver around the nine ships that were torn apart and exited the wormhole as floating debris. The systems were very good at shooting down missiles, and they could also give fighters and drones nightmares if they got too close to the ships.

[They're aiming at the GRAF cannons,] Myleena noted.

[I see. They're not dumb,] Jason agreed.

More and more ships made it through, moving through the debris field of their own as they launched more and more missiles. The space between the fleet and Kosigi bloomed with explosion after explosion as the Phalanx computers scored hits on missiles that were incoming, but those explosions formed a strangely beautiful trail of fire that got closer and closer to the moon. The explosions of other missiles made it harder for the targeting computers to lock onto new missiles behind the explosions, only getting a good lock when they came through the firestorm of the prior destroyed missile, which allowed the missiles to get closer and closer to Kosigi before they were destroyed.

"GRAF cannons ready, Admiral!" he heard Ilia's voice.

"Fire!" Dellin barked immediately.

One by one, the 16 GRAF cannons with line of sight on the wormhole fired. They couldn't fire all 16 at once because the recoil could actually alter Kosigi's orbit, so one by one, massive bars of white-hot pure energy lashed out from the moon's pitted surface. The half-mile wide bars of pure kinetic energy eradicated every missile in their paths as they streaked across the sky nearly as fast as a rail slug, and whatever they hit, they ripped into molecules in the blink of an eye. Several Consortium ships simply turned to shadows within the incandescent brightness and then dissolved away, leaving nothing behind when the bar of energy passed by.

"Get the toys deployed, Bo!" Jason ordered over the speaker in the War Room.

"I'm working on it, Jayce!" he replied. *"We didn't have them deployed close to Kosigi, they're on the way!"*

Jason checked the tactical map. A combined fleet of Confederate warships was racing towards Kosigi at flank speed, but even at that speed, it was going to take them nearly 11 minutes to get there. Kosigi didn't orbit just outside the atmosphere, after all. It was 526,000 *kathra* from Karis, or about 273,000 miles, so it was going to take the fleet time to get there, even at flank. The KMS and Kimdori ships started pulling away from the others thanks to their superior engines, but then they slowed and allowed the fleet to catch up when Haema realized that they would be all by themselves when they got there. They were angling to come in just behind Kosigi, to let the moon's mass shield them from missile attacks until they were ordered to engage.

[I don't get it, why come in there?] Myleena asked, puzzled.

[I think I see it,] Jason replied. *[If they can take out the surface batteries on their side of the moon, they can use it as a shield against the fleet and give them an anchor, something at their back to keep from getting surrounded. If they can get landers on the surface, they can take out the batteries where they can't fire back.]*

[But we have Gladiators on the surface.]

[Yup, so they're gonna find out that that's a bad idea as soon as their first group of mantis mecha hit the surface,] Jason communed, a bit smugly.

More and more ships poured out of the wormhole as it stayed relatively stationary, ships evaporating in the white blasts of GRAF cannons or fried by collector blasts lancing in from the star, but Jason saw that they were also losing a ship for every five that came through. Myleena tried to focus the disruption field on the wormhole but had mixed results due to how far away it was from the planet. Jason watched through the sensors and cameras as a large formation of nearly 2,000 Consortium ships managed to get through in the minutes it took the fleet to reach the far side of Kosigi, more coming through than the collectors and GRAF cannons and rail cannons could destroy, and they continued their constant barrage of missiles. The Phalanx guns were now firing at full auto, spraying small rail slugs into the space over the surface, but not even that cloud of projectiles stopped all the missiles. Shields bloomed into visibility as the ground batteries' shields were raised and almost immediately hit by missiles, and it wasn't just the GRAF cannons that were being targeted. Most of the

missiles were aimed at the GRAF cannons, but every battery emplacement on that side of Kosigi was being targeted by missiles, and they had to raise their shields once the missiles were inside the kill zone of the Phalanx system. Only pulse weapons could fire through a Teryon shield, so the Phalanx systems went offline as they resorted to the shields...and the absolute instant that happened, the Consortium ships surged to full flank speed as soon as they cleared the debris field of their own ships. Plasma torpedoes started to rise up from the surface as the vanguard of the Consortium fleet charged the lunar surface, continuing to fire missiles, the ships behind them just coming through the wormhole adding to those missiles.

"All ships in sector two, engage, all ships in sector two engage," Lorna ordered. The Confederate ships behind Kosigi accelerated to come around the moon as Bo's toys finally reached the moon. Missiles with various warheads, Buzzsaws, and doomblasters screamed past the moon and for the charging formation, as the leading units deployed. They were Torsion-based units, one of the toys they'd held back for something like this, creating a Torsion field in front of the weaponry that would destroy missiles and warp the trajectory of energy weapons fired into it randomly, bending the shots depending on the contours of the field. They might veer away, they might bend and bend back and hit something behind, it was entirely random and not too reliable...but for 3D, it was good enough to protect the weapons behind the field from being burned down by defensive fire. More and more Consortium ships came through the wormhole, then it suddenly screamed towards the star, traveling nearly 6,000 *kathra* in a matter of seconds, and rendering the ships in transit into fine metal dust that oozed out of the aperture. The wormhole began to destabilize, destroying more and more ships, then it smoothed out and ships again started pouring out of it.

The 3D weapons intercepted the charging enemy fleet about 75,000 *kathra* from the moon. The enemy opened fire on them as soon as the Torsion field came down, after the generator units burned out and exploded, but there were too many toys. Buzzsaws tore into enemy ships and detonated, tearing them apart. Missiles exploded ahead of the fleet and spread spiders into their path, which attached to the ships and started working their way in. Torsion blades and gyroballs, more held-back innovations, lanced by the ships at an angle and then orbited barely ten

shakra over the hull, the Torsion effect slicing into their ships and causing atmospheric decompression, killing the crews without damaging the internal systems of the ships, allowing them to capture them after the battle, while the gyroballs spun through the enemy formations generating wild gravity fields designed to kill the insectoids. Mobile platforms called doomblasters, overcharged plasma weapons, reached the enemy and started firing, firing plasma blasts of such power that not even a Neutronium hull could stand up to them. Several weapons veered away and headed for the wormhole aperture, evading fire from the ships. They accelerated geometrically once they cleared the enemy, then reached the wormhole and exploded about 10,000 *kathra* from the terminus. They were loaded with a special type of antimatter bomb, a “dirty” bomb laced with synthesized Teryon molecules, and when they exploded and those Teryon particles saturated the space near the wormhole, their effect on space started taking effect. The theory was that they would disrupt the wormhole until the synthesized molecules decayed, and it looked like it was mixed. What the particles did was make the wormhole move, pushing it back away from the particle field, but while it moved it destroyed every ship trying to traverse it, so it did its job...just not in the way that Myleena had predicted.

Yet still the Consortium came, running the gauntlet of the toys, ship after ship losing power and starting to drift when the spiders got inside and destroyed their computer cores and power conduits. The Confederate fleet was around the moon, and Jason watched as they met head on about 20,000 *kathra* from the surface of Kosigi. Missiles lanced back and forth, hitting ship after ship, then fighters came around the Confederate ships and joined the battle. Jason focused on a small group of ships, seeing a Faey battle cruiser’s entire bow simply disappear as it was pounded by Torsion and then dark matter shots, spinning away as an Urumi heavy cruiser came up behind it, Torsion bolts firing almost in every direction. The Urumi cruiser took hit after hit, yet it kept coming, guns blazing, plowing right into the middle of the advancing Consortium ships. But they didn’t stop, they went right by, right through the fire of the Confederate ships, one destroyer spinning out of control after its starboard wing was sheared off by a KMS destroyer and crashing directly into a Skaa destroyer, tearing both ships apart from the incredible force of the impact. Fighters turned and chased the Consortium ships as they went right through the Confederate advance, and the bigger ships turned and started to pursue.

They didn't even really *try* to engage...what was their game?

He watched from a surface camera as the Consortium reached Kosigi, and the came right at the capitol doors. Ships hit the hard shield in a dome over the doors and utilized shield bores, and once they had holes in them, they deployed landers, both mantis mecha and some kind of large blocky unit, like a flying Lego brick, and when they landed directly on the doors, Jason gasped and realized what they were doing.

They were trying to get *inside* Kosigi!

Lorna had never planned for that! Kosigi had so much firepower, everyone thought that the Consortium would be crazy to attack on its side of the planet...but they weren't attacking *Karis*, they were attacking *Kosigi*! If they could knock out Kosigi, they'd rob Karis of one of its most formidable defenses, and if they did it from the *inside*, they wouldn't have to go through Kosigi's hail of fire to take out its weapons! Not just that, but inside Kosigi there were biogenic computers, biogenic modules, half-built ships, a treasure trove of Karinne technology. And if they got inside, they'd have the heavily armored shell of the moon *protecting* them, even as it protected those inside the moon right now! They'd done it perfectly, tied up the ground batteries just long enough to get landers onto the moon, and now they were going to try to cut the doors open and get ships inside before they were destroyed by Kosigi's defenses!

He brought up a tactical asset map at Kosigi, and he saw that the interior of the moon wasn't defenseless. He saw Wolf and Raptors activating inside the moon, as well as 12 ships that were inside for repairs, and Gladiator units were moving towards the landers to engage them as Lorna ordered the Naval ships to open fire on the landers.

"Get the Tarks to the door control room! Scramble all fighters and operational ships to the capitol door tunnel! Prepare for boarders!" Dellin shouted. *"Get our Generations to the area with tactical gestalts! Turn off the door shield and turn the Phalanx guns around the doors on the landing craft!"*

That was a brilliant bit of creativity, Jason saw. The Phalanx guns flanking the doors turned and started firing on the landers, who didn't have the Karinne's own shield protecting them from external fire. But turning off

the shield let more landers get to the doors. The fighters chasing the Consortium ships dove on the landing craft just as Gladiators rose up from bunker emplacements and ventured out onto the doors themselves, and they engaged the enemy ground units. In mere seconds, a wild, chaotic, pitched battle erupted on those metal doors as Consortium units tried to protect those blocky mecha, which were trying to cut a hole in the door using a Torsion blade...but they'd have little luck with that. That door was 57 *shakra* thick, so they'd better have one hell of a cutting blade in those mecha to get through it. Gladiators moved confidently through a blitz of rail fire as the targeting computers in the Phalanx units disseminated friend from foe, walking their fire around Gladiators and low fighters, shooting *only* at Consortium units.

A sudden blip got his attention, and he saw that enemy ships were absolutely pouring out of the wormhole now, dozens a second, and that included the twisted, burning wreckage that came out with them from ships that were destroyed by the flux. The Consortium was sending the bulk of its fleet now, getting as many ships into Karisian space as possible, but they were losing about 16% of the ships coming through as the wormhole remained far more stable than Myleena anticipated. Those ships hung back, well out of range of anything but missiles...waiting for the advance force to penetrate Kosigi and get the doors open, he surmised. Jason saw that their blocky units *were* cutting all the way through the doors, but they were going very, very slowly, and that made them sitting ducks. Mecha after mecha was destroyed by a concentrated hail of fire from both Phalanx guns and defending mecha, then by infantry units, Karinne Marines and Tarks by their armor colors, coming up from the service tunnels and engaging the mantis mecha with pulse weapons. Consortium insectoids in armor boiled out of those blocky mecha and charged the infantry units, so there were both mecha battles and infantry skirmishes happening all over the doors.

But in an instant, everything changed, and that was when Erin, Femali, and Jori got there. The three Generations had their tactical gestalts, and they turned that power against the landers. In perfect unison, three of the blocky landers trying to cut a hole in the door just *crushed*, as if they were beer cans stomped on by a 500-pound man. And they continued to get squashed in threes as the three Generations turned their power against their enemies, using the one weapon against which there was no defense, and that was

their telekinetic talent. The tactical gestalts gave them the power to smash those mecha, but they had to be relatively close to do it...and in this case they were right on the other side of the massive capitol doors. After smashing the last cutting lander, they turned their power into a shield of warped space that turned every Torsion, dark matter, and missile shot fired down at the doors back around at the very ships that fired them, forming an area of warped space directly over the doors that prevented the Consortium from supporting their ground units without interfering with the Phalanx guns' ability to fire on them, since they were *beneath* the area of warped space. In short moments, nearly half of the mantis mecha and armored bugs were down, and dozens of ships above had smoking holes in them from their own shots.

"Turn the GRAF cannons and solar collectors on those ships sitting by the wormhole," Lorna ordered. "All ships in sector three deploy to sector two, all ships in sector two engage at Kosigi."

[They're not coming into range of the planetary defense grid, or us,] Myleena communed.

[They're not stupid,] Saelle answered, and Jason realized that other Generations were merged into the planetary network, which would let them hear each other as they shared communal thought. *[Trying to invade Kosigi, that's not a bad plan. We'd have a hell of a time getting them out of there if they took the moon, even though we could turn off all the computers. There's only two ways in, and they could just concentrate all their fire on those two tunnels while they strip the interior bare of every biogenic crystal and piece of Karinne hardware they can find.]*

[Yeah, but how do they get away with them?] Jezzi asked.

[Think, silly girl. They still have spies in the other governments, and we showed them how to jump the interdictors when outbound. If the other Confederate ships can do it, a Consortium ship can definitely do it.]

Jason almost smacked himself in the forehead. Of *course*! If they could get in there and get Karinne technology, then jump out with it, they could hide somewhere in the galaxy and so far away that only the KMS and the Kimdori could chase them...where they'd be massively, massively outnumbered. The Consortium was here for the secret of biogenics, and if

they didn't think they could take Karis to get it, well, they *could* take it from Kosigi!

"Myri, you do not let any KMS ship outside the gravity well of the planet, out where a Consortium ship can jump hyperspace," he ordered immediately to the War Room. *"Saelle thinks the enemy is going to concentrate on Kosigi, and I think she's right."*

"Explain," Lorna said.

"They're after biogenics, well, there's a ton of biogenic units in Kosigi," he answered. *"And they may have stolen the secret of how to jump the interdictors outbound from one of the other Confederate governments when Myleena sent them the specs to upgrade their ships to do it. Saelle thinks they're going to break into Kosigi and use it as a fortress to hold us off while they loot the place clean, then try to make a run for it when they have enough of our tech to reverse engineer it. Then they can take it and however many Faey and Terran prisoners they take in Kosigi back to the Consortium so they can use it against both the Benga and us."*

There was a long moment of silence in that room, then Lorna frowned. *"All ships in sectors five and six deploy immediately to Kosigi,"* she ordered. *"I don't want another Consortium ship to get within fifty thousand kathra of those doors. Redeploy planetary defenses to fill the holes."*

"Just watch for them to change tactics," Shio Admiral Jarik Furystorm said. *"If they see us counter them at Kosigi, they'll make a run at Karis and attack the holes in the defenses."*

Jason saw the ships start to really move, on both sides. The large concentration of Consortium ships rushed forward, straight at Kosigi, even as Confederate fleets redeployed. But while the main battle was happening at the doors, the easing of the constant barrage of missiles allowed the ground batteries on the surface to take down their shields and start firing again. The entire far side of the moon lit up as MPAC, Torsion, and pulse blasts flew, aimed at the Consortium ships close to the doors, as they ascended higher once one got too close, and the three Generations down there managed to tear the entire port wing off the destroyer when it got within their range, rising up into the firing arcs of the batteries more distant from the doors. Jarik also turned out to be right, Jason saw almost

immediately, for the ships streaming out of the wormhole were turning and circling away from Kosigi. The Consortium was splitting their forces, attacking Kosigi and moving to attack some other part of the planet. Trajectory showed a closing orbital arc that would bring them close to the shield on the far side of the planet from Karsa, over the northeastern quadrant. That area was mainly open ocean, but the Virgan continent's western edge and the far continent of Harga had landmass in that quadrant...and right where many of the Confederate assets had just been pulled to protect Kosigi. The Consortium was going to attack the weak point in the defenses, get their landers past the shield, then come down in a descending trajectory that would allow them to attack either Karsa or Kosiningi.

"That's it! Missile batteries, open up on them!" Myri shouted, slamming an armored fist on the display table.

"Do it," Lorna agreed. *"All Confederate long-range assets engage. Cut them from Trelle's hair!"* she barked.

The missile gunboats and orbiting missile pods, which had been held back, were held back no longer. They'd been waiting for a large number of ships to get into the system before unleashing them, and Lorna obviously felt they'd hit the threshold. More 3D toys were also screaming into the fray, the second wave fired from the launch freighters dispersed through the fleets. The result was a virtual rain of missiles and toys screaming away from the planet, all of them converging on a point right in the middle of the ships that were now trying to circle around the planet. More ships continued to absolutely pour out of the wormhole, Imxi ships starting to appear along with Consortium vessels, and from those Imxi ships, fighters were launched. They rushed forward towards the missiles and weapons.

"Imxi fighters inbound. Rail units focus on them before they can shoot down our missiles," Lorna ordered. *"Fighters on standby."*

Explosions of Imxi fighters started to appear on the image in his mind's eye as rail batteries from the ships and orbital platforms opened up on the fighters, the shots coming between the gaps in the missiles, hitting them before they could react. A field of fiery dots appeared before the Imxi fighters started taking evasive action, and they started firing just as the missile shields in the vanguard activated. The units turned aside Torsion

bolts from the fighters and destroyed quite a few fighters that got caught in the effect as the units slammed into the Imxi formations. The Imxi fighters that had scrambled out of the way turned and chased after the missiles and weapons. But they weren't going to catch up. Jason watched as the cloud of missiles. Buzzsaws, gyroballs, and other nasties hit right in the center of the Consortium fleet as it moved laterally in relation to the planet, tearing ships apart in explosions, cutting them to ribbons, destroying computer cores, killing crews.

But still they poured out of the wormhole like angry wasps from a disturbed nest. Hundreds of ships a minute streamed out of the relatively stable wormhole, then the wormhole suddenly *yanked*, careening nearly 2,400 *kathra* in a matter of seconds, shattering every ship in transit as it moved. It yanked again, then again, and it dawned on him that it wasn't random. The movement was in the same direction. They were trying to move the wormhole from its origin point! Using Cybi's systems, he quickly calculated its trajectory based on its movements, and saw that it would intersect a tangent that would put the wormhole *just* on the horizon when viewed from Kosiningi, shortening the distance the Consortium would have to go to get there. Jason projected that onto the main view table in the War Room, but Lorna had already figured that out. "*Pull all ships from sector eight to coordinates 16-53-122,*" she ordered, which would put those ships right in the enemy's path. "*They're starting their push.*"

"*All ground units, stage two,*" Sioa ordered, which would put all ground units and Army fighters on alert. "*Activate all ground batteries, prepare for enemy action.*"

Around the doors at Kosigi, it was an all-out brawl. Ground mecha and infantry traded shots as Consortium and Confederate ships fired at each other almost at point blank range, as Haema and the *Iyaneri* stuffed themselves right down the throats of the enemy fleet. The massive capitol ship was escorted by two tactical battleships, the *Prophet* and the *Jason Karinne*, and all those particle beams had an immediate and utterly devastating effect. The two tactical battleships were firing all 18 of their particle beams in a continuous cycle, firing until the units had to recharge and recycle then firing again, and they were the head of a spear of combined Confederate ships that quickly tore a gaping hole in the Consortium formation. But the Consortium wasn't just folding, they fought

back with almost desperate savagery. Jason watched as a burning Consortium cruiser, gouting plasma from a primary exchanger into space through a molten hole in its aft sections, turned and rammed a Skaa battle cruiser, taking the Skaa ship with it just as its aft section exploded. He felt a jolt of fear and concern when the KMS cruiser *Steadfast* was focused and pounded by Torsion blasts, then the ship veered and turned, spinning by the yaw. He saw Gladiators and infantry units running in terror as the ship spun down towards the moon, then crashed upside-down just to the east of the doors, gouging a trench in the native rock and obliterating several ground battery emplacements. The *Steadfast* ground to a halt, smoke billowing from several breaches in the hull, leaving behind a trench of molten rock and twisted bits of metal that had once been ground batteries or external sensor towers, but almost miraculously, the compressed Neutronium armored hull had withstood that mind-boggling impact...mostly.

“Push them back from the doors!” Lorna barked.

Around the moon, a huge formation of fighters screamed in, Wolves, Raptors, and Alliance Warhawks, the bruisers in the Confederate fighter fleet. They turned on the Consortium warships while the fighters already there focused on the enemy ground units on the doors, just as the reinforcements from the Consortium reached the fray. The *Iyaneri* marshaled the Confederate ships around it as they were quickly surrounded, the massive capitol ship parking itself directly over the doors and daring the Consortium to try to move it. MPACs, rail slugs, pulse blasts, hot plasma, stream weapons, and Colonial iso-neutron bolts fired in every direction as missiles and particle beams lashed out from the formation, slicing enemy ships apart. The Confederate ships almost couldn't miss due to so many enemy ships surrounding them, as fighters attacked the Consortium ships in the gaps between the ships. He saw the destroyer *Tikanne* get taken out, falling towards the moon in a trail of fire from its aft section, but the Confederate ships closed the gap, a Colonial star cruiser and a Shio fast attack ship pulling in to cover the gap.. A bright white light illuminated the fight at the doors as GRAF blasts again rose up from the surface like fireworks, the massive cannons firing on the ships trying to circle around the planet, firing on them before they got out of line of sight.

“If they want the doors open, then let's give them what they want,” Dellin barked. Jason looked into his control center and saw him putting on

his helmet. “*We got those units in place, Ilia?*”

“*In position,*” she replied.

An evil smile graced Dellin’s face just before the smoky transparent titanium faceplate of his helmet covered, and the short Faey man picked up a pulse rifle just like an infantry grunt and activated it with an exaggerated slap on the panel. “*Then open the doors and welcome them inside.*”

Jason was about to object, but he saw the ground units scrambling off the doors, using the engines in their armor or the glide drives in the Gladiators to get off the doors. The doors jerked, then began to open, and the Consortium ships tried to go past the Confederate ships to get into the tunnel, not noticing or not caring that the Confederate ships were scrambling out of the way, moving away from the doors. But as the doors opened wider, they saw that the tunnel was occupied. There were 17 ships sitting just behind the doors, some battle-damaged, some only half built, but they all had operational weapons, and mixed in with them were the *thousands* of pulse weapon units waiting to be installed on ships, rigged to fire without being installed, some on power packs, some on broadcast power, and held in place by Kosigi workers in armor. That was *genius*, Jason decided as a virtual blitz of pulse blasts fired from manually held heavy pulse weapons opened up, firing around the retreating Confederate ships as dock workers in armor aimed those weapons *manually*, men and women in armor pushing the barrels as a third worked the trigger, firing the weapons. Jason also saw that the Consortium mantis craft and infantry units on the doors had nowhere to go. The doors had no clearance where they retracted back into the moon’s surface, and the ground units were slammed against the side of the door unit when they ran out of real estate where the mantis craft used their own engines to get clear, rising up and directly into the fire of prepared infantry and Gladiator units, literally turning them into a turkey shoot. It became a slaughter when the Confederate ships turned and started firing on the ships trying to get through that onslaught of pulse fire, tearing enemy ships apart, blowing them up, turning them into Swiss cheese before they could reach the doorframe. The Consortium ships were pincered between the hail of pulse fire coming out of the tunnel and the Confederate ships they tried to get around, and enemy ships exploded or crashed into the surface of the moon in windrows.

By opening the doors, Dellin had created a kill zone...that man was a *genius*.

The interior Wolf and Raptors joined by Gladiators with flight pods then poured out of the interior of Kosigi, and they engaged the disrupted Consortium formations along with the others, allowing the Confederate forces to gain the upper hand at the doors in a matter of moments. The pitched battle around the doors started to push away, as the enemy ships closest to the doors were annihilated, and the reinforcements were disrupted and put on the defensive as the Confederate warships were backed up by those free-floating pulse weapons, fighters, and ground batteries. He saw a swarm of Warhawks and Wolves blow a Consortium destroyer in half with a constant pounding of pulse and Alliance hot plasma fire, then the fighters whipped away in unison to turn on a Consortium battleship, but not without losing three Warhawks and two Wolves to enemy fire.

And in the middle of it all, he saw a Faey fighter pilot, without her fighter and with an ejection exo-pack attached to her back, wielding the pulse rifle that was part of the exo-pack. She was firing at anything she could see, fighting on even without her fighter, fighting on no matter the odds, fighting on because she knew there was no retreat from the battle. Telemetry identified her as Naval Ensign Kiomi Feralle of the 132nd Fighter Squadron, and Jason watched as she destroyed one of those slapdash drones the Consortium had started to employ, then slid to the left almost like she was an ice dancer, slipping aside as a Torsion bolt twice as thick around as she was tall lashed out from the nearby destroyer. She turned her pulse rifle on the destroyer, firing at full auto even as she slid laterally, then she was *yanked*, pulled towards the lunar surface. Jason sensed that that was Erin's doing, pulling her out of what was certain death, using his boosted talent to get her out of there...and she didn't seem very happy about it. She continued to fire even as she was pulled towards the tunnel.

He made a note to himself to give that girl a medal when this was all over.

With the door situation looking handled, he and Myleena turned their attention to the enemy fleet circling in towards the planet. They were nearly out of line of sight of Kosigi, rail fire and GRAF blasts chasing them all the way to the horizon, a constant train of ships whose line turned like a snake

as the wormhole shifted position, littering the space behind them with the flaming wreckage of their compatriots. *[Bring up the GRAF cannons facing the horizon,]* Myleena ordered via commune. *[Jason, get ready to bend shots into the enemy.]*

[We're ready,] Jason answered as he centered himself, engaged the biogenic relays around Kosiningi. He displayed shot trajectories onto the main tactical in the War Room so they'd keep their own ships out of his firing lines, then he started building the spatial tunnel as Myleena acted as his spotter. She'd tell him where to aim, he'd send GRAF blasts to that location. The biogenic units in the core room started to hum as he built power even as the GRAF cannons prepared to fire, and Myleena fed coordinates directly into his mind via communion as he formed the spatial tunnel. She had him aiming at a Consortium super-battleship, bigger than the other battleships but not big enough to be one of their command ships. *[Ten seconds, second target,]* Myleena communed, giving him a second set of coordinates he translated in his mind to how he had to manipulate the tunnel to hit that point. That was what four days of drills and practice had been about, teaching him how to aim.

[GRAF firing,] Myleena warned, and he saw the angry white bar lash out from the edge of Kosigi. The blast hit the spatial tunnel exactly on target, in the exact center of the tunnel, and the bar then turned, twisted, bent around the circumference of the planet above the shield as Jason warped the space through which the blast traveled, exiting the spatial tunnel and hitting the super-battleship almost dead center. The entire ship and the 12 Consortium ships that just happened to be in the path of the beam simply dissolved away, shattered into molecular dust in a microsecond, hit by something so powerful that not even Neutronium could stand up to it. Jason adjusted the tunnel just as the second GRAF cannon fired, then the third, then the forth, Myleena's mind linked to his through Cybi and allowing them to communicate and react in the timeframe of the mindscape, which was far faster than the physical world. They carried on a nearly full conversation about the wormhole and how stable it was just in the 1.3 seconds between the fifth and sixth GRAF shots, as they bounced ideas off each other about how they might be able to make it much less stable using what assets they had available.

Eventually they came up with an idea. Myleena took control of the toy deployment from Bo long enough to redirect every gyroball in inventory right at the wormhole, the idea to use their spatial flux generators to destabilize space around the wormhole, which would in turn destabilize the wormhole. She then looked over the map and chose the next target, then fed the spatial tunnel coordinates to Jason to allow him to adjust the tunnel.

The power displays climbed higher and higher as Jason maintained the spatial tunnel, requiring more and more power units to come online to handle the demand as Myleena targeted every big ship she could see in the stream of Consortium vessels...but no command ships had come through yet. Or they had and had been torn apart in transit, one or the other. A blinding bar of energy slammed into the formation from the other side as the solar collectors had finally been redeployed and started firing, being careful only to fire on ships that weren't on a physical line between the collector and the shield...and that window closed quickly as the enemy fleet traversed the "twilight" region of the planet and came fully into the day side, where the collectors couldn't fire on them without hitting the planetary shield. Jason added GRAF shots to that, giving the Consortium withering fire from two directions as he bent indescribably powerful blasts of pure kinetic energy around the planet and slamming them into the enemy ships as white-hot lances of pure solar energy melted their way through the ships from the other side. He saw the fleet get in position to meet that train of ships head-on, and it was led by the *Aegis*, flanked by four command ships from the Faey, Urumi, Alliance, and Skaa navies, and escorted by the KMS battleships *Trelle's Gift* and *Jenda* with the new tactical battleships *Arabax* and *Shikoi*, captained by Staff Admiral Rinli Karinne, one of the staff admirals that had returned to the bridge because they were in such desperate need of experienced captains to command the big ships. Sevi nosed her *Arabax* into the lead, forming the tip of the spear, which was where she always shined the most.

[Jason, what would happen if we fired the GRAF cannon directly into the wormhole?] Saelle asked.

[Not as much as you'd think,] Myleena answered for him as he adjusted the spatial tunnel. *[The energy would be dissipated into the spatial flux without doing any damage to the ships inside. Kinetic energy has no effect inside an area of spatial flux, because it's not multi-dimensional. Rail slugs*

would just get bounced off the spatial boundary, because their mass can't penetrate the border of a one-way gate.]

[Okay, what about MPACs and pulse weapons? Aren't they multidimensional? Wouldn't they have an effect even inside the wormhole?]

[Hmm, now that would work. They'll enter the wormhole and damage anything inside they hit,] Myleena mused as the next GRAF cannon fired. [Too bad it's out of range of our pulse weapons to give it a try and see what happens.]

[Maybe, but plasma torpedoes have lots more range, and they're multidimensional too, I recall] Rahne mused.

[So they are. Okay, Rahne, have the ships at Kosigi get within torpedo range of the wormhole once they finish off the Consortium fleet, give them Trelle-damned bugs something to think about, while we wring as many shots out of the GRAF cannons as we can before they engage our fleet.]

Rahne had a good idea. If they could destroy the ships before they could even get out of the wormhole, it was fewer ships they had to fight when they could shoot back, and the debris itself posed a navigation hazard to any ship that made it out in one piece. And the ships could sit at maximum range, where they'd have time to run if the Consortium turned on them, flee back into range of the ground batteries at Kosigi. Those batteries had the same idea, he saw. All the rail batteries were aiming at the wormhole, sending slugs into the area just hoping that a ship would come out and get hit. Since rail slugs had no range limitation, as long as the wormhole was in sight of Kosigi, they could shoot at it. But the wormhole wouldn't be in range for more than a couple of moments, given how it was slowly making its way around the planet in skips and jumps, skirting the gravity well of the planet where it could open stably enough to let ships through.

Jason could only fire at the tail end of the stream of thousands of Consortium ships when the firing lines got too close to the planet or got their own ships in the way. A horde of Skaa picket ships formed up behind the main line Confederate vessels, nearly 4,000 picket ships, and they prepared to engage. But the precarious nature of the picket ships displayed itself when one ship detonated of its own volition, spraying fiery shards of metal into the picket ships around it as it suffered some kind of catastrophic

breakdown, which resulted in its power plant exploding. Such was the nature of the picket ship fleet; the ships were held together with bubble gum and duct tape. But those rickety old ships had guns, and those guns were online and waiting for the Consortium fleet to get in range.

“Gunboats, open fire,” Lorna ordered. The flare-hulled gunboats opened their doors and unleashed their payloads as the vanguard of the enemy fleet approached, sending a cloud of missiles towards the enemy, as Bo’s deployment ships opened their cargo doors and launched their salvos of 3D toys right behind the missiles. The Confederate ships in the formation also fired their missiles, primarily from Alliance and Skaa ships, adding to the hail of death screaming at the enemy. Every KMS ship behind the gunboats and Naval corvettes opened up with rail fire as the gunboats fell back into the middle of the formations, but the Naval corvettes held position as Wolf and Warhawk fighters moved up into position. At Palla’s command, the fighters and corvettes surged forward, moving between rail shots fired from the ships behind them, coming up behind the missiles and 3D toys to hit the enemy just as they came out of the missile barrage, hitting them before they could recover. Raptors, *Un’Dara*, *Krissha*, and Shio Rapier fighters remained close to the fleet vessels to provide anti-missile and close support when the Consortium engaged. More and more orbital platforms moved into position, providing a second layer of defense should the Consortium get past Palla.

The lead Consortium ships simply vaporized in the hellstorm of missiles, but they plowed right through, sacrificing the ships in the lead to protect the ships behind, and then the fighters hit them. More and more ships spiraled out of the advance or simply exploded as Wolf and Warhawk fighters made their presence known in ferocious fashion, savaging the lead cruisers and destroyers, destroying ship after ship as the nimble Wolves and the insane reflexes of the Shurai Warhawk pilots kept their own losses at a minimum, since the Consortium ships were firing wildly in almost every direction to keep the fighters at bay. But the Consortium ships just kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming, two replacing every one they destroyed, still pouring out of the wormhole in a constant stream and following the same trajectory, all of them en route to attack the same point.

