

# ***TRIBULATION***



## **SUBJUGATION 4** BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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# Chapter 1

*Koira, 18 Toraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 28 January 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 18 Toraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

Amber was starting to make a nuisance of herself.

There was just something intrinsically, fundamentally *wrong* about an insufferably cute animal that was smart enough to *know* that it was insufferably cute, and therefore exploited that insufferable cuteness with almost ruthless impunity. In the 18 days since she'd arrived in their house, she'd quickly learned that she could do virtually anything and get away with it, because she was, quite literally, too cute to punish. Fortunately, thus far she had yet to attempt anything truly criminal, but that didn't mean that she didn't abuse her cuteness. One of the ways she was abusing it was just what she was doing now, licking his ear when he was trying to sleep. Her tiny little tongue was surprisingly hot, and it startled him awake.

"Amber!" he grunted incoherently. "I'm trying to sleep!"

She gave one of her little squeaking yips, not quite a bark but somewhat similar to it, and jumped up onto his shoulder. She didn't even weigh three pounds, she was so small, but her little claws were like needles as they kneaded into his shoulder. He groaned in frustration and swatted lightly in her general direction, but the little bundle of fur was not impressed by his attempts to shoo her away. She harassed him until he conceded defeat and opened his eyes, looking up at the little vulpar with sleepy aggravation. "Listen, you little—" he began, but when he moved his arm to point it his finger at her, she jumped down, pushed against his side, and wormed her

way under the covers. He felt her turn a circle and lay down tightly against his side, and then she was still.

And *that* was what she abused. She had some kind of fetish about sleeping under the covers, and she had this attachment to sleeping with him if Rann wasn't laying down. She would harass him until he either let her under the covers, or if he was asleep, harass him until he moved in such a way that gave her an opening. And she was totally shameless about it. For her, so long as she ended up napping against his side and under the blankets, what she did to get there made no difference. The ends justified the means in her tiny little vulgar mind, and if she annoyed the humans, well, she was too cute for them to be mad at her for very long.

He settled back down, trying to prevent his mind from racing. So much to do, and so much already done. So much to worry about. The expeditionary force that would ambush the incoming Consortium fleet was going to leave at sunset local time, and this was the first opportunity he'd allowed himself to do more than catnap in a chair in some dark corner for four days. And he wasn't the only one. The entire Legion was suffering from the same exhaustion as they prepared for this attack. There was so much they had to do. Finalize the attack strategy. Arrange the manufacturing of the mines, platforms, bombs, and assorted weapons that would be used in the assault. Train the KMS on how to deploy and utilize the equipment. And even while they did that, they debated ways to attack the bases the Consortium already had here and generated some rough ideas to refine later.

And outside the boundaries of Karis, there was even more going on, even more to worry about. Thus far, their enemies had not attempted to jump into any protected system, though they had attempted to deploy hyperspace probes to analyze the effect. But they knew what they could do, and the Kimdori, masters of hyperspace, had already taken steps to deny the Consortium the use of hyperspace for anything other than moving ships and using their modulated string communications. Enemy probes were detected and either captured or destroyed before they got anywhere near their destination, utilizing automated capture drones or hyperspace missiles, using machines that were immune to the effects of hyperspace on living minds. Beyond the Consortium, the other empires in the sector were trying to adjust to the new system, and not very fucking happy about it. The

Alliance especially were still absolutely furious about the interdictors and being forced to move everything through the Terra Entry Station, but Jason knew that they were only furious because it hamstrung their plans to instigate war in the sector and then pick up the pieces when the opposing sides destroyed each other. Right now, with the interdictors up and running, the Alliance knew that the Imperium and her allies, the Urumi, were nigh untouchable, which made it very, very hard to commit random border atrocities or infiltrate Imperium worlds and commit sabotage. Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had been very thorough in instituting their new policies concerning outsiders in their territory, and the Kimdori were kind enough to sweep through those who were allowed to remain and weed out the sleeper agents and spies. In ten days, all enemy agents within the Imperium and the Collective were expelled, arrested, or simply executed, depending on who they were, what they knew, and what kind of danger they posed.

This was where the Faey's nature worked in their favor. There were actually few outsiders within the Imperium, because others were *very* uncomfortable around the telepathic Faey. The agents and spies the other empires sent had to be telepathic themselves to evade detection, and how many telepaths another race may have varied from race to race, which restricted how many agents a government may be able to send. The Jakkans and the Colonists had a very high rate of telepathic citizens, especially the Colonists where 45% of their population had some kind of telepathic or empathic capability, where some races, like the Kizzik and the Zyagya, had no telepaths at all. There were 77 worlds in the Faey Imperium, but among all those star systems, there were only 107,493 people who were citizens of another government, which was an infinitesimal fraction of the Imperium's population. The vast majority of those were diplomats in consulates or workers in outside corporations that had offices in Imperium space. It was a different story in the Collective, but in a way, it was a similar situation. The Urumi had a reputation among the other races as being dour and unpleasant, so tourism within the Collective wasn't as high as it could have been. Despite that, Sk'Vrae's officials had to root through 1,583,946 applications for diplomats, corporation workers, and a few independent foreigners who had started their own businesses within Collective space to remain. The Kimdori were helping Sk'Vrae's people to root out the agents and enemies, but it was going to take them a few more days to process all the applications and check out the applicants.

Zaa would sort all that out. Jason had other things to do than worry about that.

Though he was exhausted, he went over everything one more time. They'd packed 31,842 gravitic shockwave mines into the cargo holds of *Dreamer* and *Arabax*, and there were 3,768 Torsion weapon platforms, basically flying guns, stowed on board the two large ships as well. Those two ships were at the vanguard of a fleet of 31 KMS ships that would be jumping out, starting the long, grueling two-day trip to their ambush point, and every ship was carrying something they'd use in the attack. The attack point was pretty far out beyond Exile, at the very edge of the spiral arm of the galaxy which was closest to Andromeda, at the far end of it from Karis, which would be 135.23 minutes of continuous hyperspace travel. It could only be done in 6-minute intervals, so they were going to break up the trip into two days so everyone would have a break. The Kimdori had already started their ships in that direction, the bowler ships that would be dragging meteors as well as searching for any surveillance the Consortium may have in the area. When the KMS ships arrived, those ships would only have about 20 minutes to set up the attack. They didn't want to get there too early in fear that the Consortium might investigate any destruction of possible surveillance equipment they may have monitoring the fleet's route. So, their ships would literally start deploying the instant they came out of hyperspace.

Tim's idea was their basic strategy, but the disposition of the enemy fleet had altered their original plan. At first, they thought the fleet was moving in 10 waves of 3,000 ships, but they were wrong. The extreme distance of the fleet from their sensors had returned a false reading, and it wasn't until three days ago that they finally had enough accurate intelligence to begin the real tactical planning to attack the fleets. They were towing six stripped-down interdictors with them, and each interdictor would be placed in a different place and activated in the path of the enemy fleet. Extreme hyperspace sensors had discerned the formation of the enemy fleet. It was jumping in five major forces, each force consisting of 6,000 ships, each wave towing one of those bases, and those waves were separated by about 40 minutes. That would give each wave time to come out of hyperspace, awaken the crew, and then move out before the next wave arrived. Their plan wasn't to mass everything at one chokepoint and

unleash it, as had been their original idea. Now they were going to conduct 5 separate attacks by dropping their fleet out of hyperspace at the same time, preventing the first wave from warning the waves behind. They'd plotted out where each interdictor needed to be to drop the enemy out of hyperspace simultaneously, which had literally required Cybi to calculate; it was *that* complicated. Each group would have a complement of 5,307 self-propelled mines and 628 Torsion weapon platforms to use to attack the enemy, and each ambush point would be supported by 39 Kimdori vessels off at a distance and ready to drag meteors behind them and release, to rake the enemy fleets with rocks moving at close to the half the speed of light. No ship would be within weapon range of the enemy fleets, relying completely on the automated weapons. The ships would be at a safe distance, attacking the enemy with heavy-mount railguns as a single Kimdori ship stayed with the interdictor, to either move it or destroy it as necessary, but the interdictor itself was going to be a weapon. If the Consortium somehow threatened them, they would be destroyed, and they'd been seeded so their destruction would create a Teryon-tachyon shockwave that would burn out any device that had hyperspace applications. It would burn out every Consortium string communications console, and would also blow out any hyperspace jump engine if it was online and in standby mode when the shockwave hit it, to further cripple any attempt to recover damaged ships by cutting their communications and damaging their ability to jump hyperspace. The ships would be controlling the weapons platforms by remote, which would fire on any ship that escaped the mine blitz and continue to fire on them until it was destroyed. As per normal Legion rules, no technology in those mines or those weapons platforms was anything but what the Consortium already had, and none of them would survive the attack. Every single device had a self-destruct, and in the case of the weapon platforms, those self-destructs were designed as a non-safetied PPG. If any of them were self-destructed, they would explode with the force of a fusion bomb, and those would be detonated as close to the Consortium ships as possible to try to deal collateral damage.

Myleena had also added a devious little something extra into those self-destruct protocols. If the platform was damaged or destroyed but the PPG and main computer survived the attack, then the computer would delay self-destructing until an enemy ship got close enough. In that manner, Myleena hoped that the Consortium ships that either survived or arrived to assist



would move to gather up the pieces to analyze, and then get blown up when the computer overloaded its unshielded PPG and made it explode.

That was the Legion way. Leave nothing behind. Do as much damage as humanly possible. Aggravate the ever-living fuck out of the enemy.

He'd been in yet another all-night conference with Tom and Jenny, talking over how to attack those bases and tossing ideas around, until Jenny literally fell asleep on Tom's shoulder. That had been about two hours ago, over at the hastily constructed Dirty Deeds Department, a warehouse and lab over in the engineering complex next door to the Shimmer Dome.

Was it two hours ago? He opened his eyes again and realized the sun was coming through the windows at the wrong angle to be morning. He blearily looked towards Jyslin's nightstand, at her clock, and saw that it was 1328 hours, not even noon yet, for noon was 1430 on Karis. He'd been asleep for over four hours. It sure as hell didn't *feel* like he was asleep four hours.

Shit. He had things to do. He couldn't sleep anymore.

He sat up, which annoyed Amber, and scrubbed his face, then reached to his nightstand and grabbed his gestalt even as he turned on the lights by mental command. He usually slept with it, but he didn't want *anyone* disturbing him when he went to sleep. But he didn't need the gestalt for everything anymore, thanks to the communion network Cybi designed and the Makati had built for them. Cybi had included protocols that allowed any Generation to access anything via communion the same as using a gestalt by using the network as the interface, but no Generation would go without a gestalt. They were more than simply the means by which to make everything work. They were computers attached to their brains, giving them more functions and capabilities, like the ability to download and instantly "learn" a language. And in these troubled times, no Generation would go without a gestalt there to amplify their psychic abilities.

That was one of the things that was going on here on the strip today. The Makati were installing something Cybi had designed four days before, something she called a biogenic focus. It was a large tactical gestalt that would be installed in their basement, since Jason's house was more or less the center of the strip, that *any* Generation within a thousand *shakra* could

access to boost their power. At that range, Jason, Myleena, Danelle, Kyri, Aran, and Rann could access that tactical gestalt without leaving their own homes.

He centered himself as he put on the gestalt, then turned it on. A bonded gestalt wasn't bad as far as starting up, reaching its fingers into his mind, but it wasn't an entirely pleasant sensation, and one to which they had to grudgingly adapt. He endured the gestalt intertwining itself into his thoughts until it was fully settled in, again operating in the back of his mind and laced between his thoughts, back to how he now considered *normal* to feel. He no longer felt normal without his gestalt.

Amber gave a little yip, looking up at him demandingly.

"Sorry, sweetie, I have to get up," he told her, reaching down and petting the tiny little thing, no bigger than a kitten. "You should go bully Rann into taking a nap."

She yawned, gave him an irritated look, then got up and padded off the bed, then went up to the closed door. She gave two little yips at a certain timbre, which was a trigger for the door to open. Vulpars did not like closed doors, so they came up with a way for her to get in and out on her own.

He swung his legs over the bed, getting his brain working. If it was nearly noon, then the task force would be undertaking final preparations for their projected 2100 departure. He also had some reports to read and a couple of status reports to send. But first things first. Using his gestalt, he opened a link with the military command center. Today it was lovely Eyai Heralle Karinne, with her shocking pink hair—her natural hair color—and her hauntingly beautiful aqua eyes. She was married to a Generation male named Rolan, standing in the place Shey often occupied. "Good morning, your Grace," she said with a nod. "You need a status report?"

"Yeah, I've been asleep too long. Hit me." He listened as she explained their situation, stressing the preparations being made by the task force about to leave, then gave him the status of several projects, both Legion and routine.

"The training courses for the new gestalt upgrades start tomorrow," she finished, then gave him a curious look. "Does it *really* do that?"

He nodded. "You'll never have to type again," he told her. "And the fighter and Gladiator pilots will have a hell of a lot more control, since they won't have to speak to communicate anymore. It's almost exactly like sending, just over a gravband. The new additions let you completely control any device with just your interface."

She whistled. "By Demir's sword. It will be, hell, revolutionary."

"Well, at least most of the control devices are holographic as it is, so we won't have a lot of useless junk to throw away."

She laughed. "True enough," she agreed.

"You should see Jyslin use it," he said, both amusement and respect in his voice. "All these lines of code, bam, just right there, and it scrolls down the monitor like a runaway glitch. It's almost unbelievable. And Myri's quite the expert on using hers to emulate sending over gravband channels."

"I wonder how long it'll take to adapt?"

"If Jys is any indication, not long at all," he answered. "An hour of training and you're good to go. At least the software upgrades were easy. They got pushed out last night as part of the universal reboot."

"I hate those," Eyai growled. "It takes half an hour to get the command center back up and running."

"Heh, I was working on something and forgot about it," he told her. "Nothing like getting a one-minute warning to save."

"I see you have one of the new interfaces already," Eyai noted, looking at the shiny new gestalt on his ear, its lone prong extending under his left eye.

"Heh, one of the perks of sitting in the big chair, Eyai," he told her, tapping it. It was indeed a new gestalt, incorporating the module he, Jyslin, and Myleena had designed. The gestalt was basically the same design, just with a slightly better main CPU and a little more memory. It had been the next version that would be pushed out and was already in production for the replacement, part of Myleena's endless tinkering with the gestalts and interfaces to maximize their power, and it would be the last one until she perfected gestalts that ran off of the Consortium's broadcast power system.

If there was one thing they could take from them and use, it was that.

Not everyone would get a new interface, though. Only military or critical command positions would get a new interface, since they'd only produced about 190,000 of them before they designed the new module. Those who weren't slated for a new interface would instead be given the module for the upgrade, which they could either install themselves or take to any local house-ran shop that distributed and repaired interfaces to have the module installed for them. But it had to be done in 9 days, because after 9 days, another universal reboot would disable control devices for public computers, to save processing power.

It was just one of the ways that Myleena, the genius that she was, was encroaching on Generation-only capabilities. The rest of the house would be able to emulate the Generation ability to commune over gravband after the upgrades were complete, using command thought that was modulated and broadcast over gravband. Almost everything a Generation could do with a computer anyone could do now, since Generations could commune with virtually any computer on Karis through the gestalt, or commune directly with biogenic computers without need of a gestalt. Myleena had solved half of it, the "output" from mind to computer, but Jason felt that it would take her a long, long, *long* time to figure out how to emulate the "input" side, the interface directly interacting with the brain of the wearer. That was still exclusively the realm of the Generations.

There was some play at it, but not for the Faey, over at the Academy. A Faey and a human were working together over there to explore the possibility of *cybernetics* emulating what Generations did. They in no way had any knowledge of the Generations, they'd conceived this idea completely on their own, but from what Ayuma showed him, it actually had a chance of success. A Faey would *absolutely never* allow anyone or anything to monkey with their brains, since it would threaten their telepathic abilities, but humans were an entirely different kettle of fish. Those two were trying to find some way to *directly* connect a human brain to a computer, by wiring the human brain with input/output sensors at critical points that would allow the brain to communicate directly with the computer. The Faey had completely mapped out the human brain about two years after subjugating Terra, so the Faey doctor had the medical skill, and the human cyberneticist, who was Faey trained and usually built cybernetic

prosthetics for patients, had the expertise to design and build a computer to interface with a human brain.

This wasn't a completely new field. The Faey had been using cybernetic prosthetics for centuries, eyes, arms, legs, and they could replace organs with artificial units as well to hold over a patient until a cloned replacement could be grown from the patient's own DNA to prevent rejection. Meya's cybernetic eye was a perfect example of that. She had decided to keep the cybernetic eye even after being offered a cloned replacement, because she liked it better, said it gave her much better vision and the ability to see in infrared and ultraviolet. She did have a new eye implanted to replace the stock one, an eye that was absolutely identical to her organic one, which made it impossible to tell that one of her eyes was artificial. The Faey already knew how to attach machines to the nerve endings and let the machine take orders from the patient's brain by interpreting the electrical signals received from the nerves.

But what these two were proposing was like something he remembered out of an old anime movie he'd seen called *Ghost In the Machine*, where someone would take a cord and plug it to a receptacle embedded in the skull, which held a computer attached to the brain by sensors and I/O leads, and physically connect a human brain to an external computer.

It was a curious idea, and Ayuma told him that the two of them were only about three months from actually trying it. They even had two volunteers that were willing to allow the Faey doctor to implant the sensors and leads in their brains, then attempt to directly interface with computers in a series of experiments to test the theory.

Jason couldn't fathom anyone willing to volunteer for an experiment like that, where one mistake turns you into a vegetable, and Faey medicine could cure anything that might handicap someone, from muscular dystrophy to spinal cord injuries. And he sure as hell wouldn't let anyone do that to *him*, since he was right with the Faey on this one. Any monkeying with his brain may damage his talent, and he would not allow that under any circumstance.

But, to each his own. Maybe those two believed that them being the first "wired" human beings would make them famous. Hell, it just might at that.

“Alright, tell Myri I’ll be over in about two hours, at least if everything goes to plan.”

“I’ll pass it on, your Grace. Bringing Rann?”

“I don’t know if he’d find sitting around listening to people talk very exciting, Eyai.”

“Well, we’d like to see him,” she smiled.

“I’ll make sure he knows that before I leave.”

“You’re just no fun anymore, my Duke.”

“Was I ever?” he asked, which made her laugh. “See you in a few hours.”

“Good luck with the rest of your schedule, your Grace. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Like waiting for an inspection, no doubt.”

She just winked at him, and the monitor went dark, then was replaced by the crest of the house of Karinne, the screen saver.

He stumbled into the shower and let the hot water wake him up, then he was dressing in jeans and a simple tee shirt as he listened to the open sending chatter going on in and around the house. Rann, Aran, Zachary, and Sora, all of his children but Kyri, as well as Yuri and Ryla, were currently having a training session with Ryn...and there was nobody better suited to train a telepath than the most skilled telepath on Karis, hands down. Ryn was *that good*. Aya and Dera were in the house, being the security presence, and Suri and Shen were out on the deck between his and Tim’s house, which accounted for the five guards that most often escorted him around, his personal retinue of sorts. There were five other guards on duty, scattered along the strip, just making sure everything was alright. Jyslin was downstairs with Maya and Vell, talking about something, along with Riza and Miza, Bryn’s twins, Christy and Jack, Temika and Mike’s daughter and son, Jari, Songa and Luke’s son, and Zara, Min’s daughter. Ayama and Surin were cooking lunch. Yana was on her way over, from the sound of it, and she was bringing Kyri over for lunch. Tim was at work, he knew, but Symone wasn’t at home. She’d expressed more and more curiosity about Gladiators, and he had no doubt she was over in Karsa playing around in

one. Being the *amu dozei* of the Grand Duke did have certain advantages, like being allowed to invade a military base and take a Gladiator out for a joy ride. Temika and Kumi were over at her office in the White House, Meya and Myra were over at Embraijn continuing their work with the Exiled that had decided to return to the house, Songa was over at the medical annex doing her job as the overall commander of the Karinne branch of the Medical Service, Luke was at a satellite classroom taking lessons from the Academy, Mike was at work over in the machinery shop at the Shimmer Dome, Myleena was up in Kosigi working on the Consortium ship, and Min and Bryn were working, but everyone else was home, either off shift or with a day off.

The other girls on the strip were busy now. Since they'd gotten involved in this war with the Consortium, they'd stopped sitting around being nobles and had involved themselves in the war effort. Zora was up at Kosigi right now, training on a battleship as a navigator. She would be entering the Fleet as a reserve navigator and instructor, but would primarily be working either as a dropship pilot to ferry personnel and supplies between Karis and Kosigi or as a Kosigi "pusher pilot" who moved ships around within the base as needed, which was why she was up there getting training on a battleship. She would also be doing occasional work with Myri in the command center along with the rest of the squad, manning comm terminals over in the command center at the White House and staying safely out of harm's way if Jason had anything to do about it. Maya was the only squad member not working in the command center, for she had become the nanny of all the kids on the strip, taking care of them while their mothers were off at work. This was a job for which Maya was well suited and glad to undertake, since she was by far the most motherly of all the squad. She enjoyed having a house full of kids, and Vell again proved he was the best husband on Karis by being there both for his wife and for the kids, teaching and being supportive. Just about every child on the strip called him Daddy Vell.

Songa certainly had her hands full now, because of the fact that Karis had been outed. Since it was no longer a secret, and there was no longer a need to keep Karis away from the rest of the Imperium, Jason and Miaari had decided that it was time to partially open the planet to the outside. That had started two days ago, when a combined group of Imperium and

Collective shipbuilders visited Kosigi and were in fact still up there. Jason had more room up there than he knew what to do with, so he had offered space in Kosigi to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae for shipbuilding efforts, who had sent engineering teams to look things over and work with the commander of Kosigi, Admiral Dellin Karinne, one of only four male Admirals or generals in the KMS. The big thing would be separating the facilities so his allies couldn't get into the areas where biogenic systems were kept or repaired, but that was doable. Yesterday, the Imperial Medical Service's central command had dispatched 18,000 doctors and medical staff to Karis, under Songa's command, to officially merge Songa's splinter Medical Service to the Imperial Medical Service and give her the doctors she needed to care for a population of 6 million. Songa had been in dire need of more doctors, so she was so happy yesterday when she went to meet the transport from Karis that she was all but walking on air. She'd be busy as sin for the next few weeks bringing her splinter organization up to official IMS standards, but it was more the sheer volume of work more than any needs to upgrade. Songa's little outfit was more technologically advanced than the IMS, and most likely it was the IMS that would be upgrading to Songa's standards. But there was official paperwork and rules and such that had to be smoothed out between them, and that was where Songa would be doing the most work.

There were other plans as well. There was a large contingent of Urumi workers coming to help man Kosigi and other construction efforts on Karis, and Dahnai had also promised workers to help out. The Kimdori as well were moving more and more workers to Kosigi as they built docks to build their own ships, which too would be kept separate from their allies because they utilized biogenics in their ships as well as a few technologies they even kept secret from the Karinnes. That hollow moon up there was about to get all kinds of crowded, but that was just fine, since it was, by far, the best shipbuilding facility among all the allied governments. Self-contained, well equipped, literally next door to a stargate, possessing an atmosphere while still being a weightless environment which made it easier on the workers assembling the ships, Kosigi was a shipbuilder's dream location. And the Imperial and Urumi shipbuilders certainly proved that. He had the suspicious feeling that Nera Doyalle all but had an orgasm when she saw the place. All they had to do was finish the second set of doors, which



would allow them to bring titanic behemoths like the *Aegis* into the dockyards, and they'd be all set.