Then it changed. The ships gushing out of the wormhole changed direction, heading almost straight towards the planet, the shortest possible

distance. They again split their forces to force the Confederate forces to meet them, trying to tie up the defensive ships as much as possible. Lorna reacted to the change by redeploying Naval forces on sentry at other locations to converge on the projected trajectory of the incoming ships while Haema's fleet at Kosigi mopped up the last few dozen enemy ships, securing the doors, which began to close once the last ship was destroyed. Instead of heading for the enemy ships, most of the Confederate forces there instead headed for the wormhole, following Rahne's command to fire plasma torpedoes at the wormhole to try to disrupt the constant stream of ships exiting it. The *Iyaneri* and its two escorting tactical battleships broke away from the fleet, changed course to intercept the Consortium at their new projected attack point, but they weren't doing it quietly. He saw the doors hiding the GRAF cannon on the *Iyaneri* open, and the shimmering haze inside the barrel of that weapon made it clear they were about to fire it. Now that they had the space and time to bring the cannon online and fire it, Haema wasn't wasting the chance.

Palla's ships met the train of 3,763 Consortium ships head on even as Jason adjusted his spatial tunnel to fire on the ships heading along the new vector, since they were in his arc of safe fire. Jason's bent shots and shots from the *Iyaneri* and the 7 cannons on the surface of Kosigi with a line of sight opened up on the new train of ships, targeting the largest of them for destruction and vaporizing them. The Consortium plowed headlong into the waiting cadre of Confederate ships, and within seconds, the two fleets were intermixed and firing nearly at point blank range at each other. The first hundred or so Consortium ships had no chance, torn to pieces by the concentrated fire of the defenders, but for every ship that was destroyed, two more filled the hole it left behind. In mere seconds, it was a brutal slugfest much as Lorna expected, ships trading fire and nearly scraping hulls as the enemy tried to knock the defenders out to give them time to get shield bores onto the planetary shield and get landers past it. The picket ships really made a difference as they moved in and engaged, the rickety old vessels blowing holes in much more advanced Consortium ships. They were destroyed with single shots from the enemy, but they were taking Consortium ships with them, and that was what they were literally designed to do. Like an angry swarm of bees that died as soon as they delivered their sting, the Skaa picket ships were being taken out at a shocking rate, but they were destroying Consortium ships even as they were destroyed themselves.

For every five Skaa picket ships destroyed, they took a Consortium ship with them.

Three Confederate command ships, two Skaa and the Shio's lone surviving command ship, converged on the new projected point, looking to meet the *Iyaneri* within a minute of the KMS capitol ship reaching that point. Lorna was starting to commit the heavy hitters to the battle, Jason saw. The KMS capitol ship slid around almost like a skidding car and came to a halt facing the oncoming enemy ships with its GRAF doors open and the cannon charging for another shot, which made it abundantly clear that Zora was at the helm of that ship. It unleashed a full power blast, so strong it had to use its engines to keep position on top of using the recoil reduction system, and it fired that blast right down the throat of the oncoming enemy fleet. Since it was firing directly into the line of ships rather than at them from the side, Haema took out 137 ships with a single shot. The Consortium ships screaming at them at full flank that weren't annihilated by the blast flinched away, spread out and opened up their formation as the GRAF cannon recharged. Haema was going to get three more shots, he calculated, and could possibly get a fourth if she pushed it, but that would be extremely risky. If the Consortium hit the GRAF cannon while it was charging but before it fired, all that kinetic energy it had built up was going to feed back into the ship. That command ship was too fucking new to be obliterated in its first major action. The bulk of the Confederate forces converged on the *Iyaneri* just as it fired its second GRAF blast, taking out a couple dozen advancing Consortium ships as the incoming swarm tried to avoid the blast. More and more ships assembled around the KMS capitol ship, preparing to beat the enemy back.

But then they suddenly spread out, scattering in the face of the *Iyaneri*, breaking into clusters of several dozen ships that moved to the weakest points in the defenses. The ships streaming in at Palla's position did the same, and Jason saw that they'd drawn the Confederate forces into concentrations, and now they were going to try to hit the shield at open points to get through...just as Lorna had expected.

"Spread out and engage enemy forces at field commander's discretion," Lorna ordered calmly.

Within four minutes, the battle Lorna envisioned had erupted. Denied their attempt to quickly get into Kosigi, the Consortium was spreading out to attack the shield in multiple areas to spread the defenders out as much as possible. Literally the entire hemisphere of Karis around the shield saw fighting as Consortium ships used their numerical advantage to hit the weakest points in the arrayed Confederate defense, but Lorna had wisely deployed her forces to allow the quick response to nearly any point around the planet. Swarms of Skaa picket ships roamed the perimeter of the shield and moved wherever they were needed, attacking concentrations of Consortium ships.

“*Not yet, Jason,*” Lorna said calmly. Jason watched from the War Room camera as the Confederate command staff studied the asset allocation holo, watching as blips that indicated friendly and enemy ships moved and vanished from the display. Jason didn’t want to wait, he wanted to attack *now*, especially when the dot that represented the heavy cruiser *Hailaeri* vanished off the holo, and then the tactical cruiser *Revenge*. Those were *people* disappearing off that map, not icons on a hologram, for God’s sake! But Lorna held him back, held him back, watching and studying. For nearly ten minutes, she held Jason back, as more and more Consortium ships engaged Confederate defense all over the hemisphere. She then looked up and nodded. “*Now.*”

It was almost like the hammer of a wrathful god descending from the heavens and smiting the sinners. The power feeds for the biogenic network all over the planet spiked as Jason gathered in every iota of power he could muster, and then he unleashed it. He focused on the ships that had destroyed the *Revenge* first, passing by the burning hull of the cruiser and wading through stubborn picket ships and four orbital platforms defending the shield. Jason reached out with a phantom hand and crushed those ships like they were eggshells, wringing them out and tearing them apart, then he turned his attention and wiped out an entire squadron of Consortium battleships within 200 *kathra* of the shield over the equatorial island chain north of the Parri village, striking them with a blow of pure telekinetic power, shattering their hulls and sending the debris flying off into deep space. The power generators whined in protest as Jason smote the enemy with righteous fury, destroying a collection of Consortium and Imxi ships that had wiped out a formation of picket ships and only had orbital weapon

platforms holding them at bay. He tore apart the largest battleship and used it against the others, hurling the remains into the Imxi ships and fatally crippling them, leaving them burning and spinning out of control. Jason smashed group after group of Consortium ships, anywhere they threatened to reach the shield, able to attack anywhere around the planet instantly, allowing him to back up the stalwart defenders struggling to hold the unending avalanche of Consortium ships at bay.

For nearly six minutes, Jason flailed at the enemy, until the power generators feeding the core room finally went red, taking him offline as the generators cooled and reset. He saw several red blinking areas on the tactical map, where Consortium shield bores had managed to get landers through the shield, and he saw Sioa's forces moving to intercept. They were coming down in a ballistic arc that would land them on the western edge of Karsa, going after the Shimmer Dome. If they could jump out, then that made sense. Why lose tens of thousands of ships and landers trying to get to Cybi when they could hit the Shimmer Dome, plunder the biogenic crystal-growing units, and escape with them? He was grateful that Saelle was there with Jezzi, the two next-strongest Generations on Karsa, defending the second most critical place on the planet. Raptors and Wolves raced towards those landers even as the ground batteries on the planet's surface opened up on the invaders, batteries placed at strategic position that would allow them to fire at large swaths of sky, especially since the enemy was still outside the atmosphere. Lander after lander exploded or burst into flame as rail batteries started taking their toll, capable of firing through the atmosphere and hitting the landers before they even started their descent into the atmosphere, leaving trails of fire lancing up into the sky rather than the usual corkscrew trail of vapor and smoke due to the altered slug shape and increased velocity to let them reach that far. The slugs were nothing but vapor dragging air molecules behind them when they reached that far, but even gaseous iron and titanium could do horrific damage to enemy ships when that stream of free molecules hit the landers going that fast. The descending landers only had a moment's respite when the batteries ceased fire, but that was only so they wouldn't hit the Army fighters who engaged them just as they started their descent into the atmosphere. A cascade of fiery falling debris heralded the initial engagement of army Wolves and Raptors when they reached the first concentration of landers, making the

Consortium fight for every inch of airspace they traversed, making them fight all the way down to the surface.

The generators came back online, and Jason was too busy to watch the landers. He again turned on the invading ships above the planet, sweeping 18 different locations where ships had reached the shield away, destroying them as they tried to bore through the shield. After that was done, he again acted with Myleena, letting her find where he and Cybi were needed most, and then searching for the next one as he handled the problem. The two of them worked in complete harmony, protecting the vulnerable areas of the shield as defensive forces redeployed to protect them, doing exactly what Lorna and the others wanted of him, to be the strongest defense protecting Karis and preventing unmanageable numbers of enemy landers from getting through the shield. As long as Jason held the enemy back, Sioa's ground forces could handle what was getting through.

He'd never been in such an intense fight in his life, and the thrill almost matched the sheer terror of it.

Commander Justin Taggart snaked his ship through a line of Torsion bolts fired from an automated enemy drone that was on his tail, turning and weaving as his wizzo brought a drone in to shake it. He turned into Joae's drone's fire almost perfectly, allowing the drone's pulse weapons to destroy the enemy drone threatening his ship. Joae redeployed the four drones she controlled so one was shadowing their six and the other three attacked with the fighter. He had Iyoi on his wing, babysitting his greenhorn while his usual wingwoman was limping back to the *Trelle's Gift* with most of her port wing gone and running on her emergency backup engine, which barely gave her any maneuverability. It was purely there to get the fighter out of a fight if the main engine was damaged.

If only it was that simple. He'd lost Jikki and Mui from Wing Three and Pria from Wing Two, but Pria's wizzo Ruji had survived. Even the Ghost Squadron was taking casualties in this absolute brawl, because the ships rallying around the *Aegis* were completely surrounded by Consortium ships. He lined up with an Imxi frigate and unloaded on it, white balls of pulse fire strafing the long, narrow ship right amidships and blowing it apart, then flinching as a heavy Torsion bolt passed almost *too* close to his

starboard wing. A KMS corvette leading four Warhawk fighters slashed by in front of him, chasing a trio of Imxi fighters, but the corvette vanished in a brilliant burst of yellow-red fire when it was struck dead center by a dark matter blast from a Consortium destroyer.

"It's getting pretty hairy up here, boss," Iyoi's nervous voice came over STG.

"Just stay on my wing, girl," Taggart ordered as he veered up and to port, sending a blitz of pulse fire right into the open gunport that had destroyed the corvette, and he was rewarded by a crippling explosion on the enemy ship, shuddering it as its atmosphere started to vent into space. He noted almost clinically that another Ghost fighter's telemetry vanished from his board, Lassa. He spared a split second to check for armor telemetry and thank God he spotted it. Lassa had ejected, but her wizzo Giviri's telemetry was flatline. He'd lost another one. "Ghost Squadron, regroup in front of the *Aegis*," he ordered on their dedicated STG channel while chatter from local, pilots calling for assistance or responding to calls, orders relayed from cruisers, came in a constant stream. He turned his ship hard as he headed for the bow of the command ship, which had several fires burning on its hull, but it was faring much better than the fiery hulk of the Skaa command ship that had been beaten down to the point where it finally succumbed. The ship was dead in space and on fire, locked in orbit so at least it wasn't crashing into the shield. The *Aegis* turned as all its particle beams on its port side opened up at the same time, carving over a dozen enemy ships into pieces, the support ships for a super-battleship and the vessel itself, then it fired several plasma torpedoes into the void.

The 34 remaining Ghost fighters grouped up right at the bow of the ship, as well as a small flight of 10 sleek Warhawk fighters. The Shurai flight leader hailed him on STG. *"We are at your command, flight leader,"* he called. *"What is the plan of attack?"*

"We have no orders, so let's see if we can open a hole in this mess and give our ships room to maneuver," he replied as he quickly scanned the area. "There, 102 mark 23. Let's take out those destroyers and give those Urumi ships some breathing space."

"Understood, flight leader. The honor of first kill is yours."

You heard me, girls, let's pry this can open a little, he sent to his remaining pilots.

Let's rock, Berya sent enthusiastically.

The 44 fighters accelerated quickly as they rushed back into the fray, the ten sleek and dangerous Warhawk fighters keeping up with the Wolves. The fighters wove and danced through enemy fire and some of their own fire, two Wolves sliding around a particle beam from a KMS destroyer as it sheared an Imxi cruiser in two. Taggart painted the enemy ships with sensors, determining kill order, then the 44 fighters broke into three groups seamlessly, fluidly, the ten Shurai pilots moving in complete harmony with the pilots of the Ghost squadron. Taggart had the flight leader of the Warhawks and his wingman with him and Iyoi, and the four of them opened fire on the lead destroyer. The relentless pounding from pulse and Torsion weapons blew a gaping, flaming hole in its port aft section, making the destroyer veer off course as it lost engine power. The four fighters turned and fired at the destroyer behind it, one of the Warhawks vaporizing in a reddish blaze from a Torsion bolt, and the three remaining ships lanced by, leaving the enemy destroyer on fire and with its lights blinking on and off as its power system failed. Another destroyer went dark, then another as the others destroyed their ships, and that gave the Urumi destroyers room. The moved into the breach and unleashed everything they had as the fighters pulled out.

"They're breaking!" Iyoi called in excitement as the hole they started widened more and more as the Urumi poured into the breach, splitting the enemy forces, and then the massive *Aegis* wedged itself into that hole, firing in almost every direction as the picket ships dealt with ships that were trying to bore through the shield below them.

Orders flashed up on his command window. "Ghost squadron, break off and assist the picket ships at the shield," he called as he turned his fighter around. He punched the throttle—

—And then darkness.

Iyoi flinched and recoiled violently as a stream of blackish-red dark matter shots fired through the wreckage of the destroyers slashed by her

port wing, and that turned to near panic when she realized that she was the only fighter left. The boss' fighter was spinning away with its entire rear blown off, and the Shurai fighters were gone. Just like that. No warning, no dogfight, no glorious last stand against the enemy. Just...gone.

Gone.

She screamed when her fighter was slammed, like some giant hammer had hit it in the stern just between the stabilizers. The fighter spun out of control, the gyro going crazy as her entire board went nuts, flashing red everywhere. "Eject!" she screamed to her wizzo as she mentally punched the panic button. The armored box of the fighter's internal cockpit disengaged from the structure of the fighter and then was ejected from the main body, the box opening and falling away as her exopack activated. She looked back to the remains of her boss' fighter and saw Joae eject from the upper cockpit, but nothing from the central body. The fighter was twisted wreckage, the ejection system may be beyond hope of working.

Rather than head for the nearest ship, she instead punched the exopack towards the lead fighter. She reached it quickly, saw that the armored cockpit was intact, but the outer doors in the belly were mangled beyond any hope of opening. But the ship was ripped in half just behind the cockpit, so she moved around to the sparking, plasma-venting ruins behind the ship and looked in. Taggart was still in the armored box, floating freely after the locking system failed, and he wasn't moving. She disengaged the exopack and wriggled into the red-hot metal wreckage and grabbed him by the helmet and pulled him out and found that his armor was intact. He was unconscious, but his armor wasn't breached, and his armor telemetry was broadcasting the medical emergency beacon. She wrapped her arm around him as she re-engaged her exopack, reattaching it to her back, and then punched the engines towards the closest ship, which was the *Aegis*.

By the skin of his teeth and Trelle's eternal grace, her boss had survived. Had that dark matter blast hit his ship two more shakra towards the bow, it would have taken his head off.

But that was the life of a fighter pilot. Death was often avoided or met by a single shakra.

The Consortium battle plan was both succeeding and failing at the same time.

As they no doubt planned, their assault on virtually the entire hemisphere was getting landers past the shield. The Skaa picket ships were making that a very costly proposition, however, as the picket forces reached a group of ships that had managed to bore through the shield and destroyed the ships while the landers started to descend. But it was failing in that no ship was surviving long enough to get any lander back. If their plan was to grab enough biogenics to reverse engineer and escape Karis space with it, well, they couldn't maintain a foothold at any point where they'd bored through the shield long enough to recover a lander. Any time they tried to secure a position to give their landers time to grab something and get back, the Consortium ships were wiped out by an onslaught of frail but deadly Skaa picket ships.

Lorna was also taking no chances. No ship that engaged Confederate forces was allowed to retreat. If a ship picked up the wreckage of a KMS ship or captured a Wolf fighter, they could escape with biogenics or pulse technology. The command staff had made it clear that no ship that came within 500 *kathra* of the planet would be allowed to retreat. Any ship that tried to withdraw away from the gravity well, supposedly to jump out, was targeted by ranged weaponry and destroyed. The Kimdori were ensuring that no enemy ship was capable of transmitting any information out of the system, so to get any secrets away from Karis, they had to do it on a ship that managed to jump out. And Lorna was *not* going to let that happen.

The landers were having little more luck. Every single lander that breached the shield headed straight for Karsa, for the Shimmer Dome, but they were beset by swarms of vicious Wolf and Raptor fighters, and those that got that far found that the Shimmer Dome was a heavily fortified bunker bristling with Gladiators, Marines, ground batteries, and five Generations inside the erected infantry hard shield, and *they* were what the Consortium could not get past. Any mecha that got within a city block of the hard shield was obliterated in the blink of an eye, ripped apart or crushed like a paper cup, while the Imxi and insectoid infantry units were held off by both heavily dug-in defenders and protected by the Generations within who were warping space around the hard shield to bounce Torsion bolts harmlessly up into the air. The defenders could fire through the hard

shield with their pulse weapons but they couldn't fire when the Generation was protecting them, so they would hold off until the Generation gave them the signal to fire, unleash a withering storm of pulse fire at the attackers, then the Generation would again erect that protection before the Consortium ground forces could fire back.

The only luck they were having was that they had something else in mind, another phase of their battle plan they were preparing to execute. Consortium ships still streamed towards the planet in unending waves, pouring out of the wormhole, but ships were starting to mass far out of range, behind the wormhole. For every twenty ships that came through in one piece, one ship was pulling back to join that reserve. Lorna had already taken note of it, and she was preparing to deal with whatever they had up their sleeves.

Jason panted a little as he rested, the strain of the merge and the energy he personally exerted wearing him out. Myleena had taken over the merge, though with far less power than he could bring to bear, to give him a chance to catch his breath and get his strength back. His mental eyes were glued to the planetary asset allocation holo, as he hurriedly counted ships, checked personal armor telemetry of close friends in the KMS, seeing who was still alive and who he'd lost. It wasn't all good news, but it sure as hell could have been worse. Inaba Takeshi and virtually the entire crew of the *Temeron* were dead, the ship completely destroyed. Hiae from the *Prophet* was alive, but had been grievously injured, according to medical reports. Same with Commander Taggart from the 76th, whom he admired greatly. He was in a sickbay on the *Aegis* at that moment, and initial reports were not good. He had severe brain hemorrhaging from massive trauma, so heavy a hit he took that it managed to get through his armor and injure his brain. Taggart may never fly a fighter again, Jason realized grimly. He may not even talk again. An injury like that, it could leave him a vegetable, the brain destroyed and killing everything that made him who he was. Faey science could regenerate his brain, but it couldn't recover whatever memories he'd had that were lost, and it couldn't exactly replicate the neural pathways that helped form Taggart's basic personality, not unless they had a highly detailed brain scan of Taggart on file. If they had that, they could possibly restore his basic personality, but all his memories, experiences, his motor skills, they'd all be gone. He'd be like Rahne had been, a blank slate.

And what worried him most was the *Iyaneri*. It was dead in space, its power gone and fires raging all over the hull as Kimdori ships towed it out of the battle zone. He was getting no telemetry from *anyone* inside the ship, so he had no idea who was alive and who was dead...and *Zora* was on that ship.

But the ship had done its job. It and its supporting ships had beaten back the major Consortium assault on that position, though it had taken so much damage that it was dead in space, not even its emergency beacons or telemetry links operational...and a rupture in the jump engines was putting so much hyperdimensional flux into the area that it was disrupting all Teryon and gravband communications in the ship's vicinity, as well as distorting local space and making conventional gravometric engines unstable. Only KMS and Kimdori translation engines were working properly, necessitating the Kimdori towing the *Iyaneri* away from the surviving ships in its squadron so they could get their engines back online. That was blocking all telemetry from everyone inside the ship, so Jason had no idea who was alive inside the crippled capitol ship.

He looked back to the Shimmer Dome. He was certain that the Consortium was shocked that they'd put so much defense there, so sure that they'd come for Cybi that they could sneak in and grab the units that grew biogenic crystals and then escape with them. Saelle was in her Gladiator and on the edge of the shield, using her tactical gestalt to wreak havoc on the enemy. Her gestalt wasn't as powerful as Jezzi's but since it was mobile and she could get it very close to the enemy, it gave her just as much power as Jezzi.

He felt his strength return and took back the merge from Myleena. He went right back to work reinforcing areas of weakened defense, destroying ships trying to bore through the planetary shield. *[We have got to get that wormhole closed,]* he complained to Myleena. The gyroballs had had limited effectiveness, mainly because most of them were destroyed before they could affect the wormhole.

[I'm working on something,] Myleena promised as Cybi calculated ship totals and put up a graphic in his mind. They'd only seen 58% of the Consortium's available fleet, if intelligence was correct. He looked to the wormhole and saw ships still streaming out of it, along with the wreckage

of ships destroyed in transit, but he noted that more and more Imxi ships were coming through now. Those ships were still breaking into elements and spreading out, attacking virtually the entire planet all at once, groups identifying areas where the shield had little or no defense and swarming to that spot. Skaa picket ships and the planet's automated orbital defense platforms also swarmed to those points, attacking the Consortium ships that tried to bore through the shield and get landers to the planet, while main Confederate forces focused on the largest groups of enemy ships.

But still they held those ships back.

He checked Karsa. There were multiple fires burning in the city from shot down and crashed landing craft, and around the Shimmer Dome, it was a double siege. The defenders fought mantis craft and armored insectoids in the open grassy park that was part of the restricted area around the facility, Sioa pulling defenders from other positions and having them converge on the area, trapping the enemy ground units in a half-donut ring, the beach and sea cutting the circle short. The center was a fortress and the enemy infantry was surrounded on all sides by determined defenders, forcing them to fight in both directions and gut through a nasty crossfire as they tried to get past Saelle and Jezzi. More landers tried to reinforce them, but they had to come in under heavy fire from ground batteries and attacks from Wolf and Raptor fighters. The mantis craft were dropping into the sea some distance from Karsa and coming in underwater, but the first Consortium attack had let the Karinnes see that trick, so they had defenses in place under the Karsan sea, torpedo missiles launched from sea bed defensive batteries that protected the shoreline abutting the Shimmer Dome. Geysers of white water denoted every mantis craft and infantry transport that was destroyed trying to come in from under the water's surface.

Sioa looked to have the Shimmer Dome well defended, so he went back to his duty, crushing enemy ships that reached the shield. They were spreading out more and more, spreading out the defense more as they spread from attacking the hemisphere to attacking the entire planet. Battles and skirmishes were being fought in every sector around the planet's shield, as more and more automated platform and Confederate ship icons wavered and vanished off the tactical display. The superior numbers of the enemy was taking its toll, wearing down the defenses around the planet...and pinning down almost every ship in its defense of the shield, he realized.

Much as Cybi expected, eventually, the last line of defense would be her and Jason, if the Consortium kept coming the way they were.

Leaving Kosigi virtually unprotected.

Dellin saw that, too, he reasoned. The capitol doors were again closed, and all the free-floating pulse weapons were back inside, as well as most of the fighters and Gladiators. But the GRAF cannons on the moon's surface were firing at any ship that dared come within line of sight, and he saw from the tactical that most of the damaged ground batteries had been put back in service, hastily repaired by crack maintenance crews.

Bo was also marshaling his resources, gathering up all automated weapons with an eye on that reserve fleet.

He focused on the *Aegis* for a moment. The GRAF doors were closed—far too risky to fire it at that range—and the ship was engaged against a concentration of enemy ships that outnumbered it and its task force by nearly seven to one. Multiple fires were burning on the hull, but the ship was still fighting, particle beams and pulse weapons blasting in every direction as fighters swarmed in the space between the bigger ships, shooting at the cruisers and at the Imxi fighters that had started to show up in numbers. Faey Raptors and KMS Wolves were taking a big bite out of those fighters, dominating the pilots and using them against their comrades. The *Arabax* surged ahead of the *Aegis* and cleared the three Consortium battleships in front of it out of the way, its nine particle beams shearing apart the large ships, Sevi using the ship in the manner in which it was intended.

Jason studied the tactical map a second and realized that there were only five Confederate capitol ships left. The Consortium was going out of its way to knock them out, as they had the *Iyaneri*, focusing on it and pounding it until it was down. They had done the same to 13 other capitol ships around the planet, finding them and sending huge squadrons of ships to take them out...and now they were trying the same thing with the *Aegis*.

Attrition. That was what this was about. The Consortium was simply trying to wipe out the defending fleet, and once they were out of the way, the planetary defenses smashed, they'd take what ships they had left and try to take the planet. And even if they couldn't take it, they'd have Karis

blockaded, trapping whatever was left of the Karinnes behind their own planetary shield.

No. They'd go after Kosigi. Karis was too expensive to take, and everything they really needed was inside Kosigi. With the Confederate fleet wiped out, they could conceivably take the moon base once they broke its defenses.

[They're going to try to take Kosigi,] Jason communed to everyone who was listening. [They're trying to take out our fleet so we can't stop them from breaking in. Jezzi, Saelle.]

[Yes, Jason?]

[I'm about to ask you two to do something absolutely crazy.]

[Get us on a fast corvette, and we can make it to Kosigi,] Jezzi replied confidently.

[Do NOT use the doors,] he warned. [Have the pilot land the corvette in a corvette bay. If they use those ships they're holding back, they could storm the doors if they're opened. If they try to storm the corvette bay, they can only get ground units inside. Myri, I want the best corvette crew you have inside the shield to land at the Shimmer Dome immediately.]

"We're one step ahead of you there, Jayce," Myri said, looking up as if she could see him. "We're gathering up the ground units we can spare and getting ready to ferry them up to Kosigi. If they break in, every woman with a pulse rifle is going to matter."

"Transports only, Myri. If we open the doors, they'll rush the moon."

"We're fully aware of that, Jason," Lorna said calmly. "We have sufficient transport dropships and fighter escorts on the planet to handle the deployment."

"We have Confederate shipboard infantry transferring to Kosigi as we speak," the Shio Admiral added. "If you check the board, you'll see the transports moving towards the lunar base." And that was true enough. Shuttles and dropships were leaving ships, even ships in the middle of battle, and racing towards Kosigi. He saw a Skaa infantry transport launch off one of their battleships and explode almost immediately when it was struck by a dark matter blast, demonstrating that the troop movements were

not without considerable risk. Fighters disengaged from the battle and escorted those transports towards the moon, while the ones that had arrived were entering through the many small fighter and corvette bays scattered across the surface. They were ways into the moon, but they gave no ship the ability to get completely inside. The only connecting tunnels between those bays and the interior were personnel passages and cargo elevators. The only way to get anything larger than a spinner inside the vast empty space within the moon was through one of the two sets of doors.

“Pull every Gladiator we can spare and get them to Kosigi.” Jason ordered.

“We have confirmation, General,” Shey’s voice called. *“The Consortium can jump outbound from the interdiction effect. Kimdori spies just got it to us.”*

“That tears it,” Lorna barked. *“We can’t let anything escape. Myleena, can we stop them from jumping out?”*

“Actually, we can,” she replied immediately. *“Jumping out depends on the waveform being stable. If we cycle the transmission power randomly, it should create a distortion in the interdiction effect that would stop them from jumping outbound. But, it’s gonna reset the interdiction field,”* she warned sternly. *“The size of the field depends on it operating on that stable frequency. If we randomly cycle the power, it’s gonna collapse the interdiction field to a volume only about sixty million kathra in diameter. That’s pretty big, almost all the way to the star, but the bugs’ sensors will see it and they’ll conceivably turn and run at flank speed, trying to race out of the effect to jump.”*

“Work up what you need to do to stop them from jumping, but don’t implement it without a direct order, Myleena,” Lorna warned.

“I’ll have the program to govern the interdictors ready in about five minutes,” she replied confidently.

Jason’s attention was pulled away when a bright flash blinded a camera he was monitoring, and he saw the *Aegis* succumb to the constant barrage of fire. The ship’s power shuddered and then went out, and it started to list as the engines fluxed just before shutting down from power starvation. The ships around it closed around it like ancient Greek Hoplites closing ranks

around a fallen companion, protecting the crippled ship as best they could as they fired in every direction. The remaining ships continued to fight, destroying four Consortium ships for every one they lost thanks to the planetary defense systems adding to their firepower. But they were surrounded, and they were outgunned. Jason watched in painful helplessness as every ship in the formation was either outright destroyed or damaged so severely that it was crippled, with only one ship escaping once the outcome was inevitable. Sevi's *Arabax* led the 14 ships trying to get out of the trap, but only the *Arabax* managed to survive to reach the outer perimeter of the enemy and flee, trailing six different trails of black smoke behind it from hull breaches and fires. The Consortium didn't keep firing at the crippled ships until they were completely destroyed, however. As soon as a ship stopped firing back, went dark, they left it be and moved on to a ship that did.

After all, they could salvage any ship they didn't outright destroy if they won the battle. They were leaving them alone to pick over for technology.

But they were making a mistake they could exploit, he saw. They were focusing on the KMS ships first, knocking them out so they could come back to salvage them later, and that meant that they were ignoring the vast majority of the available firepower the Confederate forces could bring to bear. They were losing *way* more ships than they would have if they weren't singling out and targeting Karinne ships. The picket forces especially were eviscerating the Consortium formations, the rickety old ships arriving wherever they were needed and attacking with nearly suicidal fearlessness. Assaba had told his ships that they would not retreat, and that was exactly how they were fighting. For every picket ship the Consortium destroyed, two more took its place, matching numbers with numbers.

They could use that against the Consortium.

"They're singling out KMS ships," he said over the speaker in the War Room. *"Let's use it against them."*

"They do seem to be inordinately focused on KMS vessels," Lorna agreed as she studied the tactical holo. *"Do it. Pull all KMS ships back, put them in the largest squadrons and put lots of picket ships between them and the enemy."*

“Let’s move all KMS ships to Kosigi, both to reinforce the moon and pull their forces within range of the moon’s batteries,” Navii intoned calmly.

“I concur,” the Skaa Admiral nodded. “I’ll pull the picket forces from subsector six-three to protect the KMS ships.”

“I have another round of toys coming up from the planet. I’ll put them in defense mode around Kosigi,” Bo added.

“We need to get the crippled KMS ships out of there to prevent bug boarding parties that might snatch tech and run. Have them tow them to Kosigi as well,” Lorna called.

Jason watched as the forces realigned. Kimdori ships swooped in and started towing damaged or crippled KMS ships out away from the planet, often while being pursued by Consortium destroyers and battleships, while the remaining operational KMS ships moved to converge on the near side of Kosigi, keeping the moon between them and any long-range enemy attack. A large armada of picket ships pulled away from the planet and rushed for the moon, and the Consortium immediately attacked the section of the shield they left undefended. But Jason was there, eradicating the ships as they tried to bore through the shield, but not getting them all in time. He didn’t bother with the landers, allowing them to descend towards the planet, because Sioa’s ground forces would deal with them. Other Confederate ships gathered around the KMS vessels as they redeployed to Kosigi, mainly Faey battle cruisers, and fighters swarmed in to create a perimeter to protect the ships as they retreated away from the planet’s protective shield.

And they certainly drew a crowd. Large swaths of Consortium ships followed the KMS vessels, trying to chase them down and cripple them, but the Kimdori finally played their hand. A *massive* armada of Kimdori ships jumped in without warning, startling even Lorna, nearly a thousand newly built ships that Zaa had been keeping secret at Kimdori Prime. They broke into squadrons and screamed in at high speed at intercepting courses, and wherever those ships made contact with the enemy, they left drifting, eerily undamaged vessels in their wake. Kimdori stream weapons did almost no damage to the ships, but they exterminated virtually every living thing within them with frightening efficiency. The Kimdori cut a wide path of

death through the pursuing Consortium ships, then surrounded the ships heading for the moon like guardian angels.

“Damn that secretive Kimdori,” Lorna growled. “The Kimdori didn’t report they had that many ships! They were holding them back!”

“That’s Kimdori for you, never honest about anything,” Myri grunted. “But I’m certainly not complaining.”

“Kimdori Expeditionary Fleet Two joining the theater,” a Kimdori flag officer said as his face appeared on a flat hologram. “We have orders to protect the lunar base at Kosigi at all costs. Bring all damaged vessels into our formation and we will effect battle repairs.”

“How?” Lorna asked.

“Duchess Myleena isn’t the only one working on damage control robots,” he replied urbanely. “We have both repair macro units and repair nanites ready for dispersal to all friendly ships. Bring them to this point so the repair spiders can enter their ships and begin repair operations.”

Just about everyone in that room looked both relieved and *really* fucking annoyed with the Kimdori in that moment.

“That’s a good idea. I have maintenance teams inside Kosigi I can pull from combat duty and send out if you can get ships close to the moon’s surface,” Dellin agreed. “Bring them in close to the planet-side doors.”

Lorna glanced at her six command-level officers, then nodded. *“Spread the word. Damaged ships still under power rendezvous at the planet-side doors of Kosigi for repairs, so we can get them back to the shield and in service. Ships with damaged weapon systems are priority.”*

Jason was about to say something, but a spike in the data got his attention. He focused on the mathematical irregularity in the mathematical expression of the distortion field that Myleena was running, and then he fixed on the cameras currently on the wormhole. He saw it shudder, expand to nearly triple its size, then it began to distort. *[Myli, are you doing that?]*

[Not me,] she replied, then she laughed brightly, which he heard audibly since she was in the room with him. *[It’s their wormhole system! It’s losing integrity! Their whole system must be overloading!]*

[Cybi, get me a visual of Trieste,] he asked quickly as he watched the wormhole's internal swirl of color shimmer through several colors as the wormhole lost stability, gyrating wildly without moving, then the literally exploded in a spherical burst of wild Torsion flux, a reddish burst of energy that absolutely annihilated the ships and debris that had been close to the gate, including the large number of ships the Consortium had been staging for another attack on the moon. In the blink of an eye, those 4,000 ships were eradicated in a Torsion shockwave generated by the explosive collapse of the wormhole. But like most Torsion effects, the energy quickly dispersed into space, smoothing out, until the shockwave was nothing but a tiny gravity ripple by the time it reached Kosigi. But the damage to the Consortium was absolutely crippling. They'd not only lost the wormhole, they'd lost the reserves they'd been staging for the second attack. The collapse of the wormhole had wiped them out.

Cybi got a visual of Trieste via spy probes, and he watched in a moment of almost disbelief as he watched the moon of Go'jur'mi *shatter*. The wormhole system inside had gone completely haywire, and before it lost power, it created a powerful spatial distortion that gave the wormhole in the center of the moon the gravitational pull of a small star for 1.2 picoseconds, and that was all it took to shatter the entire moon. Rocky debris crushed inward, then the whole thing exploded when the wormhole lost integrity and explosively returned to normal space, ejecting all the energy holding the wormhole open back at the device trying to maintain it. The backlash caused that picosecond of hypergravity, and that spelled doom for the moon of Go'jur'mi. The moon crushed to half its volume in a split second and then exploded, sending pieces of the moon and the remains of the Consortium fleet yet to traverse the gate drifting away in every direction.

The Consortium's experiment with one-way wormholes was over. The Consortium fleet at Trieste was gone, and in about 36 minutes, the planet of Trieste was going to be bombarded by rocky debris from what was once one of the planet's moons.

"What the fuck just happened?" Lorna shouted, banging her armored fists on the table.

"The wormhole destabilized, and their jerry-rigged system couldn't handle it anymore," Myleena answered, almost smugly. *"The moon of*

Go'jur'mi just exploded, General. Every ship they hadn't sent through just got ground into fine powder. Oh, warn the people on Trieste to take shelter, they're about to be bombarded by moon fragments," she added absently.

"So no more reinforcements," Jarik said with a relieved smile.

"They have enough ships here to still accomplish their objective, Jarik, to steal Karinne technology," Navii warned.

"Myleena, get that program ready to stop them from retreating," Lorna called. *"They may break off and retreat, and we can't let that happen. We have to wipe them out here and now, or they'll just hide until that second wave from Andromeda gets here."*

"You got it, General. It can take effect six seconds after you give the order."

"Send it out to every ship, Shey," Lorna barked. *"Tell everyone the wormhole is gone, and now we just finish off what's here."*

"Yes ma'am," Shey said in a victorious voice, turning back to her comm board.

And just like that, the entire battle changed. The Consortium, which had been pressing the attack on every side and had the Confederate forces trying to regroup to counterattack, had been just ten minutes or so from gaining a decisive advantage in the battle, suddenly had no more ships replacing those that were lost. The bugs in the enemy ships immediately switched tactics. Enemy transports launched from main ships and headed for any KMS ship that was crippled or dead in space and had yet to be towed away. As Lorna warned, they were going to try to grab any Karinne tech they could get their claws on and try to escape with it. But those ships were trying to deploy amid the fighters the Confederate forces still had in the theaters, and they'd been converging on damaged or crippled KMS ships. Those boarding ships were set upon by a storm of angry fighters, and fighters relayed warnings of boarders to crippled ships via sending, flying close enough for the pilots to reach the surviving Faey inside, who then abandoned damage control and prepared to fight off the invading enemy. Four Consortium destroyers pulled up to the crippled KMS destroyer *Kitoki*, and they captured it with towing beams and turned for open space, trying to get far enough away from the gravity well of the planet to jump

out. They didn't get very far, however, when two fighter squadrons from the carrier *Brian Fox* intercepted them, destroying the two lead destroyers in a blitz of pulse fire, then they swung around for another pass as the other two destroyers disengaged towing beams so they weren't sitting ducks, but they also didn't abandon their prize. A Faey destroyer, the only Confederate ship anywhere near the *Kitoki*, stormed in with MPAC batteries blazing, supporting the 65 fighters swarming around the two enemy destroyers. The two destroyers were blown to pieces under the withering hellstorm of plasma and pulse blasts, and the Faey destroyer parked itself within 200 *shakra* of the burning KMS destroyer, defending it from another attempt to capture it.

Savage battles erupted all around the planet, not at weak spots in the defenses, but around any KMS ship that was unable to maneuver. Consortium ships converged on those crippled ships to either try to tow them away or get boarders inside to grab equipment, but the Confederate forces were prepared to defend those ships and what was inside of them. Jason watched a couple dozen different intense firefights as the Consortium committed everything to capturing a KMS ship, and the Confederate forces defended the KMS ships from capture while Tarks and Marines fought boarders within.

Jason focused on one group that had managed to wipe out the picket ships that was defending the crippled battleship *Trelle's Gift*, its bow and stern sections heavily damaged and venting atmosphere, smoke, and fire into space. The fifteen destroyers and two battleships quickly captured the powerless ship in towing beams and turned for deep space. "*Myleena, shift the interdictors twenty seconds before those ships reach jump distance. Element 28, converge on transmitted coordinates! Don't let them get away with that battleship!*"

"*Twenty seconds, you got it, General,*" Myleena replied.

Jason watched as a group of 31 Confederate ships turned and started chasing to Consortium ships. They had enough towing the *Trelle's Gift* to pull it at full speed, but just as they started to slow down to execute a jump the absolute instant they were far enough away, Myleena shifted the interdictors. The ships kept slowing down, but then lurched ahead at full flank when the bugs inside realized that they couldn't jump out but could

see the edge of the interdiction effect on their scanners. But that deceleration gave the Shio, Alliance, and Faey ships behind them time to catch up. Missiles fired from the Shio and Alliance ships, streaking across the distance with Warhawk fighters riding the wakes of the missiles, running at full throttle to catch up to the enemy. The missiles tore into the Consortium ships towing the battleship, and the Consortium ships turned, all but two battleships breaking off and rushing the advancing ships to give the battleships time to get away with their prize.

But they went too far out. A beam of blazing, incandescent light lashed in from deep space and slammed into both battleships towing the *Trelle's Gift*, as the towing ships came out so far from the planet that they were in line of sight of the solar collectors that were waiting for targets to shoot. The concentrated, coherent beam of solar radiation vaporized its way through the near battleship and then through the far battleship's very stern, nearly missing it, in the blink of an eye, blowing a hole nearly 60 *shakra* wide through the stern sections of both ships, and then the near battleship shuddered and detonated in an absolute inferno of blazing white light. The ship was blown apart, the explosion tearing the far ship away from the KMS battleship as the towing beam overloaded. Another beam blazed in and vaporized the narrow neck holding the bow section to the stern section of a destroyer, causing the bow section to spin off into space with greenish-red fire pouring from its exposed sections, then another coherent beam of solar radiation streaked by a turning destroyer, missing it as it veered out of its vector. The Consortium destroyers seemed unsure of what to do for a second, and that was just long enough for element 28 to get within MPAC range. The Faey ships in the formation opened fire with MPACs and plasma torpedoes, but it was the Alliance Warhawk fighters that drew first blood. They swarmed over the nearest destroyer in a fury of Torsion fire, and the entire ship exploded, sending shrapnel flying in every direction when one of the Shurai pilots hit something important...at the probable cost of his own life. The fighters were too close to the ship when it went up, and 12 Warhawks were destroyed in the explosion. The other Warhawks were joined by automated drones from Bo's inventories as he got them out there, and Buzzsaws lanced in from the direction of Kosigi and blew apart five more destroyers. The rest were destroyed in a blitz of MPAC and Torsion fire when the Confederate ships got within range, and the element then

encircled the *Trelle's Gift* and began to tow it themselves, turning towards Kosigi.

"Bo, spread out every mine, drone, toy, and platform you can get your hands on in a ring outside the perimeter," Jason ordered. *"Don't give them a free run at deep space."*

"I don't have much left, but I'll try," he replied, biting his tongue a little bit as he put a finger to his interface.

"Any ship not actively engaged with enemy forces pull back to 600,000 kathra from the planet and form a defensive perimeter. Let no Consortium ship get past," Lorna ordered. *"We have our boots on their necks, ladies and gentlemen, it's time to start pressing down."*

And that was it. The Consortium ships suddenly turned and started making suicide attacks, going after the largest ships they could see. With the Confederate forces forming a perimeter and the interdictors shifted into a mode that prevented jumping out, the remaining 2,190 Consortium ships had no chance to either take the planet or escape with biogenic technology. And when they knew it, they tried to do as much damage as possible before they were destroyed. Jason did what he could to destroy any ship in range before it could do damage, but he was helpless to watch as other ships were rammed by Consortium ships running their engines at flank, tearing ships apart and creating blinding explosions all around the planet.

When the last Consortium ship vanished off tactical, with just a few mantis ships and individual infantry units left alive, Jason leaned back in his chair and blew out his breath. The Consortium again proved that they were formidable opponents. They had done what nobody had expected them to do, attacking *Kosigi* with the intent to take the moon and plunder it, and that had been their plan the entire time, he realized. The attacks on Karis could have gotten them some technology had they managed to get inside the Shimmer Dome, but it was mainly just to tie up the defenders at the planet and give them time to assault Kosigi. Everything had been about Kosigi, from the first shot they fired right up until the wormhole exploded. Lorna and the general staff acquitted themselves nicely by adapting and countering their strategy, but still, had that wormhole not destabilized and exploded....

He didn't want to think about it.

The immediate danger passed, he reached out to survey telemetry for purely personal and selfish reasons, checking to see whose armor was online and whose wasn't. He breathed a sigh of relief when he finally pinged Zora's armor, online and registering an injury to Zora's right arm via sensors, but Zora's vital signs were stable. She was most likely receiving medical attention at that moment. He found every other one of the girls' armor units online, and all of them hadn't so much as gotten a scratch. Zora, Min, and Sheleese were the only ones that had been in actual combat, and Min and Sheleese hadn't taken a single hit as they defended the Shimmer Dome from the bugs. But there were a few notable large ship captains whose armor he could not find. He already knew that Inaba had been killed, but he couldn't find Gema Karinne's armor, or Leta's, or Drae's. They were either dead or their armor was offline. He also couldn't find Admiral Dellin's armor, but he *seriously* doubted that the short, handsome commander of Kosigi was killed, or even injured. He had been in his command center at the very center of Kosigi. Odds were, he had his armor deactivated for some reason.

He did check, though. He looked into the command center, and there Dellin was, the entire left arm of his armor taken off as a technician worked on something in the backplate, where the power plant and much of the equipment was located.

He did a quick tally, based purely off armor not transmitting telemetry checked against all registered armor, and he counted 11,002 units offline. Those were people who were dead or injured. He surveyed the ships and found that every single KMS warship larger than a corvette had taken at least some battle damage, but he also counted 209 ships that were completely destroyed, over a third of the fleet...if one counted Naval corvettes and gunboats. Discounting the smaller ships, that was 53% of the fleet.

Half the fleet destroyed in a single battle, with upwards of 11,000 casualties. But it could have been a *hell* of a lot worse.

Worse like the Skaa. They had taken *dreadful* casualties among their picket forces, losing nearly 12,000 of them, and the Confederate fleet as a whole had lost 2,591 ships, or 62% of the fleet. In return, they had

destroyed 6,019 Consortium and Imxi warships, not counting those destroyed by the wormhole explosion, with automated defenses, ground batteries, Kosigi munitions, missiles, and 3D toys accounting for nearly 7,000 kills themselves. The rest of the 20,000 or so Consortium ships had been in Karis space and wiped out by the wormhole explosion, in transit through the wormhole, or while waiting their chance to go through the wormhole at Trieste.

As Lorna predicted, they won...but it had been a costly, costly victory.

“All forces begin search and recovery procedures. Stand down from battle alert,” Lorna called over every gravband channel. *“Tow all damaged ships to Kosigi for repairs and bring up the sweepers to start clearing debris in orbit. Upload all combat logs to central command as soon as possible for analysis. Good job, ladies and gentlemen. Good job.”*

Jason disengaged the merge and sat up from the chair as Myleena did the same, his friend scrubbing her face as they both felt the mild disorientation that came with severing a merge that deep with a biogenic unit. *We’re hearing the stand down order, Jayce, Jyslin called. Is it over?*

It’s over. It wasn’t easy, but we won, he replied. *Go ahead and have Aya let you guys out.*

[I’m counting half the fleet gone,] Myleena communed soberly.

[About that, and a few pretty important ship captains seem to be missing,] he replied. *[It was almost exactly as Lorna predicted. A victory, but at the cost of over half our fleet.]*

[Turned out we weren’t needed as much as we thought.]

[They learn, Myli. They knew from the first time they attacked Kosiningi that they weren’t gonna pull it off, so they went for what they could get. Kosigi, and the Shimmer Dome.]

[Surprised they didn’t go after the power, or the shield generators.]

[The shield was keeping the rest of the fleet out of what was going on on the surface,] he answered. *[Once they got ships inside the shield, it was protecting them as much as us. If the shield hadn’t been there, the orbital missile platforms could have pounded the landers into dogmeat without so much as having to turn around.]*

[Ah. Well, I'm an engineer, not a tactician. Now let's get out of here and start cleaning up.]

[Good idea. Cybi, let's start the checklist for raising the core.]

[Certainly, Jason. Just sit back down and I'll take care of it.]

Chapter 10

Raira, 14 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 6 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Raira, 14 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

It *seriously* could have been a lot worse.

Jason sat in his office, wearing a tee shirt and a pair of jeans rather than armor, while Shen stood with Dera by the door and chatted with each other privately. The Consortium was completely routed, with only the ships still in the nebula left, and those were entrapped by the interdicator since they'd been in communications blackout since the attack there. They had never received the missive that explained how to refit to jump the outbound interdicator waveform, and the Kimdori's hyperspace probes had total coverage of the entire nebula. No Consortium ship had come out since they destroyed their command center. Because of that, he felt very, very relieved. The threat they posed to the galaxy had been almost eliminated, with only an expedition into the nebula to destroy what remained of their fleet left to do.

He looked over the lists. Virtually the entire KMS was in Kosigi for repairs, along with a couple *thousand* Confederate ships, parked in the cold air inside the moon while repair crews roamed around, getting every ship space worthy and able to jump back to other repair facilities. As he feared, he'd lost four ship captains. Drae, Gema, Leta, and Inaba had all been killed in action. Hiae had been critically wounded, had lost both her left arm and leg and half of her pelvis when a Torsion bolt came right through the bridge from above and would have killed her if she was standing six inches to the left. Pemai had lost her right leg below the knee, Jeya had to be peeled out

of her armor after her right arm and shoulder were caught in an emergency door that came down just as she was thrown to the deck.

Commander Justin Taggart was looking at six months of rehab *minimum* after major brain damage, but Songa was optimistic that he'd eventually make a complete recovery. The damage hadn't destroyed the memory or autonomic parts of his brain, but the damage *had* all but crippled him, dealing damage to the motor control centers in his brain, almost as if he'd had a stroke. His entire right side was effectively paralyzed. It had also partially damaged his talent. He still had his telepathy, but it was weaker than it had been. But Songa had a plan for all of that. She was going to use some experimental brain repair techniques to restore him, drawing on existing Faey medical technology and the use of spiders. The Faey had the ability to clone brain tissue, but they had no way to surgically *implant* that tissue without damaging the surrounding brain tissue to get to it. The Faey aversion to doing anything to the brain for fear of damaging talent had actually created something of a void in Faey medical technology where brain issues were concerned. Songa was going to use spiders to replace destroyed tissue in Taggart's brain, pinpoint internal surgery that would not disturb the surrounding brain tissue and repair the damaged sections of Justin's brain. Without that procedure, Justin would still make a recovery, but he'd never fly again. If he wanted to keep his career as a fighter pilot, he'd have to undergo the procedure.

And while they were doing it, Songa was going to implant Justin with a cyberjack. Since they had to repair parts of his brain anyway, the spiders were simply going to run the fibers as they traveled into Justin's brain. Justin had agreed to the jack implantation, and he would be that critical first experimental test subject, the first telepath willing to undergo the procedure. Justin's talent was still there, though it too had been damaged by his injury, and the two procedures would test two theories. The first was if nanites and Faey medical science could restore damaged talent due to brain injury, and the second was to see if they could successfully implant a jack into a talented brain without damaging that talent. If Justin lost his talent, he could still do his job as a fighter pilot, so he wasn't half as worried about that as he was having the procedure repairing his brain enough for him to get back into a fighter. Either way, they'd know in about three weeks. It was going to take Songa that long to grow the cloned brain matter that would be put in to

repair Justin's brain, carefully rewiring all his neural pathways since Songa *did* have a synaptic map of Justin's brain, part of his basic military medical file, and it was Songa's hope that they'd repair all the damage, preserve his talent, *and* successfully implant the jack.

And then there was Zora. She was at the Medical Annex at that very moment, having a cyberarm fitted to the stump just below her right elbow. Somewhat surprisingly to him, Zora had opted for an endolimb, a cyber replacement of her right arm with tissue grown over it to conceal the fact that it was artificial. She'd be in the hospital for about five days as they grew the tissue over her arm, and Jason was going to keep Sora while she was there. He wasn't sure why Zora had opted for the endolimb over a regrow or a cloned replacement, but it was her choice.

The damage to the fleet was bad, but the planet's surface had come through with only minor to moderate damage, mainly from fires and impact caused by falling debris from enemy landers. There were some holes in buildings in Karsa, and some grass fires out on the plains south and west of the city. Most of the damage was to the west side of the city, around the Shimmer Dome, where the Consortium had landed to storm the complex and found that the Karinnes had been waiting for them. Thanks to their plan to hit the Shimmer Dome and then try to escape with biogenic units, the rest of the planet had been left alone. The Consortium hadn't wanted to throw mecha and infantry away attacking Kosiningi, content to simply get biogenic technology and hide out until their massive second wave arrived, working to reverse engineer the crystals so they'd be able to produce them once their big exodus fleet got there.

KMS wide, the casualties had been far fewer than in the other militaries. They'd lost 5,318 and had 6,559 injured, where if his people weren't in Crusader armor, that figure would have been nearly triple. In the other services, entire crews on ships were lost because the Naval personnel didn't have self-contained armor systems that doubled as space suits if the ship lost pressurization. The Faey had learned that fact from the KMS and had been equipping their crews with older self-contained armor or put everyone in an E-suit if they didn't have enough armor to go around, where the Skaa had suffered *horrific* casualties. The Skaa had a shocking disregard for casualties, based on the very high population that was one of their greatest advantages. Those in power weren't worried about losing 25,000 or 30,000

sailors, since there were a few dozen *million* Skaa waiting in the wings to take their places. When an empire had a population in the hundreds of billions, losing 27,991 Skaa in the battle was barely worth a blink of their eyes. They only cared if they lost high-ranking officers.

He skimmed through yet another report as he got ready to go down to the conference room and attend the first meeting with his staff since the battle. The Confederate rulers were doing the same thing he was, assessing the damage to their fleets and getting repair materials and replacement personnel out to the ships, which made Kosigi one insanely busy place at the moment. Dellin was managing that hurricane with his usual deft hand, however, getting everything organized, prioritizing repairs on ships based on need. Since the Stargates were back, one linked to Terra and the other to Draconis, a steady stream of dropships and cargo freighters were flowing in, bringing in the replacement equipment and raw materials Dellin needed to get everyone's ships back to jump readiness.

And while all that was going on, the Kimdori were watching everything like a hawk, making sure a damaged pulse drone or piece of wreckage holding a biogenic crystal didn't *happen* to find its way into the cargo bay of some Confederate ship. The sweepers had done a good job collecting up all debris and wreckage from KMS ships, isolating it and keeping it away from the other military branches.

Fuck were the others *pissed* at Zaa at the moment. Her jumping that surprise fleet in didn't sit well with quite a few of them, and it irked Jason a little himself at first, but he'd just found out maybe an hour ago that most of those ships were only half-built. Zaa had told her builders to put engines, power plants, and guns on them, then they sent them out, often with half the ship's interior unfinished. Many of them only had pressurized atmosphere on the bridge, with every other Kimdori in E-suits.

Things were busy on the surface as well. With the battle over and the Confederation victorious, the summit was on again, and Yeri was busting her ass getting things ready for it. The conference would start in two days, giving the Karinnes time to clean up and repair the damage to Karsa, but not everyone was going to wait that long. Dahnai was scheduled to arrive tomorrow morning, and the Brood Queen and Overseer Brayrak Kruu were both going to arrive in two hours. Sk'Vrae wanted to have some long talks

with Jason about the Urumi systems, and the Overseer had some business with Kumi that had to be conducted face to face. He'd just stay over until the summit began, since he had professed an interest in discussing allowing Moridon banks to open branches on Karis with Jason. Jason didn't mind; the Moridon were quite honorable, and their secrecy went both ways. They kept their own secrets, but they also kept the secrets of others. And since the Karinnes were a *major* source of banking profit for Moridon, Brayrak wasn't about to piss Kumi or Jason off.

He finished up and stood up, then pointedly ignored Dera's stern look and pointing finger, pointing at his armor on its stand. "Push off, I'm not wearing it 'til I go home," he declared, marching right by them and out the door. "I'm going to the cabinet meeting, Chirk," he said as he came out into the reception office. Chirk was behind her desk, staring at her monitor, and Brall was also in, stacking up some memory sticks. "You heading out, Brall?"

"Yes, your Grace," he answered as he stuffed the sticks in his carry satchel. "I'll start at the Shimmer Dome and work my way down the checklist."

"Good man. Send me a report when you finish at each location."

"I'll send them to Chirk's terminal, since you might be busy."

"I will inform you as they arrive, revered Hive-leader," her monotone translator called.

So, has Kyva gotten over her temper tantrum yet? Shen asked impishly as they got into the hallway.

She didn't have a temper tantrum, but she was rather irritated that she didn't get to so much as fire a shot, Jason sent with an audible chuckle. *But I'm not feeling sorry for her. There was no other place she needed to be but defending Cybi's front door, as well as the bunker holding my family.*

Truly, Dera agreed. *I'm still surprised they didn't attack Kosiningi.*

I guess they learned how impregnable it is the last time they tried, he replied. *So they went after the Shimmer Dome instead. That makes sense when you think about it. Capturing Cybi gets them a CBIM, which would have destroyed herself the instant she felt the cause was lost. Going after*

the Shimmer Dome would have gotten them all the equipment they needed to build their own CBIM. And that's why we stacked so much defense there.

Myri is a clever vulpar, Shen smiled.

It was Navii who made that call, not Myri.

Well, her cleverness was never in doubt.

Amen.

Jason padded into the conference room and saw that his cabinet was already seated and waiting, talking among themselves. They fell silent as he and his two guards came into the room, and Jason sat in his chair without a word. "Alright, we only have about two hours before I have to go," he said aloud for the benefit of his Makati and Kizzik cabinet members. "So let's get the big stuff off the table first. Yeri, you first."

She cleared her throat and touched her interface, bringing up a holo in the center of the table showing a list of assets. "I've got everything organized for the summit," she began. "I have accommodations for the rulers in place and itineraries, as well as security arranged with Captain Aya and Miaari. What's new, Jason, is that I was right about others wanting in. Grand Emperor Shakizarr sent an official request to attend the summit about an hour ago. I told him that we have to clear it with the Confederate Council first, but I doubt they'll say no. We're going to be planning for the Syndicate, the Verutans know they're coming, and they know just what kind of monsters they are."

"The Verutans must have good spies at the Academy," Jason said without much humor. "We'll have to send a ship for him, there's no way he could get here in time. It's a sixteen day jump from the closest Verutan system to Karis. Did you warn him he'd have to forego his usual ship and escorts and get here on a KMS ship?"

"I did, and he's alright with it," she answered. "The Grand Emperor is the first to make an official request, but I don't think he'll be the only one. Kiaari warned me that the High Councilor of the Grimja Union is about to make the same request, and if the Verutans want to attend, you know the Haumda won't be far behind."

“Yeah, you should plan for the Haumda,” he nodded. When Yeri didn’t say anything more, he looked to her left. “Kumi?”

“Not much to really report,” she replied, brushing her hair out of her face. “Just that nobody at this table should worry about cost when it comes to repairs. Just send me the bills, I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. Trenirk?”

“Since the Consortium focused on the Shimmer Dome, they literally didn’t touch any other complex,” he replied. “We’re at 99% production capacity, and that’ll be at 100% in about three hours, when they finish cleaning up around the Shimmer Dome and fixing what damage was caused.”

“Outstanding. Jrz’kii?”

“The freighter schedule is restored after the disruption,” her translator spoke for her. *“Supplies are back on schedule for our allies. The Stargate linked to Terra will be relinked to Exile in seven hours, once the last of the Confederate supplies are brought in from Terra, and food shipments from the farms on Exile will resume.”*

“Sounds good. Bunvar?”

“Much like Trenirk said, we didn’t take much damage anywhere else because the bugs were focused on the Shimmer Dome,” she answered. “I have all the Karsa damage on a timetable for repair. Infrastructure wise, we came out of this without scraping our horns on the ceiling. No damage to any major infrastructure.”

“I guess that overlaps in with you, Rund?”

The male Makati chuckled. “We had some transmission conduit damage coming into the Shimmer Dome, but nothing we couldn’t fix since yesterday,” he replied. “Planetary power is fully restored, the singularity plant is fully operational and running at optimum, and my teams are disassembling the temporary redundant feeds to the shield generation stations.”

“Sounds good. Grik’zzk?”

“Due to the focus in Karsa, on-planet agricultural resources were undisturbed and on schedule,” the Kizzik answered. “The farms on Exile report they are also on schedule, and all production is simply awaiting the relinking of the gate to be shipped and placed into the logistics schedule.”

“What about the test farms on PR-371? Any reports yet?”

“Only one, and that is that they need more time before a more detailed report will be issued,” she answered.

“Alright. It won’t be easy to farm there anyway, they’ll have to get all the inducers set up and find crops that can tolerate the air pressure,” he grunted. “Any reports from the mining scouts, Trenirk?”

“I expect to get the first in about an hour,” he answered.

“Good. Havann?”

“We’re still repairing the main communications array on Kosigi,” he answered. “We’re utilizing the emergency backup array on Kosiningi until the Kosigi array is back in service. The main broadcast power distribution center on the surface of Kosigi took some serious damage as well, and they estimate it’ll be up in about four days. The internal system was undamaged,” he said as a holo diagram of the moon appeared, showing the damaged areas in blinking red. “We also suffered damage to nine of our mirror transmission nodes. I’ll have an updated repair schedule on your desk an hour after we’re done here.”

“Looks like the broadcast power system took more damage than the hardline system,” Jason noted.

“Because they attacked the external broadcast power facilities,” he answered. “I guess they thought they were power stations for the ground batteries.”

“They do put out a serious energy signature on scanners. Miaari?”

“Security is prepared for the summit, and the Kimdori maintain security on all damaged Karinne equipment over the planet. We’ve had several instances of Confederate ships trying to pick up Karinne equipment from the debris fields, but we have everything under control. Cybi is keeping careful track of every biogenic crystal from here to Kosigi. If even one

finds its way into a Confederate vessel, she will know. We have extra clan in Kosigi to oversee security while the ships are under repair.”

“Sounds good. Alright, Myri?”

“To put it delicately, we got our asses pretty heavily kicked,” she reported. “We don’t have a single ship that didn’t take some damage, and between ship damage and casualties, the KMS is going to need at least a month to get back to some semblance of operational readiness. We’re prioritizing ships based on the amount of repairs and operational requirements, trying to get the ship classes to form task forces up and running. The most heavily damaged ships we can repair were the biggest ones. The *Iyaneri* will be out of service for two months, it took severe damage, and the *Aegis* will be in drydock for 14 days. The only large ship we have right now that’s fully operational and doesn’t look like it was dragged through hell is the *Arabax*. I have no idea how Sevi managed to get through that with her ship more or less in one piece. They sent nearly twenty ships after her to take her out.”

“Sevi’s legend continues to grow,” Jason said lightly.

“More like the new *Arabax*,” Myri grunted. “The tactical battleships came through it with less damage compared to the other battleships. I think it’s because of their design. We should have all our tactical battleships back on the board in ten days. The most heavily damaged was the *Shikoi*, it’ll be down for ten days.”

“How is Rinli?”

“Complaining about her missing fingers already,” Myri replied. “She’s just going to go without them until they have cloned replacements ready.”

“I didn’t hear that Rinli was wounded,” Kumi said.

“She lost two fingers on her left hand to a Torsion rifle, when her crew was fighting off bug boarders, and Rinli wasn’t about to let her crew do the fighting for her,” Myri replied. “She’s had worse playing batchi, but she loves to complain.”

“Okay, that’s the basics. Let’s get to the details.”

He discussed the rebuilding and repairs in more depth with the cabinet for the time that he had, mainly with Bunvar to organize getting all the

repairs done in Karsa, then he adjourned the meeting and went down to the landing pad to greet Sk'Vrae and Brayrak Kruu. They were on the same personnel skimmer, Aura of all people the co-pilot, and Jason didn't feel the least bit underdressed in his tee shirt and jeans. He'd warned them that he would not formally greet them, and Sk'Vrae knew him well enough to know what that meant. The massive armored lizard and tall demonic being stepped out of the hatch and down the steps, and Jason stepped up to greet them. "Brood Queen, Overseer," he called, taking Sk'Vrae's large, bone-plated hand. "How was the trip?"

"Enlightening, your Grace," Brayrak replied. "There is still debris orbiting the planet, and quite a few dead hulks that were Consortium ships. The ferocity of the battle is still quite evident."

"It was fairly nasty," he agreed with a nod. "But luck favored us. The Confederate Council is about to meet, and I have a conference room available where all three of us can attend. If you'd follow me, please."

"Lead on, Jason," Sk'Vrae replied.

They went to the conference room just beside Jason's office and sat down at the table as holograms representing the other members of the council appeared over the table. Jason allowed Sk'Vrae, who had the highest rank, to sit at the head of the table, with him and Overseer Kruu to each side of her. "I see you made it safely, Sk'Vrae," Dahnai said as she adjusted her crown. She was in her formal robes, meaning she had either just come from court, or would go to it after the meeting.

"It was an easy journey until we came out of the Stargate, then our transport had to literally fly around debris," she replied. "The space around Karis is still littered with the wreckage of Consortium vessels." "Better their ships than ours," Dahnai said bluntly as the last of them appeared, Secretary Kim. "Now, first things first. Zaa, I'm gonna smack you when we get to Karis," she said. "Where did that fleet come from?"

"Directly off the docks at Kimdori Prime, and many of them were only shells holding engines and weapons," she replied directly, staring at her camera unwaveringly. "I had my dock workers only install what absolutely had to be in those ships to get them to Karis and allow them to shoot at the

enemy. That many of them didn't even have environmental control systems was a fact that the Consortium did not have to know."

"Well, it worked," Grayhawk chuckled. "And their arrival was quite timely."

"Alright, that does answer that question," Dahnai said, mollified a little. "Alright, Jason, how goes it at Karis?"

"We should have everything at least cleaned up by the summit," he replied. "As the Brood Queen noted, we're still cleaning up the debris fields and repairing the damage to Karsa. Which was very light, thank goodness," he sighed in relief. "The Consortium only attacked one place on the ground, so the damage is restricted mainly to that area. Before we get started, I have something to pass along. I don't know if you were told yet, but the Grand Emperor Shakizarr of Veruta asked to attend the summit. We don't have any objections."

"Yes, we already know, and now that the Brood Queen and Overseer Kruu are in attendance, we can discuss the matter," Magran nodded.

"I am merely a neutral observer, honored Speaker," Brayrak said calmly. "Much as the Kimdori, we are not part of the Confederation."

"Still, your wisdom is appreciated at this table, Overseer," the Colonist replied. "As much as the Denmother's voice is given great weight among us."

"I don't think there's much to discuss about this," Vizzie said. "The Verutans are not someone we want to alienate. They can cause us a whole lot of trouble if we offend them, especially with the Alliance weakened after the Consortium attack, and with the Syndicate coming, we may need their help."

"That gets to the heart of it," Assaba agreed. "It only behooves us to have as many outside empires attend the summit as possible. The Verutans, the Haumda, the Imbiri, the Grimja, the Prakarikai, even the smaller empires like the Farguut, the Ogravians, and the Aggjat."

"Maybe even as far away as the Jun and the Morbods," Dahnai grunted. "Though I doubt that anyone at this conference would enjoy being in the same room with a Morbod."

“We can issue invitations, as long as Jason doesn’t mind hosting them,” Kim said. “I can get word to them within the hour through the Academy.”

“It might be best,” Magran said. “What’s coming concerns everyone in this galaxy. Even if they don’t attend, we should transmit the conference to them on diplomatic crypto so they can see what we discuss and what decisions we make that might affect them.”

“*That would be prudent,*” Grran agreed as his fingers danced before him. “*Secretary Kim, can you arrange for it through the Academy?*”

“Easily, Field Marshall,” he replied. “The White House on Karis can set up a dedicated comm feed directly to the Academy, and we can transmit it out to the various embassies on the campus so they can relay it to their rulers.”