The other thing Karis had over their allies was simple space. With 86% of the planet uninhabited and possessing an environment tolerable to every race in their allied governments except the Menoda, they had lots of room for factories to be built. Dahnai had already approached him with the idea of allowing her to build factories and facilities on the northern continent of Hevarga, with the express understanding that those facilities would be handed over to the Karinnes after the war was over. This proposal he and Miaari were still discussing. Jason was leaning towards it, Miaari was undecided but slightly skeptical of the idea, and they had to weigh the merits against the potential problems a little more before they made a final decision.

The proposal they did accept was from the Great Hive of the Kizzik. The barren tracts of unterraformed Karis were close to their natural desert habitat, and they wanted to bring a second, much larger colony to Karis and settle on the other southern continent, Virga, where the first colony had settled on Karga and was fully integrated into the house. Out on Virga, it was the Faey, humans, and Makati that would integrate in and around existing Kizzik infrastructure. They would terraform it to their tastes, and that would also provide House Karinne with a large force of inexhaustible Kizzik labor. Now that the scent-language translators were being mass produced at a frenzied pace by the Kizzik, they had suddenly gotten a *lot* more interested in spreading through the Imperium. Freed of the need for translators, the Kizzik were free to fully integrate into the Imperium, and Jason's talks with Dahnai made sure that the Imperium was welcoming them with open arms. If things were still on schedule, the first wave of Kizzik hive builders would arrive tomorrow, whose responsibility was to excavate the subterranean tunnels in which the Kizzik preferred to live, and begin the terraforming process by fertilizing the soil around their proposed hive location and planting crops and bringing their giant aphid-like livestock from their homeworld, sheep-sized insects that produced a honey-like nectar which the Kizzik loved.

Jason's full use of the abilities of other races of the Imperium had showed Dahnai just how effective they could be, so much so that she had taken his advice and had promoted a Makati to be the head of the palace,

her Chamberlain. Jason had no doubt that the Makati female would have her palace whipped into perfect operating order within a month.

He came downstairs and scooped up Danelle, who was coming back from the bathroom and headed for the den. *[Uncle Jason!]* she communed with surprising clarity, which was a surprise to him. Either Rann or Myleena had taught her that trick.

*[And who taught you to commune, you sneaky little thing?]* he asked with a smile, hefting her a few times.

*[Mommy. She said only you, Mommy, Miss Cybi, and the other kids could hear it.]*

*[Almost. Yuri and Sami can't hear it, but the others can. Did your mother also tell you how to use this?]*

*[Almost never, that it's a super-secret secret that we never ever tell anyone. But she said I can use it with you any time,]* she answered, grinning conspiratorially.

*[Your mother has good sense, and she's right. This is something that no one can ever, ever, ever know about, pippy. If they can't do it, they can't ever know about it.]*

She nodded seriously. *[Mommy made sure I knew that.]*

*[Keep that in mind. Now back to lessons with you.]*

*[‘Kay.]* He set her down and watched the six-year old rush back to the den, getting back to her lessons in sending.

*[Myli,]* he called, using the biogenic network to relay his communion up to Kosigi, *[I think we need to talk about what you're teaching that daughter of yours.]*

*[Pfft, keep yourself out of my business, Jayce,]* she teased in reply. *[She's pretty good at communion, isn't she?]*

*[Better than Rann,]* he said honestly.

He greeted Ayama and Surin as he entered the kitchen, then kissed his wife when she came in. *Morning,* he greeted.

*Morning, your Grace. Breakfast or lunch?* Surin asked.

He chuckled. *Anything, I'm hungry and I don't have much time*, he answered.

*We have the hamburgers almost done, if you can wait a minute.*

*Works for me. Morning love*, he greeted Jyslin.

*Morning*, she mirrored, kissing him again, then chuckling when he put his hand on her flat belly, where their twin girls were growing but hadn't grown enough to show quite yet. *Sorry for not waking you, but we decided you needed the sleep.*

*I guess I did*, he agreed, running his hand over his face. *I need some food and some coffee, then it's another long day. How did the Legion meeting go?*

*Short*, she answered. *Right now, we're waiting on Jenny and Faea out of the engineering department to get back to us about an idea.*

*Which one?*

*The meson cannon*, she answered. The meson cannon was actually a proved device, a weapon that destabilized the crystalline structure of certain metals and made them brittle, kind of like the liquefaction device Jason had invented long ago. But the difference between them was that the meson weapon *permanently* damaged the metal, where his device did not. The Imperium didn't use them in combat, since virtually every metal or alloy used as armor was immune to the meson effect, they used them primarily in demolition of buildings to pulverize the crystallized titanium girders and supports most often used as the superstructure. One of the ideas was to launch an automated meson cannon and have it attack one of the Consortium bases or shipyards, because the shocked tungsten/titanium alloy they used for the superstructure of their ships and bases *was* vulnerable to the meson effect. The hope was that the meson weapon could damage or destroy sections of their bases or sabotage their shipbuilding efforts by destroying their docks.

What they needed from engineering was to see if the meson weapon could fire while cloaked by a CMS, a Cloaking Matrix System. The Consortium's sensor technology was vulnerable to both the CMS and the Urumi's ingenious stealth field technology, a stealth system that utilized projected stealth shields rather than the armor of the ship, and they intended

to abuse the absolute fuck out of that fact. If they could work up a weapon platform equipped with a few meson cannons that could fire without disrupting the CMS, they could do some real damage. Myleena's engineering department had taken over the CMS project to work with it and try to improve it, so it would be up to the engineers to try to make it work.

*How's the production on the other toys going?*

*Full bore, she answered. They already have nearly a million Satan's Marbles made, and our warehouse has about six thousand harmonic conduit breakers stockpiled. All we have to do is mount them on hyperspace platforms and they're ready to launch.*

*Well, we'll see about that after we attack that fleet, he yawned. He sat at the kitchen table, Jyslin sat on the edge of it, and Ayama put a plate holding a hamburger and some french fries down for him. "Thanks," he nodded, picking it up. I need to get the bullshit out of the way quick so I can get over to the command center.*

*What bullshit?*

*The usual, he shrugged. Telling Dahnai and Sk'Vrae what's going on, fielding calls from the High Staff, sorting through all the whining. The usual.*

*Jyslin chuckled. Poor baby.*

*Watch it, woman, or I'll make you my personal secretary and make you field all those calls.*

*Oooh, a chance for you to do me on your throne? I'm in!*

*You are ridiculous, he laughed, patting her leg fondly.*

*I'm your wife, you silly boy. I'm allowed to be ridiculous, she grinned at him. She looked at her watch and winced. Fuck, I'm late, she complained. Rann! I have to go up to Kosigi to see Aunt Myleena. You wanna come?*

*I do I do I do I do! He sent back in a frenzy of excitement.*

*Then go get your armor on, baby, she told him.*

*Aww, can I go, Mommy Jyslin? Danelle asked.*

*I wanna go too! Kyri demanded.*

“And that’s why you don’t open send such things,” Jason chided her audibly, one of the rare occurrences when he spoke aloud to her.

She laughed. “Live and learn, I guess,” she answered. *Alright, alright, anyone else want to go?*

*Duchess, I’m giving them a lesson!* Ryn protested.

*Yeah, and like you wouldn’t like to take a break yourself,* Jyslin challenged, to which guilty silence was replied. *I’ll give you guys fifteen minutes. If you’re not in armor and waiting by the dropship, you’ll be left behind!*

There was a sudden explosion of sound, sending, and activity from the living room, as the kids being given a sending lesson erupted like a volcano, rushing to where their armor was kept. For Rann and Danelle, this wasn’t that big of a deal, but for the kids who lived elsewhere, it meant a frenzied run home and an attempt to get armored up as fast as possible. It was also the new reality of their situation. *Nobody* left the strip without wearing armor, as per Aya’s blistering ultimatum. Not even Jason, even if he was just going to the White House. This was now war, and in war, anyone in potential danger did not leave the house without their armor on. Jason now spent so much time in his armor, he was starting to feel like a turtle.

At least it was shiny, brand spanking new armor, just delivered four days ago. It was like Saelle’s armor, it was the new Mark II Crusader armor, the redesign after the first battle with the Consortium. It had thicker stomach armor, the vulnerable spot which had produced the most injuries during the battle, both pulse and MPAC weaponry in the forearm pods, and had already been upgraded to take advantage of the new abilities of the interface. The forearm keyboard and I/O device was no longer required, though Myleena decided to keep it in the design as an emergency backup. Unlike civilian equipment that could be remotely accessed by techs to diagnose problems or repaired by a roving tech, a soldier out in the field may not have that luxury, so they needed a reliable redundant backup to access the computer in their Crusader. Jason and the Generations wore a special version of the Mark II, with a built-in tactical gestalt. Wearing that armor, he could pick up a hovercar with his telekinetic ability. That armor was being built as fast as possible and distributed out to every Generation, even to the kids. Kyri was the first of the kids to get Mark II armor, but then

again, she was the only one of the kids who could fully utilize it, since she was the only one with expressed telekinetic power. And in typical Kyri fashion, she rubbed their noses in the fact that *she* had brand new armor, and they didn't.

*Fifteen minutes? Harsh,* Maya chuckled mentally.

*Call it motivation, they need to be able to fully armor up in four minutes anyway,* she replied shamelessly.

*Speaking of motivation, I need to get moving myself,* Jason sighed, taking another bite. *See you at the triple D?*

*Probably. We'll have to find some nice secluded corner and remind each other we're married,* she winked at him

He chuckled. *I wouldn't say no, that's for sure.*

*We'll work something out,* she winked.

Aya wouldn't let him out without escorts, not now, but she didn't deem it necessary to send all four of his usual escorts with him when he wasn't leaving the planet. It was Dera and Shen that Aya sent with him after he wolfed down his meal, armored up, and jumped in his dropship to head to the White House.

He was spending way too much time there now, and there was no end in sight. Now that they were officially at war, it having been declared by Ducal decree four days ago, his office at the White House compound was now where everything got done. He would have preferred to work out of home as he used to, but he had to be close at hand now, close to where the action was, and that was here, at the central hub of all house activity. It was yet another indication of just how things had changed.

The first major order of business was going to be the daily reports to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae. This was done via conference, usually with all three of them conferenced together, and the timing of this conference changed from day to day due to the shifting windows of activity on all three planets. Draconis and Karis were only separated by an hour, but Uruma Prime only had a ten-hour day, so the windows of opportunity that both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were available at the same time weren't consistent. He had an appointment with them in an hour, so he had time to read through some

progress reports in his office, which was a surprisingly spartan affair in the main building. Up until four days ago, he hadn't even really had a secretary, though demands had changed that. He now had two assistants, and neither were Faey. The senior assistant was a Kizzik, a noble named Ch'Thrk but allowed Jason to call her Chirk, whose amazingly organized mind kept all his paperwork and appointments in order. It only took her two days to get everything organized to her satisfaction, and now Jason knew exactly what was going on. His other assistant was a Makati named Brall, and much as the Kizzik's job was to keep everything Jason had to deal with straight, his job was to make sure Jason's decisions were carried out to his satisfaction. He jokingly called them In-Box and Out-Box, and they were an exceptionally effective pair. They were waiting for him when he arrived at the office, and Chirk almost performed the formal greeting, which Jason had told her not to do. "Alright, guys, hit me," he called as he closed the door.

"You have a conference with the Empress and Brood Queen in fifty minutes, my Duke," Chirk's mechanical translated monotone emanated from the module on her shoulder. "The daily reports are prepared and ready for your perusal. The highest among them is the new estimations on ship production and a new completion date for the new doors of Kosigi. I have your schedule ready. You have meetings at the command center and with Admiral Dellin, as well as projected time at the Three D once all business is concluded."

"Thanks, Chirk. What's the line on the Shimmer Dome?" he asked Brall.

"They're getting it ironed out, your Grace," he answered, scratching his eyebrow absently. "I had to go down there and kick a few shins, but they'll get the new assembly line in operation within the takir."

"Good, good. And the Gladiator software upgrades?"

"On schedule. We've had a few requests from the department of power, I'm checking things out for you."

"They want another plant up?"

"More than one. With the rumors flying that we'll be building up, they want to move ahead of any construction. The main core plant can handle

the entire planet's power, but this is for the emergency backup system. If we industrialize the untterraformed continents, as rumor has it, they want plants up and running before the first foundation is laid."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," he nodded. "Tell them to work out the details and send it up. What's the schedule for Virga looking like?"

"On schedule," Chirk answered through her translator module. "The first of the builders are to arrive in the morning, and all materials they asked for us to provide are staged and ready. They can begin tunnel excavation within an hour of arrival."

"The advance build teams already have the power couplings laid and the data towers set up," Brall finished. "When the Kizzik land, they'll find everything they need to get started and everything they asked for already there and waiting for them."

"Outstanding," Jason told them as he sat at his desk and used his gestalt to access his primary work panel, which would *only* allow Jason to use it. "Alright, guys, let me tackle these reports."

He worked through them, status reports on the various projects not important enough for him to personally oversee, until it was time to talk to the others. He never left his office to do so, the security protocols locking the place down and requiring him only to turn around to look at the air-projection monitor, a two dimensional hologram of sorts, that took up the entire back wall. Sk'Vrae's scaly face appeared first, and then Dahnai's lovely face seconds later. "Ladies," he greeted informally.

"Your Grace," Sk'Vrae nodded.

"Hey Jayce," Dahnai smiled. "Denmother Zaa?"

"Her staff said she'd be a little late, and to go ahead and start without her."

"Ah. So, how's the timetable?"

"Unchanged," he answered. "My task force will be jumping out soon to start towards the rendezvous point. We'll know how effective it is in a few days. Are both of you coming?"



Sk'Vrae nodded. "I have my schedule cleared to arrive on Karis in five days," she answered.

"I should be there in three," Dahnai answered. "Have you been getting hourly calls from the High Staff?"

"About every other hour, but yeah," he answered. "Every day that goes by, he gets more and more furious about the entry station. Keeps bitching that Alliance merchants aren't delivering on time. He's almost accusing us of intentionally delaying them."

Sk'Vrae snickered in a hissing voice. "He's smarter than we thought." They were, in fact, doing just that. They weren't being obvious about it, but the entry station knew that Alliance merchant vessels were to be given higher scrutiny compared to other ships, which caused more delays for them. The commanders of the TES were aware that the Alliance was considered hostile by their leaders, so they inspected every speck of dust that blew out of an Alliance merchant transport when it opened its cargo doors. The Alliance would backstab them at the first available opportunity, so they were being exceptionally cautious when it came to handling Alliance goods, making absolutely sure they contained no hidden surprises, scanning Alliance ships before allowing them to dock more thoroughly than other ships, and Alliance citizens visiting Terra were passively screened by Faey telepaths before allowing them to continue on to Terra.

"So, we waive any late charges enforced against Alliance traders by their customers due to the entry station and let him stew?" Dahnai offered.

"It sounds logical to me," Sk'Vrae agreed.

"Sounds good. How's the armor coming, Sk'Vrae?" Jason asked.

"We should have mass produced sections available in three days," she answered.

"The Goraga shipyards?"

"On schedule," Dahnai answered. "But from the reports I'm getting back from my shipbuilding units, it looks like we'll be shifting a great deal of shipyard activity to Kosigi. It's *way* better."

"We have plenty of room," he said simply. "The capital doors should be ready well before we'll have need of them. As soon as you officially request

it, we'll work out the details."

"Well, the Collective is officially requesting it," Sk'Vrae declared. "We will still build our fast attack ships at our own yards and the Goraga yard, but the Kosigi yard is far superior for building larger ships."

"Not a problem, your Majesty," he said simply. "I'll put my people on cordoning off a sector of the yard for your use. Just send us a schedule for moving your equipment over."

"Done. I'll send an additional twenty thousand workers dedicated to building the Collective's docks within Kosigi. I'll have them there in two days."

"We'll welcome them," he agreed. "I'll forward this to Admiral Dellin and let him handle the project."

"I'll send further inquiries to him," she nodded in understanding.

"I haven't received a full report on that yet, but odds are we'll be doing the same," Dahnai said. "So, Jayce love, could you start working on us moving in as well? I'm fairly sure that's what Lorna will suggest, may as well be ready to move on it as soon as I get all the recommendations."

"Not a problem," she assured her.

The screen split again, and Zaa's face appeared in the middle. "Denmother," Jason greeted her. "I was starting to wonder."

"A minor issue required my attention," she answered assertively. "I bring news."

"We listen to you, Denmother," Sk'Vrae prompted.

"My children have completed the investigation of Collective territory concerning hostile outsiders," she declared. "The full report will be made available to you within the hour, Sk'Vrae. The short of it is that we have identified one hundred and thirty-nine hostile agents in sensitive positions, an additional four hundred and sixty-one inactive sleeper agents, and sixteen hundred and nine hostile agents and passive intelligence gatherers in non-sensitive positions. I would suggest the elimination of those in dangerous positions and seventy percent of those in non-threatening

positions. The remainder we shall tag and observe to use to feed to our enemies false information.”

“It will be done as you wish, Denmother,” Sk’Vrae answered respectfully. “All know that in matters of intelligence, all should be as the Kimdori envision.”

“That was fast,” Jason mused.

“I sent additional children to complete the task quickly,” she answered. “I will have a projected course of action to deal with the problem in your hands in three hours, Brood Queen.”

“I will have it carried out exactly to your specifications.”

“Jason, the workers that will begin work on docks for Kimdori ships will arrive at Kosigi in two hours,” she told him.

“I read Dellin’s report,” he assured her. “We have everything ready for you.”

There really wasn’t much more to talk about, so after a little inane chatter, they ended the conference, and Jason’s real work began. His first stop after putting Chirk and Brall on their tasks was what was now called either 3D or Triple D depending on who said it, the Dirty Deeds Department, a rush-built warehouse by the engineering facility that was beside the Shimmer Dome. It was here that the Legion did its work brainstorming ideas to attack the Consortium and testing those ideas, and it was probably one of the most secure facilities on Karis. Two Gladiator exomechs and ten KMS Marines stood guard at the only entrance to the warehouse, which was protected by its own force shield, and not even Jason was immune to the entry protocols, which were biometric. He had to prove by DNA scan that he was who he said he was, and it was a very short list of people who were allowed past that checkpoint. The original Legion, about half of Myleena’s engineering department, and about twenty military personnel were allowed in, not counting the five members of the Imperial Guard that were assigned to Jason. Aya was serious when she said he goes *nowhere* outside the strip without guards.

Once inside, he got to work. First, he got a status report from Jenny, one that wouldn’t leave the building, the *real* status report on where they were testing several ideas. After that, he, Jenny, and a brilliant Faey engineer

named Gerann Karinne had a long discussion about broadcast power. Gerann was a spectral energy engineer by training and specialty, one of Myleena's old Black Ops people she lured to Karis, a man who dealt with broadcast energy systems from gravband to Teryon hyperspace communications to old-style radiation and EM systems. If it dealt with broadcast through air or space or generated energy frequencies, Gerann was the man to talk to, from designing a new Teryon transceiver to fixing a microwave oven. Gerann was the lead engineer in charge of the broadcast power system the Consortium used, and it would be his job to build a Karinne broadcast power network that would both supply remote power and also be un-jammable. Gerann was both trying to find a way to jam Consortium broadcast power while simultaneously trying to design a system which could not be jammed in return. But he was up to it. Gerann was gifted when it came to dealing with frequency-based systems. Because of the viability of broadcast power, Gerann currently had the highest rung on the ladder of priorities that didn't deal with fighting the Consortium, and his work was so important and sensitive that he and his staff had been moved to 3D to work on the project.

Gerann was a curious young man. He was only forty, which was still young by Faey standards, and had shocking pink hair that he kept in a military buzz cut, a hue almost identical to Captain Jeya Denalle. He was used to seeing pink hair, since it was something of a common Faey hair color, but it looked decidedly odd on a man with Gerann's rugged, almost brawny features. Gerann was *very* well built, since he lifted weights, which was a very un-male thing to do in Faey society, but his wife certainly didn't mind. Gerann was married to one of his ship captains, Captain Rola Karinne of the cruiser *Oravalo*. Rola had taken over after the captain was killed in the battle, so she hadn't named the ship she currently commanded. Rola was, however, slated to take over on one of the new tactical cruisers that were already being built, slightly larger than a regular cruiser, smaller than a heavy cruiser, but with much bigger engines and packing much more firepower, and she intended to name that the *John Wayne* in honor of her favorite Western actor.

"Alright," Jason said after Gerann got him up to speed, "when do you think you'll have a prototype transmitter ready?"

“I’m building it now,” he answered. “It’s not going to be un-jammable, but I have to start somewhere. It’s been a little tricky trying to get metaphased plasma into a carrier. It’s not going to run on microwaves.”

“Incompatible?” he asked, to which Gerann nodded.

“I can’t get multispectral phased plasma into a single phased carrier. I think that’s why the Consortium uses the type of plasma power they do. Instead of building two different systems, they just stuck with what they could broadcast and tried to make it the best they could.”

“But you think you can broadcast metaphased?”

He nodded again. “I can broadcast Karinne metaphased,” he said confidently. “I already did the math. The prototype I’m building uses *our* technology, not theirs, and we’re more advanced in power generation and power management than they are. I can’t piggyback plasma on a microwave signal, but I *can* piggyback it into a Teryon carrier. Teryons are already multidimensional, so they can support piggybacking modulated energy that exists in multiple quantum states simultaneously, where microwaves can’t.”

Jason’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he answered. “The small-scale test model I built worked, so now we’re scaling up to prototype stage. I just need to build a receiver and we’ll be able to test it in about five days.”

“Damn,” Jenny breathed. “What kind of range will it have?”

“The math says we have to limit the energy broadcasts to short and medium range Teryon frequencies,” he answered. “Long range frequency blocks introduce too much distortion into the metaphased plasma to allow it to be demodulated and used. So if I adapt it to medium range Teryon blocks, a power transmitter on Kosigi could power all of Karis. Odds are I won’t do that, though. I’d rather use a series of seventeen short-range broadcast nodes scattered over the planet and Kosigi, so we’re not depending on *one* power source. This is war, and if we lose that one single broadcast node, we’re in deep shit. The system I have in mind will use strategically placed nodes that are spaced within the maximum range of at least two other nodes, so if one goes down, the other two nodes can increase their power to cover the down transmitter’s area until it’s repaired.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Jason agreed. “But we should still build two medium-range power plants as a redundant backup and just run them on minimum power, keep them warmed up so to speak, stations that can cover the entire planet, and have them ready to go just in case. Given we’ll be relying on this new system as much as the Consortium already does, it has to be absolutely uninterruptible.”

“You see to the point of it, your Grace,” Gerann nodded soberly.

“When will you have the prototype ready?”

“I should have it ready for testing in five days,” he answered. “I’m waiting on the Shimmer Dome to build me some custom biogenic boards.”

“Biogenic?”

“I told you we’re using our technology,” he reminded Jason. “Teryon communicators use biogenic systems, your Grace, you know that.”

“Could you use moleculartronics if you adapted it?” Jenny asked.

He shook his head. “Biogenics aren’t as fast as moleculartronics, but moleculartronic systems can’t handle Teryon communication systems. Teryon systems require immense bandwidth, because they’re multidimensional. To adapt a moleculartronic computer to handle that bandwidth, it would be a hundred times bigger than a normal transmitter.”

“But the Faey already use multidimensional moleculartronic systems,” Jenny protested.

“Yes, and look how big they are,” Gerann answered immediately. “Look at the hyperspace jump engines on any other ship in the sector. They’re *massive* compared to the ship itself, taking up over half the volume of the ship. Our ships have much more efficient engines that are only ten percent of a ship’s volume, because we have better, more efficient designs that use computers more compatible with multidimensional applications, just like the Consortium does. That’s why we and they can jump in real time, where the others all have relativity delay. Don’t confuse alternate quantum states used in metaphased plasma with multidimensional states. They’re two different things.”

“That’s one thing I have to give the Consortium,” Jason grunted. “That computer we captured is *damn* advanced. If it can impress a Moridon, it’s

up there.”

After that conference, Jason went up to Kosigi to meet with the arriving Kimdori workers. They arrived in five huge transports, tens of thousands of trained Kimdori industrial workers who already had their assigned tasks. Three quarters of them would be building docks for the construction of ships, while the rest of them would be under Karinne command and would be put to work to complete the second set of doors. That was the most important thing to finish at the moment, so they could repair and build their own large ships. The inner doors and system of three redundant airskin shields had already been installed, and they were only about ten days from finishing the tunnel, currently burrowing through the rocky outer layer much faster than they’d gone through the armored interior shell, armor that would give even the Consortium nightmares about trying to breach. After that, they would build doors over the entrance and cover them with rock, so they looked natural, and they’d be in business.

After that was done, he returned home for a quick meal and to spend some time with the kids, then went to the White House and basically aggravated the hell out of Myri and the command staff by being in the command center to observe as they made final preparations for the task force to depart. Four members of the Legion were going with the task force as consultants for the deployment of their weapons; Bo, Luke, Leamon, and Tom, the four most technically trained and capable outside of the core Legion engineers who were needed at 3D. Jason looked at the holographic monitor screen that dominated the far wall of the command center, divided up into six different camera views as well as a tactical map of the entire Karis star system that showed deployed resources, and one of the views showed the task force massing up in preparation. It was a grand sight, the triangular aft-winged destroyers and cruisers surrounding the longer, more sleek yet still triangular-based heavy cruisers *Arabax* and *Temeron* and the battleship *Victory* that made up the Karinne fleet. Jason was sitting at a console not far from the raised, circular main command platform where Myri, Sioa, Juma, Navii, and the core command communicators sat, trying to stay out of their hair and looking over the operational status reports of the many automated weapons that were loaded on their ships. The Kimdori ships were already en route, and from the look of that report, they’d arrive right on time.

Jason and the command staff basically watched for two hours as the last of the containers were loaded and the ships completed their preparations, and he felt his stomach start to churn when the task force formed up and prepared to jump out. Admiral Leta Karinne, one of the women who had worked her way into the house to earn the title of Zarina and the captain of the *Victory*, was on the big screen, giving a status report. Leta would also be the commander of the task force and the woman in charge of the attack, so he and she had had quite a few long talks since the task force was formed and the orders were sent down. “We’re right on schedule,” she summarized. “The last weapons are being secured as we speak, and all ships in the task force are reporting ready to jump.”

“Then you have the conn, Captain,” Myri told her. “The mission is now in your hands.”

“I’ll try not to embarrass you, your Grace,” she winked, looking at Jason.

“You’d better not, or I’ll send you to your room without supper when you get back,” he answered.

“Like I don’t do that already,” she snorted. “I just hope your Legion agents can handle hyperspace.”

“You’re too high rank to clean up their puke, Leta.”

She laughed. “Well, they’ll have plenty of time to rest once we reach our destination. All of four minutes.”

“They’ll cope. If they don’t, kick them in the ass.”

“I’ll make sure to tell them you told me to do it,” she winked.

“Be my guest.” He gave her a serious look. “Be careful out there, girl. And good luck.”

“We don’t need luck,” she said with a light smile. “Reports by the hour, General.”

“Noted. Jump at designated mark,” Myri replied.

The command center watched in nervous anticipation as the task force turned in unison, then the countdown timer in the upper left ticked away the seconds. When it hit zero, the task force jumped out, vanishing as if by



magic, riding a synchronous waveform that allowed Karinne ships to jump out through the distortion created by the interdictors.

“And there they go,” he sighed, standing up. “And I’ll get out of your hair now, Juma.”

*You’d better, your Grace, she smiled at him. Go home and get some rest.*

*I think I will. Keep me posted.*

*I’ll send you hourly reports, Myri promised.*

Jason got home well after Rann’s bedtime, and Jyslin was still at 3D, so he was greeted when he came in the back door by Ayama and Hara, the night watch commander who had just come on duty, taking over for Kaera, the evening watch commander. Ayama handed him a cup of coffee as he came into the kitchen, and he took it with a nod of thanks. *Where is everyone?*

*Rann is in bed, Hara relayed as Dera and Suri went back out, heading to their barracks for some rest. Lady Jyslin is at the Shimmer Dome. Kyri and Danelle are upstairs with Rann, they’re sleeping over. Rahne was over earlier, and Aura also came to call. Oh, and Symone tore up the lawn when she brought a Gladiator in for the kids to look at up close.*

*Great, Jason laughed audibly. How bad?*

*I was quite put out, Ayama declared. I’ll have to hire a service to repair the damage.*

*Be sure to send Tim the bill, he told her with a slight smile.*

*Oh, I’ll be sure to do that, she answered huffily.*

He went up to his room and took off his armor, then went down to check on Rann, Danelle, and Kyri. They were asleep when he opened the door, all in his bed, Kyri sleeping with her head at the foot of the bed for some odd reason, and he had to smile a little bit. He never had gotten over the idea that those two precious little ones were *his children*. Rann, such a smart little boy, already showing a maturity and temperament that would make him a fine Grand Duke. Kyri, good God, so much power in such a little body. She lacked the maturity to know how to use it responsibly, but at least she hadn’t done anything outrageous yet. And though she wasn’t his,

he loved Danelle almost as much as Myleena did, for she was a very curious and intelligent little girl, and she'd make her mother proud someday. He stepped in quietly and tucked Rann and Danelle in a little more, and his movements caused Kyri to stir. *[Daddy,]* she communed.

*[I'm sorry I woke you, pippy,]* he answered gently, leaning over her and kissing her on the cheek. *[Why are you sleeping this way?]*

*[Why not?]*

He chuckled quietly. *[Alright, you got me there,]* he smiled at her. *[Where's your mother?]*

*[Home. Danny and Ranny asked me to come.]*

*[Well, that was nice of them,]* he told her. *[And there wasn't any ulterior motive behind it, hmm?]* Kyri flushed slightly, which made him smile. *[I thought so. What are they trying?]*

*[They want to learn how I do telekinesis.]*

*[Telekinesis, dove. Any headway?]* he asked curiously.

*[I think Danny's about to get it,]* she answered. *[Ranny, dunno. I don't think he's figured it out yet.]*

*[Hmm, maybe I'll give you a hand tomorrow,]* he mused. *[They should be learning it from me or Ayuma anyway. You're not a good teacher.]*

*[I am too!]*

*[You enjoy teasing them too much when they fail to be a good teacher,]* he challenged, which made her flush again and him chuckle. *[We'll talk about it in the morning, dove.]*

*[Kay. Night, daddy. I love you.]*

*[I love you too, my Kyri,]* he answered, kissing her on the forehead. *[Sleep well.]*

He padded back to his room, but not without touching base. Despite the fact that it was all the way on the other side of Karsa, the powerful bond between Jason and Jyslin let him reach her. *Love*, he called.

*What is it, Jason?* she asked.

*When are you coming home?*

*In about a half an hour or so, she answered, her weariness bleeding in through her sending, and making it a touch hard to decipher given they were sending across about twenty miles. If you're half as exhausted as I am, you'll be asleep when I get home.*

*Well, don't strain yourself, he warned. I don't want our daughters born with worry lines.*

*She laughed mentally. Blame the Consortium for that.*

*I surely will. Now wrap it up and get home. That's an order.*

*An order? And just who are you to order me around, boy? she asked playfully.*

*I'm your husband, the father of your son, and I have this little piece of jewelry that says I outrank you, little missy. Now get home.*

*Oh no, you did not just use the ring argument!*

*Bet your ass I did. Now come home before I strip you of your title, have Red Horn build a dungeon, and toss you into it!*

*Keep digging that grave, buster, she taunted in reply. I'll deal with you when I get home. Someone has to remind you of just who runs things around here.*

*It sure as hell isn't either of us, he ventured.*

*She laughed in his mind. True. I'll wrap this up and come home, since you're being such a little bitch about it.*

*Yah yah yah, it worked, didn't it? Now come home!*

*She managed to get home before he was fully settled in. She was in her armor, and she sat on the edge of the bed as he read through some reports on a handpanel. Well, now that I have the armor advantage, I should educate you, boy, she teased as she kissed him.*

*That armor won't save you from me, wench, he retorted. Now take it off.*

*Yes, master! she answered with a teasing smile. She made a little show out of it, enjoying him watching her, so she made sure to act like it was a striptease. Once she was fully nude, tall and sleek and sexy and*

unbelievably attractive, she picked up a towel, blew him a kiss, and trotted into the bathroom. She sent the entire time she showered, telling him about the day's activities over at 3D, about their success in coming up with a way to adapt Jason's hypersonic bug killer they used on Menos, one of his first real inventions, to attack the insectoid ship crews of the Consortium. *Songa went over the models, and she said it has a fairly good chance of success, she answered. It won't kill them, but the frequencies are designed to vibrate their exoskeletons, which would probably feel like a thousand ants crawling all over them. But if we use it at the right time, it might distract or hamper an enemy ship long enough for us to destroy or capture it. Songa is still wheedling me to get her a live specimen to examine, you know.*

*Same here, Jason agreed. But we'd have a better chance at a live capture when Myli or Gerann figure out a way to jam their broadcast power. If they don't get the order to kill themselves, we might be able to get to them before they take the initiative and do it themselves.* He read an update on command staff movements and saw that Commander Abrams had been promoted to a cruiser...that was fast. He'd been captain of the destroyer *Merro* for only a few months, but he was in line for the next cruiser that came out of Kosigi. A few other names were here, he saw. Navii was moving ship captains up and promoting officers to the destroyers, because they had a fucking slew of new ships in production. Jeya would be leaving the *Steadfast* to command a cruiser, and Hiae would be the first captain of one of the new tactical battleships. That wasn't unusual though, for the captain of the *Defiant* was often first in line for the next big ship that came available. She'd be a good choice for the new class of ship, larger than a heavy cruiser but smaller than a battleship, and armed to the fucking teeth with *nine* particle beam projectors on top of sporting an armada of pulse weapons and plasma torpedo launchers, an Imperium weapon that had the firepower to be included on Karinne ships. The ships traded that firepower for empty space, so these new ships would have no fighter bays. Other ships in the task force would be supplying fighters, and there was a design for a carrier class ship already in the works, a ship designed purely to carry fighters. Pulse weaponry made even a single fighter a dangerous enemy to a warship, because they were fast enough to close vast distances quickly, nimble enough to evade fire, and pulse weaponry would go right through Consortium shields and armor. The fighters had proved themselves in the battle at Karis, and even though they couldn't employ them for

telepathic attack against the Consortium in the usual Faey tactic, fighters were still an important element of KMS strategy. A swarm of fighters could destroy an enemy ship, and that made them worth it right there.

He checked the Kosigi reports once he started thinking about fighters, and there it was. Cybi's little pet project, and it was due for completion in 2 days, 17 hours. She was building the fighter the Karinnes designed, the Wolf fighter, in an automated bay up in the moon. He'd looked at the sims for it, and *fuck*. If it could do what the simulations said it could do, look out universe. It was nearly 20% larger than a Raptor, and most of that extra space was taken up by the engines, which made it as fast as sin and as agile as a dancer. It was armed with pulse weapons that were much stronger than the weapons on a Raptor, nearly double the output power, and could carry external missiles on its wings for long-range combat. The pulse weapons in a Wolf could do more than blow holes in the hull. It could penetrate past the outer sections, penetrate deep into an enemy ship, and that would let it do some real damage when the Teryon pulse exploded into normal space if the pulse bundle was a good 90 feet past the outer hull. That would get the pulse blast into the target ship's internal systems and superstructure.

He just had to ask. *[Cybi, is this on schedule?]* he asked, pointing at the Wolf report. She would no doubt access the minicam in his gestalt and look at where he was pointing.

*[Ahead of schedule, actually,]* she answered. *[I was going to surprise you.]*

He chuckled. *[Well, now that I've ruined it for you, when will it be ready?]*

*[It's ready now. In fact, go look out your window in about twenty minutes and you'll see it land on your pad. I'm sending it down by remote link right now.]*

*[Outstanding! So, I get to play with it tomorrow?]*

*[I felt you could use a distraction, so you do not sit at a panel and worry all day tomorrow. Or even worse, go back to the White House and torment Myri and the generals.]*

He laughed. *[They bitched to you, eh?]*

*[Considerably.]*

*[Well, thanks, Cybi. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.]*

*[I always think of you, Jason,] she answered mildly. [You are both my Grand Duke and my friend.]*

*[Well, a guy can't go wrong with you watching out for him,] he chuckled. [I'll take your experiment out for a test tomorrow. We can make a day of it, see if it performs up to the simulations.]*

*[I'm confident it will.]*

*[If it pans out, we'll need to get the fighter into immediate production.]*

*[I've already worked out a production schedule, and the new factories built for fighter production will be online and tooled to produce Wolf fighters in two weeks.]*

*[It's going to take some training for the pilots, though,]* Jason grunted, looking at a holo of the cockpit, which was best described as a coffin. A Wolf pilot would not sit in the ship, he would be laying prone in a heavily armored box literally in the middle of the ship. The pilot would rely completely on cameras for vision, including remote cameras that would orbit the fighter and be controllable by the pilot to check things out while the fighter stayed at a safe distance. For a Generation, it would be very easy to adapt to a Wolf. But for a standard fighter pilot, it was going to take some training, both to adapt to a cockpit with absolutely no manual controls whatsoever and to adjust to using cameras as their eyes instead of looking for themselves. Even though a Raptor was interface controlled, it did have a few manual controls, either backups or for tertiary systems not important enough to convert to interface control. The Wolf was like a Gladiator in that it was completely hands-off, done purely by interface with only video screens to serve as a means of receiving input. For that matter, it was also similar to a Gladiator in that the pilot was put in an armored box buried in the middle of the mecha.

It arrived just as Jyslin got out of the shower. She joined him at the window to watch in curiosity as the large fighter slowly descended, and Jason was impressed. It was sleek, larger than a Raptor, and had two sets of triangular wings amidships and at the stern, the stern wings much smaller, almost like stabilizers rather than wings. It had angled offset vertical

stabilizers both above and below, and Jason saw as it turned to land on the pad in the proper orientation that the forward main wings were angled down by about 20 degrees in relation to the keel line, where the rear stabilizer wings were level with the keel. It had a cockpit just forward of where the nose attached to the flared fuselage, put there purely as a means for the fighter to carry an additional passenger which would be empty most of the time, and he could see the remote cameras, circular discs attached to points on the fighter's fuselage. There were 16 of them, but only 6 of them were intended to be in use at a time, one in each axis direction from the ship. Those circular pods were more than just cameras, however. Each one carried external sensor equipment in addition to a camera, which would give a Wolf a much broader sensor sweep radius and the ability to remotely sweep an area by sending a camera pod to investigate. The camera pods would have a high mortality rate in combat, so the fighter needed to carry quite a few spares. The fighter itself was a glossy black, which meant it was unpainted compressed Neutronium, the metal's natural color.

*What is that?* Jyslin asked as it landed.

*My new toy,* Jason sent eagerly. *It's the prototype fighter. Cybi just finished it. I get to give it a shakedown tomorrow.*

*Ah. Well, it should keep you from pulling your hair out worrying, at any rate,* she noted, then she giggled and kissed him when he snorted at her.

*You have your own work to do, woman,* he warned, reaching down and goosing her.

*She laughed. I'm too tired!* she protested. *And so are you, mister! I can tell! So sleep first, sex in the morning.*

*Such a morning girl,* he noted, which made her giggle. *But you'd better get it now. I have a new girl now, and you'll just be the obstacle keeping me from her in the morning.*

*She gasped, then laughed loudly when she saw his expression. Oh, now you're in trouble, buster,* she sent with insincere indignation, grabbing his hand and dragging him away from the window. *Now get over here and start convincing me that I should bother keeping you.*

*Fine with me, there's nine other girls out there ready to take your place,* he replied flippantly.

*I own you, buster,* she grinned at him. *They can rent you, but they pay me for the privilege.*

*I want half the profits, then.*

She snorted, which made him laugh. *Shut up and go to bed,* she ordered. *I'm so tired I can barely stand.*

*Poor baby,* he teased, letting her pull him down into bed. *You know, what I have in mind doesn't require you to stand,* he sent, letting desire tinge his thought.

She gave him a hard look, which made him explode in laughter. *In the morning!* she sent commandingly.

Jyslin did pretty much well rape him in the morning, which he didn't mind at all, but he was halfway serious when he told her she'd be keeping him from his new girl. As soon as he wolfed down breakfast, he armored up and went out onto the flight pad, where the sleek black war machine awaited him.

Just getting into it was different than any other mecha. The pilot entered from the belly, floating up into what all but looked like a maintenance hatch, then he settled into a command pod that looked almost exactly like a Gladiator's, featureless metal armor with viewscreens that descended from the top to surround the pilot. All input would be done with an interface or gestalt, but all output came onto the screens or were relayed by a mechanical female voice not too far from Cybi's voice. The armored pod locked his armor in, completely immobilizing to the gel-backed locking plate, then the entire pod rotated so he was laying on his back in relation to the ground, feet pointing towards the nose of the craft, which was done to minimize the armored pod's aspect towards the directions where fire would most likely come, the bow and the stern. He reached out with his gestalt and made a connection with the fighter's computer. At that mental connection, the fighter started up, the screens blinking on with various camera angles, a head's up display, and tactical information along the edges of the three front-facing screens.

"Alright, Cybi, let's do a complete diagnostic," he called aloud, testing the fighter's voice recognition system as he commanded the fighter to



completely power up and begin top-tier diagnostics, the diagnostics the fighter would run for a maintenance worker, not a pilot.

*“Understood,”* her voice returned vocally. *“Mind, my friend, that the command center is monitoring, so no funny business, Myri says”* she told him.

“I’ll crash this thing just to spite her.”

*“You will not! I did not put all the effort into building that mecha for you to wreck it just to amuse yourself!”*

“You’re so mean to me,” he teased as the diagnostic results started scrolling down his left screen.

After a few minutes, the diagnostics were complete, and Jason allowed Cybi to download all applicable information he needed to pilot the Wolf into his gestalt. With that information attached to the back of his mind, he’d be able to pilot the Wolf effectively enough to give it a test run, but like any skill or ability, only practice would move that information from the gestalt into his natural memory. He’d be a poor fighter pilot in the Wolf until he had time to master it, but he’d be better than a Raptor pilot thrown into it for the first time. That was because even though he had the information in his gestalt and at his fingertips, there was still a delay between getting it from the gestalt to his brain. And in modern fighter combat, a delay of even a few milliseconds could kill. He felt the engines power up, and could feel their power in his skin, in his very bones, a slight shivering of the craft that told him that Cybi had really packed some heat in the engine casing.

*[Alright, Cybi, let’s see what this baby of yours can do,]* he called, his communion translated into gravband the command center could pick up.

The instant he picked the skids up off the plascrete, he was in complete and total *love*. The Wolf was sleek, agile, incredibly powerful, yet it handled with the subtlety of his Nova, responding to the slightest nuance of his communion, responding to his *desire*, not his *command*. The pilot pod was protected from G-forces by an inertial dampening field, so Jason could perform moves that would kill another pilot in the Wolf. Despite being built for space combat, Cybi had made it so aerodynamic that it cut the laminar air like a knife, giving it incredible speed and agility in the atmosphere, and when he dove it into the Karsa Sea, those same forces let it slip through the

water like a shark. The oversized engines gave the mecha incredible power, the ability to accelerate and decelerate in a split second.

After putting it through its paces in the atmosphere, he ascended up into space, and once he switched to vector-based navigation, the ship's agility increased tenfold. The thing was unbelievably fast and could turn so hard it was almost like it simply disappeared going in one direction and appeared going in the new one. Holy *fuck*...no Consortium ship could ever hope to outrun this thing! He launched the remote camera pods, which Cybi called spinners because their outer cases rotated during operation like a frisbee, and suddenly he had a much wider point of view. This was where he was different from the other pilots, because he was a Generation. The Wolf's computer literally built a three-dimensional map of everything around him then fed it directly into his gestalt, which then fed it directly into his brain. He just *knew* where everything was around him nearly 60 *kathra* in every direction. For a standard pilot, that map would display on one of the viewscreens.

*[We're getting back some solid data here, Jayce,]* Myri called over gravband. *[There's no stress or anything at all showing on the prototype. It's solid as a rock, even with the high stress maneuvers you're doing]*

*[Yeah, it's hard to tell I'm even turning in here, the dampeners are hardcore,]* he answered. *[Let's try a dry run. Have Kosigi launch a destroyer for me to shoot at.]*

*[Sure thing, hold on,]* she answered. Seconds later, a destroyer came out of the doors of Kosigi, one of the hot-ready standby ships that would respond to an emergency, and he saw it was the *Steadfast*. Jeya's ship... though not for much longer.

*[I heard there was this talkative braggart out here that needs his butt whipped,]* Jeya's voice called teasingly over shortrange.

*[Prepare to eat crow, woman! Uhh, remember, this is an exercise. If you scratch this thing, Cybi will beat you senseless.]*

*[I certainly will,]* Cybi's voice cut in, which made Jason laugh.

*[Oh, alright, I'll put the weapons on wargame mode,]* she sighed in mock disappointment. *[But it's terribly unfair when I'm not allowed to fight back. If even the test shots do damage, I'll be spanked!]*

Test shots from pulse weapons still packed a little punch, so Jason raised the Teryon shields, which were the only shields known that could repel pulse weaponry. He made sure to triple check that his own pulse weapons were on wargame mode, firing at minimum power, then he turned and dove at the *Steadfast* like a hunting falcon. With the superior sensors in the mecha, he was able to identify firing vectors with blazing speed and slide his ship out of those lines of fire, which caused the storm of pulse blasts launched at him to miss. He penetrated their defensive fire with shocking speed, then fired his own pulse weapons at the destroyer once he was in range. A series of dull white balls peppered out from just under the nose and to each side of it in three distinct lines, since the Wolf had six pulse weapons rather than the four a Raptor employed, and those shots lit up the destroyer's shields. He turned with his trajectory as he passed over the destroyer, continuing to fire by keeping his nose oriented to the destroyer and using his engines to continue to evade incoming fire, simply coasting along on his forward momentum. He completed the maneuver by flying backwards, the fighter slipping back and forth, up and down to evade dull white orbs as his own pulse weapons continued to blaze and continued to hit the mark over and over. Though his pulse blasts were stopped by the destroyer's shields, the computers were calculating impact points and simulating the damage as if he were firing at full power.

According to his own readout, he scored no damage on the *Steadfast* after he flew backwards and out of his weapon range, for in the simulation, he had yet to bring down the destroyer's shields. But, in another version of the simulation that treated the *Steadfast* as an enemy ship that would not have shields that could stop pulse weaponry, he had dealt noticeable damage to the vessel. Either way, he had taken not a single hit in reply, which meant he was still alive, and the fight would continue. He turned on the destroyer so fast that he was sure the gunners on board were a bit startled that he was coming back at them before he was even out of their range, and again sliced through their defensive fire, focusing his fire on the same places he'd shot the first strafing run, trying to collateralize the damage by hitting shields already weakened by his first attack, and in the other simulation, trying to hit holes he'd already made in it, which would let his shots penetrate even deeper into the enemy ship.