“Then we should discuss it before we vote,” Assaba declared. “Though I think we can declare through general acclimation that the Grand Emperor Shakizarr will be extended an invitation?” When everyone nodded or assented, he glanced to his left. “Jason must arrange to pick him up from Veruta, they have no ships that can get here in time.”

“I’m already working on that, Emperor Assaba,” Jason answered.

After they discussed broadcasting relevant parts of the summit’s conferences and voted to do it, Jason got down to the other business. “We’ve all but smashed the Consortium already here, but we’re not finished with them yet,” he told them as he brought up a holo of the PS, PR, and PQ sectors, which held the Imxi and the nebula where they’d built their command center, and the next sector over, which held the spacefaring civilization closest to Imxi territory. “There’s still about 900 ships hiding in the nebula that we have trapped, that never received the instructions of how to jump the interdictors, so we can go deal with them when we have the spare time.” He blew out his breath, then looked to Zaa, who nodded. She knew what he was about to do. “Our tap on their communications have uncovered something that is of utter importance to everyone at this table. Hell, everyone in this *galaxy*.”

All of them stared at him intensely, paying very close attention. “Just as we feared, the Consortium already here were just the first wave. We’ve intercepted communications that they’re sending a second wave to our

galaxy, and this one is *much* bigger. It's not a military invasion force, friends, it's a *colonization* force. Unless they were intentionally sending false information to their commanders here, we're expecting ten million Consortium civilians escorted by one hundred thousand military ships to arrive in the PR sector in five years."

They all stared at him, almost unbelieving.

"I know. I wasn't sure about this either when they first brought it to me, so I'll admit I've sat on this information for nearly a month until we could get some confirmation. I didn't want to bring this to the council only to find out that it was bad intelligence. Well, we have confirmation now, thanks to communications we intercepted about two hours ago. The Consortium in Andromeda are starting the exodus to our galaxy in twenty days. They've sent orders to the Consortium here to prepare the PR, PQ, and PS sectors for colonization by the incoming force. This is why I've been deliberately vague about what we're going to do about the Imxi. I thought about granting you right of passage through our outpost at PR-371 and allow you to divide up their systems among yourselves, rewards for the investment you've made, but you face the prospect of just losing those systems when this second wave arrives, if we fail to beat them back when they first arrive. They're jumping directly into the Imxi systems. We even have their deployment schedule, as transmitted to their energy beings here," he said, using his gestalt to add that to the map, displaying a table of dates and locations converted from Consortium location codes to Confederate standard location codes.

"I see little issue here, Jason," Sk'Vrae said. "We conquer and interdict those systems, dividing all resources up equally among all Confederate members, either by direct control or allowing the Karinnes to administer the entire Imxi territory and dividing profits equally among us. The Consortium coming here do not know how to bypass the interdictors. They will arrive and find themselves locked out of their intended arrival points, and if they do have that many civilians, they won't have the supplies to last very long on those ships without a safe harbor of resupply. And those large numbers of military ships will be unable to attack if they must defend their civilian transports."

“Actually, this is part of what I wanted to discuss during the summit,” Jason said. “I just wanted to give you advance warning and send you the data we’ve already collected so you can have your advisors and analysts go over it, and we can all be ready to tackle the problem with all of us having all the information before we debate it.”

“Still, this is most worrisome,” Magran grunted. “And it *is* as we feared. The Consortium intends to conquer our galaxy.”

“Actually, it is the opinion of my best analysts that the Consortium are *retreating* to this galaxy,” Zaa stated. “They are losing the war with the Syndicate in Andromeda. This is the first phase of a withdrawal from that galaxy to relocate to ours, and then recover and prepare for the Syndicate crossing over to our galaxy to continue the war. It is our opinion that they are ceding Andromeda to their foes and fleeing to our galaxy with as many resources as they can.”

“That does seem to fit what we know,” Assaba grunted. “Send us all your data, Jason, and I’ll have my advisors and intelligence officers study it.”

“I’ll send it out right now,” he said, slotting a memory stick into the panel on his desk and sending its contents over the crypto channel’s databand link. “We’ll discuss it in detail during the summit, but I wanted to give you advance warning so everyone has time to prepare.”

“That will simply be added to our discussions about the Syndicate. The Consortium may pose the greater threat in the long run, but the Syndicate fleet will be here in three years,” Vizzie said. “We cannot lose sight of one battle because we worry over the one afterwards.”

“Yes, but since we need more information about the Syndicate, I am about to dispatch a brave band of Kimdori to Andromeda,” Zaa told them. “We need information, and this is the only way we can get it.”

“That’s a five-year trip,” Dahnai noted.

“We have a plan to get them there safely,” Zaa replied calmly. “Those brave children will be our eyes and ears in Andromeda, sending us advance warning of what might come our way.”

“That is prudent,” Magran nodded. “Though it’s a terrible burden on the Kimdori that are chosen to go.”

“I have more volunteers than I need,” Zaa said dismissively. “The opportunity to go where no Kimdori has ever gone before is almost irresistible to many of my children. We are explorers at heart, and this is the ultimate chance to explore what has never been explored.”

“If you need any Colonial equipment or assistance, you need but ask, Denmother. We will support your expedition as best we can.”

“We have everything we need, Speaker, but thank you for your support,” she replied. “What we needed most was a ship capable of making the journey and supporting my children while there, and a Karinne Scout Ship is ideal. They are built to operate for long periods of time away from a base of resupply.”

“We’re refitting three Karinne Scout Ships to do the job right now,” Jason added. “Rigging them to be as self-sufficient as possible. There won’t be any repair docks in Andromeda, so those ships will need to be rigged so they can repair virtually anything that breaks down without a repair dock.”

“I’d like you to keep us abreast of the mission, Denmother,” Assaba said, almost sounding like a request. “And if you would, send us the scientific data they gather.”

“All scientific data will be sent to the Academy for archival and study, and I’m sure they’ll make that data available to interested parties, your Majesty,” Jason told him.

“Excellent. I find myself most curious about what might be in another galaxy.”

“Thus why so many of my children all but begged to be assigned the mission,” Zaa chuckled.

They finished up after about an hour more, mainly briefings from Lorna and reports from the battle, including quite a bit of viddy footage that Lorna showed as she described Consortium tactics and how they were defeated. After they finished up, Brayrak was escorted down to Kumi’s office while Sk’Vrae returned with Jason to his own, and they sat at his desk and had a long talk about the four Urumi systems that the Karinnes administered, and

how things would and would not change with the Karinnes becoming autonomous. But Sk'Vrae demonstrated that she had her own ideas and plans about that, broaching a few trade agreements with the House Karinne that wouldn't have anything to do with the Imperium.

He had Chirk arrange a proper escort for the Brood Queen to her suite at the hotel downtown, then he boarded the Marine corvette *Lancer* and headed for the Medical Annex. He moved from room to room, visiting the injured, sitting at their besides and spending a few minutes with them, because *they* were the reason that the House of Karinne was still standing. He didn't just isolate himself to wounded KMS soldiers, either. There were quite a few Confederate Naval personnel in the Annex, and he visited with them as well, thanking them personally for their service to the Confederation and their personal sacrifice in being injured protecting Karis from invasion. He wanted to drop in on Justin, but he was in surgery when Jason checked, one of the pre-op procedures to prepare him for the experimental procedure that would repair his damaged brain and implant the cyberjack. After nearly three hours of visiting men and women in hospital beds, he dropped in on the most important woman in the Annex, at least from his point of view.

Zora was sitting at a desk rather than in her bed, looking at a monitor as she leaned her head on her remaining hand. Her other arm from the elbow down was dominated by the metallic endolimb, which was attached to her arm but had not yet been activated. It was wrapped in soft protective gel with cloth around it, protecting the artificial muscles and datalines grafted to the ends of her nerves so she could control the limb. She was supposed to have it in a sling, but it instead rested on the desk, her cyber hand unmoving. The cyberlimb would weigh a little more than her old arm, so they'd also done a biotine treatment to the biceps and triceps of her right arm so it would be ready to take the extra weight, and part of her physical therapy would be both biotine and strength training in her left arm so she didn't have disproportionate arm strength. She glanced at the movement in the doorway, then gave a brilliant smile and jumped up from the chair. *Jayce!* she sent happily, enfolding his armored body in a hug with her good arm. *Just couldn't stay away, could ya?*

Of course not. How was the attachment surgery?

I was out for it, no idea, she winked. But I woke up with this new ornament here, so it musta went okay, she added, bending her right arm at the elbow to bring her metal-boned lower arm up. I start the tissue process in the morning. They said it'll take about two days to finish.

So, why go for an endo? Why not regrow or clone a replacement?

Hell, why not? she replied simply. At least I'll never break this arm, she added with a wink. I don't have to pay for the cyberlimb, so why not replace the old with something better than normal?

And I won't be arm wrestling you anytime soon, he added lightly, sitting on her bed. She sat with him, and he took her left hand between his own and held it. I'm just glad that you're here to make the choice, he told her. I was majorly worried when I couldn't ping your armor. I wasn't sure if you made it or not.

It was a little nervous for a while, especially after this happened, she sent, residual fear bleeding into her thought as she hefted her nonfunctional arm.

How did that happen? I didn't get the specifics.

Shot off by a bug. They'd managed to penetrate all the way down to deck 16, and since the helm was dead, I fell back on my old job as an infantry girl, she replied. I joined the Tarks and Marines and helped fight them off, and we pushed them back to section 12 before I was taken out of the fight. That's where I got hit. I had no idea a Torsion bolt could hurt that much.

It's something I sure hope to never experience. I lost one hand, never wanna go through that again. I'm just lucky, I don't remember losing it at all, so I have no idea how much it hurt. So, they turned it on yet?

Of course, I've already had the first of my therapy sessions, they just don't want me to use it outside therapy 'til they grow the tissue around it. Afraid I'll damage the muscle cords or datalines. Kinda weird that they're gonna grow flesh over it and I'll be able to feel, she mused lightly, looking down at the artificial hand.

Well, I'm just glad you're here, he sent again, leaning over and putting his forehead against hers and sharing a private moment with her. Sora's

settling into the guest room, so don't you worry about her. She'll be over to see you first thing in the morning.

She was here earlier today, she told him, patting him on the cheek, then she kissed him gently on the lips. And that's for being such a good friend, and a good father to our daughter.

Jason spent nearly an hour with Zora, then he went upstairs and checked in with Songa. He got the latest updates about the wounded straight from her as she walked from one nurse's station to another to look over patient charts and see if they needed her. In a time of need, even the commander of the Karinne Medical Service did rounds. *She was a doctor. We've been transferring the stable Confederate wounded back to Terra, they're being picked up and treated by their own medical organizations from the main medical annex at the Academy, she told him. We have the medical knowledge to treat all Confederate races, but we're pretty tight on bed space at the moment. We're keeping all amputees for limb replacement, however. We send no one back less than whole.*

I support that policy, he agreed sincerely. The other empires' medical tech isn't as advanced as ours when it comes to limb replacement anyway.

Precisely, though doctors from the Medical Service have been teaching at the Academy. I'm sure they'll train up quickly. Medical knowledge should be available to all.

No doubt Dahnai didn't dare try to tell them no, Jason chuckled audibly. Even Dahnai had the sense not to cross the shaishain, the Medical Service.

Nobody tells a doctor what to do, Jayce, she sent lightly, giving him a sly smile.

I'm tempted to prove you wrong, woman, he threatened, jabbing her lightly in the side, which made her laugh. You need anything, you get in touch with Kumi, and she'll take care of it. Right now, every department more or less has a blank check, and I definitely want every man and woman in this annex to have everything they need to recover, ours and theirs.

I'll keep that in mind, she sent with a wicked little look in her eye.

I'll check your requisitions, woman. If I see any pizza ovens on your request forms, you are so busted.

Come now, Jason, I've learned too much from Yila for you to catch me, she teased.

That's it, Yila is banned from Karis, he declared.

After that, he went home, padding off the corvette after it moored to the wharf and walking heavily down the gangplank, his helmet in his hand and his guards behind him, with Aya standing at the edge of the gangplank with a sober look on her face. She fell into step beside him and her interface queried his gestalt and offered a file. *I finished the security schedule for the summit and organized everything with the security heads of the various leaders, so everyone knows what's going on. That's the newest draft, she told him as he accepted the file. I have four guards at Her Majesty's suite. Sometimes it surprises me that she comes here without her retinue, that her own guards won't arrive until the day of the summit.*

She trusts us, Aya, and that's one way she shows it, he replied. *It's an Urumi thing. Remember when she came for the ritual combat with Dahnai? Then she had her guards, because Dahnai was here, and she didn't trust Dahnai.*

But she'll come in Dahnai's presence without them now, Aya mused.

Yup. She trusts that you'll keep her safe before the summit, so she's put her security in your capable hands. They walked up the stairs to the low deck in front of his house on the beach side, and looking at it, he realized that with Sora in the guest room, he was out of available space. *Huh.*

What?

I think I might have to talk to Red Horn about renovating the house, he replied. *With Sora staying over, I'm out of guest rooms. Well, if we don't count the nursery and the rooms already put aside for Siyae and Bethany. If I have another child with Jyslin, I'll be out of bedrooms.*

They could add a third floor without much trouble, Aya speculated, looking at his colonial. *The armory and your home office just take up too much space, Jason.*

That might not be a bad idea. We can move all the kids up to the third floor and I can expand my home office, he sent cheekily, which earned him a tart look.

After taking his armor off, he ensconced himself in said home office and caught up with all the reports, both medical reports and recovery status reports. Dellin was keeping him up to date without bothering to go through Myri, syncing a holo of the status board with his home office, and Jason could look at the holo plastered on the left wall and see exactly what Dellin saw when he looked at his own board...just not quite as clearly. Dellin's board was nearly twice the size of his wall, so he had to zoom in to read some of the writing. But he could see the colored dots denoting ships, with the colors representing various Confederate navies, and the ones blinking indicating that initial repairs were complete and they were about to come off the docks to go back to their own territory for more extensive repairs. Estimated repair times were attached to every ship icon, updated in real time since he was synced to Dellin's board.

But the board didn't show everything. He looked over the repair estimates for the ships too small to appear on the boards, the gunboats, corvettes, and fighters. Quite a few fighters had been damaged or destroyed in the battle, though the Wolf fighters had suffered far fewer casualties by percentage than other fighter models, and there had been Gladiators both up in space and on the ground that had taken damage. Fighter casualties had been shockingly light given how many fighters were lost, thanks to the strong defensive systems in Wolves and the fact that the enemy's main weapons against them were missiles, against which the fighter's shields and armor made a significant impact in keeping the pilot and wizzo alive. Some had been destroyed by dark matter or Torsion weapons, and it was those where the crews suffered disproportionately high casualty rates. Justin's fighter had been hit by a dark matter weapon, where if it had been hit by a Torsion weapon, Justin would be dead. Dark matter weapons weren't shield-piercing and didn't go through armor the way Torsion weapons did, but a fighter hit by a ship's heavy dark matter cannon wasn't going to survive. They were simply too powerful, so powerful that they'd even penetrate a compressed Neutronium carapace.

Myri already had the initial estimates ready for him. They'd be at 65% operational capacity in three days, but that figure was based on yanking ships that hadn't been fully repaired and putting them in the theater in case they had to fight. It was going to take over a month to get every ship that was moderately damaged repaired, but it was going to take upwards of three

months to get some of them back on the board. There were 68 ships that were so damaged that entire portions of them would have to be rebuilt, the most notable one being the heavy cruiser *Jefferson*, which was going to have nearly a third of the ship rebuilt. It was just on the very edge of being salvageable, because its engines and computer core were only lightly damaged. Some, however, were just too far gone. Those would be decommissioned, cannibalized, and then recycled for their metal, but their names would live on, assigned to new ships coming off the docks and placed into mothball rather than activated immediately.

And they'd have enough ships for that. He switched over to the long-term ship building projections that Navii, Juma, and Dellin had ironed out before the battle, and by the time the Benga arrived, the KMS would be fielding a fleet of 3,780 ships. By then, they would have 10 command ships, 10 carriers, 165 tactical battleships, 223 battleships, 460 heavy cruisers, 796 cruisers, and 2,116 destroyers, following Navii's plan of making the destroyer the backbone of the fleet that would fight off the Benga. That was 2,116 particle beam projectors they could throw at the enemy. And those would just be the *finished* ships. By then, Dellin projected that he'd have 4,300 docks built inside Kosigi and capable of producing ships, so they could have that many ships in production at one time...and given they'd be facing 100,000 warships when the second wave of the Consortium arrived in five years, they may *need* them all producing warships.

The Karinnes weren't the only ones preparing to ramp up production. Every Confederate ruler was doing the same, and much of the summit was going to be about the simple logistics of them all managing to keep up with the demand. They'd all need raw materials, equipment, workers to build them, money to pay for them, and they were going to have to cooperate to make sure everyone got what they needed to produce ships for the war effort. Meya and Myra already had a long list of systems to explore on their desk, looking particularly for the heavy ores that made up the Neutronium alloy that most of them used for armor, as well as the extra ores the Karinnes used to produce compressed Neutronium carapaces. That was the strongest armor known to science...which didn't mean much to a Torsion weapon.

Three years would be enough time for Jenny and Eraen to invent their own version of the diffuser. When the time came, they'd be ready. If they

could protect themselves from Torsion weapons, then their compressed Neutronium armor *would* make a big difference, as well as their Teryon shields, the only shields known that could repel multiphasic weapons like phased ion and MPAC weaponry.

Amber waddled into his office and jumped up on his lap, purring in contentment as she laid down, and he absently put a hand on her soft fur, stroking it as he pondered the numbers. If they could get the people to man those ships, they'd be in pretty good shape. They were already opening the new recruiting offices, and Miaari's clan was slated to arrive on Karis next week, after the summit was over, and move into the Kirgan city of Jaxtra. The Kimdori and the Kizzik had met and talked it over, and the Kizzik were even now helping the Land Authority prepare Jaxtra for inhabitation, removing the plas shielding and installing the infrastructure links. They'd establish their training schools over there, where Kimdori from every clan would come for training, and the rest of her clan would be assigned to protecting Karis from outside threats...and they'd *need* them to handle the huge workload of screening so many new applicants. The Threxst clan would move to Karis and take over responsibility for it from the Kimdori point of view, and Jason would welcome them. Miaari's parents would be moving to Jaxtra as well, overseeing the training schools personally, and Miaari intended to move there herself and commute back and forth to work. Jason couldn't blame her. If his parents were alive, he'd live as close to them as he could himself.

"Don't worry, girl, Rann will be home soon," he murmured. "So, I meant to ask. How is it living with Shya?" he asked the vulpar absently. Amber gave an indelicate little grunt, which made him chuckle. "Just be patient. Shya's probably not used to vulpars. I'm sure you'll have her well trained in just a few more days." Amber gave a little yip, which made him laugh. "It's good to know you're not having any serious problems with Shya," he told her, patting her shoulders. "I woulda hated having to put her in a doghouse in the back yard." He moved on to a report giving projections on finishing the repairs in Karsa, fixing the damage caused by Consortium landers and mantis mecha that were shot down and crashed in the city. The worst of it was the stadium, which had taken a direct hit from a lander and had wiped out three sections of the seating on the press box side of the stadium. Bunvar had estimated it would take about two weeks to finish all

the repairs and get the stadium back in service...that meant that a few baseball games and batchi matches and one Shio *shiziki* game were going to be either cancelled or relocated to the Southside Sports Complex, which hosted the intercity batchi league and was much smaller, but could be converted to host baseball or *shiziki*. Jason sent back a text note to her interface telling Bunvar to put more resources on getting the Karsa Sports Complex back up and running, repaired in time for the Bombers' three game home stand against the Pinara City Blues, because of the morale boost the games provided to the city. He wanted the complex fully repaired in a week. Bunvar answered immediately telling him she'd have it fixed in five days, and as far as he was concerned, that matter was handled. Bunvar would simply pull more workers from other jobs and focus on the stadium, and she'd have it fixed in five days. Bunvar never made an estimate she couldn't back up.

He worked through several more reports, from repair estimates to civilian injury reports from falling debris to reserve asset status, mainly their large complement of Raptor fighters they used as reserve fighters for the militia, and after nearly two hours, he leaned back in his chair and rested a moment, petting the sleeping vulpar in his lap. After the summit, he reasoned, things would slow down. They still had two major things left to do, destroy the last of the Consortium warships at the nebula and deal with the Imxi, but after that, they'd shift from active war footing to preparation, getting ready for the coming of the Syndicate. Three years. Rann would be nine, Shya eight, and most of his other children would be eight as well. Bethany and Siyae would be two, coming up on their third birthday, as would Walter and Siyara. In fact, there'd most likely be quite a few kids in their terrible twos, since several girls on the strip either were pregnant or were trying to get pregnant, like Symone and Kumi, now that they'd fixed the problem that was making it very hard for the women on the strip to conceive.

He needed a break. He was almost burned out on reports, and he still had some 73 reports or communiqués to sort through before he cleared his inbox...and the silly thing was, he had *asked* for most of them. He gathered up a slightly irritated Amber and carried her downstairs, where the smell of spices wafted from the kitchen, and set himself down in front of his piano. He needed to calm his mind, relax a little, and nothing did that better than a

little musical piddling. Ayama poked her head in from the kitchen when she heard him start up with a little light and easy jazz, warming up the fingers and filling his mind not with status reports and schedules and estimations, but notes and melodies and harmonies, the language of musical expression. Jason moved from early 20th century jazz to several Enya pieces for the piano, *Watermark* and *Cusum Perficio* being his favorite, then delved into the pieces more suited for his skill level. He started with Chopin, then he played a couple of pieces from Mozart and Beethoven now that he was warmed up. He was back to jazz when Rann, Shya, Danelle, and Sora filed into the living room, playing some ragtime. *Maple Street Rag* and *The Entertainer* were piano pieces that would test the mettle of any player.

Hey kidlets, he called. So, how was the trip?

It was okay, Rann replied. They'd been on a trip with Maya to the Parri village to see the oye trees, both to give them exposure to the Parri and also to keep them busy and out from underfoot as things got put back to normal. They'd be back in school tomorrow.

You were gone a lot longer than I expected, he noted as Amber reared up and put her forepaws on Rann's armored leg, yipping demandingly to be picked up. You must have really had fun.

We stopped in the mountains and Miss Maya let us go inside this big cave by a really pretty waterfall, Shya answered as Rann very carefully collected up his vulpar in his armored arms.

I think I know where she took you. We just set that place aside as a nature preserve last week. So, she let you explore the cave?

We had our armor on, she said we couldn't get hurt or lost, Sora noted, patting the breastplate of her armor. The cave was really neat.

Armor...speaking of that, I think I'll talk to Aya about letting you go to school without it after the summit, he sent musingly.

Once I'm absolutely certain that every last vestige of Consortium presence in our galaxy is eradicated, all of you can go without your armor, Aya answered that open sending. So we're not there quite yet. It won't be much longer, but not yet.

Well, that answers that question, he sent with a grunt, and the expression on his face made all four of them giggle. But you four will be going without it for the summit. Did they fit you for your new formal robes?

I don't like formal robes, Rann complained.

They're not half as bad as the ones I wore in the palace, Shya countered, looking at Rann.

They finished them, and they'll be delivered tomorrow, Aya added. And we have rehearsals for the greetings tomorrow at 1830, so make sure Chirk gets you home on time.

Yes mommy, he sent cheekily, which made Danelle laugh.

Now you four go get your armor off. Sora, Ayama's going to take you to see your mother after dinner.

Good. That new arm looks so weird.

Well, when she's back home, it won't look any different from before, Jason told her.

I think it's kinda neat she'll have a cyber arm, Rann sent. It would be like being Cyborg from the Terra TV show. You know, being super-strong and having all those cool machines.

You're already a superhero, pips, Jason sent dryly. In the comic books, being a telepath and a TK was being a superhero.

Well, it doesn't seem as neat as the TV show. I mean, everyone here is a telepath.

It's not so super when everyone can do it, Danelle noted.

Jason laughed. That so reminds me of The Incredibles, he told them, then he started playing again. Now get upstairs and change, I don't want any scratches on my bench, he smiled.

After they changed, Rann came back down in a pair of shorts and a Faey boy's top, which only had a left sleeve that reached his elbow, leaving his left shoulder bare. He continued the family tradition, sitting on the bench beside Jason and getting yet another piano lesson. Rann had honest interest in the instrument, always so amazed that Jason could play it so well,

and just as Jason had with his mother, Rann had become quite determined to learn to play the piano himself.

Sometimes I don't think I'm ever gonna get this, he fretted as he tried for the fifth time to play a simple song, one of the starter songs.

You're better than I was at your age, son, Jason chuckled. *And besides, you'll get better and better as you grow up. You are gonna have something I never had, though*, he said, looking down at him.

What?

A full 88 key keyboard with keys sized to your hands, he replied. *That way you can try to play anything I can without your hands holding you back. I had to grow before I could play some of the songs your grandmother taught me.*

Oh, neat! When do I get it?

When I finish building it, he replied. *I'm just waiting on them to deliver the keys from the fabrication facility, and I can finish putting it together.*

Oh, that's what you've been working on down in the shop?

Yup, he replied. *We'll put it in your room. It has a biogenic link in it so you can listen to what you're playing without Shya complaining about it*, he sent privately with a sly look.

Oooh, I could play the songs in my head and play them over the speaker.

You could, but that's the cheating way to do it, Jason grinned. *I could do the same thing, but it's more fun to play with your hands, not with your mind. Not everything on Karis needs to have an interface control.*

Shya scooted up onto the bench beside Rann. She was wearing only a pair of panty-like swim bottoms, and she put her arm around her child-husband, almost possessively. The two of them had settled into what Jason might call domesticity, getting used to living in the same room, Shya adjusting to the life of *not* an Imperial Princess, and actually liking it more than living in the palace. Jason wasn't surprised. The life of an Imperial Princess was very restrictive, structured, with little chance for her to be a *kid*. It was hard to have friends, hard to play in open spaces, and she had

lessons after lessons after lessons about virtually everything, from how to stand to how to sit to how to eat to how to talk. There was a hell of a lot of baggage that came with that title, so much so that little girls all over the Imperium that dreamed of being an Imperial Princess would probably not like it very much once they found out what it was like where the cameras of *Courtwatch* didn't go. Shya got to be a little girl in Jason's house, got to play on the beach and squabble with her brothers and sisters-in-law and just *be*. That was something that was hard to do when the weight of the entire Imperium was pressing down on her shoulders.

Jason did not envy Sirri one tiny little bit. He actually felt sorry for her.

Sometimes I think you cheat, Daddy Jason, she sent seriously as she watched his fingers.

What do you mean?

I mean it doesn't seem possible that it can make the sounds you make it make with just ten fingers. You use your talent, don't you?

Jason laughed. *You don't know how many years I had to practice to make it sound like this, pips,* he replied. *I've been sitting at a piano since before I was Rann's age.*

I do like it, she sent seriously, looking at the keys as Jason played Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.

If you want to learn, I'll teach you, Jason offered. *But it takes some dedication. You won't get really good at it for a while.*

I'll live here the rest of my life, she replied calmly.

Jason chuckled. *Not in my house you're not,* he smiled over at her. *You and Rann will move into your own house when you grow up.*

I mean on Karis, she elaborated.

Since Rann's going to be the next Grand Duke, you'd better be living on Karis, he sent lightly. *You two remember that you're staying over at Mommy Dahnai's house tomorrow night.*

That should be fun, I really like Sirri and Maer, Rann sent eagerly.

After entertaining the kids at the piano a while longer, Jason got a visit from the lead builders from Red Horn Construction. He discussed his house potentially running out of bedrooms, and they sat down with a panel and sketched out some ideas to expand the house without causing any major construction around the strip. Adding another floor was the easiest way to go about it, but they could also expand the house some 14 *shakra* towards the beach without interfering with any other house or building, just shortening the beachside deck a little. That would require them to all but rebuild the entire house, so he instead discussed adding another floor, and moving his bedroom and office up there then renovating the second floor to convert his current office and bedroom into bedrooms for the kids. That would take a little doing, since they'd have to build his office with all the security protocols, but it would also let them build a third-floor balcony that would open into the bedroom. They could put two more bedrooms up there of a decent size, since his office and bedroom did take up a lot of room, but the idea of building a little suite style mini-apartment for Rann and Shya appealed to him, which they could then convert into double bedrooms for the twins when Rann and Shya moved out.

The architects that came to talk to him drew up a design, and Jason rather liked it. The third floor of the house would have two major divisions. The corner of the house closest to Tim and Symone's house would have their bedroom, with his home office on the other corner and the middle taken up by a luxurious master bathroom, the armory, and a small utility room for holding some equipment needed for the security of the office. The master bathroom would open to both the bedroom and the office, a different layout than his current one, but there would also be a dedicated hallway between the bedroom and the office that would run parallel to the main hallway coming up from the stairs. On the front side of the house, facing inland, would be a large two room suite that would belong to Rann and Shya. It would be laid out as a mirror of the master bedroom and office, requiring them to go through the bathroom or down the hallway to move from their living room to their bedroom, but that was so they could convert the living room to a second bedroom when Siyae and Bethany took over the suite after Rann and Shya moved out. The living room would be just that, laid out as a living space, but since it was a fairly large room, they could put a guest in there as an emergency guest bedroom if they really, really had to...and Rann and Shya could host a slumber party in that room easily. It

would give the kids a little more space for their things, and since Rann *was* the Heir Apparent, he did deserve a tiny bit of luxury. That suite would be it.

“How long would it take?” Jason asked as they generated some hard plans using an interface, one of the architects literally transplanting the plans in his mind’s eye into the panel using command thought.

“Something this easy? Four days, and that’s mainly because of the extra precautions we have to take with the security when we build your office,” he replied. “You can take a vacation, and when you come back, your house is finished. You just call us and let us know when you want it done, and it’ll get done. We’ll finalize the plans and get with Miaari about the security of the home office, get everything worked out, and at the soonest, we could be ready to start in five days or so. I think we’d better also talk to Captain Aya and see if she wants any upgrades for the office,” he grunted, scratching his temple. “Since we’ll be building it from the foundation, we could make any changes they want.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” he agreed. “She’s over in her office in the barracks. Lemme warn her you’re coming.” *Aya.*

Yes, your Grace?

I’m sending a couple of Makati from Red Horn over to you. They’re working out the plans to add a floor to the house, and they want to consult with you on the security for the new office.

And your bedroom, she added. Send them over, I’m in my office.

“She’s in her office, guys, any guard can direct you there,” he said, then he shook the taller Makati’s hand. “Send me the finished plans and an illustration of how it’ll look when it’s done so I can show to Jys, will ya?”

“We surely will, your Grace,” he replied. “And like I said. You call us and tell us when to start, and four days later, we’ll be finished.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said with a mild smile.

After the Makati left, he stood at the windows in the dining room and looked out over the ocean. He had never regretted one second living on the beach, by the sea, and while it was a little too hot for his tastes here, the gentle ocean breezes never failed to cool the sub-tropical air and soothe his

spirits. The gentle rushing sound of the waves of the beach were blocked by the armored glass, but he could hear them deep inside as they lapped at the shore...almost as if he could hear them in his soul.

This was his planet. This was his *home*. And at times like this, he could feel it deep in his soul.

He had so much work to do, he could almost hear the desk upstairs rattling on the floor to get his attention and bring him back to being a responsible and dutiful Grand Duke.

Work...fuck work. He headed for the deck door, fully intent on taking a long, relaxing, invigorating swim in the ocean.

Daira, 15 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 7 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 15 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

At least Dahnai wasn't being a royal bitch about propriety.

Jason, his family, Saelle, Brood Queen Sk'Vrae, and Overseer Brayrak Kruu stood on the wharf by the strip watching the Marine Corvette *Honor* land softly in the choppy surf, stirred up by a storm a few *kathra* offshore, its dark clouds forming a striking backdrop for the corvette as it slowed to a stop with the hatch right by the dock. The pilot put the engines in position-holding as two guards attached the mooring cables, self-annealing anchors that attached to the hull and were tied to hawsers on the wharf. Dahnai had expressed a desire to keep things *informal*, which meant that she'd probably be coming out of the corvette in a bikini. Even though she was here to work, she never treated her visits to the strip as anything other than a chance to let her hair down for a while. Jason himself was being just as casual, wearing a pair of khaki shorts, a tank top, and no shoes, while Sk'Vrae wore a simple kilt-like wrap, and Brayrak was in a functional and

rather plain Moridon robe of soft blue, a striking color compared to his dark red skin. He *had*, however, polished his horns for the meeting.

The hatched opened, and Dahnai stepped out after two of her guards, both in gleaming white, brand new Crusader armor. Dahnai wasn't in a bikini, but she was in a pair of rather skimpy shorts and wearing a very Terran tee shirt. Maer and Sirri were just behind her, Maer wearing only a half-shirt and a pair of soft boots, showing off his lower half, while Sirri wore only a pair of swim bottoms and Terran flip-flops, showing off her top half...which was normal for Faey children. Kellin was herding them out, in a thigh-length casual robe that was somewhat lazily belted at the waist.

Jason stepped up and kissed Dahnai on the lips, not very chastely, then she moved down the line to greet Jyslin, Saelle, Tim, and Symone while Jason picked up Sirri and hugged her. "Unf, you get bigger and bigger every time I see you, pippy," he told her as she kissed him on the cheek. "How are you?"