The second strafing run scored a kill...it just wasn't his. His alarm blared when he took a hit to the starboard wing, which basically blew it off in the simulation, but he was still alive. He continued to fire as the ship pretended to suffer that damage, taking his starboard pulse weapons offline to simulate the damage to his starboard side and reducing his engine output as he lost his aft starboard plasma exchangers. The ship reacted much more sluggishly now that it was damaged, but he still managed to last another fifteen seconds before he took a hit directly to the central mass of the fighter, which killed him.

*[Ha! You owe me a case of beer!]* Jeya called teasingly.

*[Too bad you'll be struggling to keep your ship alive to drink it,]* he answered smugly as the results of the two versions of the simulation scrolled through his mind. He'd dealt real damage in both of them, for he had penetrated her shields and dealt minor damage in the first version, and in the second, well, it was going to take her damage control teams several hours to get the ships back together. He'd blown some *big* holes in it.

Myri summed it up perfectly. *[Fuck. Navii, look at this. He did that much damage before he was taken out, and that's just one fighter. Imagine ten of these strafing a Consortium destroyer!]*

*[I'd say we should get that thing shaken down and in mainline production immediately,]* the elderly woman replied calmly.

*[Fuckin' right we will, but let's keep going. Alright, let's set up and run it again.]*

The upcoming attack was lost in the day of helping the KMS test the prototype, and by the end of the day, *nobody* could say they were not mightily impressed by Cybi's little project. Jason ran tactical simulations against Jeya, against formations of ships, against cruisers and battleships, and against Raptors, and the resulting data were highly promising. The Wolf was a potent threat against fleet-class ships, its stronger pulse weapons even able to score significant damage against a battleship, and when pitted against other fighters, it was a bloody fucking nightmare. Raptors were incredibly fast, and his pilots were damn good, but the Wolf was just too fast, too agile, and they simply couldn't compete against it in a dogfight. Once his fighter pilots were trained in a Wolf...holy God. Look out. That

experience in a fighter like this? They'd make the Consortium wet themselves when they saw a swarm of Wolves launch from a KMS ship.

By the time they were done, Jason landed the prototype in Kosigi, meeting Aya and Dera there, and he could see that Aya was not happy with him. The rest of the command staff was there as well, and Jeya and Koye arrived in a dropship as he shook hands and accepted clanging hugs from friends and pilots in armor. "Alright, Myri," Jason said when he kissed her on the cheek. "I think you'll agree when I say get the Wolves in production *fucking now.*"

"You're right about that," she agreed with a nod. "We'll have a production schedule ready by tomorrow."

"How fast could we build them?" Jeya asked.

"It only takes about four days to build a fighter once you have a factory tooled for them and parts stockpiled, so we can have the first series in service inside two months, once we get them fully shaken down and identify any possible design issues," Jason answered. "But, since this is an original Karinne design, I don't think we're going to find any. They probably had all the bugs worked out already."

"I sure as hell didn't see any problems with it when I was trying to shoot that thing," Koye laughed, pointing at the prototype.

"Myri, get Kumi on this to get the factory space secured," he told her. "I want these on the line as fast as possible. I'll have Cybi prepare the parts list, so we have everything in mass production mode as fast as possible."

*"I already have all pertinent data compiled and ready for use,"* Cybi called from one of the nearby floating cameras she used to keep an eye on things.

"Alright. Find another pilot to take over the rest of the shakedown, I'm gonna go home."

"We don't have anyone qualified to pilot it!" Myri protested.

*"I have a training regimen and the required simulation programs already prepared. Send your best fighter pilot to the training facility and I'll get her started on rating,"* Cybi called.

“Sioa, Juma, find the best damn fighter pilot we have and get her ass in that chair *immediately*,” she ordered.

“I have a couple in the army support corps that can do it.”

“I have a few naval pilots that can too,” Juma countered.

“Well, send them all,” Jason ordered. “We only need one pilot to continue the shakedown, but we’ll need instructors.”

“True. Five from each?” Juma offered.

“Sounds good. They can compete to see who gets to finish the shakedown.”

After breaking off from them to go home, Aya made her displeasure known once they were on the dropship. *Really, Jason! she complained. Going off alone in an untested mecha? You are too valuable to risk yourself like that! The Grand Duke does not test pilot experimental mecha!*

*I needed the distraction, and I trust anything Cybi makes for me, he replied calmly. I’m sorry if it upset you, Aya. God knows, I don’t want to be spanked again.*

That made Aya smile grudgingly and Dera grin at him.

*Well, keep that in mind, she growled at him. Because I will spank you if you do something that crazy again.*

*Aya, it’s me. If I’m not doing something crazy, you’d think I was sick or something.*

Dera burst into silent, wheezing laughter, and after giving him an ugly glare, Aya did too.

The fun from the day before faded over the night, because the house was getting down to business.

And that business was war. Legion style.

Everyone that could manage to get past security was in the command center the next morning, and every eye was glued to the comm feeds coming back from the task force. They were still in hyperspace when Jason arrived with Tim and Miaari, two jumps away from their destination, and

what he was seeing on the screens was delayed by 17 seconds due to the distances involved. Not even Teryon string communications were real time when dealing with two points halfway across the galaxy from each other. They were also simple observers in this. The task force knew what to do, and they would issue no commands. They were simply watching this tightbeam feed back to Karis, accomplished by a series of dedicated hyperspace satellites the Kimdori had laid when they jumped in earlier. If not for those, there would be strict radio silence so the approaching fleet would have no idea they were going to be ambushed. The crews were all in stasis, but the computers on those ships were no doubt still functional, and they may react to an unknown communication signal.

Everyone was tensely silent as the task force came out of hyperspace, rested for few minutes, then broke up into the five different attack elements and prepared to make their final jump. Each element would attack one wave of the Consortium fleet using interdictors to knock them out of hyperspace, with one spare interdictor being brought along in case one of them malfunctioned during the journey. Each wave was also towing one of their big moon-sized bases, and those were also going to be targeted for attack. Hitting the ships was important but trying to damage or destroy those bases was the highest priority, else their enemies would have a place to repair their ships *right there* without having to worry about the interdictor trapping them. If they didn't destroy those bases, then the attack wouldn't do nearly enough damage to cripple the Consortium plans in their sector. And for that, each attack wave was sporting a little something the Kimdori lent them, an antimatter bomb. The bombs would be launched from behind the interdiction field on hyperspace missiles, which would give the Consortium no chance to try to stop them. The missiles would literally drop out of hyperspace right on top of the base, and then explode.

Jason almost found himself holding his breath when the fleets jumped out, holding Miaari's hand tightly, each one moving to its designated intercept point. It was a nerve-wracking three minutes as they made their final jump, and then, when they appeared, they immediately started. The picket ships started launching Torsion weapon platforms and mines as the interdictors were started up quite a distance behind them. It would take the interdictors time to build enough of a distortion field to trap the Consortium ships inside, and their build time was carefully built into the plan. By the

time the attack was over, the interdictors would enter the “bell curve” segment of their field expansion, which would strand the surviving enemy fleets deep in interstellar space. No matter how effective the attack was, those interdictors would be left behind to slow the enemy down as much as possible, with a single Kimdori ship close to them to either tow them out or destroy them should the Consortium manage to get close enough to threaten or capture one. Those Kimdori watchers would also be launching hyperspace missiles and the bomb.

“Kimdori commander reports they’re in position,” one of the comm officers called aloud.

“Naturally,” Miaari murmured quietly to him.

“Eighteen minutes to mark,” another reported.

“Kimdori jammers are starting up,” came another call, which meant the Kimdori were blinding any sensor sweeps of the approaching ships to fool them into thinking the space in front of them was empty. A large fleet in normal space in front of the advancing fleet might trigger an alert, so they were taking no chances. They wanted the surprise to be complete.

Miaari had to all but sit on Jason to keep him in his chair as the minutes passed by with agonizing slowness, as the mines and weapon platforms spread out, and the picket ships retreated behind the interdiction field to get out of any retaliatory attacks. Their job was to get as far away as possible and fire heavy-mount railguns at the enemy, weapons that had no range limitation, weapons that had been installed just for this mission. “Ten minutes to mark,” the time officer called as Jason saw on another screen that the Kimdori bowler ships had their meteors in tow and were accelerating to attack speed. Those ships as well had railguns mounted on them, and once they released their meteors, they would break off at a tangent and fire until they were out of ammunition. The attack was timed that the meteors would strike before the hyperspace missiles and bombs were sent in, hiding the fact that they could jump weapons through hyperspace until the last possible second, to maximize confusion.

He was literally sweating as the five waves of Consortium ships appeared on the feed, detected by the Kimdori’s passive hyperspace



sensors. They were right where they were supposed to be and were making no moves that hinted they were aware of the ambush waiting for them.

“Three minutes to mark,” the timing officer called in a nervous voice, and all talking died out as every eye turned to the monitors.

They were the longest three minutes of his life. Every second was an eternity as the huge blot of enemy vessels approached the trap, and he felt his heart lurch when the lead wave passed by the trap point that would ensnare the last wave. The first wave just kept going, blissfully unaware that they had just flown through an open lasso, waiting for the right horse before it was cinched closed. Jason watched tensely on the tactical map as the lead wave passed the second trap point, then the third, then the fourth, and then he started panting like he’d been running for an hour when the edge of that blot quickly advanced on the red line that moved towards it, where the interdictors, which were set above the enemy fleets so they could move past the trap points without being knocked out of hyperspace. He gasped just before they touched, then whipped his head to the three screens showing two camera angles and a tactical of the first wave ambush point.

Before him, *thousands* of Consortium ships suddenly appeared, dropping out of hyperspace. And none of them moved for the first critical seconds, no doubt as the computers aboard those ships tried to figure out why they were no longer in hyperspace and begin to awaken the crews to deal with the unforeseen issue.

Then the automated weapons activated.

He gaped in awe as the attack began. It was the same on all five screens, but he focused on that first wave, that vanguard of the fleet, as the gravity mines activated at the detection of the hostile ships, hurtling towards them at shocking speed, far faster than they could go if a living thing was aboard. A swarm of little lights suddenly catapulted forward, and immediately behind them, hundreds of automated platforms, what Myri had started calling drones, rushed in their wake. Each mine was designed to lock onto only *one* ship, so multiple mines would not attack the same ship unless it was a heavy cruiser or larger. If another mine had a lock on a destroyer, a mine would choose another ship, until it found one that had not been locked. Each mine knew that only four mines were allowed to lock onto a cruiser, nine to a battleship, and 15 to anything bigger than that, and within

the first second, every mine had a confirmed target and converged on that target. For six critical seconds, the enemy ships did not move, did not react. And then, almost in unison, every ship raised its shields.

But it was too late for that. The mines were already among them, and the closest ship, a destroyer class vessel, didn't get its shields up before the mine hit it. The mine clamped on to the aft section of the ship, just over its engines, as it was designed, and then it detonated. The explosion rocked the destroyer, sent it into a slow spin, as the gravometric shockwave induced by the explosion attacked the destroyer's engines, overloading them. The entire aft section of the ship then exploded in a hellish inferno of greenish-red fire, colored due to the atmosphere within the ships, when the engines within were overloaded and caused to explode by the mine.

All over the screen, similar explosions erupted throughout the formation. The ships that got their shields up before the mines reached them discovered that the mines projected a metaphased plasma arc before them just before impact, which hit the shields and disrupted them, letting the mines punch through, then the mines sought to strike the enemy ships as close to its engines as it could manage and explode. Ships were hit all over the place, and nearly 40% of them suffered catastrophic engine breaches, which made the engines explode. Virtually every destroyer and cruiser class ship Jason could see on the tactical went from red to blinking yellow, meaning its engines had exploded, reducing its threat to the drones.

In 38 seconds, the mines had taken their big-ass bite out of the enemy. Of the 5,183 ships in the first wave, 2,016 had their engines blown up by the mines. The bigger ships, the cruisers, battleships, and the two command ship-class vessels in each formation, survived the mine attacks without their engines exploding, but each of them had a gaping hole where the mines had hit them.

And those were the ships the Torsion platforms attacked.

Swarms of tiny dots unleashed reddish beams at the surviving ships, racing in behind the mines, and for nearly five seconds there was no return fire, letting the platforms run wild all over them. The camera focused in on one battleship, damaged by the mine attack, suddenly list and have its lights go out as 16 platforms focused on it, the platforms firing at critical points they'd worked out by analyzing the captured destroyer they had up in

Kosigi. They knew where and how to hit the Consortium ships to inflict maximum damage. But then the enemy ships began to return fire, and Jason watched the platform count on the tactical for the first wave decline. The platforms were fast and agile, but they were trying to avoid dozens of guns pointed at them. The battleship's lights wavered back on as their damage control got a handle on the problem, but then a massive hole in its armor just *appeared* near the bow, and Jason realized the first round of one of the heavy mount rail guns had reached the enemy formation. The 6-ton projectile had hit the enemy ship moving at 308,384 miles an hour, which was enough to go right through the enemy ship's heavy armor. The shell, which would vaporize on impact, then sprayed the internal structure of the ship with that vaporized metal gas, which would still carry cataclysmic destructive power. Even the ship's own structure would become collateral damage as it was ripped apart and carried deeper into the ship like a battering ram. The battleship shuddered, knocked backwards by the incredible kinetic energy that had impacted it, and then two more holes appeared in it as more shells found their mark. Gouts of flame erupted out of the impact holes as the blowback bulged the armor around the penetrating impact point, hinting at the kind of damage those shells had inflicted to the interior of the ship.

He was damn proud that his invention could do damage to the enemy.

For the first wave, the automated weapons lasted for 97 seconds after the mines activated. It took the surviving Consortium ships 97 seconds to react to the attack and destroy the Torsion platforms, but not before those platforms took their pound of flesh out of the enemy. The platforms managed to knock 16 cruisers and heavy cruisers out of action and dealt considerable damage to several battleships. But just because the last of the platforms were destroyed, that didn't mean they were in the clear. The 5 KMS ships at each ambush point were firing on the Consortium ships with railguns, and they were hitting more than they were missing. The remaining ships retreated, moving towards their base, seeking cover against those deadly shells. It only took two or three hits from those railguns to knock their shields down, and any shots that followed them went right through their armor like paper. They pulled back towards the base their two command ships had been towing.

And just gathered together for the meteors.

They saw them coming and tried to get out of the way. Battleships and cruisers turned and scrambled out of the path of the 318 meteors of various sizes, from one ton rocks to a few 2000 ton behemoths, the Kimdori had towed behind them and released, a hail of lethal shrapnel hurtling at the enemy, but not all of them managed it. Jason focused on one battleship that was nailed almost dead in the center of its bulky aft section by a 1300 ton meteor, shattering its shields and hitting it so hard it buckled in its armor, and almost immediately all the lights in the ship went out as it was slammed jarringly in a new direction, the meteor hitting it so hard that it knocked it out of its flight vector and sent it spinning out of control. Though the meteor hadn't torn the ship in half, he had no doubt that that incredible impact had done so much internal damage to the enemy battleship that it wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. Something that big, with that kind of damage? The repair time would be measured in weeks, not days.

The repair time went up even more when the battleship spun directly into one of the two command ships. The shields of the command ship repelled the battleship, flaring to visibility when the battleship slammed into them, and then ricocheted away, but the impact against the shields could only have done even more damage to the battleship's interior.

The ships saw the last of the meteors go by, then they again tried to form up around the command ships and retreat back to their base...just in time for the next surprise.

The first one in was the antimatter bomb, which dropped out of hyperspace *inside* the base. The base shuddered, and then blew into a million pieces as the bomb exploded, showering the ships with debris. Almost immediately after them, every missile the Kimdori had been packing dropped into normal space and went after the surviving ships. A series of brilliant explosions filled the screen as the missiles impacted the surviving ships, so many explosions that most of the enemy fleet was hidden by the fire that quickly evaporated in the vacuum of space. When the view cleared, they saw that literally every surviving ship had extensive damage to its armor and hull, and about 200 of them had hull breaches, venting atmosphere into space.

Jason looked at the quick analysis. There had been 5,163 ships in the first wave. Of them, 2,016 had been destroyed by the mines, the vast

majority of them destroyers and cruisers. Of the 3,147 ships remaining, 138 had been disabled or destroyed by the Torsion platforms. Of the 3,009 ships remaining from those, 115 had been disabled or destroyed by the meteors. Of those remaining 2,899 ships, 388 had been disabled or destroyed by the bomb explosion and subsequent missile attack.

So, in the first wave, only 2,506 out of 5,163 ships survived their planned attacks. That was nearly 50% casualties. That was 15% more than they expected.

Jason quickly read down the screens, his gestalt adding it up. The first wave was the most successful attack, unfortunately. The worst attack had been the fourth wave, who only managed 23% ship casualties and whose bomb had been off target, exploding outside the honeycomb structure of the base and only damaging it, not destroying it. But it had still managed to deal considerable damage, laying waste to the entire side of the base that had been subjected to the explosion.

He added it up. All said and done, the Consortium now only had 17, 985 ships out of their original 30,000 plus that they had sent. Nearly 34% casualties...almost what they had projected. The majority of the destroyed ships were destroyers and cruisers, but wave 5 had managed to destroy one of the command ships, destroyed in the antimatter explosion, and wave 3 had managed to deal a great deal of damage to both of them.

And that was just to the ships. Even the ships that survived the mines would have suffered dreadful losses of their insectoid crews as those mines blasted gravometric shockwaves through them. Jason figured that some ships out there, the ones with lights on but not moving, simply had no crew left alive to operate them. The losses to those crews had to be absolutely staggering, which was part of the plan. Any ship you can't destroy, you kill the crew through their weakness to gravometric flux. With luck, the Consortium wouldn't have enough crew left to man the ships that survived the attack.

And it wasn't over yet. The interdictors were still up and were now in their "bell curve" stage, their distortion fields expanding at an exponential rate to trap the surviving Consortium ships out in deep space, and far from any support or reinforcements. The 31 KMS vessels were also still on site, along with the Kimdori fleet, and they were all lobbing railgun fire at the

remaining ships, making it virtually impossible for them to begin recovery procedures...at least until a hail of missile fire left each wave position, aimed at everything their sensors could detect, an overkill reaction to a desperate situation, but also one that would be effective. They were long-range missiles using gravometric engines, and it only took Jason a few seconds to see that the KMS ships only had about 19 seconds to either retreat or try to tough it out. It was the first time they'd seen the Consortium employ missiles, but it also was not a surprise that they had them. They expected to see the Consortium show them several new weapons over the course of this war, things they didn't bother to bring with them earlier.

There was a 17 second delay between what they were seeing and what was happening, so the decision was made for them by the time the feed reached them. In unison, the KMS ships turned and jumped out, one of them just seconds before a missile reached it, and the Kimdori guarding the interdicator had only 137 seconds to decide what to do before the missiles reached their positions. They too turned and jumped out, and seconds after they did so, all five of the interdicators detonated in a cataclysmic inferno that generated a Teryon-tachyon shockwave so immense that it carried before the explosion like a stellar tsunami...just as they were designed to do. This was the "endgame" scenario, to blow up the interdicators and allow the shockwave to blow out every hyperspace-based system on the enemy ships, from communications to active jump engines, to further delay any attempt at recovery by preventing the fleet from making contact with reinforcements. That shockwave took only 7 seconds to hit the enemy, not doing any visible damage, but also knocking out the remote cameras the Kimdori had left behind, abruptly ending all transmissions from the attack sites, be them from the Consortium or from their own remote equipment.

There was a moment of silence in the command room, then Juma jumped out of her chair. "Fucking A!" she screamed, pumping a fist in the air. That unleashed a torrent of screams and applause, and there was quite a bit of hugging and handshaking going around. But Myri, who had the soul of a squad sergeant, got them all back on track quickly. *This isn't over, bitches!* She snapped mentally. *I want the telemetry logs uploaded to 3D right now so the engineers can study it! Get copies over to Miaari's office for intelligence analysis! Recall the task force to Karis immediately! Analysts, I want a detailed damage report to the enemy fleet compiled and*

*on my screen in five minutes! I also want copies of that video cleaned up for off-Karis consumption and prepared to be sent to Empress Dahnai and Queen Sk'Vrae! Get 3D and tell them the follow ups are on the board!*

Jason felt more relieved than anything else. The attack had been completely by surprise, and they had inflicted significant damage on the enemy. It was going to take them *weeks* to recover what ships they could salvage after this, and naturally, the area would be a prime target for further attacks to keep them from having an easy time of it as they gathered up the pieces. 3D already had toys ready to launch into the attack area that would make any attempts to recover damaged ships...exciting. And with Myri giving the green light, the first of those automated devices, placed in the old junk dropships and fitted with engines that could do 137 continuous minutes in hyperspace, would be launched within four hours. In four hours, the shellshocked Consortium was going to get a little visit from another wave of gravometric mines carried in a disposable corvette-class ship, something they literally salvaged from one of Dahnai's ship graveyards and fitted with hyperspace jump engines, but this time what would be behind them was a rampaging Torsion shockwave generator, a mobile ship shredder that would appear in the middle of active Consortium ships and immediately try to strafe them, letting the Torsion effect rupture their hulls. They'd be sending 28 of them, and they were just the first in a series of weapons and devices that would be fired off at the ambush point to keep the Consortium from being able to easily salvage their damaged vessels. They'd find trying to do that to be just as dangerous as full fleet naval combat.

The Legion way. Once you had the enemy down, kick him in the balls.

But still, 34% casualties. That was over 10,000 ships that the Consortium could *not* throw at Karis, and that was what mattered.

The attack had been a success. And he had no doubt that the Consortium were a bit stunned at the moment. Now they knew just who the fuck they were dealing with...people who fought *dirty*. Men and women with absolutely no morals who would use anything, no matter how cheap, to achieve their objective...because their objective was to *survive*. There wasn't a single man or woman on Karis that didn't understand that their lives were on the line here. The Consortium would kill almost everyone on

the planet if they conquered it, everyone except those they would need for the biogenic computers and to genetically manipulate to turn them into Generations. But for everyone else, it was a death sentence.

Back even a little mouse into a corner and find out how fearlessly and how savagely it would fight. And the Consortium had just learned that important lesson.

He leaned back in his chair, then had Cybi get Zaa for him. *[The attack was a success, Denmother,]* he communed, which was sent off to Zaa via Teryon communications. *[The results are still being tallied, but it looks like about 34% casualties to the Consortium.]*

*[Thank the gods,]* she breathed in reply. *[I want to see the data, Jason.]*

*[I'll have the data sent off to Kimdori Prime as soon as we get it compiled and organized.]*

*[Have you told Dahnai or Sk'Vrae yet?]*

*[No, but I'll tell them in a little bit. I want some hard numbers before I explain what happened.]*

*[Very well. I'm quite pleased at the result.]*

*[You're not the only one,]* he agreed. *[I was hoping for more, but I'll take what we got. Right now, the enemy has a fucking mess on its hands, and it's only going to get worse once our harassment toys start reaching the ambush point. We're going to make salvaging their assets a full contact sport.]*

Zaa laughed. *[With you, Jason, everything is a full contact sport,]* she told him.

*[It keeps life zesty,]* he replied dryly.

"I need to get to my office and start analyzing the data, Jason," Miaari told him, licking him on the cheek. Through her touch on him she already knew he'd talked to Zaa. "Come, Tim, we have work to do," she called.

"And lots of it," he agreed, patting Jason on the shoulder. "See you probably sometime next week, bud," he grinned. *We need to do a little foursome with the girls when we have the time,* he added, sending privately.



*Yeah. Find a day, I'll make time.*

*No sweat. I'll find out after I see how much data I have to comb through.*

*Lots, most likely.*

*Fuckin' right*, he chuckled audibly. "Come on, boss, no doubt they'll be riding us for conclusions before we've even opened the files."

Miaari nodded knowingly. "That is always the way it is with intelligence. Those who need it can't wait for it, and those who can't wait for it didn't have any in the first place," she said, giving Jason a light look.

"Oh, go on before I cut your tail off, woman," he barked in reply, threatening her with a rolled-up piece of paper, which made her laugh. "And save time tomorrow for lunch at my house!" he called as she and Tim left.

"I'll be there," she promised.

After about twenty minutes, Jason had files ready for the conference, so he returned to his office. He woke Dahnai up with his urgent call, getting a good look at her proud breasts when she appeared on his monitor, with Kellin sleeping in the bed behind her. "Jayce, it's one in the fucking morning," she complained.

"Well, it's only just into afternoon here," he said dismissively. "But this is important. Switch over to secure mode, and cover up those tits, woman, we're going to conference Sk'Vrae in."

"If she gets excited looking at my tits, I don't want to know about it," she grunted, which made him laugh. "Let me go to my office. Back in a wink," she said, and her image winked off to be replaced by a holding screen with the Imperial crest. Jason also had to get Sk'Vrae out of bed, but she wasn't quite as surly when he finally convinced her night comm officer to wake her up.

"It must be serious news to call off hours," she noted, to which he nodded.

"I already informed Zaa. As soon as Dahnai makes herself less naked and gets to her secure comm, I have news for you."

“She was asleep? Ah, I see, it’s the middle of the night at Dracora.”

“Oh, complement her on her tits sometime after we’re done.”

“Why?”

“Oh, just keeping her on her toes,” he said with a light smile, which made her hiss chortlingly.

“Evil male. I knew I liked you the first time we talked.”

Dahnai appeared again a few seconds later, wearing a frilly pink nightgown she must have bought on Terra at some point, since it was clearly a human design. The sleeves were of equal length. “Alright, I’m on secure,” she said. “Now, what’s the big news, babe?”

He uploaded an edited file showing the attack on the Consortium to their comm panels and started it. “This just happened about an hour ago,” he said. “This is the incoming Consortium fleet. We ambushed it just as it entered our galaxy using interdictors to knock them out of hyperspace and automated weapons we could afford to lose. Now watch.”

They both watched in silence as five different views showed them five different attacks simultaneously, each an attack on one of the waves. The attack only took about six minutes of total time, from the initial mine assault to the Consortium finally responding with missiles to chase off the distant ships, and then all five views went to static after the retaliatory Teryon shockwave blasted over the area and destroyed all hyperspace-capable equipment. “We destroyed or crippled eleven thousand, two hundred and sixteen ships in the attack. Given the amount of gravometric flux flying around out there and the kinetic impacts from the meteors and the railgun shells, we figure every ship suffered at least fifty percent casualties to its insectoid crews. Some ships that survived the attack probably had upwards of ninety percent crew casualties. They’re easy to kill when you attack them through their weakness to heavy gravity, but that also translates to them being vulnerable to physical force, like their ship being slammed by a meteor or a railgun shell. And every ship that survived the attack took some kind of damage, from light to heavy. We managed to destroy four of the five bases they were towing, and also managed to destroy one of their command ships and heavily damage two others. In other words, we consider the attack a success.”

“Holy *shit*,” Dahnai breathed. “You did this with *mines*?”

“Mostly mines, yes,” he nodded. “But there were more mines than ships, Dahnai, they were bound to do damage,” he grinned. “Unfortunately, we couldn’t trap them with the interdictors, they had long-range missiles equipped with gravometric engines, so we instead knocked out all their communications by burning out their radios. And, in about four hours, they’re going to find out that we haven’t forgotten they’re there,” he smiled ominously. “We have more automated weapons being readied to jump out in disposable robot ships to attack them as we speak. If they want to salvage, they’d better dance to do it. If they stand still, they’re toast.”

“Jason, I’m...shit. I’m shocked,” Dahnai breathed. “I can’t believe you did so much damage with nothing but simple *mines*!”

“He had the advantage,” Sk’Vrae deducted. “He knew exactly where and when they would appear, so he set a very effective trap for them. Given that kind of information, a one third casualty rate to the enemy is not surprising. Well done, your Grace,” she complemented with a simple nod. “You are as cunning as you are intelligent. I find myself pleased to be in alliance with you.”

“Yeah, well done, babes,” she smiled. “What do the Kimdori say this will do to the enemy’s plans?”

“Nothing yet, they want more time to look it over, but I’m fairly sure we just knocked them on their asses,” Jason said. “They have to repair before they can start to move, then find crews to man the ships they have left, and we’re not going to just sit here and let them to do it. From now until they manage to tow the last ship out of the ambush area, they’ll be salvaging under fire. So, they’ll have to repair, reorganize, and then redeploy. Personally, I think we just bought ourselves three or four months before they start their campaign. The sheer amount of damage we dished out is going to take them that long to recover from, just from the repairs. I’m sure they’ll start moving some forces as they get them repaired, but with so many ships either damaged or without crews to man them, they’re going to need time to get our boot out of their ass.”

Dahnai grinned. “Good. Now, since your secret attack was a success, why don’t you come visit me?” she invited. “You haven’t visited in a while,

and I miss you.”

“I don’t think I’d like to be part of that conference,” Sk’Vrae noted, which made Dahnai flush purple and Jason laugh.

“I may not have time, love, you know how busy I’m going to be.”

“You can manage overnight,” she protested. “Bring Jys and your *amu dozei*, and naturally you need to bring Rann. Shya really misses him.”

“I think we could manage an overnight visit,” he ventured, pondering it. It would take a little juggling, but a day or two of relaxation would do wonders for his mood...almost as much as a chance to get Dahnai in bed with him. That always made him happy. “But it’ll be in a few days. There’s just too much going on around here right now.”

“That’s fine. Call me with the details when you know. Now, send us some telemetry of the attack so our analysts can go over it.”

“Right here,” he said, holding up a memory crystal.

They discussed the attack in more detail as they went through the video again, as Jason described the mechanics of the assault, and then they wrapped it up because both of them needed to go back to bed. Miaari padded in as he finished up, scratching absently at the white fur between her generous, fur-clad breasts. “What is it, Miaari?” he asked. “You found something already?”

“Yes,” she nodded as she sat down and touched her memory band. A segment of video appeared on the screen of his console, and a readout of energy patterns appeared beside it, part of the sensor logs. “Watch,” she said, waving a hand before the screen, causing the video to play. It showed video from wave 2, then zoomed in just as the entirety of the towed base exploded in an inferno of blazing energy. “There,” she said, pointing at a spike on the passive gravometric sensors. The video slowed down and zoomed in even more, showing something literally launching out of the hellstorm and sizzling off into deep space. “It is a distress beacon,” she answered. “It got outside of the interdiction shockwave before it arrived, and it managed to transmit once it cleared our jammers. We picked it up on our Consortium transceiver. The Consortium already here knows that their fleet was attacked. They sent a response and got no reply, and since then,

they have fallen to radio silence. We think they are using local channels to coordinate a relief mission.”

“You have someone going after that thing?”

She nodded. “We had one squadron of Kimdori ships turn around to find it and bring it back. It might have useful data, if it’s carrying the station’s logs. Many beacons do just that, so whoever finds it knows what happened.”

“Well, they were going to find out anyway,” he grunted, glancing up at her. “Are your ships safe enough?”

She nodded. “They will scoop the beacon from hyperspace in a pass, they never have to drop into normal space,” she assured him.

“That must be a neat trick,” he noted.

“It’s not easy, but our ship computers are very good at it,” she agreed. “Making scoop pickups is part of being spies. Some information can only be passed on physically and scooping it up from deep space in a pass is an effective tactic.”

“True,” he agreed, looking up at her again.

“Jason, stop staring at my breasts. That’s why you have Jyslin and Symone.”

He laughed. “I was not, I was thinking,” he retorted. “Besides, I’ll bet they’re nothing but for show anyway,” he teased. “You know, look more like a Faey. They’d never believe you’re female if you weren’t sporting a rack.”

“Wrong,” she winked at him. “We *are* mammals, Jason. They work just like Jyslin’s does when I have a baby.”

“So, you don’t give them a little extra padding to draw attention to them?”

She looked away from him primly.

“Ha! I knew it!”

“I’m going back to my office,” she declared. She then swatted him on the top of the head, which made him burst out laughing, and she stalked off,

her tail slashing behind her aggressively.

“You are *busted*, woman!” he taunted, pointing at her as she reached the door.

She made a rude gesture before going through the door. To her credit, she didn’t slam it.

Jason had to chuckle a little as he got back to work. There was a lot of information to go through, and things to do over at 3D, and there wasn’t much time.

Jason was fairly certain that the Consortium *really, really* hated him by six hours after the attack.

As he combed through the data with Miaari and Myri in shifts, made some calls, fielded another indignant rant from High Staff Graith of the Alliance, and started making plans for a visit to Dahnai, he still managed to keep his eye on what was going on out at the edge of the galaxy.

The first wave of attack vehicles arrived about five hours after the initial attack. These were junk ships, corvette class freighters, the smallest ship capable of utilizing hyperspace jump engines that could get there. Miaari had bought them for him from the Imperium mainly, then they were fitted with hyperspace engines and a big enough power plant that could power the engines to get them where they had to go. The ships were robot controlled, automated, so they could make the entire hyperspace jump in one leg, and as soon as they arrived, they dumped their cargo, jumped about a light year away, and self-destructed to deny the Consortium the opportunity to get their hands on *anything*. The cargo pods were equipped with the short-range hyperspace jump pods used by hyperspace missiles, which were very short range as hyperspace went, the kind that had relativity delay. But for the very short jump to the attack site, that was more than acceptable., since the delay would be about two hours.

What they expected out of this attack was to catch them off guard, but not to manage it more than once. For that reason, this first attack was front-loaded with the majority of their available weapons. After this attack, the Consortium would most likely picket skirmishers to intercept incoming

toys...which, of course, was something they were counting on for a few of their other plans.

Jason and Miaari stopped what they were doing to watch from his office when the six freighters dumped their pods and jumped out. On his office vidlink he saw the feed from the observer cameras, saw the cargo pods jump, and then the cameras detached from the pods to observe as the pods unlocked and the air in the pods blew the contents out into space when they depressurized. Within those pods were about 3,000 mines, and each attack site had 3,000 mines launched to it. They were programmed the same way the first mines were, and as soon as they were dumped, they swept the area for targets.

And there were targets out there. No external Consortium ships had arrived to help with the recovery efforts, so the attack site they were watching showed them Consortium battleships moving among damaged ships or twisted wreckage that had been collected up and laid out in orderly rows, hanging in weightless space, while other ships formed a defensive perimeter around the scene, which was only wise given they'd just gotten their asses kicked. They had made four different sections, probably sorting the ships by damage, with swarms of much smaller energy signatures roaming around. They were either some kind of dropships helping with the recovery or they were fighters of some kind. Those signatures wouldn't confuse the mines, but sensor logs of those energy signatures might be handy later on, if they decided to try to attack those smaller vessels.

The Consortium response to the sudden appearance of the cargo pods was immediate and decisive. A barrage of red streaks fired from the defensive picket ships when the mines got within range of Torsion weaponry, and a series of explosions showed Jason that their targeting systems were pretty efficient. They still had to deal with sheer numbers, however. Not every ship along the picket or deeper within the site was in a position to fire at the mines, and there were 3,000 of them. Because of that, about 60 mines managed to penetrate both the Torsion and dark matter fire and make their runs at the ships. Because they mimicked the programming of the first wave of mines, only four mines locked onto the closest battleship while the others spread out and tried to hit the other ships along the defensive picket line. The gunners managed to hit two of the mines, but the other two managed to penetrate their shields and slam into the ship. The

entire port side of the ship went dark as the two mines unleashed their gravometric shockwaves, but its starboard guns fired on the mines that rushed by it, managing to hit five more. There were several more explosions through the assembled battleships along the picket as mines managed to penetrate defensive fire and hit them, and the results were mixed. Some mines didn't manage to latch on close to the engines and thus fired their shockwaves into nonessential areas, but one ship went complete dead when three mines exploded against its flared aft section, slowly spinning out of control as it lost complete power and the inertia induced by the explosions started a very slow, lazy corkscrew spin into the crippled vessel.

The battleships reeled from the mine attack, but they were in no way shape or form prepared for what came after them.

Screaming in so fast that it made the mines look like they were standing still, the Torsion weapons which had been coined the Buzzsaws raced in. When they got close enough, they would fire their weapons, which was a sustained Torsion shockwave effect along a two-dimensional axis and attempt to ram the closest enemy vessel that had power. In effect, it turned the circular devices into circular sawblades, and those blades were spinning at high angular velocity and had just broken free of their mounts. A sustained Torsion effect like that would only last for about five seconds before it overloaded the generator and made the device explode, but that was why they were fitted with engines that would get them to the enemy ships in a bloody fucking hurry, since they'd need that kind of velocity to get the weapons to penetrate deeply into the enemy ships. The devices raced in as the Consortium fired at them, but these devices were bloody fast and actively programmed to avoid enemy fire, which made them *much* harder to hit. There were 28 of them screaming towards the Consortium, but defensive fire whittled that number down to 9 once they were close enough. Jason saw one of them activate its Torsion field, a circular nexus that swirled and shimmered around the circular device, the entire effect rotating at high angular velocity because the device was spinning. The device lanced in through the shields of the damaged battleship, the one that only had power to its starboard side, and the Torsion effect sheared right through the armor just at the base of the narrow neck-like projection that attached the crescent forward section to the main body of the ship. The device



disappeared into the ship, no doubt slicing through bulkheads and decks, then the device's PPG reached critical mass from the Torsion generator overloading from sustained use, and the entire thing exploded...deep inside the enemy ship. They saw fire gout out of the hole the device made as it punched into the ship, and then the entire ship lost power. The other 8 surviving weapons also managed to hit enemy ships, but none of them had hit quite a critical area, and the damage they inflicted was moderate rather than crippling. But that was still damage, and it was going to take them time to repair those ships.

"I'd say the Buzzsaws are a success," Miaari murmured as they watched.

"Fuck, that wife of mine is one brilliant bitch," Jason agreed with a chuckle; the Buzzsaw was her idea.

In all, their follow up attacks disabled or destroyed an additional 97 ships through the five recovery sites. That wasn't a very large number when considering there were tens of thousands of them out there, but it sent the Consortium a message, one that Jason had no doubt they were taking seriously now.

*Don't ever think you are safe.*

Now the Consortium had an idea of how this war was going to go for them. They would have to exercise constant vigilance for fear that a cargo pod was going to drop out of hyperspace at any moment and unleash some devilishly crafty automated device that would try to destroy their ships... and *would be able to do it*, despite how small some of the devices were. They would have to devote resources to surveillance and defense no matter where they were, no matter how far from Karis they were, because Jason Karinne had just demonstrated that he had a *very long* arm. The fleets trying to recover from the attack now knew they had to do so under constant threat of attack, and it was going to slow them down as they deployed considerable resources to try to detect the ships and cargo pods from a distance and picketed interceptors to try to stop them before they could get close enough to deploy their deadly cargos. And what was more, Jason was showing them that their technology was not secure, that he could analyze them and find their holes, their weaknesses, and exploit them for everything it was worth. They would have to spend time and resources coming up with

ways to stop his attacks. Jason could see another round of tag like how he and Myleena had gone around and around a long time ago, where the Consortium analyzed their attacks and found the hole they were exploiting and moved to fix it, while Jason and the 3D crew kept looking for new holes.

He could have made it even worse for them, such as leaving crates of Satan's Marbles for them to salvage and bring aboard their ships, but they didn't want to reveal the depth of the toy box quite yet. The conduit smashers and the marbles would have their turn, but they would be used at the proper time, when they could inflict the most damage.

One thing was for sure. Jyslin's clever Buzzsaw's were not just going to be a weapon of the Legion. Those weren't that hard to make, and they could *easily* be adapted to become a standard weapon of the KMS.

The attack over, the remote cameras self-destructed, following the Legion mantra of leaving nothing behind, and Miaari pulled a crystal out of the vidlink that held all the sensor data transmitted by the remote. "I'll add this to the analysis," she told him.

"Get the report to me as soon as you can, even if you have to wake me up," he called as she started towards the door.

"Just remember you asked for that when you bite my tail off for calling you at three in the morning," she answered as the door opened of its own volition for her.

"You'd just grow a new one," he snorted in reply, which made her chuckle as she left his office. The door closed behind her, and Jason rewound the video and watched it again, then studied the sensor readings, then sent the whole thing over to 3D so they could use that information.

So far, things were going more or less as they'd hoped. They'd dealt enough damage to the Consortium to slow them down, and that would give them time to prepare and try to figure out what their first move would be... because they sure as hell hadn't broadcast it yet. But when they did, they'd know about it, and be ready for them.

He hoped.

He got home late, picking up Rann as he ran to the door on his little legs and kissing him on the cheek. "Hello Rann," he called with a smile. "Did you have a good day?"

*Yeah! Aunt Maya let us go to the boardwalk today! We ate cotton candy and Danelle got sick and threw up when we rode the swing and Kyri got in trouble for cheating at one of the games using her telekinesis and—*

*Woah, hold on there, runaway gabber,* he sent with a chuckle. *Now what exactly happened with Kyri?*

*Aunt Maya caught her cheating at the game where you throw the ball through the hoop to win a little stuffed animal.*

*She knows better than that,* Jason grunted mentally. *I think I need to sit down and have a talk with that young lady.*

*Aunt Yana already did,* Rann grinned. *Kyri couldn't sit down afterward.*

*If that's what it takes,* Jason chuckled audibly. *Did you do your lessons?*

He nodded. *Miss Ryn did them with us today.*

*And did Kyri do your other lessons?*

*What lessons?*

*Danelle said you're trying to learn how to do telekinesis.*

*Oh, that. Not today. Will you teach me, daddy? Kyri likes to be mean.*

*I should be the one teaching you anyway,* he answered. *We'll try a little after dinner.*

*I already ate dinner.*

*Well, I haven't,* he declared, hefting him a little bit in his arm. *I've been way too busy with work to eat more than a quick bite at my desk all day. Ayama, is there anything even remotely close to being ready to eat around here?* he called in a plaintive way that made Rann giggle, almost sounding like he was begging for his dinner.

*Roast in the oven, and save Lady Jyslin some,* she answered. *She isn't home yet.*

*Let's find her. Block yourself a little, little man, this might get loud with you right here in my arms.* Rann nodded, and Jason unthrottled his power, which was significant since it was boosted by the tactical gestalt in his armor and reached out for his wife. *Jyslin, are you coming home soon?*

*I'm on the way now,* she answered. *Be there in five, and please tell me Ayama made something for us.*

*She said she did. I'll get it on the table as soon as I get out of my armor.*

*I knew there was a reason I married you.*

*It certainly wasn't because of my looks. That's why I married you.*

*Flatterer.*

*How is it flattery when your looks are the only reason I married you?*

There was a startled silence. *Watch it, buster,* she sent teasingly.

*I'll watch something else when I get home. I just need to make sure Kumi's home first, though.*

Jyslin's reply was amusingly insulted. *Keep digging, Jayce, you're almost to the mantle.*

*It keeps you from getting bored,* he answered dryly, then broke contact. "Alright, little man, I need to go get this armor off," he told his son, setting him down. "Go finish what you were doing."

*I wasn't doing anything,* he protested.

*Well then, come along,* Jason invited.

Rann stayed with him as they went up to his room and he went about taking off his armor, listening as his son told him about his day in greater detail. He watched intently when Jason gestured for his shirt, which rose up off the bed and floated over to him, which reminded Jason that Rann was actively trying to use his latent telekinetic abilities. He knelt down in front of his son, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, and held the Ducal signet ring in his hand. "It's a lot like sending, son," he began, holding the ring out so he could see it. "You know how you gather up your thought and push it out? Well, using TK is much the same, except you don't focus your

concentration on your thought. You focus it on what you want to move, and then push.”

“What if I want to bring it to me? Wouldn’t that be pull?”

Jason laughed. “I didn’t mean literally,” he answered. *You push with your will, son*, he continued, using the purity of sending to convey his meaning far more accurately than words could manage. *You put all your focus behind your intent to move something, like this ring, and then you push, and push hard. TK is not easy, not in any way, not when you start out. Understand?*

*I think I do*, he answered with a nod. *So, you have to really, really push hard?*

*Very hard*, he answered. *The first thing I ever moved was a ring just like this one. In fact, it was that one*, he added, pointing at the original signet ring which had since been replaced by a ring with the new crest. Jason kept the original in a glass case on the shelf unit in the bedroom, a memento of sorts. *It was how I won the house, by proving to Dahnai that I was a Karinne. So, little man, give it a try. Focus every tiny bit of your concentration on this ring, then push with all your might to try to make it come to you.* Rann nodded, then he narrowed his eyes as he looked at the ring. Jason could almost feel his focus on the ring like a palpable thing, and he suddenly realized that maybe Rann was about ready to take this step. He focused his own attention on the ring, and he certainly felt *something* there, an external force. He felt the ring shift slightly in his hand, then it skittered visibly about a quarter of an inch. Rann reached out physically for the ring with his hand, and it skittered again, then started to vibrate and shiver in his hands. Rann was doing it!

But then he lost it. The ring settled back in his palm when Rann gave an explosive breath and literally fell back into the bed, both hands going to his temples. “Ow!” he cried.

“That wasn’t bad, little man,” Jason told him, his voice filled with pride. “You almost had it!”

“I feel like I sprained my head.”

“I told you it’s not easy, kidlet,” he chuckled. “I told you once before a while ago, using TK is actually more tiring than getting up and getting it

myself. But you *did* make the ring move.”

“I did?”

“You surely did,” he nodded when Rann looked at him. “With a little practice, I think you’ll manage to pull it out of my hand very soon.”

“Wow, I did it!” he cried happily. *Kyri, Kyri, I did TK! I made Daddy’s ring move!*

*It’s about time you managed to do something so easy!* she answered, a touch snobbily.

*That’ll do, little miss,* Jason warned, sending privately.

*Well congratulations, my little man!* Jyslin sent, from downstairs. *I’m so proud of you!*

*Thanks, Mommy,* he sent modestly.

Rann had already eaten, but he was happy to sit with his parents at the dinner table, since they hadn’t had much chance to see each other in the last few days. Jason was quite content to chat about things that were only important to a child rather than make serious decisions that might get people killed, hearing all about Rann’s day. After dinner, both Jason and Jyslin found the energy to take a bath with Rann, despite the fact that both of them were exhausted, so tired that even Rann could see it in them. Jason did give Jyslin a detailed account of the day, though, describing their success as seen from the command center, and praising her for her Buzzsaw’s after telling her that they were very effective.

They put Rann to bed at his usual bedtime, then they wearily dragged themselves to bed. *I really should do something about you, buster, but right now, all I want to do is sleep,* she sent with weary amusement. *I didn’t realize how tired I was ‘til I got in the tub.*

*Yeah, it doesn’t hit you ‘til you slow down long enough for it to catch up,* he agreed. He accepted her into his arms and snuggled with her. *There’s always tomorrow, little miss morning girl,* he noted.

She giggled audibly. *Yes, there is,* she agreed, then she yawned.

He was *this close* to falling asleep before the communion touched him, waking him up. *[Jason,] Cybi called. [Jason.]*

*[What is it, Cybi?]* he asked, a touch irritated, but not at her. She wouldn't disturb him without good reason.