"I've been okay. Is everyone okay after all the big war?"

"Mostly. Zora, Sora's mommy, she's still in the hospital, but she'll be home in a couple of days."

"What happened?"

"She lost her arm, and they're giving her a new one. She'll be just fine, and I'll tell her you asked about her."

"Kay. Ranny!" she said happily, hugging him once he put her down.

Maer stepped up and shook his hand, quite soberly, then he laughed and gave him a hug. "I'm glad you're okay, Uncle Jason," he said.

"We're all glad we're okay too, Maer," Jason smiled. "Ready for a few days of vacation while your mother arm-wrestles with the rest of the Confederation?"

"I'm not *arm-wrestling*," Dahnai protested as she hugged Saelle, then she stepped up to Sk'Vrae and offered her hand. "Brood Queen, you look very well."

"Life is quiet and refreshing on Karis, when they are not under siege, your Imperial Majesty," the large Urumi replied blandly, taking Dahnai's

hand in greeting.

“I think we can go under council rules when I’m wearing this, Sk’Vrae,” she said with a disarming smile, plucking at her tee shirt. “Overseer! I’m surprised to see you here, but it’s a good surprise,” she said, taking the hand of the almost impossibly tall Moridon. At a touch over nine feet tall, Dahnai barely came up to his chest.

“Organizing some financial agreements with the Karinnes, and Jason was kind enough to allow me to stay over for the summit,” he replied with a gentle expression.

“Are they buying out the banks, Brayrak?”

He chuckled. “Actually, they have authorized us to open branch institutions on Karis,” he replied.

“Just ironing out the details,” Jason said as he clasped hands with Kellin. “It’s great to see you, Kellin. How has palace life been?”

“Same old, same old, as the Terrans say,” he smiled earnestly, clapping Jason on the shoulder. “We saw the debris fields before we made our landing vector.”

“Yeah, there’s more than we estimated, and it’s spread out over such a large area, we’re not done sweeping the space around the planet yet,” he replied. “We’re going to be recycling most of it. Consortium armor can be melted down and recast without ruining its integrity. That scrap’s going to be the armor on some Confederate ships in a few months. May it protect them far better than it protected its former owner,” he said with a grim kind of smile. “The shocked titanium they use for their internal superstructure, we can use that too.”

“You’re not here to talk business, boys,” Dahnai said chidingly.

“Oh yes we are,” Jason said, giving her a direct look.

“*Kellin* isn’t,” she corrected with a smile.

“And what is on the agenda, your Majesty?” Brayrak asked.

“Fighting with *him*,” she replied, pointing at Jason.

“We’ve already done most of the fighting. We’re just going to finalize the language that splits the Karinnes from the Imperium,” Jason retorted. “We hope to do the official signing at the start of the summit, in front of the entire Confederation.”

“Symbolic,” Brayrak nodded.

“More like a very direct point,” Jason replied. “The other members have to trust us, Brayrak, so a little symbolism is going to be needed here.”

“I agree, and I also agree with your vision, Jason,” the tall Moridon stated. “I see unparalleled profit for *all* parties if your idea for Stargate hubs is agreed upon.”

“Which naturally parlays into more profit for the Moridon,” Dahnai chuckled.

“We are merely the facilitators and the accountants, your Majesty,” he said with a slight smile. “And for her Majesty’s future reference, a branch of the First Bank of Moridon will be constructed three city blocks from the strip fence, for the convenience of his Grace and his neighbors,” he said grandly. “Might you consider opening an account with them, so you have easy access to financial experts for your vacations?”

“They certainly move fast,” Dahnai grunted to Jason, who chuckled.

“That is the official bank of the House Karinne,” he replied easily. “But there’s going to be six different banks with branches here, to serve the citizens. The First Bank of Moridon isn’t the best bank when it comes to a restaurant owner or a subway mechanic,” he smiled.

“And that is why we have many different institutions that focus on the needs of many people,” Brayrak declared in his calm voice. “The First Bank is a bank for sovereign entities, noble houses, large institutions, and highly esteemed personal account holders, where Moridon Municipal Savings would be ideal for the common man.”

“Hell, I don’t mind. We have our own banks here, but it never hurts to have competition, even when you’re competing against yourself,” Jason shrugged. “Now let’s get off the dock and get some barbecue while your transport lands with your staff and gear. Surin’s been slaving over the grill for two hours.”

“Oh *hell* yes,” Dahnai said eagerly, even using the English word for *hell*. That startled Jason a little; it was the first time he’d ever heard her utter a word in English. And naturally it was a swear word.

Dahnai’s staff set up her guest house as her guards worked with Aya to secure the strip, while they all ate barbecue at the picnic table on the deck. They’d had to get a special chair for Brayrak, and Sk’Vrae creeped Tim out a little by eating the pork ribs bones and all, making a crunching sound as she chewed them up. Jason had to tell the story of the battle from his point of view, and Saelle, Evin again at her side after he got off the transport, told the story of the defense of the Shimmer Dome, which Min and Sheleese elaborated when they joined them after getting off duty. Ilia told the story of the fight around Kosigi when she got there, finding it almost funny that the short Dellin almost had to be held back to keep from joining the fight at the doors and in the upper corridors as bug infantry entered through one of the corvette bays and tried to establish a foothold. They’d never expected him to be so eager to fight. Sk’Vrae added to it with missives from her command staff and the captain of one of the Urumi flagships, which had been heavily damaged and was being repaired up in Kosigi. “Oddly, the ship of the KMS that bears my name came out of the battle with only minor damage,” she noted. “I find that a good omen.”

“The bugs focused mainly on the bigger ships, I guess they thought that they’d get more usable tech out of them than a destroyer,” Jason grunted as he picked up an ear of corn fresh off the grill. “It was hairy there right before the wormhole exploded. They’d massed up a huge force that we were in no position to do anything about, and I think they were about to commit them. Then the wormhole solved all our problems,” he said with a dark chuckle.

“I remember the viddy of that,” Brayrak nodded. “That explosion looked truly ghastly. I’m amazed there was no collateral damage.”

“It was a Torsion explosion, Overseer. If you’re not familiar with spatial physics, an explosion based on a spatial distortion dissipates quickly as it travels from its origin, because the energy involved is a special form of what you’d call higher dimensional kinetic energy trying to return to its natural state in the upper dimensions,” he explained, picking up the butter knife. “It escapes out of our physical world quickly as it travels, and the

faster it travels in our three dimensions, the faster it escapes into the upper dimensions of hyperspace. That kind of energy doesn't behave like energy in the manner in which you're familiar, it has its own special rules. If that hadn't have been a Torsion-based explosion, the shockwave would have wiped out a huge chunk of *our* fleet as well, devastated the surface of Kosigi, and probably brought down the planetary shield. But lucky for us, it dissipated about twenty thousand Moridon *kurkrat* from the wormhole's location."

"Then we can all thank our gods for small favors," he said, opening his mouth and displaying those creepy black teeth, complete with fangs, which sank into a piece of chicken.

To his surprise, Yila Trefani strolled up to the table, staring hungrily at the large platter of barbecued chicken. Anya had gotten her hooked on chicken. "Your Imperial Majesty, Overseer, your Majesty, your Grace," she said, nodding to each of them. Yila was wearing a poncho-like upper garment that ended at her ribs, something he'd seen her wear before—just not that *particular* garment—and Yila being Yila, she had nothing else on but boots. "I didn't realize you'd have arrived by now."

"Grand Duchess Trefani," Sk'Vrae replied. "I am surprised to see you here."

"I have right of free passage to and from Karis, your Majesty," she replied mildly. "I came to discuss certain matters with Kumi and the Overseer, but I didn't realize you'd be grilling."

"Such a liar," Jason noted dryly. "Grab a seat, but if you touch those chicken legs, you die," he warned, which made Sirri and Maer laugh.

"You allow this scoundrel free run of your planet, Jason?" Sk'Vrae asked.

Jason laughed. "Oh, I keep a close eye on her, Sk'Vrae," he replied with a sly sideways look.

"I am not a *scoundrel*. I'm a pirate," Yila corrected primly as she reached for the platter of chicken. She knew the rules in Jason's house, and that was she wasn't going to be served at a barbecue. If she wanted it, she got it herself. "Jason says so himself."

After a long and enjoyable lunch, Jason and Dahnai went into the house and up into his office. Dahnai moved to pull her tee shirt off, but Jason stopped her with a hand as he passed by. “Flashing your tits is not going to improve your bargaining position, woman,” he told her, which made her laugh.

“Then why stop me? And why are we talking?” she asked as Jason sat at his desk, then activated the security for the room.

“Shya and Dera aren’t the only listeners on Karis,” he said bluntly. “And my office security won’t stop talent.”

“Ah, so, the vaunted Karinne technology still hasn’t broken the telepathy barrier,” she said with a playful smile as she sat down in front of his desk.

“Give us a few years,” he replied dryly, which made her giggle almost like a schoolgirl. He brought up a 2D hologram between them, nothing but text on a white background. “Alright, here’s what we’ve agreed to so far. Let’s go over that, then work on the last few points.”

For nearly six hours, they worked out the last few points of the agreement, as both of them lamented the fact that their families were playing on the beach, swimming, and having an otherwise wonderful time without them. Dahnai constantly tried to steer the negotiations to keep a hold over the Karinnes, but Jason shut her down every single time. The only concession Jason made in that regard was that he agreed that the Karinnes would still have a place in the *Siann*, but *only* as a neutral observer, much as the Moridon and the Zyagya were neutral observers in the Confederate Council. Saelle would serve as the emissary from the Karinnes in the *Siann* but would have no legal rights or powers within it. She was there to observe, nothing more, nothing less. Jason took it further by making it clear in the treaty that the House of Karinne would *not* be given Highborn status when the child of Rann and Shya eventually took the throne of Karinne, and would *not* become a member of the Highborn Council.

At 20:32, Jason finished writing the last version of the treaty and then sent it to the legal teams, both his and Dahnai’s, who would read it and search for any problems. The treaty was quite specific and very clear in its language that made the Karinnes an independent entity that did not answer

to Dahnai, but still had strong ties to the Imperium and many treaties that tied them together both economically and militarily. The Karinnes would respond with military force if the House of Merrane came under attack by another house and would answer a general call to arms issued by the Empress. The Karinnes would maintain all current trade treaties within the Imperium with the assorted houses, which included the Merranes, the Suralles, and the Trefanis. On the other hand, the Karinnes would have the right to reject the call to arms if the Imperium was going to war with an outside entity with which they had a separate peace treaty, and in that case, the Karinnes would declare neutral status and help neither side...unless such an act violated a mutual defense treaty the Karinnes held with another government. That bit of language was in there so the Karinnes could step between Dahnai and some other government and threaten war with *both* of them if they didn't stop being silly. The agreement made it clear that no treaty the Karinnes held with the Imperium or the Merranes could supersede binding treaties held with other governments, and in the situation where separate agreements the Karinnes made conflicted, the Karinnes had the right to decide what to do in that situation. The Karinnes would honor all treaties and agreements with both governments and individual entities within the Imperium, from the farms of Exile to the trade agreements with the Trefanis and the Merranes to the administration of the four Urumi systems currently held by the Imperium. Also in the agreement was the right of the Merranes to hold an island that Dahnai had not yet chosen as sovereign Merrane territory on Karis to serve as a vacation house for the Empress, the one place she could go to have complete privacy and be able to truly relax. The agreement also spelled out Raisha's custody and status, giving both Jason and Dahnai rights and responsibilities concerning her upbringing. She would retain the title of Imperial Princess until such time that she decided what she wanted to do, and it spelled out the duties and responsibilities of both the Merranes and the Karinnes to keep Raisha and Miyai completely safe. Saelle was a part of that, but it also included the right of the Karinnes to have their *own* security and guards within the palace whose sole and complete responsibility was the protection of Raisha, Miyai, Saelle, and Evin when they were living there. That security, comprised of both a detachment of Imperial Guard and security specialists from Karis—mainly Kimdori—would move with Saelle and her family as they moved back and forth between Karis and Draconis.

And the most clear and binding language of all stipulated that the Imperium recognized Karis as the sovereign territory of the Karinnes, and Terra as an independent, self-governed system granted protectorate status within the Imperium. It also made it abundantly clear that the Karinnes were an independent and sovereign governmental entity that answered to *no one*.

“I figure they’ll have their answers back in the morning,” Jason said with a yawn, then he stretched in his chair. Dahnai had her feet up on his desk, playing with a few memory sticks by making them float in spiraling patterns in the air, maybe showing off a tiny bit. Dahnai *was* a fairly strong and very skilled telekinetic, and on Karis, she could show that off a little. “Why is it that whenever I’m with you, I’m almost never on my feet?”

“I see that as a good thing,” Dahnai winked. “So, now that you’ve thoroughly humiliated me in that agreement, I think it’s about time you started making it up to me.”

“Humiliate, pfft,” he snorted. “I know you’re having the Merrane corps start moving. You think the others are gonna go for it, so you’re getting your house corps in position to start making deals. And they’d never go for it if we were part of the Imperium.”

“I know, I know,” she sighed. “But I’m an *Empress*, babe, I don’t like giving *anything* up. Especially not an entire noble house led by my *amu dorai*.”

“You can’t order me around anymore, such a shame,” he said blandly.

“I never really could in the first place,” she admitted with a sly smile. “But that’s what makes you so fucking irresistible. Faey women can’t resist a man who says no.”

“Don’t I know it, saying no to a Faey is what got me here,” he chuckled as he stood up. “Alright, we’ve suffered in here enough. Let’s go out and enjoy the sunset, enjoy a nice dinner, then just relax the rest of the night. Oh, and Jyslin’s spending the night over at your house,” he added absently.

“She knows she has to give up the bed when I’m here,” Dahnai chuckled as she stood up herself. “My staff should have brought my formal robes over; I’m just going to dress over here in the morning so we can start greeting the others.”

His comm beeped, then Shey's face appeared on a holo on the wall. "Sorry to disturb you, your Grace, your Imperial Majesty, but you wanted to be told when the task force was ready to depart for Veruta Prime."

"I take it that the Verutans finally got back to us?"

She nodded. "The *Arabax* is going to tow the Grand Emperor's personal ship back to Karis. The Verutans want us there early, I guess so they can try to scan the ships while they're in orbit," she said with a light smile.

"Emperor Shakizarr intends to stay on his ship for the duration of the conference and commute back and forth to the meetings. All necessary security precautions are being set up to defend the Grand Emperor's ship in orbit and escort his transport up and down."

"That just frees up another suite for someone else. Tell Secretary Yeri and let her juggle the accommodations," he ordered.

"Already did, your Grace," she replied. "The task force will consist of twelve ships, led by the *Arabax*. Myri felt that the Grand Emperor would be insulted if a ship captain was in command of the task force, so she dispatched Admiral Palla to the *Arabax* as a diplomatic officer. Captain Sevi will command, but Admiral Palla will do the talking," she said.

"Sounds good," Jason said absently, watching Dahnai tousle her bronze hair idly, twirling that gorgeous hair around her index finger in little loops as she stared at the holo of the agreement, which had been shunted over to the side wall. "Anything else?"

"Given how hard you're staring at the Empress, I'm somewhat surprised that her Imperial Majesty is still in her clothes," she said cheekily. Dahnai gave a double-take at Shey, then burst out laughing.

"Shey. What did I tell you about being bad?"

"To make it as entertaining as possible, your Grace," she replied with a straight face.

"That made *me* laugh," Dahnai said with a grin.

"Yeah yeah yeah, if there's nothing else that matters, get off my holo, woman."

“Of course, your Grace. At once, your Grace,” she said with aplomb. Her face then vanished as the holo image winked out.

“Well, you certainly have very brave officers on your comm stations,” Dahnai grinned.

“Sometimes I wonder why Shey’s still there,” he grunted.

“Because she *does* make it entertaining,” she winked. “And if you were indeed staring at me that hard, well, I think it’s time for me to flash my tits. Give you more to see,” she said with a sultry smile as she reached for the tail of her tee shirt.

“Save it for the beach,” he told her, taking her hand.

Raista, 16 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 8 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 16 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Landing Pad R-16B (Restricted Access Pad), Karsa, Karis

Jason had to yawn a little bit.

Dahnai kept him up almost all night. As was usual for her, the first night they were together after the long separations was...energetic. Dahnai was a beast in bed, and she unleashed that primal energy on him last night. The fact that it was fairly warm, and he was in his formal robes also wasn’t helping his sleepy state. This was the first day of the summit, and Jason would be greeting every ruler at seven different landing sites that were close to their hotel suites. They would be given time to settle in and relax a little, then they’d be given guided tours of Kosigi and several other sites on Karis over the rest of the day. Yeri had everything all set up, all her people in place, and now it was just a matter of executing the plan. And this was the first step of what was going to be a very long four or five days, depending on how things went. Jason, Jyslin, Rann, Yeri, and Miaari were standing in a line to formally greet Speaker Magran and the Grand Master, who had deigned to travel to Karis personally, probably the only chance he’d ever

have in his life to come to Karis given his advanced age. They were the first rulers to arrive since Sk'Vrae and Dahnai had messed up the schedule a little bit by arriving early. Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were in Karsa, Dahnai shopping and Sk'Vrae receiving a tour of some of the ruins of the original Karsa on the southwest side of the city that the Kimdori had left alone, as a reminder of the past. It wasn't their place to greet the others in this fashion, as the host of the summit, that was Jason's responsibility. Behind the receiving line was an honor guard of Karinne Army, Navy, and Marine units, and Kyva was in her Gladiator, standing at the far end as both part of the honor guard and as a very real and powerful defense in case something truly crazy happened and they were attacked. Kyva's rig was freshly painted, with the emblem of the Ducal Medal of the Champion on one shoulder guard and the nude Faey wielding a sword relief that was the graphic of the KBB on the other. Those two images warned anyone who knew Karinne heraldry that the woman in that Gladiator was one of the most deadly warriors in the entire *galaxy*.

"A little sleepy, are we Jason?" Miaari asked lightly as he yawned again.

"I know where you live, woman," he warned, which made Jyslin laugh. He pulled at the collar of his interior wrap again, being reminded of how heavy formal robes were with their many layers and thick, heavy outer garment, causing Jyslin to step in front of him and help him straighten out his lapels and collar. She finished just as their first guests became visible, a formation of a Colonial dropship being escorted by ten Wolf fighters and a Naval combat corvette, the corvette *Broadsword*. The Colonies utilized spatial engines, as did every empire in the sector, but theirs was a slightly obsolete design by Faey standards that made Jason's skin crawl a little from spatial flux as the long, sleek silver shuttle landed on skids just in front of them. After a moment, the hatch opened, and ten Colonists wearing ancient, archaic uniforms of the Grand Master's Guard filed out and drew sabers, then raised them in salute as a hoverchair appeared in the hatch. The Grand Master himself was pushed out of the hatch by Magran, and dear God did the Grand Master look *old*. He was venerable even by Colonist standards, having just celebrated his 224th birthday last month. His gray skin was wrinkled, dotted with dark red age spots, and his face was gaunt, but his black eyes were still lively and darkly luminous. He was covered in a soft

blue blanket that rested in his lap, and above it he wore the white and red robes of the Grand Master. The honor guard arrayed behind the Grand Duke snapped to attention and saluted, and Jason stepped up and bowed as Magran pushed his ancient ruler down the corridor formed by the guard. He then took the emaciated, slightly palsied hand that was offered to him. "It's very good to see you again, Grand Master," he said with honest warmth. "I'm humbled that you would attend."

"This is far too important a matter to simply receive Magran's reports, though Magran's reports are always thorough and impeccably informative," he replied in a surprisingly strong voice. "I shall be attending the meetings personally. I have more than enough strength for a few days of activity."

"We'll make sure you have complete comfort during your stay here, Grand Master," he said earnestly, stepping back. "I'd like to present my wife, Jyslin, and my son, Rann," he said as they stepped up.

"Ah, you are even lovelier than the last time we met in person, Duchess," he smiled as he took Jyslin's hand.

"It's good to see you again, Grand Master," she replied in a vibrant voice. "Rann," Jyslin urged.

Rann stepped up and bowed, something he had to practice almost every day. "It's an honor to meet you, Grand Master," he said in a voice that was only *slightly* nervous.

The wizened old Colonist chuckled. "And it's very good to meet you too, Duke Rann," he replied in a gentle voice. "Your parents must be very proud of you."

Rann blushed a little but said nothing.

"May I present Secretary Yeri Karinne of the Department of State, and Miaari Thresxt, the Kimdori ambassador to the House of Karinne."

"It's good to meet you face to face, Madam Secretary," the Grand Master smiled as he took her hand.

"I'm honored, truly honored to meet you, your Eminence," she replied smoothly. "And your presence here will supply suitable weight to these proceedings. If you are here in person to attend, then the others will take them with the seriousness they require."

“Yes, I hoped to make that point, Secretary Yeri,” he said with light candor. “I would be honored to accept the Kimdori greeting, Handmaiden,” he said, looking at Miaari.

“I would be honored to give it, Grand Master,” she replied in her steady voice. She stepped up and leaned down, then put her hand on the side of the old Colonist’s neck. He reached up and mirrored the gesture, smiling as he patted her furry neck and shoulder.

“Welcome to Karis, Speaker Magran, it’s good to see you again,” Jason nodded. Colonial etiquette was fairly clear and strict when the Grand Master was concerned, which required Magran to take a fully silent and subservient position. He was the Speaker, he led the Colonial Council, but when he was with the Grand Master, Magran was little more than his servant...but that was the highest position of honor a Colonist could attain outside of becoming the Grand Master himself. Jason would address only the Grand Master in matters of importance unless the Grand Master brought Magran into the conversation, but since he knew Magran, he did have the option to at least say hello without causing an incident.

“It’s good to be here, your Grace,” he replied as he put his hands on the back of the Grand Master’s hoverchair.

“At your convenience, Grand Master, Secretary Yeri will escort you to your rooms.”

“That would be best, your Grace. For a man my age, even the short trip to Karis was a long and tiring one. I would like to rest a bit, but I will be most eager to tour Kosigi.”

Jason smiled and motioned with a hand. “If you would follow Secretary Yeri, she will escort your retinue to your quarters.”

Yeri stepped up and bowed again. “If you and your retinue would follow me please, your Eminence, we’ll get you where you can take a rest as quickly as is suitable for you.”

He nodded, and his honor guard sheathed their sabers and took up a formation around his chair. The others stepped back and bowed again as they started to move, the honor guard snapping to attention and saluting. Jason and Jyslin stayed in place until the procession disappeared into the

Karsa Grand Hotel, then Jason sighed and nodded over his shoulder. The honor guard finished their salute, then they were put at ease.

“One down, three hundred million to go,” Jason grunted, which made Miaari chuckle.

“No, only eleven,” Miaari corrected. “The members of the Confederate Council not yet here, the Leader Hraga of the Zyagya, the Grand Emperor Shakizarr of the Veruta, the High Archon Gau of the Haumda, and High Councilor Kreel from the Grimja Union.”

“I can’t believe the Grimja asked to attend,” Jason grunted. “They have their own problems right now.”

“After selling them those replicators, I think the rulers of the Grimja would give you anything you wanted, Jason,” she chuckled dryly.

“Why do they call the Haumda leader that?” Rann asked. “Isn’t he an emperor, like Dahnai?”

“He is, kitling,” Miaari answered with a nod. “It’s a very old Haumda tradition to call him the High Archon instead of Emperor, dating back to the time when the Haumda believed that the Emperor was the direct agent of their gods.”

“Oh, kinda like how the Urumi believe that their gods told them that Queen Sk’Vrae was the queen,” he replied.

“He does learn quickly,” Miaari said with a smile to Jason. “And not Sk’Vrae herself, Rann, but her family. The Urumi Brood Queens rule through what we call divine providence.”

“I remember that term from the lessons Miss Aya gave me,” he said, looking up at Miaari.

“Then Aya has taught you well, young friend,” she replied, reaching down and patting the shoulder of Rann’s formal robes.

That was the first of what Jason almost felt was a blur of formal greetings. Each empire had its own rules and quirks which changed each ceremony. Some were intimate and somewhat informal, such as the greeting of Hraga, Leader of the Zyagya. The Zyagya didn’t hold water to ceremonial displays of military prowess, so there was no honor guard to

greet him when he got off a Karinne dropship, just Jason, Jyslin, Rann, and Yeri. Grran of the Jobodi, on the other hand, required a parade of 10,000 soldiers in dress uniforms and a formation of 100 Gladiators to satisfy the Jobodi customs, of a ruler showing another ruler the might of his army. It was purely ceremonial since Grran was actually pretty good friends with Jason, but this was a formal situation, so all the formal customs had to be observed. And Grran had honestly enjoyed the parade; Jobodi loved parades. Yeri had thoroughly researched the customs of each visitor and had prepared a proper welcoming ceremony, and after the ceremony, they were taken to their quarters or got back on the dropship and returned to their own ship, as was the case of Assaba, who had landed his yacht in the harbor and would stay there for the duration of the summit.

The quirkiest ceremony had to be the Grimja one. Grimja were a very informal, rough-and-tumble lot, almost chaotic in their behavior, for theirs was a race that was a little irreverent. In Grimja society, it was what someone *did* that mattered, not some fancy title in front of their name, and they showed little decorum or respect to anyone they didn't personally know. They didn't show much decorum even in situations where it was required, were often almost shockingly direct, honest, and outspoken, but those who knew the Grimja understood this and didn't hold it against them *too* much. Grimja just weren't that big on pomp and circumstance, and found others trying to impress them with pomp and circumstance to be suspicious, if not a bit silly...and that was why the Grimja and the Prakarikai were so much at each other's throats, since the Prakarikai took ceremony to the ultimate level and got *really* offended when others didn't treat them with the respect they felt they deserved. High Councilor Kreel ambled off the KMS dropship wearing a pair of loose-fitting gray knicker style pants and a sleeveless black shirt with no adornments, *definitely* not the kind of clothes that any other ruler had worn. He grinned broadly, taking Jason's hand and shaking it with surprising strength, showing off his slightly bucked front teeth that were significantly longer than the others in his mouth. Kreel *was* almost weirdly cute in a chinchilla kind of way, with dusky gray fur, large round ears poking out of an unruly head of black hair, a black button nose, and whiskers to each side of his short muzzle. "It's nice to finally meet ya face to face, Jason," he said in pretty good Faey. "Oh, and this must be Jyslin! You're quite a handsome young lady even to us Grimja, Jyslin," he said, shaking her hand and making her wince at his grip.

“That’s so nice of you to say, High Councilor,” she replied.

“Kreel, Jyslin, Kreel! Grimja aren’t that big on silly titles,” he replied energetically. “You don’t call a guy dressed like *this* High Councilor,” he added with a wink. “By the way, Jason, you really saved our butts with that replicator agreement,” he added, looking back over at him. “By Imjirki’s whiskers, this must be Rann! My, what an impressive cubling!” he said with a start, as if he just noticed Rann. Rann looked a little scattered when Kreel swooped down and picked him up, then bounced him a few times in his arms. “Nice and sturdy, you’re going to be a fine man, Rann!” he said, giving him an earnest smile. “So, you bored with all these silly greetings yet?” he asked, giving Rann a smile.

What do I do? Rann sent almost desperately.

Tell the truth, Jason replied easily.

“A little,” Rann said. “I’m not used to it really.”

“Just a warning, little pup, I have talent too, so don’t say anything naughty about me where you don’t think I can hear it,” he grinned and winked slyly. Rann blushed, then he gave a helpless little laugh.

“Somehow I’m just not surprised,” Jyslin laughed.

“I worked for ten years in a Union Textiles branch office in Dracora before I went into politics,” he told them. “Anyway, enough of this standing around. Let’s go get a beer and talk a bit before you have to go impress the next stuffed robe waiting his turn to land,” Kreel announced.

Jason laughed. “How about you drink the beer, I’ll drink some coffee, and there’s a very good bar just a block from here.”

“Then what are we standing around here for? There’s beer to be drunk and songs to be sung! Let’s get a move on!” he boomed, turning and walking towards the edge of the pad with Rann still in his arms.

And *that* was a typical Grimja.

The last meeting of the day was the Grand Emperor Shakizarr, who *did* take ceremony seriously. Jason met him with a large honor guard and alone, since it was Verutan tradition for a ruler to meet a ruler alone with their armies at their backs. If Jason brought his wife and son, it would be an

insult to Verutan traditions. The Grand Emperor padded off his personal transport with his own guard, who assembled into ranks behind him until nearly 200 Verutans in gleaming gold breastplates were arrayed. Jason just had to admire Shakizarr from a physical standpoint. He was seven feet tall and *very* muscular, with the same green fur with black stripes as all Verutans, and he wore a simple vest with gold thread woven into the borders, the symbol of the Verutan Empire embroidered on the breast, and slightly baggy black cloth pants with no shoes. Shakizarr was one of the rare male Verutans with hair, a head full of black hair that was thick and poofy. Most Verutan males were “bald” as a Terran would think of it, with only fur on their heads. It was usually a trait of femininity for a Verutan to have hair, so male Verutans who had hair usually kept it shaved to the same length as their fur and dyed most of it green to give the appearance of fur. But *nobody* was going to accuse the Grand Emperor of being girly, so he wore his hair long almost as a badge of honor. The Grand Emperor did take notice of Jason’s glance at his black locks, and he chuckled and smiled, showing off some impressive fangs.

“I’m trying to change that old custom,” he admitted candidly, speaking flawless Faey. Shakizarr would speak the language of his host and would expect those visiting him to speak Verutan. That was an old Verutan custom. “If the Grand Emperor isn’t afraid to display the fact that he has hair, then other Verutan males shouldn’t either. But it will take a while. Verutans are very attached to their traditions,” he chuckled, then he offered his hand. “The Grand Emperor speaks with the voice of all Veruta, and accepts the invitation offered to visit Karis.”

“The Grand Duke Karinne speaks with the voice of all Karinne, and bids the Grand Emperor Shakizarr welcome upon Karis,” Jason reciprocated, clasping Shakizarr’s wrist and squeezing *hard*, just as Shakizarr did the same. “It would be my honor to inspect the finest of Verutan warriors.”

“And it would be my honor to inspect the finest of Karinne warriors.”

That took over an hour. Jason was expected to *seriously* inspect Shakizarr’s honor guard, taking ion rifles and inspecting them, checking uniforms, asking snap questions on Verutan military protocol or about the soldier’s weapon, which were answered immediately in a strong voice. As

he did that, Shakizarr did the same with Jason's own troops, and Shakizarr was just as hard-nosed about it, because that was tradition. He yanked pulse rifles out of the hands of his armored girls and asked questions based on his knowledge of KMS military protocols as well as general questions about the use of a rifle since he didn't know much about pulse weapons, and Shakizarr demonstrated that he *studied* KMS protocols, just as Jason had to study Verutan protocols; or cheat using his gestalt. It was an old tradition that demonstrated the Grand Emperor's knowledge of a potential enemy, demonstrating in the Verutan way that if they ever went to war, the Verutans would be dangerous adversaries.

After the inspection of the troops, they were dismissed, and Jason and Shakizarr walked with only two guards each along a paved walkway leading away from the landing pad. Aya and Dera walked behind Shakizarr, and two of the Verutan ruler's biggest guards walked behind Jason; again, an old tradition based on mutually assured destruction. If one of Jason's guards attacked Shakizarr, his guard would kill Jason, and vice versa. "It's a very sober thing," Shakizarr said in a conversational voice as they spent the required few moments together talking of affairs before Shakizarr re-boarded his transport and returned to his ship in orbit. Jason guided them along a sheltered walkway which Aya had cordoned off for their use. "I came here to discuss the coming of the Syndicate, and I have only just heard of this second wave of Consortium colonizers. I request that you release the relevant data to my staff for their inspection before the summit."

"You'll have it waiting for you when you get back to your ship," he answered. "It's not very much and we have no hard evidence supporting it, but we're convinced it's accurate."

"If the Kimdori say it's accurate, it's accurate," he said directly. "And it's most troubling for every ruler in our sector cluster. I heard that even the Grimja are attending this summit. For *them* to take anything seriously, that is saying something."

Jason nodded. "The High Councilor arrived just two hours ago, your Grand Imperial Majesty."

"Has the High Archon arrived yet?"

"Four hours ago, your Grand Imperial Majesty."

“You may call me Emperor, your Grace. I’ve always found that title to be a bit...long.”

Jason dared to chuckle. “I understand completely, Emperor.”

“We’ll have to take each one at a time,” he grunted. “The Syndicate is the immediate threat, and the reports the Kimdori released to the Academy are very ugly. They sound like utter barbarians.”

“The intelligence that the Kimdori have gathered is not very encouraging in that regard,” Jason agreed.

“Honorless cowards, that’s what they are,” Shakizarr spat. “A man doesn’t kill an enemy’s mate and children just to spite his enemy. That’s the highest form of cowardice.”

“That’s only the tip of the spear, Emperor,” Jason told him. “From what we’ve managed to take from the Consortium’s records, the Syndicate are absolute savages...and that’s even taking it with a dash of suspicion given we were stealing that information from the Consortium, who consider the Syndicate to be their mortal enemies. Propaganda is just as effective on one’s own military as it is on a civilian populace. Did you receive all the data we released to the Academy?”

He nodded. “And spent more than one sleepless night pondering it,” he added. “If their smallest ship class is the size of one of my *Gra’ji* class battle cruisers...that’s frightening.”

“We’ll be discussing how we can help each other prepare for the Syndicate during the summit, Emperor, even those who aren’t in the Confederation. This is a matter for *all* of us, not just *some* of us. If you need Karinne support, you’ll get as much as we can spare.”

“Good. That’s exactly what I was hoping to hear before we begin these talks,” he said, reaching over and patting Jason on the shoulder. “You will find the Verutans to be allies as we fight a common enemy, your Grace.”

“You have no idea how relieved several of your fellow rulers will be to hear that, Emperor,” Jason said honestly.

“You will soon be among us, if my information is correct,” he chuckled.

“No, Emperor, I’ll *never* be among your number,” he said honestly and directly. “It is not the desire of the House of Karinne or my own personal wish to ever be an *Emperor*.”

Shakizarr looked down at him, then smiled slightly, showing his fangs. “And that is *exactly* what I hoped to hear from the ruler of the House of Karinne,” he declared. “You honor the traditions of your ancestors, Jason Karinne. Our history tells us that the Karinnes wished to be neutral in all things, and they considered it their sacred duty to spread the gift of knowledge across the galaxy to any who wished to learn. To the Veruta, this is a good thing. It says much about your character that you place the traditions of your house above your personal desires.”

“In this case, the traditions of the house and my personal desires are in perfect harmony, Emperor Shakizarr,” Jason told him.

“And that is why the Veruta are pleased that you stand at the throne of justice of the House of Karinne. And it also pleases us that you know *when* to set the neutrality of the Karinnes aside when it is needful. As you said, what is coming is a threat to all of us. This Syndicate is not specifically targeting you, after all, and the Veruta would have seen no cowardice in the Karinnes declaring neutrality in the matter. I doubt that the Syndicate will honor the neutrality of the Karinnes.”

“They wouldn’t, nor the neutrality of the Moridon, or the Kimdori,” he nodded. “The Consortium won’t either. That’s why the Moridon and the Zyagya have observers sitting in on Confederate Council meetings, where the Kimdori occupy a somewhat unique position as a member of the military alliance but *not* a member of the Confederation itself.”

“Yes, when both the Moridon and the Kimdori take a side, this entire *quadrant* takes notice,” Shakizarr said grimly, to which Jason nodded. “That is the main impetus that convinced me that the Verutans must attend this conference. If both the Moridon and the Kimdori feel that their neutrality is so threatened that they must take action, then I would be a fool to turn a blind eye to it.”

“We’ll be glad to have your wisdom there, Emperor.”

“I will be there to listen more than speak, your Grace. We were foolish to try to stay out of the war with the Consortium. Had we known then what

we know now,” he said, then he shook his head.

“The Terrans have a saying, Emperor, that hindsight is perfect.”

He chuckled. “An apt saying,” he agreed.

“I commend you on your grasp of the Faey language, Emperor. I didn’t realize that I was using some fairly obscure Faey words.”

“Anything you do, you should do to the best of your ability,” Shakizarr replied modestly.

“Well said, your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Jason declared in a serious voice.

Jason had to go straight to Zaa after seeing Shakizarr back to his transport, revealing what he’d learned. She was at his house, sitting with Ayama drinking tea on the picnic table on the deck, with Denfather Grun playing with Rann down on the beach, and looking quite happy to do so. Zaa had brought him despite Kimdori tradition of keeping the mate of the ruler well protected because Grun was one of her most trusted and educated advisors...but he wouldn’t come within ten *kathra* of the conference himself. When Zaa was at the summit, he would be on the strip or in their guest quarters over in Jaxtra, absolutely surrounded by the Kimdori from Clan Thresxt. Zaa felt that Grun’s wisdom would serve her best as close to the summit as she could get him.

“It is as we hoped, and is good news,” Zaa said. “With the Verutans entering the war as an ally, it significantly increases our chances for a swift and decisive victory against the Syndicate.”

“Shakizarr seemed to be personally involved in the decision. Like he doesn’t like the Syndicate personally, and that was all he needed to declare war on them.”

“The motives of the Emperor and the motives of the Verutan Empire are one and the same, Jason,” she told him as Grun carried Rann back to the deck. “Shakizarr’s rule over his empire is utter and absolute. Unlike other rulers, like Dahnai, he answers to no one and has no fear of losing his throne to a usurper. His power over his empire is even more complete than Assaba’s rule over the Skaa Empire. His every whim is inviolate law.”

“But he wouldn’t let his whim rule him,” Jason reasoned absently.

“Correct. Verutan Emperors are highly educated and well prepared to assume the mantle of leadership,” Zaa nodded.

“Denfather, how are you enjoying your stay?” Jason asked as Grun reached them, setting down a laughing Rann and smacking him lightly on the rump.

“I want my juice extra cold, young cubling,” he said. “And I’m enjoying my stay very much, Jason, thank you. Jaxtra is exactly as I remember it.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“I was trained there before the fall of Karis, Jason,” he replied with a slight smile. “Our children managed to rebuild it to look so like the Jaxtra of old that there was a moment when I wondered if I’d somehow traveled back in time.”

Jason had to laugh. “Sometimes I forget about Kimdori lifespans,” he said.

“It’s not all that many Terrans think it is,” Grun said seriously. “Eventually you start to get bored.”

“I can imagine,” he agreed.

Rann returned with two glasses of *oye* juice and handed one to Grun. “Why thank you, Rann,” he said, sitting at the table by Zaa and putting his hand in hers, almost absently. The relationship between Zaa and Grun was far from ceremonial. “So, Jason, has Kiaari told you of her nearly scandalous wish?”

Jason laughed. “It’s not all that scandalous. She *is* a Gamekeeper, after all.”

“That one has almost too much pluck for such a little cub,” Zaa noted.

“She may be young, but she’s good. Her parents taught her well,” Jason observed.

“And I thought I was making a mistake by awarding her the Gamekeeper position at Terra,” Zaa said with a wry little sound. “But she had earned her chance due to her part of the restoration of the Karinnes. I cannot say that I am displeased with her performance thus far.”

“The Thresxt clan has certainly distinguished itself,” Grun agreed.

“That reminds me, how is Graal and the cubs?”

“Graal continues to serve the interests of the Kimdori with the Skaa Empire,” she answered. “He has done very well. And the cubs are growing quickly, as they do at such a young age. In but a few days, they’ll be able to tolerate the light.”

“That’s great. I’ll enjoy getting some pictures of them in normal light.”

“Handmaiden Miaari will most likely be bringing them to Karis very soon,” Grun predicted. “With the defeat of the vast majority of the Consortium forces, she will have the time to care for them properly.”

“I won’t mind,” Jason said. “Though going all the way out to Jaxtra to see them will be annoying after a while.”

“Speaking of home, Jason,” Zaa said. “I would extend a formal invitation for you to visit the Hearth.”

“I’d be overjoyed to come to Kimdori Prime, Denmother,” he said immediately. “When is convenient?”

“It needs be after we get most issues settled. Perhaps in about a month,” she answered. “I would extend the invitation to you also, Rann, and all of your brothers and sisters,” she said, smiling at him. “Ooooh, Kimdori Prime! Neat!” Rann said excitedly.

“And Jyslin as well, though she might not find the visit quite as enjoyable.”

Jason chuckled. “No, spending a few days in a radiation E-suit isn’t all that fun,” Jason agreed. “And I recall that you don’t allow setting up portable radiation shields.”

She nodded. “It’s not only harmful to the planet, which depends on the radiation to maintain the balance of the ecosystem, it sets a precedent we do not want set. We make no allowances. If you cannot survive on Kimdori Prime, then you do not visit.”

“Your planet, your rules,” he said easily. “If I recall, I can stay there a week before I have any issues myself.”

“About that,” Zaa agreed. “And that’s only so long as you fail to purge the radiation built up in your body. An hour’s decontamination on a shielded ship and you’ll be able to stay another week safely. As long as you don’t build up enough exposure for the radiation to start doing physical damage, you are safe.”

“Gotta love being a Generation,” Jason chuckled. “Radiation resistance.”

“A highly useful trait,” Grun smiled. “You are blessed with the ability to go where many others cannot, at least without extensive precautions and safeguards.”

“I’ll have to talk to Songa about Rann, I’m not sure if him being so young will keep him safe there.”

“We have had Generation children visit Kimdori Prime before, Jason. He will be safe. But it is prudent to get Songa’s permission. Gods forbid that you cross a doctor,” she said with a playful smile.

“I’d never hear the end of it,” he agreed with a grunt.

Jyslin came out onto the deck, wearing only a pair of white bikini bottoms. She kissed Jason on the cheek, then went around and did the same for Grun. “Good to see you again, Denfather,” she told him. “Enjoying your visit?”

“Very much so, thank you, Jyslin,” he replied, reaching up and putting his hand on her neck.

“When did you get home, love?” she asked.

“Not long ago,” Jason replied. “Where were you?”

“Over at Kumi’s,” she answered. “After all that seriousness, I needed some random silliness in my day to balance things out.”

Jason laughed and pulled her down to sit in his lap. “At least nobody made any mistakes,” he said. “Lord forbid we offend some galactic ruler that takes himself *way* too seriously. Present company excepted,” he added, giving Zaa a little grin.

“Duly noted, cousin,” she drawled, which made him laugh.

“Speaking of rulers that take themselves way too seriously, how did it go with the Verutan?” she asked.

“Promising,” he answered. “Shakizarr all but straight up said that he was joining the military alliance against the Syndicate. I doubt he’ll join the Confederation, but that’s fine. We’re going to need all the help we can get, and when it comes to fighting, the Verutans know what they’re doing.”

“Good,” Jyslin nodded. “When’s the first meeting?”

“Tomorrow at 18:00,” he answered. “We’re giving Yeri and her staff some time to give the rulers some tours. Kosigi, the southern ruins, some flyovers of the planet, you know, tourist stuff. We’ll get down to business tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is the first meeting going to be broadcast to the other leaders?”

Jason shook his head. “It’s also only going to be attended by the Confederate Council, so the others will have more time to sightsee. The first open meeting is the morning after next, at 12:00.”

“Ohhh, they may not like that.”

“They already know,” Zaa said. “The first meeting is mainly to discuss the repair and planned increase of the Confederate allied military forces, a conference where those outside the council will have little input anyway. We’ll start debating the coming of the Syndicate the day after tomorrow, as well as other subjects that concern all parties.”

“And when are you and Dahnai signing the official treaty that splits us away from the Imperium?”

“Not sure yet, the legal team hasn’t gotten back to me about the final draft. I’m not sure what the hold-up is. Guess I should be a little proactive. Cybi,” he called.

Immediately, her hologram shimmered into view beside the picnic table. “Greetings, Denmother, Denfather,” she said. “Please excuse my absence, but I have been quite busy the last couple of days.”

“I can imagine, Cybi,” Zaa noted. “How goes KERA’s recovery operation?”

“On schedule. All disaster recovery operations concerning KERA should be complete in nine hours, and the agency will stand down and allow the Ducal government to take over. Jason, the legal team sent you a report you have yet to read. They report that the treaty is fine from the Karinne perspective, but Dahnai’s legal experts have yet to sign off.”

“Ahh, okay,” Jason nodded. “Wonder why I didn’t get it. It’s not on my gestalt queue.”

“Because you were involved with the greeting ceremonies, all of your inbound reports are being rerouted to Chirk. And you told her to hold all reports until you check in.”

“So I did. Guess that’s my fault,” he admitted. “Do me a favor and tell her to start forwarding reports again.”

Cybi nodded. *“If you will excuse me, friends and guests, I still have much work to do. I will make a point of visiting with you tomorrow, Denmother, Denfather,”* she told them.

“You *are* attending the conferences?” Grun asked.

Cybi nodded. *“I am most curious to see how the rulers behave towards me when face to face,”* she noted, almost playfully.

“They’ll think the same of you they did before, a pushy, annoyingly overbearing female that thinks she knows everything,” Jason said, which made Jyslin laughed.

“But Jason, I do know everything,” she replied irreverently, which made him laugh as her hologram winked out.

Grun chuckled. “Cybi is most unlike the other CBIMs,” he noted to Zaa.

“She has been online longer than even the Karsa CBIM was, and much of that time has been under what was for her very trying circumstances,” she replied. “The many years have allowed her to evolve beyond her programming. It is the most convincing evidence that she is sentient, that she understands and engages in humor.”

“Anyone with half a brain can figure out she’s sentient after talking with her for ten minutes,” Jason injected.

Grun finished his juice and stood up. “Well, that’s enough serious discussion for me. That is Denmother’s job,” he said, giving her a playful smile. “Come, Rann. I would learn this art of building the castle of sand.”

“It’s not that hard,” Rann told him as they headed back towards the beach. Jason did not miss Zaa’s loving, fond look at the two of them as they went down the stairs.

“Sooooo,” Jason drawled, “are we going to hear the pitter patter of little Kimdori feet within the Hearth soon?”

Zaa gave him a tart look that made Jyslin burst into a splutter of giggles. “Do not add to the chorus trying to woo me to have another litter, Jason,” she ordered.

“Would I do that, Denmother?” he asked with exaggerated innocence.

Brista, 17 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 9 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 17 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

It was both the same and different.

It was the same in that he saw these assorted people virtually every day. As a member of the Confederate Council, he was intimately familiar with both the faces and the personalities assembled on the dais in the outer conference room, assembled for a picture opportunity. But it was different in that they were all in the same room, and the rest of those bodies were now visible and asserting themselves. Jason and Dahnai stood in the center with Magran and the Grand Master in his hoverchair in front of and between them, with Grayhawk to Dahnai’s left and Zaa to Jason’s right, and with Secretary Kim to Zaa’s right. It wasn’t that it was some place of honor, it was because they were the smallest of the assembled rulers. Vizzie and Grizza, Assaba, Ba’mra’ei, Grran, and Sk’Vrae were behind them in the second row because they were all so much bigger, with The Leader of the

Zagya, Hraga, standing at the extreme left side and Overseer Brayrak Kruu of the Moridon on the extreme right. As neutral observers of the council, they were added to the picture, but both of them were standing far enough away from the others that they made it clear that they weren't part of it.

After several pictures were taken of the rulers in their regal finery—except for Zaa, who was wearing only her fur with its white triangle and band of station, they walked into the large and extravagantly decorated conference room for the business at hand. Their many aides and military advisors were already in the room, sitting at desks on tiers in front of the main area—the room was a converted Academy satellite classroom—each of them working on panels or portable computers to prepare information for the conference. Lorna and Myri sat together on the first row along with most of the staff officers from the Confederate Allied Military, both in their Class A's rather than armor, but armored members of the Imperial Guard and the White House Guard stood at the two doorways into the room and at every tier, sharing space with Royal Guard military detachments from the Skaa and Urumi.

After everyone sat down, Cybi manifested in a hover behind Jason, and Dahnai got things going. Dahnai was *technically* hosting the conference, mainly because Jason and Dahnai had not yet signed the treaty separating the Karinnes from the Imperium. And as the host ruler, it was her privilege to speak first. “Alright, here we are,” she said in a casual voice. “First off, I'd like to thank Jason and his people for hosting us. They're not exactly set up for it, but they've done a pretty good job so far. For one, I really enjoyed that batchi match last night. Your planetary league is pretty competitive, Jayce,” she smiled.

“I find my accommodations more than suitable. The bed is big enough, that's all I really need,” Ba'mra'ei chuckled.

“The Karinnes have made us more than welcome,” Assaba agreed. “And it was a special honor to meet you in person, Lady Cybi,” he added, looking at the hologram.

“Such as it is, your Imperial Majesty,” she replied lightly. “Sadly, I fear that you being allowed to see the real me would be quite impossible.”

“I fully understand. The Karinnes have the right to protect their most sensitive places, and we do understand that you are located in the most sensitive place of all,” he said with a nod.

After that, it came down to what felt like a longer, more annoying meeting of the Council, one where he was in formal robes and couldn't wander around his office if the mood hit him. Cybi often put her hand on his shoulder whenever he started getting a little too fidgety. He sat through several presentations about the battle around Karis, showing more detailed video from it, then they got into the meat of the meeting, ship losses, repair schedules, and increasing the size of their combined fleet to deal with the coming Syndicate.

After a break for some refreshments about four hours into it, they started delving into the new material. Dellin took over the meeting at that point, bringing up a huge 3D hologram of Kosigi to demonstrate just how empty it was. “The command staff has put forth a schedule of shipbuilding that would get us to within twenty thousand combined line service ships in three years. This doesn't match the Syndicate numbers but given they're technologically inferior to the Consortium and we beat *them* with a disadvantage, most of the command staff feels that we can hold our own against them,” he declared. “The plan we've compiled goes like this. We concentrate larger ship building at Kosigi; battleships, heavy cruisers, command ships. Because of its logistical advantages and the fact that it's pressurized, we can build a large ship some twenty percent faster in Kosigi than at any other shipyard. We shift production at the other shipyards throughout the Confederation to building destroyers and cruisers, because those ships *will* have a tactical use in our overall battle plan and building those size ships in space docks isn't as difficult as the larger ships. Terra will act as the central supply point for the logistics of the overall operation, and the Confederate Allied Military will handle the logistics, making sure everyone has all the materials they need. This plan allows every empire in the Confederation to pool their shipbuilding resources, and the CAM will make sure everyone gets what they need and it's where it's supposed to be. As for large ship construction, we'll have very little trouble expanding Kosigi to undertake the increased shipbuilding operation. We still have plenty of space. Each empire will need to allocate workers to the docks for

their ships. We supply hosting and logistical support, but you build your own vessels,” he said. “Much as we’re already doing it.”

“We’ve already organized a schedule for INS shipbuilding in Kosigi,” Lorna declared. “Admiral Dellin has approved our plans, and we’re ready to move as soon as the Council gives authorization.”

“As have the Imperial Navy,” Skaa Admiral Frazzil announced.

“The Republic Navy also has their plans filed and awaiting authorization,” Republic High Admiral Vaark called from the second tier.

“We’re still working out our plans, since we’re still heavily invested in the reconstruction of Shio planets,” Shio Admiral Jarik Furystorm called.

“The Alliance Navy should have its plan ready by tomorrow morning,” Admiral Gi’ton’ba announced.

“The Jobodi would like to take advantage of this offer to begin construction on a more modern Navy,” Field Marshall Ggran’s vocoder intoned as his fingers danced in front of him. *“It is a point of shame to us that we are part of this body, yet our contributions thus far have been more words than deeds.”*

“Have your naval planners send up an official request and a schedule, Field Marshall, and I’ll assign you some space inside Kosigi. You can take advantage of our logistics as much as the others. We’re all in this together, Field Marshall, and the Karinnes will do what they can to help,” Dellin answered.

“That brings up a point. We’re not devoting *all* our space inside Kosigi quite yet,” Jason called. “I get the feeling that we’re going to have a few more applications to this body in the next couple of months.”

“I wouldn’t bet you over that feeling,” Dahnai nodded. “The larger empires like the Verutans might not join, but the smaller ones, they might, if only just to get access to the Confederate infrastructure.”

“As long as they fight with us, they are welcome,” Sk’Vrae said simply.

After Dellin and the rest of the command staff worked through the plans to increase the individual elements that made up the Confederate Navy, including doing some cross-staffing, mainly bringing some Skaa from the

picket forces up to help crew some ships in other empires on a temporary basis, give them some on-the-job training, Sk'Vrae finally brought up the important business. "As all here know, we are not done with the Consortium yet," she said. "Karinne reports place some 900 enemy ships inside the nebula in the P quadrant, trapped inside and unable to escape due to interdiction. There is also the Imxi," she said.

"Yes, the Imxi," Dahnai said, tapping her fingertips together. "We have to decide what to do about them."

"General Myri," Jason called.

Myri stood up and stepped down into the main area as those in the tiers continued to observe and take notes for their leaders. "We have a battle plan in place to deal with the Consortium ships inside the nebula," she said as a holo of the nebula appeared. "Since we have them trapped and they never received the communications explaining how to jump away from an interdictor, we can afford to wait until we have full operational readiness before we go take care of them."

"What are they doing right now, General?" Ba'mra'ei asked.

"As of right now, they're trying to salvage what's left of their base inside the nebula, and repair the ships that were damaged in the KMS assault on their base," she answered, bringing up the latest Kimdori surveillance pictures. "They don't know that we've destroyed the rest of their fleet, as they're in complete communications blackout. Since they're trapped, they're doing what they can to reinforce and fortify their position, most likely in the hopes that the rest of their fleet will rescue them. The KMS proved to them that the nebula is not impregnable," she said with a little chuckle. The holo shifted to a map of the Imxi empire, and Lorna stood up.

"As for the Imxi, we've analyzed their capabilities after losing their fleet in the attack on Karis and determined that they're effectively defenseless," she started. "The Karinnes currently hold two Imxi systems, PR-88 and PR-106, one an agricultural planet and the other an industrial center. The Karinne presence there is as a blockade with a small ground presence, they haven't actively taken over the systems, they're simply preventing the Imxi from using their assets."

“Exactly what are your troops doing, Jason?” Assaba asked.

“Over there? Mainly just sitting behind a hard shield and letting the Imxi do whatever they want, as long as they don’t try to launch any ships,” he replied.

Assaba chuckled. “Unusual.”

“We have no desire to conquer them, but we *did* have to deny those assets to their empire,” he replied, then he stood up and walked over to the holo beside Lorna. “But the Brood Queen did bring up a point the other day that we’ve thought about. I know we have to do something about the Imxi, since they attacked the Confederation, and the empires within the Confederation are entitled to some material gain in recognition of the sacrifices they’ve made. I’ve had several discussions with my staff, and we’ve decided to offer all interested parties a treaty that would grant you right of passage through our outpost in the PR sector, PR-371, and you could use that right of passage to invade the Imxi’s empire.

“But this treaty does come with a few conditions,” he said. “Firstly, and most importantly, the Confederate rulers have to decide before the first ship even leaves our sector exactly which empire gets which Imxi system,” he said. “I don’t want to see us fighting among ourselves over the Imxi systems. Secondly, this agreement is restricted *only* to the Imxi,” he said forcefully. “There are four other spacefaring civilizations in that sector which are just starting as we reckon things. They’d be utterly defenseless against a Confederate invasion. Part of this agreement will make it abundantly clear that *no* Confederate empire that signs the agreement will take *any* hostile actions against those four other civilizations, or *any* other civilization, for that matter. All of you need to remember the core tenet of the Karinnes, and that is that we will not, under any circumstances, impose our wills on another, nor will we allow the use of our assets or technology to grant others the ability to impose their wills either. Our neutrality is sacrosanct, and we will impose our neutrality on others when they in some way represent *us*. This is one of those times when it will be necessary. Without the Karinnes, you can’t *get* to the PR sector, and that means that *we* will be ultimately responsible if one of you attacks one of the peaceful neighbors of the Imxi. We absolutely will not permit that, under any circumstances.

“The Imxi declared war on us, so that makes them fair game for retaliation, invasion, even to be conquered in return,” he said firmly. “It’s not a violation of our oaths to allow them to get conquered, because they attacked us first. But the other civilizations on that side of the galaxy are *hands off*. You may make diplomatic contact with them and establish trade treaties with them, but you *will not* invade, attack, or in any way interfere with them. If you can agree to this stipulation, we are more than willing to grant you access to the PR sector and let you run wild all over the Imxi.”

“I love his colloquialisms,” Grayhawk chuckled, then he slapped his hands on the table. “I find nothing wrong with your conditions, Jason. I can’t make the ultimate decision, but I’m sure my government would agree to your conditions. They are more than fair and adhere to your Karinne code of ethics. I’m sure that we can all sit down with a map of the Imxi systems and divide them up in a way that’s equitable to all parties, each one getting what they need.”

“Does this blanket protection clause apply to unclaimed systems in the PR sector?” Assaba asked.

“No,” Jason replied. “Well, sort of,” he amended. “If you find an uninhabited system and you want to claim it, then we have no problems with that. But if there’s a sentient species on a planet in that system, you leave them alone. You can claim everything else in the system, but you leave the inhabited planet alone. And to make it clear to everyone here, I define *inhabited* as being home to any sentient race or species capable of forming social groups and demonstrating at least basic intelligence, and their technological level has absolutely no impact on this classification,” he said sternly. “To use an example all here will understand, the Parri would be classified as a sentient species under this rule. I don’t care if it’s a series of primitive villages made up of mud and straw huts inhabited by creatures that use rocks tied to sticks as tools, that classifies that species as sentient, and as such they are *hands off*. If no such organized society exists on the planet, then yes, you can claim it. If there is, you can’t.”

“Again, adhering to the Karinne code of ethics,” Grayhawk nodded. “I again see nothing wrong with that stipulation.”

“I believe we can work with those restrictions,” Assaba noted. “Send me a draft of this right of passage agreement so I might look it over.”

“I haven’t had it drawn up yet, but you’ll all have a copy of it by tomorrow morning,” Jason replied. “I’ll also release Karinne surveys of the PR and PS sectors for your exploratory branches, so they can study them and identify unclaimed systems you might want to survey for possible colonization. And over there, the Karinnes will interdict every system that our allies in the Confederation formally claim and arrange Karinne transports to provide logistical support, for basic protection and defense of those remote outposts.”

They all looked somewhat enthusiastic about that.

“Just remember, all of you, that there’s a very real chance that we may lose our foothold in the PR sector when the second wave of the Consortium arrives,” he said strongly. “We have to assume that eventually, the Consortium is going to figure out a way to get around the interdictors, and that will leave anything we have in the P quadrant highly vulnerable. If you do this, you do so at your own risk. If the Consortium somehow threatens the Stargate or threatens to capture an interdictor, we will pull them, and anyone over there is going to be *stuck* over there. I want that made clear right here, right now, before we even start discussing what to do about the Imxi. It would also be best if nobody sends any technology over there we don’t want the Consortium to get their hands on. That’s how I do it at PR-371. The only thing there I wouldn’t want them to get is the Stargate itself and the interdictors protecting the system. Everything else we have there is nothing that the Consortium doesn’t have itself in one form or another. Most of it is stock Imperium technology right off the shelf.”

“Duly noted, Jason,” Vizzie said with a nod.

“If we have five years to prepare, I’m sure we can suitably fortify our territory in the PR sector,” Assaba stated, making it abundantly clear where *his* mind was on the matter. He was undoubtedly getting ready to haggle with Vizzie and Dahnai over the choice systems in the Imxi empire.

“I would add one suggestion,” the venerable Grand Master called in his thin voice. “The civilian citizens of the Imxi empire must be treated with dignity.”

“I agree with that,” Jason nodded. “That means no mass exterminations,” he said bluntly, not trying to look directly at Assaba...and

Sk'Vrae, for that matter. Both of them were capable of it.

“That is not only wasteful, but counterproductive,” Sk'Vrae replied immediately. “Territory without workers only strains my own people.”

“Alright, now that we've got that all out of the way, put up a list of the Imxi systems with their resources and assets,” Dahnai said briskly, rubbing her hands together. “Let's work out how we're going to divide up their systems among us.”

And just like that, over the next six hours, the fate of the Imxi was sealed. The other members of the Confederation divvied up the systems of the Imxi empire, granting every full member except the Karinnes a portion of the territory. It nearly quadrupled the size of the Jobodi Empire, as they were granted two systems holding six viable planets, two of which were arctic planets that they'd find comfortable. The four large governments took the lion's share of the systems, but the Shio and the Colonies were awarded systems that would significantly increase their access to much-needed resources. Jason was surprised that the Grand Master would claim systems that way, but he showed his wisdom by choosing the ones that would do his government the most good. He wasn't interested in the Imxi people as much as access to farming and some mining, and he got what he needed. They paused for a meal as they worked out who got what, and after they returned, they finished allocating the systems and then put the command staff to the task of organizing the invasion and conquering of the Imxi Empire.

That would be a *Confederate* operation. Confederate military assets would assist the overall campaign, not each government taking its own ships and conquering its own awarded systems, but with two notable exceptions. Neither the KMS nor the Kimdori would directly assist in the taking of the Imxi empire. Both had well established ethical reasons not to participate, and the other members of the Confederate Council were willing to allow them to sit out the operation. They wouldn't be needed, mainly because the Imxi were virtually defenseless. The Karinnes would give the Confederation the ability to reach the Imxi, no more, no less. To do more would violate the oaths Jason took when he took the throne of the house. Once those systems were *Confederate* systems, then the Karinnes could get more involved.

It was a bit of legal maneuvering around the edges of his oaths, but sometimes it was a fundamental necessity when one danced around murky ethical situations like that one.

Jason contributed little over the negotiations, because all he had to do was sign a series of treaties and let them have at it. The Karinnes would interdict the systems when it became necessary—it wasn't necessary to interdict them any time soon, and once they annihilated the last of the Consortium fleet, there would be no reason to interdict them for some three years—and they'd draw up a plan to supply those systems when they were interdicted, using Karinne freighters to jump the interdiction effect to move supplies in and out. His conscious about the matter was clear, however. The Imxi had attacked them first, and as such, he didn't *have* to leave them be. He wouldn't conquer them himself, he had no interest in it, but giving the Imxi to his allies on a silver platter, letting them get something of value back in return for them defending Karis and protecting Cybi, well, that was more than fair.

After another short break, they returned to the table and Grran got them in order. *"Very well, the dispensation of the Imxi is settled,"* his vocoder intoned monotonously. *"We await only the right of passage treaties from the Grand Duke Karinne, and we can put the invasion of the Imxi on the timetable. What is next on the agenda?"*

"Just one bit of business," Jason said. "I've prepared a framework for the treaty that the Karinnes will be offering to interdict Confederate systems and set up Stargates to act as trade hubs. I know that we don't *need* the interdictors for a while now that we've broken the Consortium offensive, but I'm still going to offer this treaty to all of you, if only for the economic benefits. I'll have a copy of my offer sent to each of you tonight, so you can read it over, and take a few days to discuss it with your advisors. We'll start debating the issue in earnest next week, after the summit," he told them.

"So, the Karinnes and the Imperium have finally reached a formal agreement?"

"We have, Emperor Assaba," Jason nodded. "We'll be signing the formal treaty that separates the Karinnes from the Imperium at the start of tomorrow's conference."

“Then I’ll look forward to reading and considering your offer, Jason,” Assaba nodded.

“As will we,” Grran’s vocoder called.

“That’s all I had to say, Field Marshall,” Jason declared.

“Thank you, Grand Duke Karinne. Is there any final business for us to discuss?”

“That about covers it, Field Marshall,” Dahnai said as she looked at her handpanel. “We’ve covered everything else on the list.”

“Very well, I believe we can move to adjourn for the day,” he typed. *“Is there objection?”*

“No, I could use the break,” Grizza admitted, stretching a bit. “Me and the Prime Minister have a great deal to talk about tonight. I’ll be awaiting your treaty proposal, Jason.”

“I’ll have it sent to all of you in four hours,” he told them.

“Yes, and I have to have a long conference with the Federated Council,” Grayhawk added. “I’m positive I can present their authorization to everything I’ve negotiated by our next meeting.”

“Then our next meeting is tomorrow at 11:00 local Karsa time,” Jason injected. “Remember please, all of you, that the next meeting will include the non-member rulers, as well as be transmitted back to the Academy for viewing by those who couldn’t attend. The subject of that conference will be the Syndicate and how we intend to prepare for them.”

“Another day in formal robes, whee,” Dahnai drawled, which made Jason chuckle.

“I know exactly how you feel. I’ve been lamenting the fact that I couldn’t attend this one wearing my tee shirt.”

“And whatever else you had on below it,” Dahnai winked. “Probably something lacy and scandalous.”

“I’ll never tell,” he retorted, which made Grayhawk laugh. “Secretary Yeri has arranged a special meal for each of you in your quarters, or to be delivered to your ships, and if you wish to go out and tour Karsa in a less

organized manner, feel free to arrange it with the Karinne security. They'll escort you anywhere you want to go, at least within reason," he added lightly.

"They have many excellent shops in the main business district," Sk'Vrae told the others casually. "Offering wares from the entire sector cluster. Karsa is truly a cosmopolitan city."

"You speak from experience, Sk'Vrae?" Grayhawk asked.

"I have had the honor of visiting several times before," she nodded.

"Then perhaps you and I could go on a less guided tour of the city," he proffered.

"I would accept your company gladly, High Prince," she replied.

They adjourned after a moment, and Jason found himself walking out with Kim. Kim had barely said ten words for the last six hours, but then again, what the Confederation did in Imxi territory didn't affect Terra. As a neutral planet, they wouldn't be taking their slice of the Imxi pie. "That went much better than I anticipated," he told Jason in English as they walked out.

"Yeah. I'm still not entirely sure about unleashing the Confederation on the PR sector, but *something* has to be done about the Imxi," he grunted. "I'm worried more about what happens when the second wave gets here than them doing anything outrageous," he noted. "I may have just handed the Consortium a prize."

"In five years, we'll find out, Jason," Kim said, patting him on the shoulder. "But it was still the right thing to do. The Imxi are a threat, to not just us, but to those peaceful neighbors you mentioned. I have no doubt they've learned enough about Consortium technology to start producing it, and if we do nothing, we allow a highly aggressive species to rebuild their military and then unleash themselves on defenseless neighbors. Bringing them to heel protects us, *and* it protects those four peaceful neighbors you mentioned. And you were right. After the sacrifice the others have made for Karis, it's fair to give them something more tangible in return than just our gratitude. It costs us nothing, it protects the innocent, and when the Consortium return, I get the feeling that the Imxi will be fighting *with* us

rather than *against* us. I don't think they know just what the Consortium intended to do to them."