*[Denmother Zaa needs to speak to you now,]* she told him.

*[Alright,]* he sighed, tapping Jyslin on the shoulder. *Work is calling, I need to go to the study, love.*

*Alright, just don't stay all night.*

He put on a robe and went to his study. The holographic likeness Cybi used was already waiting for him, the nude form without detail wearing Sora Karinne's face. As soon as he closed the door, a holographic likeness of Zaa appeared as well, appearing in front of the desk. It then stepped closer to him. "I'm sorry to disturb you, cousin," she said, "but this is important."

"I understand," he said with a yawn, sitting at his desk. "What's going on?"

"I just received a report, cousin. The Alliance is about to move."

"And what do they have planned?"

"They intend to instigate war," she answered. "The children that keep eyes on them reported to me that they have decided to repeat history." She gave him a level look. "They intend to try to destroy the Academy."

"Are they insane?" Jason gasped.

"To the contrary, cousin, they are quite brutally methodical in their planning. They intend to destroy the Academy and lay a false trail of clues that would send all fingers pointing to the Skaa. With the Consortium threat lurking, their hope is that all believe the Skaa destroyed the Academy at the behest of the Consortium. Mostly, however, the hope that war erupts between the Skaa and the Urumi, which would drag the Imperium into it."

He leaned heavily back in his chair. "Fuck," he growled. "As if the Consortium wasn't enough, we have *this* to deal with. That fucking bastard!" he raged, throwing a paperweight on his desk across the room. "Does he really think the Consortium is just going to withdraw from this sector? Is he that fucking *stupid*?"

"What do you propose we do about it?" Zaa asked.

“I’m sure you already have an idea, but mine’s a little more direct,” he answered, having his gestalt bring up the local time on Draconis. It was just coming into noon there, so he placed a little call. “Stay,” he told her as he pointed at the monitor. A handsome redheaded Faey male answered the query. “Trefani manor,” he said in a mellow tone. “How may I direct your call?”

“Get me Yila. *Now*,” Jason stated in a flat voice.

The man looked a bit uneasy as he nodded, and his face was replaced by the falcon and crossed sword crest of House Trefani.

“The Trefanis?” Zaa asked curiously.

“Trust me,” he said in a grim voice.

The foxlike face of Yila Trefani blinked onto the screen. Like him, she was sitting in her private office, and she didn’t look too happy to see him. Then again, since the interdictors went up, the Trefanis had been losing money hand over fist, so she had reason to be angry with him. “What do you want, Jason?” she asked in a sharp voice.

“How would you like to cut High Staff Graith’s radioactive nuts off and use them for a nightlight?” he asked immediately.

She barked in surprised laughter. “My, are we testy today, Jason?” she asked.

“You better fucking believe I’m testy today. Denmother Zaa here just brought me some very ugly news about our Alliance so called friends, and I need your help dealing with them. Clear your schedule tomorrow. You’re coming to pay me a little visit, Yila. We have something to talk about.”

“And why am I doing this?”

“Because it’ll cover every credit you’ve lost to the interdictors.”

She raised an elegant eyebrow. “I’ll be there. When?”

“Let’s call it twenty standard hours. I know that means it’ll be damn early in the morning, but we don’t have much time and I really need to get some sleep, I had a very long day. I’ll authorize you through the Stargate to Karis.”



“Done. Now go back to bed,” she said with a slight smile.

“In a bit. I have a little more to do.”

“Alright. See you then,” she nodded, then she cut the transmission.

“Just what are you planning, cousin?” Zaa asked curiously.

“The Alliance is a major player in the interstellar trade game,” he said, tapping his fingertips together. “They’re also quite involved with the Trefanis with smuggling and some other illegal activities.”

“Yes, I know. We keep an eye on them.”

“Well, then you know that the Trefanis also have quite a few legitimate businesses operating in Alliance territory, run by Alliance citizens, that are fronts for some of their illegal activities.”

“Yes, they’re quite adept at setting them up.”

“The High Staff is about to find out that the Trefanis have their claws in the Alliance’s financial system much deeper than they expect,” he answered. “With you and Yila working together, we can give Graith whatever a Jakkan considers to be heartburn.” He closed his fist and wrapped his other hand around it, giving Zaa a cool look. “If he’s going to throw a hissy fit over disrupted trade schedules in public, then I think we should give him some *real* trade disruption to worry about.”

“And just how will we do that?”

“Zaa, my magnificent friend, the Alliance is about to find out that you don’t piss off a partner in crime,” he said smoothly. “What Yila Trefani helped set up, she can help us disassemble in a very messy fashion. The Zyagya and the Skaa especially will be quite interested in what the Alliance has been smuggling across their borders. Yila knows everything, since she’s been helping them. If we don’t even look at the illegal contraband they’ve been pushing, the unpaid taxes and tariffs on the smuggled goods that aren’t patently illegal could reach the hundreds of millions,” he trailed off with a slight, evil smile. “And I’ll see to it they pay Yila for ratting Graith out, even as the legal Trefani businesses remain behind like a cancer in Graith’s eyes. He’ll know they’re there, but he won’t be able to touch them, since they’re *legal*. We’ll score some points with the Skaa and piss off Graith, and Yila can swoop in and take over the illegal smuggling after she stabs Graith

in the back, so she'll keep earning her profits. That's a win-win in my book."

She gave him a look, then laughed richly. "Have I told you today that I love you, cousin?"

"Coming from you, cousin, a guy can't hear it often enough."

Even though Jason and Yila had been at odds for a while after Jason ascended to the throne of House Karinne, one thing he never forgot was that Yila Trefani was an exceedingly dangerous woman, probably even more dangerous than anyone in the *Siann* realized.

For one, she had patience that would amaze Job. She was cautious and methodical and could outwait a stone when it came to getting what she wanted. That kind of patience was an asset for a woman whose house earned more than three quarters of its profits through crime, since a hasty thief was often caught.

The paradox of that was that, when the situation demanded it, she could take direct action, moving swiftly, but never hastily. Yila did nothing without thinking it through, even if it was a snap decision.

But more than anything, Yila Trefani was *smart*. She had built an incredibly complex web of organized crime, and she ruled that empire with a deft hand, fending off rivals even as she kept her empire out of the light of the law. She had extended her talons into the other empires abutting Imperium space, mainly with the Alliance, but she also had a foothold in both the Skaa Empire and the Skaa Republic, where her main efforts were in smuggling and trafficking in stolen or illicit goods. She was smart in what she had built, but she was also very smart in never seeking any kind of attention or overt power. The Trefanis were not the largest of the lower houses, and didn't have the fleets and firepower of the Highborn houses, but there was not a single woman in the *Siann* that wouldn't wet herself at the thought of making Yila Trefani her enemy, because Yila Trefani could crush almost anyone who pissed her off, and the mafia don that she was did not allow anyone to challenge her power. The Trefanis ruled the underworld, and they maintained that rule with an iron fist. When someone tried to muscle in on her turf, that someone ended up dead. The power Yila wielded

was the shadowy power of a woman that worked behind the scenes, never in the open, never overtly, but the power she wielded could only be rivaled in the Imperium by Dahnai herself.

Since Yila came to power in her house, the only person who had ever directly challenged her was Jason Karinne, but that was because Jason was even meaner than she was.

Yila arrived almost exactly on time, which was the middle of the night for her but was early afternoon for Karis; Karis was currently 12 hours ahead of Draconis, and every day got it an hour closer before it passed them and started getting an hour ahead with each day. She wasn't the only one to come, however. Dahnai and Sk'Vrae both had been warned of the Alliance's treachery by Zaa, and when Jason invited Yila over to deal with it, Dahnai invited herself along without consulting Jason. She had brought Kellin and her three children with her, and to Jason's delight, Saelle had also come with them. Not an hour later, Zaa arrived from Kimdori, and an hour after that, Sk'Vrae also arrived after a hasty arrangement. When she found out that Dahnai and Zaa would both be on Karis, she decided that an impromptu conference was in order. Jason didn't mind, for though Sk'Vrae was large and intimidating looking with her bony plates and her big *Aliens* hive queen-esque crest on her head, Jason had to admit he rather liked her.

Once they settled in, however, they got down to business. Yila looked a trifle uncomfortable surrounded by rulers and divulging her house's extensive involvement in the criminal underworld of the Alliance, but after Jason told her what the Alliance was trying to do and what he had in mind to retaliate, she had to agree that it was a wise course of action. They couldn't openly declare war on the Alliance, and they also couldn't let them know *how* they were getting information that was only passing through the highest echelons of Alliance government and intelligence. They knew the Kimdori were shapeshifters and spies, but they had no idea how extensively Zaa had infiltrated them...and every other empire in the sector, for that matter.

"Alright, so, the best way to do this is to show the Skaa and the Republic both what the Alliance is up to," Jason surmised for the rulers and Yila. "We let *them* go after Graith, and we make sure both of them reward

Yila and her house for showing them how much money they've been losing to Alliance-sanctioned smuggling and freebooters."

"I knew you were dangerous, Yila, but *damn*," Dahnai grinned at her. "I didn't realize just how long your claws are."

"I'm a businesswoman, your Majesty. No more, no less," she said with a shrug. "I can provide Denmother with a detailed list and schedule of everything the Skaa and the Republic should be looking for and when it'll be there. I'm sure you'll hear Graith screaming from here when the two Skaa empires figure it out."

"I can live with his discomfort," Sk'Vrae said shortly, her crest lifting up a little from its usual resting position behind her head. Sk'Vrae could raise that bony crest to a more vertical position like moving her arm, and the crest came up when an Urumi female was angry, like a cat laying its ears back or a dog baring its fangs; males did not have crests, only females did. It was one of the peculiarities of her race. "He is a backbiting *zhraa*."

"I have no idea what a *zhraa* is, but I don't think it's good," Dahnai said with a laugh. "So, that's our unofficial response. What will we do officially?"

"Start drawing up battle plans for a possible campaign against the Alliance," Sk'Vrae said immediately. "It's becoming clear that the Alliance is going to become our enemy before this is over."

"They already are," Zaa stated. "But they will not declare open war. Not when they will be obliterated by us in a military campaign, and they know it. The other empires have very good reason to fear the Imperium."

"All the fighting among ourselves makes us good at war," Dahnai shrugged shamelessly.

"Not all of us use an MPAC to settle our differences," Yila smiled.

"No, you just use a garrote," Dahnai winked in reply. "I'll leave it up to Sk'Vrae to decide which is more honorable."

"If a warrior dies with a garrote around his neck, he deserved it for his lack of attention," the Urumi leader said simply.

“The Brood Queen does speak a truth, however,” Zaa declared. “I think your war college should prepare battle plans for attacking *all* the surrounding empires, Dahnai, just in case. Any one of them may side against us and force us to fight them. We should be ready.”

“We already have about five of them for each empire,” Dahnai answered. “I’ll have them sent to the war room.”

The War Room was another cooperative effort. Located in Dracora, high-ranking military officers from the Imperium, the Collective, and the Kimdori met and planned out their military strategies. Jason had virtually no contact with them, since they would be fighting the military war where Jason was fighting a guerilla war, but that was where his reports and data were sent, so the flag officers could pore over it and be ready when the real battles began.

And they’d managed to integrate the tactics and abilities of the three empires’ ships fairly well. The Imperium’s ships were the cannons in the formation, rugged vessels that could take a hit fairly well, but were designed to dish out savage damage with their shield-piercing MPAC weaponry—well, Torsion and dark matter weaponry now—and plasma torpedoes, but ships that were also respectably fast and highly maneuverable, which were critical to ships designed to charge in and lay waste to an enemy as fast as possible. It was that mixture of agility and raw firepower that made Imperium ships so deadly in combat. Urumi vessels tended to be heavily armored behemoths packed with multiple redundant systems for anything, which mirrored the Urumi themselves with their bony armor and their three hearts. Generally, their ships were made to be beefy tanks that could plow into an enemy formation and soak up damage with their armor and shields and superior damage control and slug it out toe to toe with an enemy, which would now be a deadly proposition since the Urumi were armed with Consortium weaponry, though the Urumi did have fast attack ships in their fleets to complement their armored monsters. The Urumi would be the anchor of the combined fleet, the bulls in the formation that had to be pounded heavily to make them stop. Kimdori ships were slashers, built to be fast, with minimal armor but very effective shields, but they too were armed with highly powerful weaponry that was their own design, shield-piercing weaponry that they called stream weapons. They fired streams of coherent tachyons, which went right through shields due to

their energy-disrupting qualities and were designed not to tear through armor but destroy a ship's internal power systems and equipment and kill the enemy crew. A tachyon steam would conduct through most known armor like electricity and bathe the struck sections of a ship with ambient tachyon fields emanating from the bulkheads themselves. The induced tachyon fields would destroy virtually any energy-based equipment inside by overloading them, and the fields also had the effect of basically flash-boiling all liquids in a hapless body that might be in the field's effect like sticking them in giant microwave oven, killing just about anything instantly. This weapon too seemed to mirror the Kimdori mindset, for their weapons did no visible damage to a ship, instead they attacked its systems and rendered it helpless and killed the crew that manned it. A battleship's armor and weapons meant nothing if its power systems were destroyed and there were no crews to man them. Karinne weaponry was well demonstrated and probably the most deadly of them all, and while the KMS didn't have many ships compared to the others, a single formation mixed in with other ships could be devastating. KMS ships were all the other ship philosophies rolled into one deadly package, for they were fast and agile, they packed weapons that could take out enemy ships in one hit, and they were incredibly tough and hard to disable or destroy.

The meeting broke up for lunch, and Jason felt fairly confident that they had Graith by his glowing, radioactive Jakkan balls. Yila could turn the Alliance on its ear and get both of the Skaa empires seriously pissed at them, which would send Graith a message that he would *know* came from Dahnai, Zaa, and Sk'Vrae: *we know what you're doing, and if you want to fight dirty, bring it, bitch.*

But it wasn't the High Staff Jason was thinking about. He realized that with Yila's connections, Zaa's networks, and his toys, they could do some damage to any empire that sided against them. He fully intended to take the fox faced Trefani matriarch and the Denmother aside after the conference and have a long talk with them, then introduce Yila to 3D and see where things went. Yila was no engineer, but she had the soul of a pirate, and her cunning would be an asset to the Dirty Deeds Department.

It was time to start bringing others into it.

“What’s clear, though, is that the High Staff has proved that he will sink to almost any depth of cowardice to achieve his goals,” Sk’Vrae growled.

“I just wonder if the Parliament knows what he’s up to,” Yila murmured.

“Oh, they do, and they’re turning a blind eye,” Zaa answered. “The allure of becoming the dominant government in the sector blinds them to the truth. Always they have been fourth in the rank of powers behind the Imperium, the two combined Skaa empires, and the Urumi. The concept of peace only holds so long as an empire sees no borders they can expand. But the instant the potential is there to take, they throw their ideals away and become everything they profess to be against. But in their case, they are hypocrites, professing to be neutral even as they scheme to start wars among others, cause untold misery, and reap the rewards of conquered territory without putting their own military assets at risk.”

“I’d bet we’re not the only ones they have plots against,” Jason agreed. “There’s probably similar little plans they’ve made for both the Empire and the Republic. The Skaa and the Alliance have been rivals for centuries. If not for the Imperium sitting on their borders, I’d bet they’d be at war.”

“And oh joy, where do their borders meet at the edge of Imperium territory? Karis,” Dahnai grunted. “If they do go to war, we’ll see their fleets jumping hyperspace just outside of Karisian territory, which will make it harder to see any Consortium fleet coming.”

“Harder, but not impossible,” Zaa stated calmly. “I worry more about the Urumi borders, since they are less secure. The Nine Colonies and the Republic are not aggressive, but they are an easy pathway for an enemy fleet to take to reach us.”

“It’s the Republic I’d worry about,” Dahnai grunted, looking at Sk’Vrae, who nodded in agreement. “They may not be the Empire, but they’re still Skaa.”

“I’m sure they say the same thing about the Faey, Empress,” Zaa said lightly.

“Well, they’re right, I suppose,” she admitted.

“Aren’t we selling weapons to the Nine Colonies?” Yila asked.

Dahnai nodded. “And the Shio,” she added. “Arming them up to keep the Alliance and the Skaa from getting any ideas.”

They discussed it a bit more, then decided to call it a day. Dahnai was a bit irked at him for not accepting her invitation to visit her in her vacation house but did accept his invitation to dinner at his house that evening. He pulled Yila aside after the three rulers left. “Yila, I think it’s time we had a long talk with a few friends of mine,” he told her.

“Oh? Who?”

“The Dirty Deeds Department, or what we call 3D,” he answered. “They’re the reformed Legion, and now we’re back to doing what we do best.”

She laughed. “I think Maeri is wetting herself at the thought of that.”

“Well, we have a new target, and I think you can help.”

“Me? How?”

“You have the knowledge and the connections, we have the toys, and we’re both equally ruthless. With you there to point the way, we can really sock it to any other government that tries to be the next Alliance.”

She gave him a look, then laughed lightly. “Alright, I see where you’re going. But you can say it, Jason. I’m a bitch.”

“You’re an evil bitch and a pirate, but that’s why I like you,” he told her evenly, which made her giggle and preen just a little bit. “I’m happily married to an evil bitch, and some of my best friends are black-hearted scoundrels. You’ll fit right in with us.”

“Oh really?” she asked with a smile.

“Really,” he affirmed, offering his arm to her as men were expected to do in Faey society, offering to lead her but let it seem that she was leading him. “You were born into the wrong house, Yila. You’d have been an *awesome* Karinne.”

“What a thing to say,” she murmured, taking his arm as they started out.



# Chapter 2

*Maista, 23 Toraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 2 February 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Maista, 23 Toraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Operational Command Center, Kosigi, Karis*

It was an interesting little gathering, watching the rebuilt battleship *Jenda* slowly slip out of an encasing drydock.

The battleship had been the last battleship out of production, giving them a fourth battleship, and was also most heavily damaged of the big ships during the battle. At first, they thought it was unsalvageable, which would have been a tragedy; from commission to decommission in 19 days. But, the dedication of the dock crews and maintenance workers had convinced Myri to give them a chance to salvage the ship, and their hard work had paid off. The entire port side of the ship had basically been blown off, exposing some 53 decks to space, it had lost the entire aft section of its starboard wing, and the bridge had been targeted and completely destroyed. After it had been knocked out of the battle, the Consortium had continued to fire on it until they left it looking something like swiss cheese. There was not a single section of the ship that had not taken at least moderate damage. But despite all that damage, the engines were still good, and its computer core had survived. Given those were the two most critical aspects of a ship, their survival had prompted the attempt to salvage.

It had been so heavily damaged that they'd been able to squeeze it through the doors and into Kosigi, where an undamaged battleship wouldn't fit. That was why Myri had decided to allow them to try to salvage the ship, since they'd literally cut off the starboard wing and managed to get the ship into Kosigi...but *barely*. It had gotten stuck in the doors during the

operation, requiring workers to go out in E-suits and cut away some damaged hull sections to free it up. The battleship had lost a hell of a lot of paint getting what was left of it through the doors, but after five hours, they finally managed to tug it through and into the slightly wider entry tunnel. After they got it inside, they towed it up by the central core, wrapped a repair drydock around it, and got to work literally rebuilding the ship from its center mass.

But it had been worth it, because the ship was now fully operational and awaiting official command to return to service. The only problem was, they had no captain for it. Admiral Raide had been killed in the battle, the highest-ranking casualty, as had the entire bridge crew, and 59% of its crew. The *Jenda* had suffered the most casualties of any ship that hadn't been destroyed or decommissioned.

It was repaired now, ready for service, but in a bit of amusing irony, the *Jenda* was trapped in Kosigi until they built the second set of doors. Where it had been shot to hell and they'd been just *barely* able to wriggle it in through the doors when it was damaged, when the ship had lost 29% of its mass and more or less its entire port side, now it was too big to get out.

Jason, Zaa, Sk'Vrae, and Dahnai watched the battleship from the command center of Kosigi, Dellin's domain on the central core. Behind them were their personal attendants and highest echelons of the militaries of all three civilizations, including Lorna, who had come with the Faey military attachment. They'd remained on Karis since arriving with Yila a few days ago, which Jason didn't mind at all. They were all scheduled to come on an official visit anyway, part of a conference they were holding with the military command staffs of the Imperium and Collective. They'd simply come a little early, that was all, to discuss their retaliatory acts against the Alliance for the plot the Kimdori had uncovered. Dellin was standing in front of his operations desk, which was on a raised dais at the back of the command center, his public desk. He had another desk in his private office, which was in the room behind the dais, and in traditional Faey military design, his private quarters were behind that office. Just like on Faey ships, the office, or ready room as they called it, was the transitional space between the commander's private quarters and his military duties. It also ensured that the commander was always very close to the bridge or command center should an emergency arise.

The space behind the *Jenda* was not nearly as empty as it would have been a month ago. Several other docks were floating out there, and each one was building either a KMS tactical cruiser or a standard cruiser. The tactical cruiser, whose interim designation was *Revenge*, was slated for completion in just six days, and that would be Hiae's new ship. On the tactical layout map Dellin kept behind his desk, there were blue, red, green, or white dots all over Kosigi. Blue dots were KMS ships either under repair or construction. Red dots were Imperium drydocks under construction. Green dots were Collective drydocks under construction. White dots were Kimdori ships already under construction or drydocks under construction. Each color was more or less grouped into a dedicated sector except for KMS ships, which were centered beside the Kimdori sector but still had a few ships or docks scattered all over, not yet moved. Each sector now had its own supply warehouses for its parts, and the workers were billeted in floating barracks in Kosigi with local gravity, with entertainment and recreation facilities located along the inside edge of the outer shell

Kosigi was *busy* now. The doors stayed open basically all the time, because a constant stream of supply ships and freighters moved in and out, delivering supplies, workers, and in one case, the half-completed superstructure of an Imperium cruiser, towed in from the Goraga yard. The doors were now a major chokepoint, and the completion of the capital doors now had an entirely new significance. But that was the other half of the reason they were up there. The capital doors were in the last phases of construction. They'd finished boring up to the surface, and what they were doing now was building the door backings to the solid rock over them, to make the doors hard to identify when they were closed. When they had the backings complete, they would cut the rock away along the edges and widen it just enough to allow the doors to open without friction, and then the doors would be opened. Between all the industry and the tens of thousands of people now living inside Kosigi, the hollow moon was even busier than Karis was now. But that was alright by him. Kosigi was the premier shipyard in their little alliance, weightless but with an atmosphere, self-contained and with ready access to all it needed.

This wasn't the only shipyard going into overdrive. The three main shipyards for the Imperium were also gearing up, Goraga, Menos, and Makan, as were the 14 or so smaller shipyards they also maintained. The

Collective had two main shipyards themselves, one at Uruma and the other at Trakka, with a smattering of smaller yards scattered around. They'd lost their largest shipyard to the attack on Bellar, since the Imperium had destroyed it rather than capture it, but they were in the process of rebuilding that shipyard. It only made sense to have one there, since the majority of the heavy metals they needed to build the ships came from Bellar in the first place. The radiation had been a problem for them, but like with everything involving that valuable planet, they'd found ways to deal with it.

That wouldn't be a problem for much longer. In just 12 days, the radiation shield they were building around the radioactive moon of Bellar would be complete, and the radiation dangers would curb a great deal after they completed all the tests and put the shield up.

"It's always good to see a ship return to service," Zaa noted as the *Jenda* cleared the drydock and began to turn. Zora was the one at the helm, acting as the pusher pilot that was moving the ship to a staging area near the capital doors, where it would wait for the doors to be finished so it could get out.

"We weren't sure about that one," Jason grunted. "The Consortium shot it all to hell. They blew off so much of it they managed to get what was left of it through the doors and into the facility. They literally rebuilt the whole thing around the engines and computer core."

"Well, it looks ready for action," Dahnai noted as Sirri hovered around her hip. As the next Empress, Dahnai liked to bring her to things like this, where she got exposure to important people.

"It's already been put back on the board," Jason affirmed. They watched as the prototype Wolf fighter, piloted by none other than Justin Taggart, swooped by the main window. Jason wanted the others to see it, and it amused him a little bit that it was Commander Justin Taggart, one of the four human male fighter pilots in the KMS and commander of the 76<sup>th</sup> Carrier Squadron based on the *Dreamer*, had won the competition to earn the right to pilot the first Wolf. He'd beaten out the other 9 pilots, which were 8 Faey women and a Makati female, believe it or not, and the prototype Wolf fighter, serial number X1, was now officially *his* fighter. He would pilot the prototype until the third production Wolf came off the line, and that would be his fighter. The first two ships off the line were slated for

other duties and would not be considered the “first” combat fighter off the line. He had rated to pilot it in just two days, but he was still mastering it, not yet rated for combat duty. Myri’s projections from Juma showed that it was going to take a fighter pilot about 12 hours of classroom training and 60 hours of simulation time to be considered combat ready in a Wolf, and that only if they were already combat rated to a Raptor. A green pilot would be looking at about two months of training before she earned her combat wings...and that also assumed the pilot already had a class 3 license. “And there it is, ladies. The Wolf,” Jason said proudly. “Just finishing its shakedown and already in production. We should have the first units entering service in a little under two weeks.”

“A fighter? You devoted that much effort to a fighter?” Sk’Vrae asked. Like most non-Faey, the Urumi didn’t hold much water to fighters, and probably more than most others at that, since Urumi preferred big, hulking ships that could wade into a firefight and beat down the opponent through sheer attrition. They only employed them to fend off Faey fighters, since fighters were a foundation of tactical Faey combat, getting the telepaths within striking distance of the crews in enemy ships. The reason other governments didn’t devote much attention to developing fighters was because other civilizations couldn’t arm fighters with powerful enough weapons to make them a viable threat to anything but another fighter. Faey fighters were traditionally armed with MPAC weapons, and thus were much more powerful, capable of doing real damage to fleet vessels. But now, any race could fit Torsion weapons on a fighter, so Jason expected to see fighters jump in popularity very fast once military analysts realized that it was far cheaper to build 20 fighters than 1 destroyer and have them have almost equal firepower.

Thankfully, though, the Faey had much better fighters than anyone else, so they’d still have the edge in fighter combat. And the Wolf would rule them all.

“That fighter’s packing enough firepower to destroy a Consortium destroyer, Brood Queen,” Jason told her bluntly. “I’ll show you the sims on it. It’s an absolute *monster* in combat.”

“It’s an original Karinne design,” Zaa elaborated. “The Karinnes didn’t build it to only be a telepathic striker. Their original intent was to put a

fighter pilot at the controls who would be trained to fighter combat and carry a telepath devoted to making telepathic attacks, where Faey methodology is to have the pilot perform both roles. It was intended to be a two-woman fighter.”

Actually, that explained a lot to Jason. It was why it had the fake cockpit, had room for two people, so the telepathic mindstriker would be in the cockpit conducting attacks while the pilot was buried deep in the ship, in the armored control pod, who would be devoted to doing the actual ship to ship fighting. It did leave him a question, however; why not simply put both the pilot and the striker in the armored box, where they were protected? Why leave the striker much more vulnerable in the cockpit? There had to be a reason for it. He’d have to think about it a while.

“Truly? It’s that powerful?” Sk’Vrae asked.

Jason nodded. “It’s that powerful. And your own fighters wouldn’t be far from it if you refitted them with Torsion weapons.”

“We’re already doing that with our Raptors and Dragonflies,” Lorna declared.

“I think we are doing that as well.”

“We are,” Queen’s Admiral Kr’Thor, the highest ranking Urumi officer in the Collective Starship Service, the CSS, affirmed. He was a typical male Urumi, bigger than the females by a slight margin and lacking the big crest on his head, though he did have a series of bony spikes growing along his spinal column, which was a feature exclusive to males, just as the crest was exclusive to females. Those spikes were in addition to the thick, durable bony plates that covered his body at virtually every sensitive spot, natural armor that, when combined with their redundant natural processes such as three hearts, made Urumi very hard to kill. Between that armor, great strength derived from the fact that Uruma Prime was a heavier gravity planet than the galactic average, and their ability to spit venom, Urumi were very dangerous in unarmed combat. “We have nearly fifteen percent of our tactical fighters refitted with Torsion weapons.”

“And every one of them can be a viable threat to an enemy ship,” Jason told Sk’Vrae. “When you put a big enough gun on something you can mass produce, it becomes dangerous. Through sheer numbers if nothing else.”

“Like the drones.”

“Like the drones,” he nodded. “A single Torsion platform isn’t that dangerous to a destroyer. But when sixty of them are in your face, that’s an entirely different animal.”

They watched as Zora piloted the battleship out into the gloom, and then moved back to other matters. The leaders were here for a scheduled conference and tour of Kosigi, since it was going to become a central point in their war effort. They’d already proven that the Imperium and Collective could work well together, mainly in the Terra Entry Station. Despite being run and maintained by two different empires, it ran very smoothly. The Urumi didn’t seem to mind being around the telepathic Faey, and they proved they were every bit as technically skilled as Faey engineers. The Collective Stormtroopers there to act as defense were thoroughly professional and had impressed the Imperial Marines, and Jason got reports daily that showed that the two military units actually worked very well together. But the main reason they were there was so Dahnai and Sk’Vrae could wrangle with Admiral Dellin.

Dellin was a curious man. He was well into middle age, bordering on old, and had been in the Imperial Navy as a supply base commander before being lured to come to Karis. At heart, he was a scholar and a scientist, but for Dellin, his studies centered around military history and military science. His particular area of expertise was military logistics, able to take a large, diverse base and make it run smoothly and efficiently, and that made him perfect to command Kosigi. He was a thoroughgoing professional, had the unswerving loyalty of everyone under his command, and was as efficient as a Makati or Kizzik when it came to keeping everything organized and all the various construction projects on schedule. One certainly wouldn’t attribute that to him, for he was one of the shortest Faey Jason had ever known. He was only five feet tall, slight and slender of build, but he was handsome in a rugged sense and kept the front and sides of his raven black hair cut just short enough to stay out of his face and still allow him to comb it in a stylish part, while the back fell down to his shoulders in what Jason would call a mullet style. That raven black hair would make him the center of attention, to the point where it made up for his lack of height. Even though he was almost freakishly short, that sleek black hair and his handsome face would make women look twice at him.

With Dellin there to explain things and basically bully the two rulers, Jason didn't have much to do but to listen. Dellin wasn't impressed by Dahnai's status as the Empress when she tried to force him into changing his proposed schedule to favor Imperium shipbuilders, and it was almost amusing to watch her beat her head against that wall. Kosigi was Dellin's command, and he *kept* that command no matter what. he did officially tune out when Cybi contacted him. *[Jason, Miaari wants to talk to you,]* she told him.

*[Thank God for you, my guardian angel,]* he communed back. *[This meeting is putting me to sleep.]* "Excuse me a minute, ladies," Jason said, standing up. He stepped outside Dellin's ready room and leaned against the door. *[Go ahead Miaari,]* he called.

*[Jason, we're getting some traffic through on the Consortium's long-distance communications,]* she told him. *[They're getting ready to move.]*

*[Move? What's up?]*

*[They're preparing to move the base out of the ambush site,]* she answered. *[We also learned how badly we hurt them, my friend.]*

*[How bad?]*

*[Critically,]* she answered. *[As you predicted, the losses of their ship crews were catastrophic. Even ships that took only light or moderate damage had upwards of sixty percent crew fatalities. They literally have thousands of ships and no crews to man them. They're going to tow salvageable ships back to other bases and basically park them, because they just don't have crews to man them. Anything they can't tow, they intend to destroy to deny us the chance to come back and pick over what they leave behind.]*

In the three days since the attack, they'd been watching the Consortium try to salvage the ships damaged in their attack against them. They'd pulled everything around their surviving damaged base and surrounded it with every space worthy ship they had to defend it as they tried to repair ships and get them capable of moving. They'd also managed to do a very good job of that. They'd sent eight other attack waves of automated weapons, but with the Consortium now on high alert, only one attack had even a modicum of success, dealing substantial damage to one of their heavy



cruisers. Much as Jason and Miaari expected, their attacks were now more or less to keep them honest, make them use up resources defending their base and ships rather than devote them to the salvage effort.

And that was going to be a strategy for the overall war effort. Since the Consortium had a huge numerical advantage, they were going to employ the same tactic they'd used against Trillane, force them to commit resources to defending virtually *everything*, because the Legion may attack anywhere, at any time. They had threatened the *entire* fleet of Sticks back on Terra during the Legion War, as they called it now, and they had forced Trillane to invest massive amounts of resources into defending their Sticks from attack. That had been a war to force Trillane to spend money, but the same basic strategy would work here. If they could force the Consortium to hold back defenses at *every* position they had, not allowing them to jump their entire fleets, tying them up into defense, forcing them to commit resources, that was less that might attack *them* once they went on the offensive. From the start, they knew this war would be about attrition, to make the Consortium use up their resources since they were separated from their unlimited resources by a five-year hyperspace jump from Andromeda.

*[And that brings us to the first actionable intelligence we've picked up from their comm network,]* she continued. *[Because they've lost so many crew, they intend to grow more.]*

*[Come again?]*

*[They're insectoids, Jason,]* she reminded him. *[From what we pieced together, each of those five bases they were bringing had egg-laying breeders in it. A queen of sorts. Now they intend to place them in a favorable environment and allow them to repopulate their lost crews. As we speak, they're building an enclosure at star PR-253 to produce new crew. It seems that the star has optimal conditions for rapid maturation of the insectoids, and it's also highly defensible.]*

*[How long would that take them?]*

*[I'm not entirely sure. Songa should know.]*

*[Cybi, patch Songa in, please,]* he called.

*[Certainly, one moment.]*

*[How does it look to attack PR-253?] he asked Miaari as they waited.*

*[Not good. The star is enclosed in a small shell nebula. Anything that goes in has to travel sublight, and as you know, no stealth technology works in a nebula, not even the CMS.]*

*[Fuck,] he growled. No ship could jump into or out of a nebula, because the gas clouds actually had considerable gravity fields which prevented jumping. And since the gas clouds were ionized and there was a tremendous amount of electrical charge in a nebula, shields wouldn't function. Urumi stealth fields and Karinne CMS would be overloaded trying to plow through that ambient charge. [They have considerable resources at that base, and if they're moving their breeding queens there, odds are they'll reinforce it even more.]*

Jason looked over the images they had of star PR-253 from the Karinne historical survey data files, and saw that it was indeed a fortress, in the scope of stellar warfare. The enclosing nebula protected the interior star from surprise attacks, and the charged, ionized gas would defeat any stealth technology that tried to invade the nebula. The nebula was large enough for them to respond to any fleet that dropped out of hyperspace and tried to enter using sublight. The Consortium had chosen that position well. It would be very hard to capture or destroy. In many ways, it mirrored the concept of the interdictor.

*[What did you need, Jayce?] Songa's voice came over communion.*

*[We need an idea of how long it would take the enemy insectoids to reach adulthood from egg stage,] he answered. [Your best guess.]*

*[My best guess? About a year,] she answered. [I dated every corpse you brought me, and the youngest of them were only about fifteen months old. Give them a year to mature, a few more months to train, and there you go.]*

*[Unless they train while maturing,] Miaari answered. [If the youngest corpse is fifteen months old, and those corpses were pulled from ships that had traveled here from Andromeda...there's a discrepancy. Does your dating take stasis into account? Are you dating them by biology or by dating the matter that makes them up?]*

*[It's based on general insectoid biological processes, and it's not exact,] Songa answered. [It's just a guess, based on their similarity to Kizzik]*

*biology and the length of time those devices had been in their heads. I can have the bodies isotope dated to determine how old they are.]*

*[I think you should,] Jason told her. [Right now, hon, knowing how long it takes them to raise new soldiers from an egg is important information.]*

*[I'll get right on it, dear,] she said seriously. [I'll have more information for you by morning, as soon as we get the tests finished.]*

*[Get it to me and Miaari both as soon as you get results, hon.]*

*[I surely will, dear,] she answered.*

*[Any action we take against PR-253 is going to have to be clandestine, Jason,] Miaari's voice continued. [Any direct action would be suicidal.]*

*[Yeah, I'm looking at the surveys now. Fuck,] he grunted. [It's like a natural version of Karis. I'll bring breaking in and attacking up to the Legion, see what they come up with.]*

*[I'll let you get back to your boring conference now,] she finished, her voice amused.*

*[Bitch. I'm gonna get you.]*

*[Better men have tried,] she teased lightly, then broke the connection.*

Jason took that information right to the rulers and laid it out for them. "It's a short-term gain, but a long term problem," he finished. "They don't have crews to man their ships at the moment, so in the short run that's good. But if they can get that egg producing facility up and running, then they'll have not only crews for the ships they have, but crews for any ships they build."

"They're setting up," Sk'Vrae growled. "This is undeniable proof that the Consortium will not leave this galaxy even if they conquer Karis."

"And that means that this is information we must spread through the sector," Zaa declared. "Right now, the other empires are afraid to resist the Consortium because of their numbers. But if we show them that the Consortium has no intentions of leaving our galaxy, it might force them to draw different conclusions. I doubt that any ruler will want to be the puppet of the Consortium."

“And once the news of the successful attack on that huge incoming fleet passes around, maybe it’ll put some steel in a few backbones,” Dahnai continued.

“But it might also spur them into attacking early,” Jason surmised, looking at the monitor. “Right now, the discord of the empires in this sector works in their favor, so they’ll just let it continue. But if we start showing signs of organizing against them, it might incite them to take the ten thousand or so ships they have available right now and start conquering.”

“That is a risk,” Zaa agreed, “but it is a risk worth taking. I know this sounds cold, but if the Consortium starts attacking the smaller empires, they will inevitably cause casualties to the Consortium due to their being armed with Torsion weaponry. And every ship they lose taking over the other empires is one less ship we face when they try to penetrate the interdictors.”

“It is not cold, it is fact,” Sk’Vrae said simply. “But this is not about morality or ethics. This is about *survival*. I will endure the suffering of the others if it prevents the suffering of my own.”

“That’s about the truth,” Dahnai agreed.

The conference broke up after a little more discussion, but Jason’s mind wasn’t in the rest of it because it was about Dellin, really. Aya took him and Dahnai both back down to Karsa, and Dahnai took only the time to change and round up her family before she was over at his house, sitting on the couch with Jyslin as they watched Rann and Shya play a game of Seven Circles with Maer and Sirri. Jason sat out on the deck, watching a storm roll towards them from the ocean as he considered the news of the day and wracked his brain trying to think of some way to attack that base at PR-253, but it quite honestly had him stumped. It was a Karis-level fortress, where the only way in was to run a gauntlet of firepower and just pray you had ships left by the time you got there. On top of that, though, was a strange feeling of...well, foreboding. Things were starting to develop, come to a head, and while he was ready for it and could deal with it, he didn’t like knowing what was coming. Fighting with toys was one thing, but here he was considering a manned attack on a heavily fortified enemy position, where people were going to die.

His people.

Not that he wanted to see the Urumi or the Imperial forces die either, but he had to be honest with himself. Sk'Vrae and Dahnai saw their militaries as *numbers*. They were statistics, and when they died, they were just statistics moved to a different column. To Jason, they were *people*. He knew virtually the entirety of the officer corps and a vast majority of the upper ranking enlisted ranks of his military personally. He attended ceremonies. He had them come by his house or office and chat with him. He even attended Jeya's birthday party. He knew it was going to come to this, manned conflict that would get people killed, but he also knew that they had no choice in the matter. The very survival of Jason, Cybi, Myleena, his children, and all the Generations were at stake here. If the Consortium took them, Cybi would be killed and Jason rather doubted that he would survive what they did to him to try to either subdue him to their will or clone him or something. Even though they weren't Generations, his people were willing to risk their lives, even sacrifice them, to protect Jason and Cybi and all the others.

He had to be proud of that, and very, very grateful.

Jyslin wandered out to join him, sitting on the bench beside him. She was connected enough to him to sense his pensive mood, and God bless her, he knew she was there to try to soothe him a little. She smiled and took his hand, patting the back of it, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. *It's going to be alright, love*, she assured him.

*I hope so*, he answered. *I'm sorry I upset you*.

*You never upset me, love*, she assured him, reaching out and touching his gestalt. *Now put house business on the shelf for a while and come visit before Dahnai smacks you*.

He chuckled. *I guess I can, but it won't last long*.

*It only has to last long enough, dear*.

Visiting was one thing, but inevitably, whenever Jason felt unsettled, he ended up in front of the piano. The rest of the family was used to these occasional evening concerts, never quite planned and rarely starting out as anything but his itch to play, but it wasn't long before half the strip was over because they could hear the music. That was because Jason rarely played by himself for long. Aya and the other guards were all quite adept at

various musical instruments, and they couldn't allow Jason to dominate the spotlight with his admitted impressive ability behind the keyboard. Jason literally grew up sitting at a piano, first watching his mother and then learning for himself, so he was more than a match for the guards, challenging them with his jazz style that forced them to think on their feet and adapt, even as he met their challenge when someone changed the tempo or style on him...but that was true jazz music. No song was ever played the same, and often uncharted territory was explored in a musical sense as human and Faey musical styles merged and sometimes clashed among Jason, Dera, Aya, Ryn, Shen, and Suri. Dahnai had heard Jason play the piano before—there was now a piano in the throne room and Dahnai had often had Jason play for the entire *Siann* during court—and she'd heard her guards play for her, but she'd never experience anything quite like this. She was honestly surprised and a little amazed to hear pure improvisation that sounded almost like rehearsed music, but that was more due to the skill of the players and their familiarity with one another than anything else.

And there was almost always singing to go with the music. The guards couldn't sing, and Jason wasn't very good at singing, but Symone was actually very good, as were Sheleese and the twins, Lyn and Bryn. Dahnai got to listen to Symone sing several Terran pop songs currently in fashion, then heard Lyn and Bryn sing a few Faey folk songs. But Dahnai and Kellin were awed to hear Sheleese belt out Faey opera arias like a veteran performer.

The House of Karinne jammed in Jason's living room well past sunset, then as the kids started getting sleepy, their friends wandered back home. Dahnai and her family remained, however, since Jason was still piddling behind the piano, teaching Rann the fundamentals. Rann absorbed these little lessons like a sponge, for he was very interested in the piano and the amazing sounds his father could make it do, just as Jason had been fascinated by the wondrous music his own mother could urge out of the instrument. Already, at the age of *almost* six, Rann understood the basics of the piano and was proving he had an ear for music.

*Sometimes I forget how amazing you are, babes,* Dahnai grinned down at him as she stood by the piano and Jason played *Chopsticks* along with Rann, Rann playing the soprano and Jason the alto versions. Rann gave him a frown when Jason started flourishing, introducing a rippling harmony,

then he laughed when his father pushed him off and played the piano version of one of Rann's favorite cartoons, the Terran show *SpongeBob SquarePants*, even singing it in a rough pirate voice and badly off key.

*This is nothing. You should have heard my mother play*, he answered. *She was a concert pianist. She could make a piano do anything.*

*Well, that was your mother, not you*, she smiled. *Now play that song I like.*

*Which one?*

*That one.*

Jason laughed. *So, you're going to test me*, he winked. *Kellin, what song does she want to hear?*

*Cheater!* Dahnai accused.

*Your one and only*, he answered smoothly, then he started playing *Maple Leaf Rag*, one of Dahnai's favorite piano songs.

Jason knew that the Alliance was going to have a fit when the shit hit the fan, and in that respect, he was entirely correct.

In a series of raids along the border of both Skaa governments, Alliance smugglers were caught and boarded, and a hell of a lot of contraband and extremely valuable cargo were seized. The freebooters, long accustomed to their smuggling routes being free and clear of any kind of traffic, were caught completely by surprise by the Skaa military vessels, so much so that very few of them managed to escape back into hyperspace. Those that were caught first couldn't even warn the ones coming behind them, since only the Kimdori, Karinnes, and Consortium were capable of communicating with ships in hyperspace.

For the Empire and the Republic, it was a coup. They managed to capture and shut down long-standing smuggling operations, since they caught so many of them that their organizations were effectively destroyed, and the value of the contraband and cargo they seized was *significant*.

For the Alliance, however, it was an unmitigated disaster, but not a natural one. The High Staff wasn't an idiot, and maybe he was a little

chagrined to find that the Trefanis had sold him out...but he should have expected it, since he was trying to instigate war between the Imperium and anyone he could get mad enough to declare war on them. Yila played a wonderful recording for Jason when she came for another visit to 3D of the High Staff having a conniption over her vidlink, threatening ugly retribution, which became stunned silence and a hastily cut communication when Yila countered with a curious bit of intelligence she'd received from one of her front businesses about a low-level Alliance diplomat trying to secure Skaa proton bombs through one of the black market operations the Trefanis indirectly controlled, and pondering why the Alliance would be trying to acquire Skaa weaponry when their own antimatter bombs were superior.

Graith knew that Yila was almost frighteningly intelligent, and would probably believe that she was smart enough to suspect that the Alliance was about to try to frame the Skaa for something they were going to do...little did he know she got that straight from Jason, who got it from Zaa.

Jason also held true to his promise to Yila. The Empire and the Republic paid a handsome bounty for the information that led to their catches, which made its way into House Trefani's coffers.

"I think this is the first time I ever made more money obeying the law rather than breaking it," Yila noted to Jason when she showed him the *huge* sum of money she'd earned for her bit of backstabbing, which made Jason laugh.

There were, however, repercussions. The Alliance came down hard on the front businesses owned by the Trefanis, and Yila had to pull most of her people out of Alliance space. Yila had to basically wash her hands of her Alliance business, but in the greater scope of things, it was worth it, both for Yila and for the Imperium.

The shocks to High Staff Graith didn't stop there, since Zaa had convinced the others to make public the Consortium's predicament and their plans. Jason wasn't too sure it should be made public, but he respected Zaa too much to gainsay her. Jason did, however, put his foot down and not allow any footage of the attack to be broadcast. He didn't want anyone to see how he attacked the Consortium, even the Consortium itself, because it would just give potential enemies the chance to see them in operation. All



that was released was a statement acknowledging that the Imperium, Collective, and Kimdori had attacked the Consortium's incoming fleet and had inflicted considerable casualties, proof of which was supplied by a poignant reconnaissance image of the Consortium fleet in the aftermath of the attack, with destroyed and damaged ships everywhere and fires raging on many ships that still had power. They then released the locations of the Consortium's bases around the galaxy, and the fact that they were towing still more bases in with the invasion fleet, making it abundantly clear to *everyone* that the Consortium had absolutely no intentions of leaving the Milky Way, even if they conquered Karis.

Then they simply sat back and waited.

What Jason was afraid would happen was that the Consortium would take what ships they had and start invading the surrounding empires before the sector could unite against them, but Zaa didn't feel that they would do it. It was the one point that got debated the most between them, since Zaa didn't think that the Consortium would see the other empires as any kind of threat since they could just go right by them on their way to Karis, which was their ultimate objective. She believed that the Consortium would make no moves against the sector as a whole unless they knew that the other empires were allying themselves to the Karinnes, or what Zaa and Sk'Vrae had started calling their Confederation. She believed that so long as the other empires stayed neutral, the Consortium would leave them alone in the short term.