"That's entirely possible," he conceded after pondering for a few seconds. "Odds are, the colonization force would have turned the Imxi into refugees in their own empire, displaced and supplanted by the ones arriving."

"So, you'll find no disagreement about your decision from *me*, Jason," he assured him.

"Nor me," Zaa said as she stepped up behind them as they walked into the hallway, where guards from every Confederate member were arrayed, standing at attention. "It both upholds the sacred oaths of Karinne and deals with the threat the Imxi pose to us all."

"Well, if you agree with it, I guess I can't go wrong, Denmother," he chuckled, looking back over his shoulder.

"Now, does this special meal involve pizza?" she asked eagerly.

He laughed. "Of course it does, hand-made by Ayama and waiting for you at my house," he replied.

He had other matters at home than pizza to attend to, however. Dahnai and Zaa rode back home with him on the Marine Corvette *Honor*, which was pulling taxi duty more often than normal the last few weeks, and he found the final version of the separation treaty waiting on his desk in his home office, in written format on fine-grade parchment, with five copies of it in a folder beside it. He sat down without changing out of his formal robes and picked it up, reading it carefully to ensure that it was the final approved version, then he leaned back in his chair and turned to look out the window once he was certain that it was. Language wise it wasn't all that big, able to fit on a single piece of large paper, but in a rather small font, yet still cover all the points and spell out and define the responsibilities of the House of Karinne as an independent entity, but it also defined the agreements made between the Imperium and the Karinnes and spelled them out on the parchment, such as the island that the Karinnes would give to the Merranes on Karis. That was in the agreement. He held the treaty carefully, not wanting to damage it, and realized that it represented the burning bridge. There would be no turning back from this course once he put his

name on that piece of paper. The House of Karinne would become a sovereign entity, intimately tied up with the Imperium to be sure, but it would be on its own. Like a teenager packing up the car to move into his first apartment, Jason felt that same sense of vague trepidation at the idea of cutting those last ties, but feeling confident that it was both the right thing to do and that he and the Karinnes were ready for this step. They'd been effectively independent since the house reformed, part of the Imperium in name only, and they'd been managing their own affairs quite effectively since they reformed. It was Dahnai more than anyone that was having issues, but that was mainly personal. Dahnai didn't want him to be out from under her control, tied up with her ego as the Empress of the Imperium, though she was warming up more and more to the potential financial boon the Imperium would receive from a neutral Karinne.

But this was it. Independence. Freedom from the Imperium and its potential for violence, where the House of Karinne would more or less take over from the Kimdori in trying to keep the Imperium under control... subtly, of course, mainly by bribing them into not starting any wars. Jason felt both relief and uncertainty, but he figured that was entirely normal. This was unexplored territory for him; not in how he managed the house, but how the house was going to interact with the outside world. *That* was what was changing here and changing drastically. As an independent and sovereign entity, the responsibilities of Yeri and Kumi were going to go up dramatically, and Jason would be thrust into the role of ruler of an empire... such as it was. The House of Karinne wasn't an empire as the others reckoned such things, but that *was* the proper Faey word to use for what the house would be. In Faey, any governmental entity that owned more than one star system was classified as an *empire*. The Zyagya, Terrans, and the Moridon were not empires, but the Jobodi and the Shio were. Since the House of Karinne owned Karis, Exile, and now PR-371, that classified them under Faey law as an *empire*.

There would be much to do after this paper was signed. Treaties to formalize with the other members of the Confederation, since the Karinnes would have a different legal standing. Trade treaties, diplomatic contacts with outside empires, the continued administration of the Academy. The Karinnes would have to take a more prominent role in the politics of the sector cluster, but those were necessary evils. The Karinnes would be much

like the Zyagya, truth be told. To be left alone would be their primary motivation, to protect Cybi and the Generations from outside influence and keep them under strict control, to protect the rest of the galaxy from *them*. Jason remembered well the lessons of the fall of the House of Karinne, how they were but one step from becoming everything that Jason would find *evil*. The Generations gave the Karinnes immense power, but that power had to be tightly controlled, protecting the Karinnes from the outside, but also protecting the outside from the *Karinnes*. Part of his new duties would be protecting the house from itself, and it would be a duty and burden that would fall to Rann, his grandchildren, and every Karinne that descended from his line.

It was a heavy burden that he was placing on his descendants, but it was *their* duty. Cybi was the soul of the House of Karinne, but Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne, and his children, and his children's children, they would be the *conscious* of the House of Karinne. It was their duty, responsibility, and burden to keep the power of the Karinnes in check, to adhere to the core oath of the house.

That the House of Karinne would never, ever, by either direct or indirect means, impose its will on another, nor allow those who utilized or benefited from the secrets of the house from doing the same.

That was why there would always be a Grand Duke or Grand Duchess Karinne. Jason wanted the house to be more democratic in how it behaved, but there would always need to be a singular entity upon which the burden of keeping the house in line with its fundamental ideals was placed. It would require significant education, training, and even screening by the house to ensure that Jason's future descendants had the right mentality, temperament, and integrity to assume the responsibilities of the house. After Rann, just being born first would *not* automatically put someone on the seat of the house. The heir would have to prove that they believed in the ideals of the house, and would uphold them, until their time was done, and a successor was named.

Only the *worthiest* Karinne of Jason's line after Rann would assume the throne of the house.

And the piece of paper in Jason's hands was the material representation of all of that, as well as all of Jason's hopes and dreams for the future of the

sector, the sector cluster, even the quadrant. Jason wanted to spread *peace* through quadrant, bring the empires together in a manner that caused them to work together for the common good even as they maintained their individual identity, and this separation agreement was the first step down that road. After the threat of the Consortium and the Syndicate were dealt with once and for all, Jason knew that he needed to show the others just how beneficial it was to work together rather than fight among themselves. And he was hopeful. If the rulers felt that the Karinnes would keep their systems safe through interdiction, it would allow them to explore more peaceful options and opportunities. But those rulers had to *trust* the Karinnes to be impartial, fair, and just, since they'd literally be handing over the keys to their empires to them, entrusting the Karinnes with the safety and protection of their planets, their assets, their *people*. It would take time. It would take a *long* time. But Jason was hopeful that after these wars against their Andromedan foes were finished, that the empires of their galaxy would see the profit in peace and pursue it most vigorously.

He took in a deep, cleansing breath, then turned back around and carefully placed the parchment on his desk. *Dahnai*, he called. *The legal teams are done. I have the copies of the treaty in my home office.*

Already? Dahnai answered, her sending tainted a little by her reluctance.

Yeah. I read it and it's exactly what we agreed to. I want you to come over and read through it to make sure you agree with me before we give them to Yeri. She'll be holding onto them until tomorrow.

Sure, babe. That would be the smart thing to do, she agreed. *Let me finish changing and I'll be right over.*

[Yeri.]

[Yes, Jason?]

[The legal teams delivered the treaties. Can you come over to my house with the guards from the White House and take possession of them? I want them in your vault overnight with a double detail of guards standing outside the door.]

[Sure, Jason. Just let me finish talking with Brood Queen Sk'Vrae and I'll be over when I can.]

Dahnai came in through his open door a couple of minutes later, with nothing but a towel over her shoulders. Jason had to admire her muscularly sexy body as she stalked in, looking over her shoulder, her thick mane of tousled bronze hair swaying. God, was she beautiful. Her belly was still flat, but he could see a *very* slight distending of her usual knot of abdominal muscles, the first visible indications that she was pregnant. It was the beginnings of her baby bump, and since she was carrying twins, she'd have quite the baby bump. Twins weren't all that uncommon in Faey biology, in fact they were about 27% of all births, with identical twins representing nearly 11% of all births, leaving 16% of twin births fraternal. She turned her head towards him, then gave him a wolfish smile when she saw that he was looking at her. *I thought I worked that out of your system last night*, she winked as she stepped around the chair and sat down.

Me? Never, he replied as he hit the button to have the door auto close. Amber barreled in just before it did, however, trotting around the desk and jumping up into his lap. He put a hand on her little body gently as Dahnai turned the parchment around and looked at it.

"So, this is it," she said without picking it up. "You don't seem as enthusiastic as I thought you'd be."

"Just pondering the implications of it, far beyond just you and me, Dahnai," he answered in a sober voice.

"Yeah, you seem to have quite the plan in that pretty head of yours," she said dryly.

"More like hopes, Dahnai. Hopes," he answered as he leaned back in his comfy chair and stroked Amber's soft fur, noting absently that she was purring. "Have you started implementing those suggestions Yila gave you?"

"They made a lot of sense," she nodded. "Yila said we'll see profits go up Imperium wide by ten percent by this time next year, even if nothing else changes. She even offered to bet her signet ring on it," she chuckled ruefully.

"Yila's not the betting type. She thinks it's a sure thing," Jason told her. "And I agree with her. She's got some good ideas. An independent Terra is a gold mine of profit, and she's already moving her house to reap the rewards."

“I’m sure she only explained half of what she has in mind,” she chuckled, “so she can get the lion’s share for herself.” She gave him a long, assessing look. “This is it, Jason. There’s no going back after we both sign this treaty. Are you absolutely sure this is what you want?”

“Some of it, some of it I don’t, but it’s what *needs* to be done,” he replied honestly. “I already know where you stand in the matter.”

She chuckled again. “I’m entirely against it, but I can live with it. I gave a little, you gave a little. I think we can both settle for the compromise.”

“Well said. Now read it while I go over the copies and make sure they’re all correct.”

Yeri arrived with six Marine guards while they carefully read over all six copies of the treaty, and when they were satisfied they were all correct, Jason placed them in a lockbox with a biogenic cypher lock. If that lock was tampered with in any way, Cybi would know instantly. “Put this in the vault, Yeri, and I mean you put it on the shelf yourself and watch them close the vault door. I want a double shift of guards at the vault door, Mera,” he told the guard commander behind her.

“I’ll take good care of it, your Grace,” Mera replied as Yeri took the long, thin box.

“We’ll keep a close eye on them, Jason,” Yeri assured him. “Are you still signing them at the start of the conference tomorrow?”

“After the opening speeches,” Jason nodded.

“Now that we have all the work out of the way, why don’t you get out of those formal robes and join me for a swim before dinner, baby?” Dahnai offered. “We could both use a little rest, given what’s coming. It’s gonna be a long day tomorrow.”

“I’d love to,” he replied, cradling Amber as he stood up. “After dinner, we’ll go look at your new island. I think you made a good choice.”

“Of course I did, *I* chose it,” she replied with a wink. “I want to talk to those Red Horn men as soon as I can. I want them to start building the summer palace as fast as possible.”

“I’ll have them meet us on the island,” he assured her. “So they can get a good ground-level look at it and start drawing up plans.”

“Great. I want it done before I give birth. I want to spend my maternity vacation *here*, in my new summer palace,” she declared.

“The *Siann*’s not gonna like that,” Jason observed.

“Fuck them,” she retorted, which made him laugh helplessly as they headed for the door.

Maista, 18 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 10 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 18 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

The second day of the conference promised to be quite boisterous.

Jason filed into a different conference room, the largest in the White House and designed for these kinds of events, a large chamber with a series of large tables and a dais on the far side, upon which sat the main table that would hold every attending ruler of the various empires. The Confederate Council would share room at that table with the Grand Emperor Shakizarr, High Archon Gau, and High Councilor Kreel, while the conference would be transmitted to every embassy at the Academy so those diplomats could send it back to their own governments. This room was far more regally decorated, looking the part of a conference room fit to hold the august rulers occupying it, with *only* Karinne Marines that served as the White House Guard standing at the two entrances to the conference room and along the walls. Security outside the room was even more heavy, with large numbers of soldiers from every Confederate member roving the halls and Gladiators patrolling outside.

Just *starting* the conference took nearly three hours, which really annoyed Jason. These major summits were political affairs, and every ruler took a turn giving a speech. The Grand Master’s speech was only five

minutes, Zaa spoke for only two minutes, and Jason shamed them both by speaking for 38 seconds, but *fucking* Dahnai droned on for nearly half an hour, and the High Archon of the Haumda managed 68 minutes. And Jason breathed a sigh of relief that the Queen of the Prakarikai wasn't there, else she'd have probably diatribed for half the day.

Haumda were ursine in genetic origins as a Terran would rate things, vaguely bear-like, and covered with thick, shaggy fur that could vary widely in coloration, and they were wide-shouldered, barrel-chested, and fairly stocky. The High Archon was about 5.8 *shakra* tall, or a couple inches short of seven feet, or a decent amount over two meters, with overly long arms and somewhat short, stocky legs, and covered with shaggy grayish-brown fur compete with what Jason would call a beard under a short, stocky muzzle. They looked more like Jobodi and Zyagya than anything else, but unlike those two species, the Haumda were more aggressive and very social in an intergalactic sense. The Haumda were exceptionally religious and had some very strict laws about behavior based on their religious code of ethics, and that made them a little extreme to the Terrans and Faey. On top of that, they had the biggest nanny state in the entire quadrant. For instance, anything that was potentially harmful to the body or caused a loss of control of one's faculties was illegal in Haumda territory. Cigarettes, alcohol, recreational drugs, even something as innocuous as caffeine, all were banned except in medical applications—only when the potential good they did outweighed the potential harm were they allowed, and only then by a doctor's prescription. If there were Terrans in the Haumda empire, *table salt* would be illegal for Terran consumption, because it was potentially harmful. That was how extreme they took things. Those laws were based on their religious beliefs about maintaining the purity of the body, but like Catholics, the lay Haumda enjoyed a good drink from time to time. The piety of the lay citizen was more for show than anything else, and there was a growing sect in their empire that was advocating relaxing the very strict laws on moral and legal behavior. The High Archon was a pretty good reflection of that attitude. In public, he was a paragon of Haumda social propriety, but in private, Yila confided, he had a wine cellar that could put many dedicated connoisseurs of the grape to shame.

After Gau finished his speech, the Grand Emperor Shakizarr took the lectern by the table and managed to put the entire conference on its ear at the outset. “As all know, we are here to discuss the threat of these invaders from Andromeda and their attempts to establish a foothold in our galaxy. The Verutans stood by while the valiant soldiers of the allied governments that make up the Confederation repelled the first of the invaders, but we will not stand by again when this new threat of the Syndicate looms over us. The Verutans will protect our home galaxy against this outside threat, and we will fight side by side with those we call brother and sister in arms, neighbor and friend, stand with those native to this galaxy against the outsiders that seek to conquer us. To prove the dedication of our cause, we will officially petition the Confederate Council for entry into the Confederation of Allied Empires. Only together can we stand against the dire threat that these pan-galactic empires from Andromeda pose to us, individual governments that control *hundreds of thousands* of star systems and all the assets and resources such control grants them. They will crash into our galaxy in wave after wave of increasingly larger and larger fleets, sending more each time we repel the last, until we are exhausted and overwhelmed. We must all stand together against this dire threat, and that means that the Verutans will seek to stand with our allies within the Confederation and pledge our support to their cause. The Verutans are with you, rulers of the Confederated nations,” he said, turning to look at the rulers sitting at the table, then he saluted them in the Verutan manner.

And that was his speech. He left a little surprised silence in his wake as he took his seat at the table, sitting between Gau and the Grand Master.

That was short, but he made the point better than we did, Dahnai grunted mentally as the High Councilor Kreel stood up to deliver the last speech.

I’m more surprised that he seeks entry into the Confederation, Sk’Vrae noted.

It is not a surprise, children, if you look at things from his perspective, the Grand Master injected, which surprised Jason a little. He had no idea that the Grand Master was talented. *He is right that it’s going to take all of us to match the sheer industrial might of our foes and remember that only as a member can he truly expect defensive support from us. If he tries to*

remain outside the Confederation but fight with us, he runs the risk of losing his empire if the Syndicate attacks him over the rest of us.

We wouldn't do that.

No, but he can't take that risk, the Grand Master answered, his black eyes unwavering. Besides, it costs him little to join us, and the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks.

Now that I can see, Dahnai nodded. Membership brings access to Stargates and interdictors.

Precisely.

“Our esteemed associate from the Verutan Empire got right to the point,” Kreel said in his casual manner, leaning an elbow on the lectern and looking more like a professor addressing a class than the elected leader of his empire’s highest governmental body. The Union Planetary Council of the Grimja was much like the old American House of Representatives, where each planet in their empire was represented by a number of Councilors based on their population. Kreel was, to use an American equivalent, the Speaker of the House, but in reality, it was more like the British Prime Minister in that he was the executive authority in the Union. “This isn’t about just the Consortium, or the Syndicate. This is about *them and us*,” he said with surprising sobriety. “They want to invade our galaxy and conquer it. Well, the Grimja for one aren’t about to let that happen. As everyone here knows, we Grimja aren’t all that militaristic. We’d much rather have a good party than a good war,” he said with a rakish smile that made several laugh. “But even *we* can see the reality of this situation. If we don’t stand up right here, right now, and make it abundantly clear to the Syndicate that trying to conquer our galaxy isn’t worth the effort of them sending their ships over here, then we’re doomed to fighting an endless series of wars against wave after wave of invading enemy fleets, until they finally overwhelm us. To scare the Syndicate so badly that they never try again, it’s going to take every single one of us in this room working together, giving it their all. The consequences if we don’t are a protracted war that ends either with our surrender or our deaths. Well, the Grimja have no plans to die anytime soon, so we intend to fight. As the High Councilor of the Grimja Union Planetary Council, we join with the exalted Grand Emperor of the Veruta in that we too will petition the Confederate Council

for the right to sign our names to the Articles of Confederation that join our neighbors and friends together into a singular military entity created to oppose these Andromedan invaders,” he declared, putting his furry hands on the sides of the lectern and looking out over the aides and functionaries, but also into the cameras broadcasting his speech to most every empire and government in the sector cluster. “This is simple numbers, friends. They have more. And given I’m a *Grimja* saying this, that should put things in the proper perspective,” he said with a quirky kind of smile, then he walked away from the podium without a closing statement.

And that’s two, Dahnai noted, glancing at Jason.

We’d be fools not to, Kreel sent impishly as he took his seat. *I wasn’t blowing smoke rings up there, friends. It’s them or us, and if us isn’t unified, we won’t be us long.*

Well said, the Grand Master agreed, his thought showing his respect for Kreel.

Yeri stood up and took the lectern. “As the Secretary of State for the House of Karinne, it has been granted upon me the honor and duty of presenting the official Treaty of Separation for the signatures of Empress Dahnai of the Imperium and the Grand Duke Jason Karinne of the House of Karinne,” she called in a strong voice as the cypher lockbox was carried into the room by white-armored Marines. “This treaty serves two purposes,” she called as they set it on the table. “First, it establishes the House of Karinnes as a sovereign and completely neutral entity, and second, it declares before all here today that the star system known as Terra and the star system of Karis will be declared both sovereign and neutral territory in all matters. Terra will be established as a military protectorate of the Imperium, an independent entity whom will enjoy military protection from all militaries currently part of the Confederation. Terra will be open to all governments and empires as a free passage system, completely neutral in all political matters, and Karis will be established as sovereign Karinne territory with the same declaration of neutrality currently in use by the Moridon, the Zyagya, and the Kimdori. A copy of this treaty will be on file at the Academy for perusal by any interested parties,” she declared as the two copies they were to sign were removed from the box. Yeri stepped over

to them as Jason checked the watermark on the parchment to ensure it was the same one he'd approved the night before.

As the others at the table watched on, Jason wasted no time signing his name to the treaty. Dahnai showed more reluctance, but she signed her copy, then they traded them at the table. Jason again checked the watermark to ensure it was the correct paper, then he signed that one as well. When Dahnai finished with hers, Yeri took them and placed them in protective clear plastic cases, then presented one to each of them. They endured a moment of picture-taking as the event was recorded for posterity, then Yeri collected up both treaties. One was taken by Aya and Dera from the room, to be placed in the archive vault, while the other was displayed on a side table, which would be Dahnai's copy.

"There will be no speeches about this agreement," Jason called after Aya and Dera left. "Because we have more important things to talk about."

Dahnai brushed her long bronze hair from her face. "General Lorna, if you would please, give all of us an overview of everything we know about the incoming Syndicate fleet."

Jason did reach out and take Dahnai's hand as Lorna stood up and walked up the steps onto the dais, then took the lectern. Flat holograms appeared behind her showing pictures the Kimdori pilfered from the Consortium computer archives, pictures of Benga, pictures of their ships, and graphs and tables and charts showing rows and columns of numbers. It was Lorna's duty as the overall ranking military officer in the Confederation to lay out the military part of the briefing that the rulers would then debate, and since not everyone both at the table and watching from their own planets knew everything that the Confederation did about the Syndicate, it was Lorna's job to educate them in her usual brisk and thorough manner.

I hope this doesn't explode in our faces, love, Dahnai sent privately, using their touch to convey her thought without anyone else having any prayer to hear them.

It's going to be alright, love, I promise, he told her. *I know you hated to do it, but it's for the best. Not just for us and for you, but for everyone. The*

potential gains from a neutral Karinne for the sector far outweigh the gains just for the Imperium.

I know, I know, it's the only reason I could stand to let you go, she told him, looking into his eyes. I guess I'll have to get used to not being your boss anymore, love.

You never really were, he said, giving her as much of a rakish smile as he could without tipping off the rest of the table that they were sending. But you don't have to worry. I'll always be there for you when you need me, hon, because I love you. I don't have to be in the Siann to do that. Hell, I can do it much better where I am now than I ever could inside the system.

I know, but I still hate to let you go.

I'm not going far, and you can always come see me whenever you want, he assured her, patting her hand. She gave him a loving smile, then they let go of each other's hands and turned their attention to the important business at hand.

The tender moment dissolved into far more important matters, and that was the business of preparing for war. They listened intently as Lorna laid it all out, everything they knew about the Syndicate, from their military tactics to the social behavior of its dominant race, the Benga. Images of a Benga shown at proper scale were projected into the room, standing it side by side with a life-sized image of a Gladiator, making it clear that they were giants by the reckoning of most species in their home galaxy. The Benga himself was only maybe half a *shakra* shorter than Kyva's Gladiator. Lorna went on to discuss weaponry and technology, and that was where she yielded the floor to none other than Myleena. She wasn't in the room, she appeared on a hologram from Kosigi, in her armor but without her helmet, standing on the hull of a captured Consortium destroyer. The ship was completely intact, it was one that had its crew fried by a Kimdori stream weapon. She had her foot up on the flared nacelle of a fixed Torsion gunport. "This is a standard Consortium Torsion weapon," she said, stomping her foot on it a couple of times as zip ships and Sticks moved in the background behind her. "This is what we've based our own Torsion guns off of. Well, as of right now, this weapon is effectively useless," she declared. "The Syndicate utilize a defensive system we've coined a Torsion diffuser that acts like a shield against Torsion weapons. The bad news is, we

were relying on Torsion weapons to fight the Consortium. Well, the good news is, the Syndicate's entire defensive strategy hinges around that fact. We've analyzed the data the Kimdori stole from the Consortium about the Syndicate, and we've discovered that most of our standard weapons *will* be effective against Syndicate ships. And I mean almost all of them. MPACs, hot plasma, Colonial iso-neutron, Shio neutron, phased ion weaponry used by the Skaa and Alliance, and the coherent ion blasters the Grimja utilize, all of them will be effective against Syndicate ships, because they can either penetrate Syndicate armor or they create ionic interference that will mess up Syndicate power systems. Syndicate ships are heavily armored but have inferior shields, and they use a form of phased plasma for power that all of us would consider obsolete. We can exploit that fact because it's vulnerable to ion interference, which will make Skaa and Grimja ion weaponry *really* nasty against them," she chuckled in a grim manner. "We've geared up to fight the Consortium, but now we have to shelve almost all of it, because it won't be nearly as effective against Syndicate ships. To get in range to use dark matter weaponry, they'll carve us apart with their own weapons. So we fall back on our original weapons, all of which have the range to let us engage the Syndicate ships without getting ourselves annihilated."

"What weaponry does the Syndicate use?" Shakizarr asked.

"They use a mix of weapons, your Grand Imperial Majesty," Myleena answered, causing some design schematics to appear in the room. "What you have to keep in mind is that the Syndicate is technologically inferior to the Consortium, so their most powerful weapons systems were stolen *from* the Consortium. They primarily use Torsion weaponry themselves, but their own diffusers work against these weapons. Consortium analysis the Kimdori stole tells us that they raise and lower this defense to fire their Torsion weaponry, because they can't fire through the diffusion effect from inside. Unlike most forms of energy shields, they can't phase match their weapons to fire through them without losing weapon power. Diffusers don't discriminate, they weaken *any* Torsion effect that passes through their field of effect, even their own shots. Up close, they primarily use dark matter weapons on their newer ships but use their original weapon technology on their older ones. Their original weaponry from before they stole Consortium technology is primarily a hot plasma weapon. As you know, plasma weaponry doesn't have the same range as most other forms of energy-based

weapons, so they gave over on their plasma weapons in favor of Torsion technology when they stole it from the Consortium. They also utilize missiles and a form of striated ion beam weapon, which is primarily meant to cripple Consortium ships for boarding and capture.”

“Simulations using this data matched against Confederate military technology and tactics are favorable,” Lorna continued. “Our original weapons will be effective against Syndicate ships, and Syndicate technology isn’t as advanced as Consortium technology. Their armor isn’t as strong as ours, and without their Torsion weapons, they will be vulnerable.”

“And that’s where we come in,” Myleena said. “Right now, Karinne researchers are developing our *own* version of the diffuser using our own research and from data the Kimdori managed to steal concerning them. We hope to have our own version of the diffusers ready before the Syndicate gets here, which robs them of *their* most effective weapon against *us*. Once we develop the diffusers, we’re going to release it as public data through the Academy for any interested government to download and adapt. If we can equip every ship we have with a diffuser, we force them to fall back on their close-range weapons, and that’s where we stomp them.”

“Yes, Duchess Myleena’s analysis is correct, if a bit non-diplomatic,” Lorna said dryly, which produced a couple of chuckles. “If we can take the Torsion weapons off the field, then the advantage falls to us,” she surmised. “Most of our energy-based weapons have longer range than theirs, allowing us to adapt slashing tactics of firing at range and maneuvering to keep them from closing the distance to use their own. We only have to worry about their missiles. This is the tactic that the Consortium itself employs against the Syndicate, and they do so to effect. Data we’ve acquired show us that while Syndicate ships are huge and heavily armored, they aren’t very fast, nor are they very maneuverable. By exploiting our speed advantage, we can prevent them from using their preferred tactic, which is a full-frontal assault using their largest ships like battering rams, breaking up ship formations. If we can keep them from closing the gap and bringing their dark matter weapons into play, we can defeat them.”

“Explain please, how they use Torsion weapons if their own defenses stop them,” Kreel called.

“They lower their diffusers to fire their Torsion weapons, then raise them after firing,” Lorna answered, displaying an animation they’d prepared for their own simulations. “Since the Consortium also relies on Torsion weapons, it greatly minimizes damage to their ships, as they’re only vulnerable to incoming Torsion fire when they’re about to fire their own Torsion weapons. The Consortium could only react to the lowering of the diffuser, which according to their own data, wasn’t enough time. Torsion bolts are not instantaneous, like a laser. They have a travel time, and the Syndicate ships had the advantage of being able to raise their diffusers within a microsecond of firing their own Torsion batteries. The time delay for the Consortium to react to the lowering of the diffusers wasn’t enough. By the time they fire their own Torsion weapons in response, the diffusers are back up and drastically reducing the power of the Torsion bolts. They fire them all in a salvo, applying maximum firepower in a short window of time, then they raise the diffusers again while their power system recharges the weapons. They continue this cycle until they close to dark matter range, then rely on the sheer size and redundancy of their ships to finish off their opponents, which are designed to withstand heavy damage and still be operational.”

“I see,” Kreel nodded. “Thank you, General.”

“The Benga are here to conquer, so that means that we’ll see far more ground combat than we did against the Consortium,” she continued. “What matters most here is that according to Consortium records, some five percent of the Benga race are telepathic, and these Benga are trained in telepathic combat techniques and utilized in ground attack operations. These telepathic Benga are the entire reason the Consortium engineered their insectoids, who are immune to telepathic attack. Well, I don’t think I need to mention that we have a pretty effective counter to these Benga telepaths,” Lorna said dryly, which caused a rumble of chuckles through the room. “Confederate ground units will be integrated so Faey infantry are interspersed into every unit. There will be one Faey company in every Confederate brigade, divided into squads and assigned to other companies. These Faey infantry units will include specialists we call *mindstrikers*, who are telepaths specifically trained to locate and eliminate enemy telepaths on a battlefield. Though this is a specialized position, every Faey soldier has training in both attacking and defending against enemy telepaths, and these

techniques can be used to protect others as well as the Faey herself. By integrating Faey soldiers into Confederate infantry, we can effect maximum protection against these Benga telepaths as well as place our own telepaths in a position to attack the non-telepathic infantry the Benga employ. Faey instructors will be made available at the Confederate Combat Training Academy which is being built on Terra to train Confederate telepaths from other empires in the techniques we Faey use in telepathic combat on a battlefield, to field more combat-ready telepaths. It's not a boast when I say that the Faey are much more advanced when it comes to telepathic combat techniques, given our race's natural gifts and our history of internal strife."

"When is this academy to be built, General?" Kreel asked.

"It's already under construction by a highly respected Makati engineering firm," she replied. "They tell us it will be ready in two months. I believe them," she said with a slight smile. "It's not just going to be a telepathic training institution, it's where all Confederate forces will be training their officers and their infantry so we can learn each other's methods and work together more effectively. If we integrate Faey infantry into other infantry units to counter Benga telepaths, they'll need to train to learn how to work together. That's part of what the Combat Training Academy will be doing, providing a centralized location where all Confederate members can send their military personnel for training in Confederate battle methods and integrated battle situations."

After a short break for a meal, Lorna continued her overview, then they started discussing the logistics, as well as what technologies were going to be released to the Academy to help *every* government prepare for Syndicate attack. Jason surprised quite a few at the table by releasing the scientific methodology behind rail gun technology to the Academy, but it was silly of them to think that they were some kind of secret. There wasn't anything in a rail gun that any of them didn't already have, it was just used in a way they didn't really think to try. Most engineers almost sneered at the idea of a *mass driver* weapon, considering them inferior to energy-based weapons due to the fact that energy weapons didn't need ammunition, but that was narrow thinking. Karinne rail cannons had insane range and incredible power, capable of punching through almost any armor except the Karinne's own compressed Neutronium...which wasn't in the public domain. Sure, it sometimes took multiple shots in the same place to penetrate crystallized

Neutronium, but that was *Faey* armor. The form of Neutronium and shocked Adamantium that the Consortium employed couldn't stand up to a rail slug, and it only took a few shots to bring down Consortium shields to let the slugs start doing damage. Rail slugs were particularly hard for Consortium shields to repel, as they were more oriented towards stopping energy instead of mass; after all, an archaic mass driver weapon wasn't something that was considered when Consortium engineers developed their shield generators. Their shields were designed to be hard in repelling space debris and micro-meteors, not titanium and iron slugs weighing upwards of a ton fired at relativistic speeds. Consortium shields were hard shields, but they were more vulnerable to rail weapons than they were energy-based weapons.

Jason couldn't release their own actual rail technology because it did have some biogenics in it, but by releasing a framework not based on any proprietary technology for other weapon engineers to go by, it would allow each empire to develop its own version of the weapon, using its own technology. Some would be weaker than others based on that empire's current technology level, but all of them would be able to design rail cannons that were easy to build from abundantly available equipment and strong enough to threaten Syndicate ships, and that was the reasoning behind it.

That and the fact that Karinne Teryon shields could repel rail slugs fired from Karinne rail cannons, so those weapons were no danger to the *Karinnes*.

And...Kumi would be doing a *very* brisk business in replicated titanium and iron for rail slugs, so it brought some profit his house's way.

It was also about the only thing that Jason could release that could do some good that wouldn't violate his Karinne oaths. He'd designed the railgun before becoming a Karinne, built it out of stock Imperium equipment, so it wasn't tied up in the oaths he took as long as what he gave to others didn't involve Karinne technology they couldn't release. By only giving others the information they needed to create their own version of it using their own technology, he helped others protect themselves without violating his oaths.

After nearly ten hours of working out supply schedules and technology sharing with only one break for a meal, as they reached the tail end of the day's itinerary, Lorna brought up the other ugly issue that everyone in the room already knew about, but had yet to discuss. "As we have released to the Academy, the Syndicate's first wave won't be the last threat from Andromeda," Lorna said as she brought up a graphic of the two galaxies, with two blinking dots on it. One was about a quarter of the way between the two, but the other was just on the edge of Andromeda. "The Consortium has sent a second wave of ships to our galaxy, but this wave is much different than the first. This wave is a *colonizing* force, consisting of nearly 500,000 civilian transports and cargo freighters and protected by one hundred thousand military vessels. This colonizing fleet is carrying ten million Consortium civilians with the intent to colonize the far side of our galaxy, what we in the Confederation designate as the P quadrant," she said, causing that quarter of their galaxy on the hologram to blink red. "It is the opinion of our intelligence experts that they are doing this because they are on the brink of losing their war with the Syndicate in Andromeda, so they're fleeing to our galaxy as a refuge, where they can colonize, rebuild, and prepare for when the Syndicate sends another wave of warships to finish them off. That's the bad news. The good news is that this second Consortium wave is five years away, and we know *exactly* where they're going, so we'll have time to prepare for them. We have time to consider and prepare for this second wave, but it should always be in the back of our minds as we prepare for the Syndicate. After all, we can't use the same technology and tactics against both, at least not easily. What works against the Syndicate isn't as effective against the Consortium. But everything we build, everything we do, we should strive to make them as effective as possible against *both* of these enemies. The Confederate Military Command Center on Terra will release information and welcome non-member governments to send military officers to our headquarters so you can be thoroughly briefed and receive training on both Syndicate and Consortium tactics, so you can best prepare to defend your territory against them."

"Thank you, General," Jason said as Dahnai stood up. Lorna nodded and moved away from the lectern, going back to her seat with the other generals. "We intend to fully discuss this second wave of the Consortium at tomorrow's conference, so we can continue to focus on the more immediate threat today. But so everyone can be up to speed on what we'll be

discussing, all the data and intelligence we've gathered on this second wave is being transmitted to the Academy as we speak, and will be available on their public domain archives for download by all interested parties. That way everyone will have sufficient background information to keep up with the discussion tomorrow."

It was another four hours in the conference room as they finished up their discussion and debate, which included quite a few questions asked by other rulers being transmitted through the Academy, and truly pushing Sk'Vrae's endurance; Urumi biorhythms were based on a ten hour cycle where they were active for eight hours and then slept for two, so for her, the two days of conferences were much akin to staying up all night two out of three days. Luckily for them, she was conditioned for such situations, and Urumi handled going without sleep better than most species. Besides, for her, a ten-minute nap during the dinner break had done much to recharge her biorhythm batteries, as it were. Jason was actually getting a little stiff in his chair by the time they wrapped it up for the day, but they'd managed to get through everything on the itinerary, and it was almost with relief that he adjourned the conference for the day. They'd been in there since 11:00, and it was 23:16 when they got out. Aya and Dera escorted him off the corvette and straight to the dinner table, where he wolfed down pork chops and green beans that Ayama had prepared for him. Jyslin came down from upstairs and massaged his shoulders. *The kids asleep?* he asked.

I just put them to bed, she replied. They were watching some of the conference, we had a tap. Rann thinks that you look a little strange up there.

Strange how?

Like you didn't want to be there.

Our son is very observant, he noted clinically as he took a long drink of cold milk. Ayama had gone to the mat for him and made an all-Terran food dinner for him...she must really be worried. You know I hate these public spectacles. By the way, you're now the Duchess of an independent house, he added. The treaty's signed. We're cut loose from the Imperium, Terra's now officially an independent system and protectorate of the Imperium, and we're on our own.

And this will change things around here how? she asked lightly, looking down at him from over his head.

Well, that exceedingly cute and very dangerous little girl sleeping in Rann's bed is one way things have changed, he answered as he looked up. *It had to be done, but it does feel a little weird. And maybe a little anticlimactic,* he told her. *I certainly don't feel all that different, at least not yet. Once we start expanding things to deal with the diplomacy crap that we didn't have to worry about before, it'll start sinking in. I already have about twenty different meetings with various rulers, and only six were sitting at that table today. Me and Sk'Vrae have to redo our administration agreement since the house isn't part of the Imperium anymore, and now Yeri's gonna get way more important around here.*

And how did things go outside of what we could see?

About the same. We basically just talked about building up our military strength to deal with the Syndicate. Tomorrow we talk about how we shift gears after beating them back to deal with the second wave of the Consortium. That's gonna be the ugly one. The Syndicate fleet is just here to conquer, and once we smash them, that's that. But the Consortium will be desperate, and they'll fight with all of that desperation.

Like they did here.

They never really had a chance to do it here, the wormhole exploding saved us from having to deal with that. We're not going to get that lucky twice, love. I can feel it. The Syndicate's just gonna be a skirmish in front of the real war. When the Consortium gets here in five years, the entire galaxy is going to know about it. For them, it's all or nothing. They either defeat us and establish a foothold here, or their entire culture and society is in jeopardy. They have something to fight for, far more than the Syndicate does. The Benga just want money and power. The Consortium will be fighting for their very survival, and there's nothing more dangerous than that.

Just don't lose sight of the Syndicate, love. They will be dangerous. Very dangerous.

I'm not. Since we can't use the same tactics against the Syndicate, it means we have to prepare for them differently, but we also have to keep the

Consortium in the back of our mind. That's what we'll be talking about tomorrow. Then, thank God, it's over. They all go home, and I can get some sleep. Then spend the next month trying to clear my inbox, he sent with a sigh that made her chuckle.

Yes, you're a king now, baby, she sent impishly. *And that makes me a queen. And as your queen, I command you to finish dinner and come upstairs so I can take these robes off of you,* she sent seductively, sliding her hands over her shoulders.

Evil bitch, he accused, which made Ayama laugh. *Not a word, you,* he threatened, pointing at her.

I did notice one thing I thought was curious, Jyslin sent, a bit more seriously. *Cybi wasn't there.*

I know. She decided that it was best for her not to distract everyone, and she is a distraction to those not used to her. They've all met her, though. She greeted the non-member rulers outside the conference room just before it began. But she was watching and listening.

Of course, you were broadcasting it to half the sector cluster, how could she not? Jyslin winked as she looked down at him again. "Cybi," Jyslin called aloud.

Immediately, Cybi manifested her hologram in the kitchen, deciding to go with the non-complete version which had her legs trail off into nothingness just below the knees. "*What is it, Jyslin?*" she asked.

"I wanted your take on the conference today," she said as she went back to massaging Jason's shoulders, and he decided to eat while he could.

"*It went well,*" she answered. "*The fact that the Verutans and the Grimja wish to join the Confederation is a very good sign. They are the largest empires in their respective sectors, and them joining the Confederation will entice the smaller empires in their sectors to follow suit.*"

"You think Gau will go for it?" Jason asked aloud.

She nodded. "*The Haumda ever follow in the footsteps of the Verutans,*" she observed. "*Gau will take his time considering it, as is the Haumda way, but he will seek entry eventually. It may take him a few months to decide.*"

What you will find distasteful is that the Prakarikai will waste little time petitioning for entry into the Confederation now that the Grimja have done the same,” she said with a slight smile. “The Prakarikai will see it as the only means by which they can keep pace with the Grimja. With the replicators helping their food situation and the Confederation assisting them in other ways, the Grimja will quickly free themselves from economic bondage to the Prakarikai. The Prakarikai will not like that. Not one bit.”

“Tell me about it,” Jason sighed. “I almost wish they’d tell the Prakarikai no, but that’s not my call. I *hate* the Prakarikai.”

“I was wondering, though. Now that you’re a king,” she grinned down at him, “does that mean that your status changes on the council?”

“Oh hell no,” he replied immediately. “I’m not a full member, and I’m not going to seek to change that. Actually, my oaths as a Karinne forbid me from being a full member, because I’d be imposing my will on those outside the house. It’s a pretty fine line, but it is there, and I have to make sure I keep both feet on my side of it. When they added the others and they codified the rules of the council, I was considered a neutral observer with voting powers in military applications, just like Zaa. I still will be. I have no voting rights over who they decide to add to the Confederate Council if I’m not voting on someone *from* Karinne territory, the way Terra was. That was the only reason I had a vote in that matter, because Terra was technically considered a Karinne holding.”

“Well that seems weird, since we’re one of the original members of the Confederation. Us, the Imperium, and the Urumi.”

“I was just a house ruler, Jyslin. When we expanded the Confederation to include the others, my status as just a house ruler *within* the Imperium didn’t give me a big chair at the table. I was only on the council because of the KMS. That’s more or less the way the original articles were drawn up. Dahnai had all the power in the agreement, since she was my Empress at the time. I was just there to provide Karinne warships and resources, Dahnai made all the other decisions.”

“Well, not anymore, babe,” Jyslin chuckled.

“Yes, still anymore,” he retorted. “I don’t *want* to be a full member. That would jeopardize our neutrality, and I won’t do *anything* that may

cause that.”

“Sometimes I forget about that dance you have to do,” Jyslin said.

“Cybi reminds me when I’m about to wander off the path,” he chuckled, finishing up his green beans, then leaning back and putting his hand over Jyslin’s. “I am seriously ready for bed, love,” he told her.

“Afraid all you get is me tonight,” she told him lightly. “Tim and Symone are over at Dahnai’s.”

“How she can have the energy for that after the last two days is beyond me.”

Jyslin laughed. “She’s just more woman than you are,” she teased.

“I should hope so,” he replied dryly.

Vesta, 19 Kedaa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 11 June 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

*Vesta, 19 Kedaa, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

The third and final day of meetings went very smoothly.

The focus for the day’s discussions was the second wave of the Consortium, and like the day before, it began with a thorough and complete overview of Consortium technology, tactics, and tendencies, from the suicidal reaction of the bugs when they knew they lost a battle to the nature of the energy beings and some of their known psionic capabilities. Once they got through that, they spent nearly seven hours discussing how they could build up for the Syndicate but also be ready for the Consortium. For one, all the Torsion weapons they had were useless against the Syndicate, but they *were* effective against the Consortium even if the Confederate ships had diffusers installed in them. They would have to return to building them once the Syndicate was defeated, because they were superior to most every currently used weapons except for Karinne, Kimdori, and Faey

weaponry...and none of them were about to release their weapon technology to others outside of Jason releasing the technical data that others needed to develop their own version of rail technology. Fighters were highly effective against Consortium ships but wouldn't be as effective against Syndicate battle fleets because of the large number of super-sized ships in them. Most Confederate fighters would be effective against the Syndicate's destroyer class ships, but the larger they got, the less effective the fighters would be. Benga would utilize ground attacks, so every empire had to prepare ground units capable of dealing with individual infantry soldiers the size of a Gladiator as well as equip their line infantry with weapons capable of taking a Benga out. A Benga was too big to bring down with a single shot from an ion rifle...and this also was where rail technology was going to be useful, as every empire could develop infantry rail weapons which *would* bring a Benga down. Not every empire had robotic technology up to the level of the Faey either, which mattered when it came to ground assault units. The Skaa, for example, utilized hovertanks rather than robotic armored mecha, but Skaa hovertanks were damn powerful and highly effective.

In the coming war with the Syndicate, the Confederate Army and Marines would be just as important as the Navy, and they could not be ignored. For that matter, they'd also be needed against the second wave of the Consortium, since they were bringing a colonizing force and would need far more ground units to protect those civilians.

After those seven hours, they had worked through all the planned discussion points, and rather than break for a meal and return, they decided to go ahead and officially end the summit. The Confederate rulers stood with the Verutan, Haumda, and Grimja rulers on a dais for something of a photo opportunity, a show of unity against this outside threat, and then they had the closing ceremony.

As they filed out, Kreel put his hand on Jason's shoulder and leaned down; Kreel was a few inches taller than him. "So, I hear you have one hell of a barbecue, and I've always been fond of grilled *thrika* shoots," he noted lightly.

Jason laughed. "Are you fishing for an invitation, High Councilor?" he asked.

“You see right through me, Jason,” he said with a sly look from his amber eyes. “A Grimja likes to have a few drinks and some quality time with friends after the work is done. It’s a tradition of sorts.”

“I don’t see why we all don’t have an *unofficial* meeting at Jason’s house,” Dahnai said. “No robes, no titles, no itineraries, just good food and good conversation.”

“Ayama is going to kill you, Dahnai,” Jason warned, which made her laugh.

“I would be inclined to accept such an invitation,” Shakizarr mused.

“You’re going to be disappointed, your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Jason drawled. “I live a very modest life. My house is probably smaller than the guard building in front of your palace.”

“I would expect nothing less from a man as humble and unassuming as you, Jason Karinne.”

So, quite by accident, Jason found himself hosting a final meeting of the Confederate Council and their guests, on the deck of his house rather than in a conference room. They arrived one by one, wearing *casual* attire, which varied wildly from species to species. Dahnai came out of her house wearing nothing but bikini bottoms, where the High Archon arrived wearing a robe only *slightly* less formal and gaudy than his formal one. The Grand Emperor Shakizarr showed up wearing only a pair of knicker-like pants that left his muscular torso bare. Zaa wore nothing, as usual, Kim was in a tank top and a pair of shorts, Grayhawk in nothing but Bermuda shorts, and the three Skaa were wearing simple kilts. Every ruler except the Leader of the Zyagya had come, and Surin and Ayama were hastily preparing food that Aya had sent guards out to get, with all the dietary issues in mind. Gau could not eat vegetables due to religious practices, and Kreel could not eat meat due to biology. The Grand Master was very old, so he had very specific dietary requirements. Ayama sorted through the various dietary issues with her guests, then she and Surin started preparing food on the grill as the leaders sat around the picnic table or on chairs brought out for them and Aya provided security. Jyslin arrived and gawked a little at all the kings, queens, and rulers sitting around the picnic table, Gau and Shakizarr looking quite curious about the strip and Jason’s house, and Kreel leaning

back with a large tankard of rich, strong Makati ale. “Ahh, you have no idea how hard this is to get back home,” he said, savoring another draw from the large tankard. “And it’s pretty damn expensive.”

“Makati ale?” Dahnai asked as she pulled her thick bronze hair back over her shoulders, pulling it into a ponytail.

“Yeah. Makati, those glorious little red bastards, they really know how to brew some good ale. Say, why don’t we make a couple of trade agreements, Dahnai? You supply us some quality Makati ale, and we think you’re the top of the Zwirtika Tower.”

“How about you pay for it, Kreel?” she retorted, which made him laugh.

“You did mention that your house was small, Jason,” Gau noted, sounding a little uncertain at using his name, almost sticking *Grand Duke* in front of it.

“I’m a simple man, Gau. This house is all I need, so it’s all I want.”

“Get used to it. He’s so modest that it’s almost disgusting,” Dahnai said.

“A little humility could do you some good, Dahnai,” he retorted, which made Sk’Vrae give a hissing chortle.

[Umm, Daddy, is it alright to come out?] Rann called. *[You have all those emperors here.]*

[It’s fine, pippy, just be polite,] he answered.

“I’ve never attended a meeting quite like *this*,” Shakizarr noted casually, looking over towards the grill. “And that does smell good.”

“There’s a time for formality, and a time to relax, Shakizarr,” Kreel said easily, taking another drink. “Of course, we Grimja have different priorities than the Veruta,” he grinned. “More business gets done in the pubs in the Union than they do in the conference rooms,” he laughed.

“If only we could all be as laid back as the Grimja,” the Grand Master chuckled. “And I think I could do with some stout Makati ale myself.”

“Just please be careful, Grand Master,” Magran said.

“I’ll be quite fine, my boy,” he said. “A stout ale is good for the blood.”

“Now you’re talking, Grand Master,” Kreel said, toasting his tankard in the Colonist’s direction.

Kellin arrived on the deck, coming up from the walkway, and he had Sirri and Maer with him. He was wearing a thigh-length robe, where Maer and Sirri were nude. “Ah, there you are, love,” Dahnai said. “Everyone, this is my husband, Kellin, and my children Sirri and Maer. Say hello,” she ordered.

“It’s nice to meet all of you,” Sirri said, giving a little bow.

“Aaat, this is all informal, don’t ruin it with bowing,” Kreel called, which made Sirri *very* nervous.

Dahnai chuckled softly. “More or less, pippy,” she assured her. “Why don’t you go up and see what Rann and Shya are doing?”

“Umm, we came down here,” Rann said from the door. “We wanted to come to your house.”

“Well, then we can all go to the beach,” Kellin said, offering his hand.

“I’ll go with you, Kellin,” Jyslin said. “If I don’t get out of here and stop trying to help grill, Ayama’s gonna slap me.”

Ayama gave her a cool look that made Jason burst out laughing. Jyslin did slap him lightly on the back of the head as she walked by, which made Dahnai burst out laughing. She and Kellin took the kids back down the stairs and headed for the beach.

“You have quite a family, Jason,” Shakizarr said. “A wise mate and your son looks to have much potential.”

“Yes, I’m very proud of both of them,” he said.

“Since we’re out of the camera’s eye, I have to ask if you might have Cybi—” Gau began, but he flinched a little when Cybi manifested her hologram by the table. “My, I didn’t realize you were listening, Lady Cybi,” he chuckled.

“It’s the only way I ever keep up with what goes on, High Archon. Jason can be terribly reticent sometimes. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing specific. I simply wished to include you in the conversation,” he replied.

“To observe and determine if I am truly alive?” she asked pointedly.

He didn’t change his expression. “Among other things,” he affirmed. “Haumda religious texts put you in quite a gray area, Cybi. As an artificial being originating on this particular planet, you fulfill three different prophecies within our scriptures.”

“Yes, I’m aware of them,” she nodded as she caused a holographic chair to appear at the head of the table, then sat down in it, joining them.

“I hope they’re not bad ones,” Dahnai said.

“One is, two are good ones,” Gau answered. “Many in the priesthood are paying very close attention to see which prophecy Cybi will fulfill.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“In the bad one, I am the harbinger of the end of all things. In that prophecy, I am the being without a soul, and the vessel through which the Great Evil enters our universe to ultimately destroy it,” Cybi answered. *“Ironically, it is this Haumda prophecy the Consortium used as their justification to attack Karis. In the second, my appearance is an omen that Granuda will return in one hundred years.”*

“What is a Granuda?”

“He was a prophet from the Second Age,” Gau answered. “In our religion, the prophets attain a status that allows them to be reincarnated back into the mortal world again and again. Each prophet is said to appear to aid and guide the Haumda, some through trials or disasters, some as bringers of a golden age. Granuda is one such prophet. If that prophecy is correct, then the Haumda will enter a golden age of enlightenment in one hundred years, since Cybi meets the requirements of the omen.”

“Interesting. How does she do that?” Dahnai asked.

“Because she is a sentience born without a body and without parents. She is called the astral consciousness in the scriptures. But, the energy beings of the Consortium would technically fulfill the same prophecy,” he told them. “Haumda prophecies are usually very cryptic. Often, we don’t

realize one has been fulfilled until years afterwards, when we can look back and see that the conditions were met.”

“Wait a minute. The first prophecy and the second prophecy are almost describing the same being.”

“Yes, that’s common in Haumda scripture. It often contradicts itself, if you look only at one event,” he admitted. “It’s the other omens that distinguish these prophecies. No Haumda prophecy has a single omen. Some have as many as two hundred.”

“Oh, okay. So, what’s this third prophecy?”

Gau looked a little sheepish. “Well, that one is directed at me personally,” he said. “If the third prophecy is true, then I will lead the Haumda to victory in a great war and bring about an age of peace and prosperity,” he said. “We’ve always thought that this would be a victory against the Verutans in some future war where relations broke down between our peoples,” he said, glancing at Shakizarr, “but with the coming of the invaders from Andromeda, it’s possible that that is the war the prophecy means. We’ll have to watch the signs and beseech the Great Spirit for guidance.”

“Here’s hoping that’s the one Cybi fulfills,” Kreel said, holding up his mug before taking another drink.

“So how does Cybi fulfill the third prophecy?” Dahnai asked, her expression intrigued.

“It’s not *just* Cybi. The return of the House of Karinne was the first sign,” he replied. “The restoration of the Great Library destroyed for a thousand cycles is the first omen. Well, the Karinne Academy was destroyed one thousand Haumda cycles ago,” he told them. “In that prophecy, Cybi is the Mistress of the Lost Garden, the oasis of verdant bloom in the middle of the great desert. Many priests believe that Karis itself is the great desert, and Cybi’s reclamation attempts while the planet was uninhabited makes her the Mistress of the Lost Garden.”

“Or maybe it’s Jason, or the entire house of Karinne,” Dahnai said.

Gau shook his head. “The description of the omen in our scriptures makes it clear that it’s Cybi. In the omen, the Mistress of the Lost Garden is

a *woman*,” he noted. “Sometimes these prophecies are very vague, but sometimes they’re quite specific. Well, this one makes it clear that the Mistress of the Lost Garden is female.”

“That certainly disqualifies you, babe,” Dahnai grinned. “That does sound pretty interesting, though.”

“As with all things in our religion, Dahnai, things can get very murky,” he said with a rueful chuckle. “Our priests spend a lot of time trying to find the omens to fulfill the prophecies.”

“So, now that we’re completely out of the public eye, maybe we can talk about the Confederation,” Shakizarr said, putting an elbow on the table, then looking up when Surin wordlessly set down a porterhouse steak in front of him, sizzling and juicy. “That does smell wonderful,” he said, looking at the utensils. He completely ignored them, using his claws to slice into the steak.

“I think I speak for all of us when I say you probably won’t have much trouble getting past the vote,” Dahnai said, to which many of them nodded.

“This isn’t meant to be an exclusive group,” Assaba affirmed. “This is about joining together for simple survival against a far more powerful foe, and the size of the empire matters little. The Shio and the Jobodi are as important as the Skaa and the Faey in this group.”

“And so far, it’s worked far better than I thought it would,” Grizza admitted. “Once we established common rules and regulations for our militaries to follow, things fell into place quickly.”

“That’s good. We Grimja certainly care about getting along,” Kreel smiled.

“Assaba speaks truth,” Grayhawk confirmed. “The Confederation has done much for my people after the Consortium attacked our small territory.”

“This is exceptional,” Shakizarr said brightly as he chewed on a piece of steak. “What manner of animal is this?”

“A Terran cow, Shakizarr,” Jason replied. “I’m sure you could get your hands on some, the Terrans do a brisk business in all manner of foods.”

“I’m certain we could arrange something,” Kim said, finally saying something after nearly two days.

“With Terra independent and neutral, they keep their farm production now?” Gau asked.

Dahnai shook her head. “They still have contracts with the Imperium for food production, but the excess, yes, that’s theirs. That’s where most of their trade comes from. Terran food is *wildly* popular in the Imperium.”

“And in the Federation,” Grayhawk agreed.

“As long as our newly gained neutrality isn’t threatened, we’re more than happy to make trade agreements with most anyone,” Kim said.

“And where do the Moridon stand in this little group, Brayrak?” Shakizarr asked, turning to the tall Moridon.

“As observers, though we have backed the Confederate war effort with low-interest loans,” he replied. “The Consortium would not honor our neutrality, and neither will the Syndicate. The Confederation allows us to maintain our neutrality and still provide us with protection, in the form of an interdictor and a Stargate to and from Moridon Prime. In return, we’ve offered financial assistance to help them absorb the costs of the military expedition. They are most fair,” he said simply.

“This is them and us, so all of us have to be on the same float in the pond,” Kreel said seriously. “That’s why the Council authorized me to petition for entry into the Confederation. You’ve proved it pretty damn plainly that if we don’t fight these invaders, they’ll conquer us all. We’re not going to sit on the bank and watch the next one. We’ll fight.”

“And we’ll welcome you,” Dahnai said, scratching at her bare left breast absently, then she smiled brightly when Ayama set a plate of grilled chicken in front of her. “Thank you, Ayama.”

“What is that? It smells good,” Vizzie said.

“Chicken, a Terran bird, and totally delicious,” Dahnai said as she picked up a thigh. “If the Verutans, Haumda, and Grimja all join the Confederation, we feel confident we can beat back the Syndicate, then help each other prepare for this colonizing wave from the Consortium that’s coming.”

“There’s enough industrial output at this table to manage it,” Kreel agreed. “If anything, we Grimja are good at building things. We can throw sheer numbers at things,” he chuckled.

As Ayama and Surin served several different meats and vegetables, they talked in more detail about how the Verutans and Grimja would integrate into the Confederation, mainly talking about how their militaries would merge into the existing structure, doing a lot of the discussion that would have taken place in formal council around Jason’s large picnic table. Shakizarr had a couple of issues with Lorna being the overall military commander of the Confederate Combined Military, but the others were confident in her abilities, so they weren’t about to let a Verutan Admiral take over her job. Gau simply listened to everything they discussed, no doubt absorbing it so he could make his decision later, while Kreel effectively charmed everyone at the table in his smooth, easy-going Grimja manner. Ayama and Surin kept putting food down for them as the other residents of the strip kept their distance from the unusual council happening at Jason’s table.

It lasted nearly two hours. After they ate, they stayed at the table and worked out a framework for the Verutans and the Grimja to bring their military commanders to Terra for initial orientation, as Cybi kept records of everything. Once they got that done, the rulers withdrew one by one, returning to their hotel rooms, and from there they’d be going back home. Eventually it was just Jason, Dahnai, and Zaa left, walking along the beach as Kellin and Jyslin sat on loungers watching the kids. Jason and Dahnai walked hand in hand with Zaa just beside them, her hands behind her back and her tail swishing behind her. “You barely said two words all day, Denmother,” Dahnai noted.

“There is little need for my input in such matters as was discussed today, Dahnai,” she answered.

“Well, now that we’re alone, what do you think of Shakizarr and Kreel?” Jason asked.

“That they are sincere,” she answered. “Kreel understands far better than the others just how important it is for us to meet the threat together. Shakizarr’s motivations are more personal and ambitious, but he will understand in time.”

“How so?” Dahnai asked.

“He sees the Confederation as a means to attain glory for the Verutan Empire,” she answered. “That fact will incite the Haumda into joining. Gau is far wiser and more observant than Shakizarr thinks.”

“I don’t think there’s a single ruler at the table outside of Grayhawk and the Grand Master who aren’t thinking about *after* the Confederation,” Dahnai admitted. “Is that what you mean, Denmother?”

She nodded. “After we secure our galaxy from the invaders, Shakizarr sees the grand navy he’s built with Confederate assistance as a means by which to expand his influence.”

“He’ll get disabused of that fairly quickly,” Jason grunted. “Once he understands that *everyone else* is going to have lots of ships equipped with nasty weapons that will make any attempt to attack someone else suicidal. Not to mention the fact that it’ll bring financial ruin to his empire to try.”

“Which was how you set all this up,” Dahnai said sourly.

“Yup,” he replied with a nod. “By making it prohibitively expensive to *attack*, it keeps everyone on their sides of the borders.”

“I can’t believe how easily you twisted all of us around your fingers,” she accused.

“When peace is more profitable than war, then people will pursue peace,” he told her. “And I’m a man that’s interested in peace above all things.”

“Speaking of peace, did you find the island to your liking, Dahnai?” Zaa asked.

“Oh yes!” she said with honest enthusiasm. “It’s just big enough to feel spacious while small enough for my guards to easily defend it. I’ve already decided on all the building designs, and the Red Horn workers are starting on it in four days. They promised to have the entire project finished in 46 days. All of it. The main house, the outlying buildings, the landscaping and the work on the south beach to make it more accessible for us to use.”

“I doubt I even have to ask about defenses.”

“It’s going to have some fairly nasty defenses,” Jason nodded. “Ground batteries, a Teryon hard shield, an extensive and heavily reinforced bunker for Dahnai and her family, and Gladiators from the Red Warriors will be dispatched to the island to assist the guard when Dahnai’s here.”

“It’s on Karis, that’s really all the defense it needs, but my guards would have a fit if it didn’t have all that,” Dahnai chuckled. “And I’m definitely going to spend my maternity here. I’m going to establish that the summer palace is the new Imperial getaway spot, where the Empress can go for some rest and relaxation out of the eye of the rest of the Imperium. Jason and the Karinnes will keep the reporters away, and I can *relax*,” she said with intensity.

“Even the Empress deserves a little privacy from time to time,” Jason chuckled, squeezing her hand.

“And it lets me keep an eye on you,” she winked. “Now that you’re independent and all, it’s going to be the only way I can keep track of what you’re up to.”

“Good luck with that,” he grunted, which made Zaa chuckle.

After discussing the entry of the Verutans and Grimja into the Confederation a little, Dahnai and Zaa went down to join the others at the beach, while Jason stood on the walkway, his hands on the rail as he looked out over the ocean. Things were going to be different now...very different. The Karinnes were autonomous, Karis was sovereign territory, and Terra was finally free of the Imperium. They were *technically* still part of the Imperium, but that was on paper. Dahnai wouldn’t interfere in Terran affairs unless Kim officially petitioned her for help, which was within his power as the executive of a planet that had protectorate status. If Kim asked for it, Dahnai would send a few battalions of Imperial Marines to Terra under Kim’s direct control. The Imperial Marines on Terra would stay there for now, continue to serve as law enforcement, but they would slowly be replaced as they trained Terran law enforcement to take over for them. But it wasn’t Terra that Jason was really worried about. Jason now had control of the House of Karinne, complete and utter control. Dahnai couldn’t look over his shoulder anymore. He was ready for the responsibility, but it was still a slightly nervous feeling knowing that he couldn’t run to Dahnai if he needed her. The Karinnes now had to *act* like a sovereign state. They had to

handle their own diplomacy, they had to deal with the other empires out there directly. Again, they were used to doing that, but now that they were independent, the interest the other empires would take in them would increase dramatically. Yeri was going to be run ragged for the next year dealing with the empires, and he'd be reading treaties, fielding trade offers, and doing a lot of the things that he'd been doing, but not been doing to the extent that he would now.

Then there was the Confederation. The addition of the Verutans and the Grimja, and almost certainly of the Haumda and the Prakarikai later on, was going to change the dynamics of the internal politics of the allied empires. There was going to be a *lot* more jockeying in the Confederate Council, and that would only increase as the smaller empires signed on. Jason had almost no doubt that the Jun would seek entry, and very soon. That...well, that would be interesting. The Jun were a humanoid species, looking remarkably similar to Faey, Terrans, and Shio, but they *intense*. The Jun had had a running rivalry with the Prakarikai and the Morbods from the Grimja sector for the last couple of centuries, but those two empires knew better than to declare war on the Jun. Anyone who declared war on the Jun had to be ready to fight a war of extinction, because the Jun *would not stop* until either they were all dead or their enemies were all dead...a fact that the race known as the Gruthim had discovered too late. There was only a handful of Gruthim left, part of the Prakarikai's empire and out of reach of the Jun. The Jun did not surrender, and they didn't accept the surrender of an enemy. They were the kind that would conquer a city, kill all the civilians, burn down all the buildings, salt the earth of the farms...even kill all the dogs and cats. They also didn't keep any territory they conquered, living within the defined borders of their empire and not seeking to expand, which was what kept the Jun in check in that respect. They weren't expansionistic, believing that Jun could only live in the 16 star systems that their deity had set aside for them, but they were *extremely* aggressive when it came to defending that territory. They believed in an absolute scorched earth policy when it came to war, where their savagery was matched only by the brutality. This aspect of their racial personality was going to make them somewhat hard to manage when they found themselves to be part of a disparate group, and fighting a war using a different set of rules. But nobody could deny that the Jun weren't damn good fighters when it came down to it, they'd just have to be kept on a tight leash.

On the other side, the Ogravians, Aggjat, and the Farguut from the Verutan sector would also most likely join, with the Imbiri most likely asking for neutral observer status, so they could keep track of things. The politics in the Verutan sector were less volatile than in the Grimja sector, because of the size of the Verutan and Haumda empires and their peaceful relations with the smaller empires in the sector. Neither of the large empires would violate a treaty, it wasn't in their racial mentality, and they had peace treaties with the smaller empires, who had the sense not to violate them themselves. The only real tensions in the Verutan sector were between the Verutans and the Haumda, who were both wary allies and rivals at the same time.

The addition of these other races with their cultures and dispositions was going to make the Confederate Council much more entertaining, to say the least. Just putting Shakizarr and Kreel at the same table had demonstrated that.

Yes, things were definitely going to change around here the next few months, but the one thing he hoped never changed was down on the beach. Kellin and Jyslin had been pulled into the water, splashing and playing with Sirri, Maer, and Danelle as Rann and Shya rode body boards, sliding across the waves and nearly crashing into Kellin. Dahnai waded out and joined them, and Tim and Symone rushed down from their house as Myleena's personal ship landed on the pad behind her house. This was what he hoped never changed. This life, on this beach, with family and friends. This was the best part of Karis, and the part that he could only hope would be better. In about six months, a second wave of children would be born on the strip, started by Jyslin, a new generation of children to fill their lives and bring happiness and contentment. Soon he would have new daughters and a new son, by both his *amu* and his friends. He wondered what Siyae and Bethany would be like. He wondered how strong Siyara and Walter were going to be, given who their mothers were. He wondered how Tim and Symone would adapt to being parents once their daughter Lyra was born. He wondered how messed up Kumi's child was going to be, with Kumi as its mother. He wondered how long it would take the other girls on the strip to get pregnant, those who hadn't managed it yet.

And he wondered how Raisha would adapt to being in such a special situation. Imperial Princess, Generation, the daughter of Empress Dahnai

Merrane and the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, now the ruler of the independent House of Karinne. She would be the bridge between the two nations...and God would she be well protected. The Karinnes and the Kimdori had approved of the security plan the Imperial Guard had drawn up, and Saelle would be returning to Dracora with Dahnai when she went home, to return to her position as foster mother for Raisha and Miyai, return to her marriage with Evin, and return to Dahnai's right hand to act as both an advisor and a protector. Raisha would have the best that both Jason and Dahnai could offer her, and he was hopeful that she would be happy.

He closed his eyes as the wind changed, shifting from blowing from his right to directly in his face, and he felt it wash over him, bringing the smell of the sea and a hint of humidity that told him that a storm was coming. It was an omen, he pondered as he thought about Gau. An omen that things were going to change on Karis, and things were going to change through the entire sector cluster.

For good or for ill...that was the question.

Thus ends the story of Secession.

*In the next story, Inception,
the Confederation prepares for
the coming of the Syndicate,
growing in number and growing
in intrigue as the empires
demonstrate that they have their
own agendas.*

*Meanwhile, the Karinnes
begin their era of independence,
adapt to being an independent
house, with all the complications
and problems that the change in
their status entails.*

*And there will be other stories
to tell.*