Jason didn't see it that way, and especially not now. They'd dealt some significant damage to the Consortium's fleet, and now the Consortium would need resources. The easy way to get them was to take them from someone else, so Jason felt that one of the medium-sized resource rich empires was in trouble, and that definition fit both the Alliance and the Skaa Republic. The Shio and the Nine Colonies were too small, and the Skaa Empire was too big.

However, as the days went by, their surveillance of the Consortium showed that it wasn't the Alliance or the Republic that were being raided for resources, and that both Jason and Zaa were correct. The Consortium didn't come after them, they instead located a different multi-system civilization literally all the way across the galaxy, in the spiral arm past the

arm holding Exile, along the edge of the galaxy literally all the way across it from the Imperium. Most life in the Milky Way was along the edges, since the closer one got to the center of the galaxy the more ambient radiation there was emanating from the core, and radiation was a hostile environment to about 90% of known life. The Kimdori were the only intelligent race known to have originated from so close to the galactic core, about halfway between the core and Karis, and those unique environmental conditions had produced one of the most unique species in the galaxy. No other complex life had been found closer than Kimdori, not even by the Kimdori themselves.

Long distance probes shielded from Consortium sensors showed them what was going on. The Consortium had located the civilization before making their play for Karis, and now that they were in need of resources, they took about 10,000 of their ships and invaded. And there was nothing that they could do about it. It was a two-day trip by hyperspace, some 158 continuous minutes of hyperspace travel, about as far as one could get from Karis. Probes showed that this civilization spanned 48 systems, and the Consortium invaded and conquered it within two days. Jason had been right that they would go after an existing civilization, and Zaa had been right that they stayed way the hell away from Karis, because if they set up shop close by, they were just putting a big target on their backs.

It was also more and more proof that the Consortium had no intention of leaving the Milky Way. They had conquered their first native civilization, and Jason had no doubt that they'd be looking for more. It also showed him that they couldn't just sit back and play defense through this entire war. If they let the Consortium spread through the galaxy, there might come a time when their sector was the *only* sector the Consortium had not conquered.

But, the logistics of it. How did they wage war against an enemy whose fleet outnumbered theirs by about 100 to 1 and was all the way across the galaxy?

Stargates, that was how. Exile already proved the viability of the outpost system, a lone system far out from their territory that could serve as a forward outpost for expansion, as Dahnai had wanted in their deal with Karinne over supplying the Stargate. What they needed to do was find a viable system *close* to concentrations of Consortium bases and get an

interdictor and a Stargate there, then use that forward position as a base of operations to conduct both clandestine and military campaigns.

Jason was looking over the astro-geographical surveys in his office at the White House with Cybi hovering by his shoulder. The Karinnes had mapped nearly 46% of the known galaxy before they were destroyed through scout ships and had telescopically mapped 88% of the galaxy using hyperspace telescopes that looked into real space. Jason was looking for viable systems near known Consortium bases. A system had to have at least two rocky planets capable of supporting military colonization with minimal environmental equipment to be considered viable. A barren, airless planet would do fine, a planet like Mars would do fine, but someplace like Venus would not. If they could drop a habitat module on the surface and be in business, it was viable. If they had to take extravagant measures to protect the equipment or the people, it wasn't.

There were several viable systems that would put them within striking distance of several Consortium positions, but the one that interested him the most was system PR-227. It was a neighbor of PR-253, about 132 light years away, which would make it a short hop by hyperspace travel. It was a very large system consisting of a binary star system, a yellow sun-like star orbiting a blue giant, and it had 16 planets in its system. There were 3 terrestrial planets in the system, and one of them was Mars-like in its composition; it had an atmosphere, but was very, very cold and had almost no water, a frigid desert planet. It was the third of the three terrestrials, but the other two weren't viable. The closest one to the stars was a molten ball of hellish death, the planet constantly pulled and yanked by the shifting gravitational pulls of the two stars, which had never allowed it to cool enough to form a solid crust. The middle planet was Venus-like. It was a truly huge terrestrial planet, five times the size of Earth, but it had an atmosphere so dense that its sea-level air pressure was enough to crush a submarine. Aside from that pressure and a gravity that was 6.7 of Imperial Standard Gravity, which was itself 1.11672 Earth gravity, the conditions on that planet were almost tolerable for humanoid life, but not quite. The temperature range was from 42 to 172 degrees Fahrenheit from the poles to the equator, and there was both water and oxygen present. But, sadly, the air pressure made the planet non-viable. Nobody could go outside without wearing hard exo-suits, and that was too much. But, the third planet, that

was more than viable. A standard E-suit could keep the outside crews warm, the air pressure at ground level was .74 Imperial standard, and gravity was .88.

*“I think this is our best bet,”* Cybi noted as they looked over the system. *“It puts us within striking distance of PR-253, and the second planet has considerable mineral deposits we can mine for our own needs. It will take some time to set up a mining operation, though.”*

“We can put the Master Builders on it, they love a challenge,” Jason mused, leaning back in his chair and tapping his finger to his chin. “The big question is, how do we fortify it without the Consortium attacking. If they can scramble an attack fleet before the interdictor starts its logarithmic expansion, they could get an attack fleet there to threaten the Stargate.”

*“We could find a system further out, but look at these mineralogical readings,”* Cybi prompted, pointing at the list of minerals on the high-pressure planet. *“It’s worth trying to secure, if only to keep these minerals away from the Consortium. I’m amazed the Consortium has not done it themselves.”*

“They’re interested in right now, not the long haul,” he returned. “So, we need to call Dahnai and find out when the next Stargates come out of 2M.”

*“I would say so.”* She patted him on the shoulder. *“And you need to stop avoiding me.”*

“About what? It’s not like you can’t talk to me any time you want, woman!”

She gave him a sly smile. *“Really? Well then, I think this is a good time to talk about the schedule of the CBIM.”*

He gave her a look, then laughed ruefully. “It’s on schedule, thank you very much,” he replied, a bit tartly. “And I’m holding firm.”

*“You’re being bull-headed and completely unreasonable,”* she answered. *“I was put on Kosiningi for a reason, my friend. I am not suited to run Karga. My programming is not suited for it. Build a CBIM designed for that task.”*

“It won’t be *you*,” he complained, leaning back and looking up at her, which made her face appear upside-down to him. “I don’t want some other CBIM running Karga and leaving you stuck out there on that rock. You belong here, Cybi. You belong at the heart of the house, because you *are* the heart of this house. Even if there were fifty other CBIMs, none of them would ever be *you*.”

*“You’re being unreasonable,” she repeated. “After all, you must build another CBIM before I can even be moved, and every bit of logic in this universe dictates that the very first CBIM you build goes in Karsa to run the Kargan continent. You don’t need two CBIMs here.”*

“Stop it with logic,” he snorted. “This isn’t *about* logic! This is about me wanting you where you belong!”

*“I belong where I am,” she said simply. “After all, it’s why I was put there. You should be allowing the Karga CBIM to run things, and since you’re being so persnickety, I wouldn’t be averse to you considerably upgrading my tactical capabilities. Stronger biogenic plants, more relays, a stronger network. Unlike the newer CBIMs, I’m much better suited for direct confrontation, because I have combat experience and we both already know I am quite compatible with most of the Generations in a merge. So if you want to do something for me, bulk me up and let me be the one that does the fighting should we have to defend Karis against the Consortium.”*

He gave her a hard, long look. “And if I say no?”

*“Jason, you should have learned after six years that a woman always gets her way,” she said sweetly, patting him on the cheek.*

“That’s it, you’re staying away from Jyslin,” he grunted, which made her laugh. “Well...alright. But you’re caving on one thing.”

*“What?”*

“You *are* moving off of Kosiningi,” he told her. “We *will* have two CBIMs in Karsa, and I will *not* leave you out there alone. The other one will run the continent, but you’ll be here as a tactical defense against invasion.”

*“Now that, I will agree to do,” she said simply. “Just make sure the complex you build for me can handle the kinds of demands that will be placed on it. And you must replace me with another CBIM on Kosiningi, Jason. I am here for a reason, and you need another one here, just in case.”*

“Well, alright,” he declared. “The first one we build will be in Karsa. Then we build your new home, then we replace the Kosiningi core with a new CBIM, then we build the Kosigi CBIM. And while all that goes on, we work on the tactical CBIM for the *Aegis*.”

*“Alright. Have the Master Builders got back to you about moving me?”*

He nodded. “They’re absolutely positive they can do it,” he replied. “They said moving your core without you losing power or access to your external systems will be child’s play, since you’re already designed to be modular and mobile and the new biogenic network gives you complete access to remote systems. And after we get broadcast power operating, that will be a moot point. You can receive power from a remote uplink and maintain your connections through the biogenic network. Moving you won’t be hard at all.”

*“Alright then, we’ll go with it. But I demand a nice place,”* she told him. *“With big rooms and a swimming pool.”*

He spluttered and looked up at her. “What earthly reason do you need a swimming pool for?”

*“Well, since I’m obviously so important to you, I deserve to be treated like a queen,”* she said airily. *“So my new home must be opulent. A queen’s mansion for the queen that I am,”* she stated in an arrogant tone.

He laughed, earnestly and long, then slapped at her solid yet holographic elbow. “You are turning into such a bitch,” he teased.

*“You like bitches,”* she teased in reply, tapping him on the nose.

“Oh really?”

*“Mmm-hmm. Jyslin,”* she started, ticking along on her fingers, *“Dahnai, Meya, Myra, Kumi, Myli—”*

“I get it!” he barked, cutting her off.

The door opened without any warning, which meant that it had to be Jyslin, Myri, or Miaari. Chirk would have warned him if it was anyone else. He looked up to see Miaari padding in, her tail swishing a bit more than usual; she was in a good mood. “Well, you’re perky,” he noted to her.

She gave him a smile. “I just finished talking with father,” she answered. “He’s granting my request.”

“To?”

“Breed,” she answered directly. “He says he finds it silly that I even bothered to ask, but that’s just his pride talking. He is my clan leader,” she said simply.

“So, it seems that the round of impending births got to you,” he teased.

She laughed. “I’d been thinking of asking for a while,” she admitted. “I miss having little cubs about.”

“So, how does that work?” Jason asked curiously. “I’ve never really asked you about your social life.”

She grinned at him. “The males my father deems as worthy of producing cubs with me will compete for my attention,” she answered. “The male who most captures my interest will sire my cubs.”

“Marriage, eh?”

“Only the clan leader mates for life, Jason,” she said simply, “because he or she is the only one permitted to breed at will. After the sire impregnates me, he is out of the picture. It is the sole duty of the female to raise the litter.”

“Ah, so that’s why the male clan leader mates for life, to keep control over his offspring,” he mused.

“Very insightful,” Miaari said with an approving nod. “Correct.”

“And men have no say in things?”

“Not in the raising, but the honor of the child impacts his own,” she answered. “If my children perform well, the sire’s reputation is raised. If they do poorly, it impacts on him.”

“And he has no say in raising the child? That’s harsh.”

“It was his decision to pursue the female, so that was his mistake if his children embarrass him,” she said simply. “Males extensively research available females to ensure they will be good mothers before they even make a formal inquiry.”

“Well, I guess that’s fair,” Jason acceded. “When does this competition begin?”

“It already has,” she smiled. “My father announced that he was giving me permission to breed two hours ago, and he’s already quite swarmed over with official inquiries, which is how a male declares his intention to win the right to sire my cubs. It’s not often that a Handmaiden makes herself available,” she said with a smug little smile.

“Arrogant bitch,” he teased.

“That is an effectively correct statement,” she said lightly. “I am officially considered a *bitch* in your English since I am a female canine that has children. In Kimdori, I’m officially a bitch until I’m pregnant, because I’m an available female.” She wagged her tail. “I think I know who’s going to win, though.”

“Already? And just how did you pull off this miracle?”

“Because *Kraal* made an inquiry!” she said, her tail shivering. “*The Kraal!*”

“Okay, educate us non-Kimdori,” he prompted.

“He’s the only other living Handservant to Denmother,” she told him, a bit shortly. “He’s a *Handgroom* as I am a *Handmaiden*. Much as I am put here by Denmother to babysit you, Kraal is the official ambassador to the Skaa Empire, to keep them out of mischief. If not for the Faey bias against males, he would be ambassador to the Imperium rather than Jinaami.”

“Ah. So, he must be good.”

“He is *very* good, and would be a fantastic sire to my cubs,” she declared. “But his status does not give him a free pass to my bed. He must *win* my attention, and I will put him through his paces even harder than the other males, if only because of who he is,” she grinned expectantly. “Such a towering reputation means he must truly impress me to prove worthy of it.”



“And I thought female humans played hard to get,” Jason laughed. “So, when do you get to start looking over the merchandise?”

“That has already started as well,” she grinned. “I’ve already received four poems.”

“Poems?”

“A Kimdori male must woo me, Jason, with both the reputation of his deeds and his ability to hold my interest. Kimdori females adore poetry, so many males work very hard to be good poets. A male must have a quick mind, a sterling reputation, admirable physical traits, and the respect of his clan leader for me to even look twice at him,” she declared loftily. “And since I am a Handmaiden, I can be quite picky.”

Jason laughed again, even louder. “I’d wash my hands of you, you’re just too much work,” he told her.

“You have that *harem*,” she snorted, slashing her tail. “And I wouldn’t pick you anyway, even if you were Kimdori. I *live* here, silly male, I’ve seen what you’re like behind the curtains. You’d be a terrible sire!”

“*Touché*,” he chuckled. “Now get your mind out from between your legs and let’s talk about something.”

They debated the idea of trying to take PR-227 with Cybi for most of the afternoon, discussing the problems of trying to establish a foothold deep in Consortium territory and the advantages it would contain, such as causing the Consortium to focus on PR-227 rather than Karis; they couldn’t allow that forward base to exist, since it would threaten PR-253. The downside was that it would give the Consortium leave to practice breaching an interdictor in their home territory, as it were, where they didn’t have to worry about sending a fleet deep into hostile space and far removed from any reinforcements or support and at the mercy of Kimdori ECM, which would be a nightmare for about any civilization. In the end, after Miaari raised several such valid arguments, they decided to discuss the matter with the rulers and ask for some advice from the War Room and the upper command staff of the White House.

But, the talk with Miaari had reaffirmed something to him...that life went on. Yes, the Consortium had their backs to the wall, and their very survival was on the line. But life had to go on. Miaari was going to have

more children. His wife and *amu dorai* were pregnant with his children, and Symone was pregnant as well. And there were other important things going on, things to do, such as teach Aura how to fly and teach Rann how to play the piano.

Life must go on, even in the midst of this war.

And life, Jason decided, *would* go on.

*Chiira, 7 Suraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 16 February 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 7 Suraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Operational Control Complex, Berraga, Bellar (Karinne-Imperium Protectorate Planet)*

For many, this was as much a statement as the declarations had been, and it was an event broadcast throughout what was now being called the Confederation, or the Confederacy.

It was official now. The military alliance between Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had been formalized as an official confederation of two independent empires, formalizing diplomatic, military, and economic ties. The terms of the confederation were very clear in that the two empires would retain their heightened level of cooperation and interdependence, operating as a single sovereign military entity, until the threat of the Consortium was neutralized, when the two empires would return to their sovereign states. Until then, however, Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had agreed to the confederation, mirroring their cooperation with the Entry Station between their empires, where each one did their own thing, but they kept each other informed of what they were doing. The Confederation didn't give Sk'Vrae the authority to butt her snout into Imperium business or vice versa, but it was definitely a step in the right direction. The two empires had been operating like a single entity

since they'd entered into the military alliance, and the Articles of Wartime Confederation they'd signed were literally just window dressing.

Zaa had declined to enter into it, but nobody expected the Kimdori to do it anyway.

This ceremony was as much window dressing as the Articles had been, but it was also very important for both sides. This was the first *big* demonstration to both sides that they were in this together, because it was the Imperium that had invested a *huge* amount of resources into a planet that they didn't technically own. The radiation shield was now complete, and the entire *Siann* and every clan leader of the clans that made up the Urumi Collective were in attendance to witness the ceremonial activation of the radiation shield the Master Builders of the Academy had constructed around Bellar's radioactive moon and the source of the most dangerous aspect of mining the planet, the lethal radiation. The shield wasn't a magical fix-it to the problem, since there would be ambient radiation on Bellar until it was cleaned up by Kimdori-designed radiation sweepers, but it was the biggest piece of the puzzle. In two months, the radiation levels on Bellar would be low enough to allow the population to leave the domes without radiation E-suits, which were significantly more bulky and expensive than standard E-suits.

It was a chance to see the Urumi power structure, which was rather unique as governments went. The clan leaders formed a unicameral house of sorts, a congress that worked with the Brood Queen, a lineage of Urumi who belonged to *no* clan and thus were given the responsibility to rule outside of the clan structure, a family that had been specifically chosen for the task, or in the Urumi's case, believed to be given the right to rule by divine providence due to the unique genetic aspects of the Brood Queen's family line.

The things one learned about one's friends. The Brood Queen Sk'Vrae and her Brood Princesses could reproduce without a male, in effect creating offspring which were clones of themselves. All other Urumi required a male and a female to reproduce, but the line of the Brood Queen could produce children without being impregnated. In fact, they *had* to, since any male sire would belong to a clan, and that would pollute the lineage of the Brood Queen's family by giving a clan a foothold in the ruling family. Sk'Vrae's 9

children, all female just like her, were in effect clones of Sk'Vrae, but oddly enough, they didn't look just like her. There was just enough genetic variation in the offspring, minor random mutations in their DNA, that made them genetically cloned from Sk'Vrae but not exact copies.

Another oddity was that the Brood Queen's family line *could* produce a child with a male if the princess so wished, but taking a mate like that meant that the princess had to abdicate her title and join her husband's clan. Sk'Vrae's second oldest daughter, Te'Pral, had done just that. And Te'Pral's children by her husband would be incapable of self-reproduction. It was a unique aspect of the line of the Brood Queen only so long as that lineage was pure. Only "virgin birth" daughters, cloned daughters of the Brood Queen's line, had that unique ability.

Even more odd was that the Brood Queen *did* have male mates, and produced children with them, though those children were not Brood Princesses. In fact, the Brood Queen had 23 ceremonial mates, one male from each of the 23 clans that made up the Collective. One, however, was a *real* mate, her husband of sorts, and the children from that union were part of the ruling family of the father's clan. Unlike Kellin, who was heavily protected and not often seen in Faey society, Sk'Vrae's husband was one of the command staff of her navy, Queen's Admiral Xa'Bran, the third in command of the entire Urumi military...and that position was not due to nepotism. Xa'Bran was a *brilliant* military tactician. But where the Brood Queen was permitted to have mates, her princesses were not.

The Brood Queen's rule wasn't absolute, since the house of the clan leaders had duties, responsibilities, and powers, but that was only on paper. Since the Collective saw the line of the Brood Queen as ruling through divine providence, the reality was that the Brood Queen's power was essentially absolute within the Collective. The clan leaders would never openly defy the Brood Queen in public, though they did often voice concerns and objections to some of the things she did in private.

It was almost amusing to see the Urumi clan leaders interact with the *Siann*. Urumi were very serious, almost dour people, possessed of a very reserved nature, but they did have rather subtle senses of humor. They saw the *Siann* as a frivolous group, given to vaporish chatter and wasteful gossiping, and the Grand Duchesses were a bit put off by the clan leaders

stuffy, austere mannerisms. It wasn't that the Faey couldn't be regal when they wanted to be, it was that the Faey need to socialize was very much different from Urumi social custom, where smalltalk was supposed to be just that...small. Speak momentarily of unimportant matters then either speak of matters of substance or be quiet. That was diametrically opposed to Faey socializing, where matters of import were only breached after lengthy social chatter.

There were, however, important things going on today, though Jason was not in the middle of it. Though he was a very important element of their war effort and had the ear of both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae, the political reality was that Jason was simply only one leader of the houses of *Siann*, and had no special standing when in official Imperial functions. As a result, he was relegated back with the Grand Duchesses, denied the podium, denied a place with the leaders...and that was just the way he liked it. The Karinnes much preferred to operate in the background, like the Kimdori or the Trefanis, allowing others to stand in the light and allow them to do their work without everyone watching them. He was more than happy to let Dahnai stand up there and blow kisses to the cameras and make the flowery speech she was making at that moment about Faey-Urumi cooperation and how they were coming closer and closer together.

Even among the other house leaders, Jason preferred to be somewhat separate from them. When he had to mix while at court, he stayed more or less with Anya Suralle, one of his few friends within the *Siann*. Her house's management of the Terran farming effort had made them work together quite a bit, and that close contact had cultivated an earnest friendship between them. The two of them were standing at the edge of the gathering with Yila Trefani, who had quickly infiltrated herself into Karinne affairs. Her work with 3D had gotten her foot in the door, and that foothold let the cunning, charming woman make all kinds of connections within his house, both social and business. For example, he knew for a fact that she'd been making some very hush-hush arrangements with Kumi, no doubt the two of them coming up with schemes to swindle the rest of the known universe. Jason would tolerate it, if only because Yila was very smart, he needed her, and those arrangements would probably benefit Karinne as well as Trefani.

Yila certainly enjoyed looking the part of one of Jason's inner circle. Myleena had given her an interface to use while on Karis, and just like

Dahnai's interface, it doubled as a comm device when off the planet, which meant that they allowed her to take it home with her. Unlike Dahnai's original interface, however, Dahnai's new interface and Yila's interface were the upgraded models which allowed them to use command thought to emulate voice communications. As a result, Yila almost never took it off, since she rather liked having instant contact with almost anyone without having to speak, so she could "send" her conversations via command thought when she wanted privacy. Not even a listener could pick it up when someone interacted with an interface at that level. Leave it to Yila to find a way to exploit something to her advantage.

*Trelle, that woman can drone on and on and on*, the fox faced Yila complained sharply to the two of them, sending privately.

*Sometimes I think being able to bullshit behind a podium is a job requirement for sitting on the throne*, Anya agreed with a cheeky smile. *So, Jason, when are you going to come out of hiding and return to court?*

*If I can help it, never*, he answered with a snort and disgust leeching into his thought, which made Anya giggle in her annoying voice and Yila chuckle. *I'd rather shave a giruzi than go to court.*

*But we miss you, Jason*, Anya winked at him. *We used to love watching Yila resist trying to strangle you with her bare hands every time you passed by.*

*Hush, woman*, Yila sniffed, which made Anya laugh. That drew a few harsh looks at her from the other Highborns.

*So, we've been hearing that the Trefanis and the Karinnes are up to something*, Anya sent urgently, trying to drag it out of them.

*We've decided to look into a few mutual business opportunities*, Yila sent evasively.

*All those trips to Karis, I should hope so*, Anya winked. *You've been spending more time on Karis than Draconis, Yila.*

*Actually, those trips were war business, not house business*, Jason added. *I needed the advice of an irredeemable pirate blackheart, and, well, here you go*, he motioned at Yila. Yila slapped him on the elbow lightly,

which made him chuckle. *In all seriousness, Yila's been helping with the war, in her own special way. Damn effectively too, I might add.*

*Not all wars are fought with guns and ships, Yila sent simply. As Jason well knows.*

*You know it. So, how are the quotas looking this cycle?*

*Don't you dare try to talk business, Anya protested. We're talking about what's going on behind the scenes here.*

*If we told you, well, there'd be an opening on the Highborn Council,* Yila sent cheekily.

Yila and Jason probably got a little mean with Anya by stonewalling her about what they were doing, but Anya took it fairly well. She was like that, and it was one of the reasons he liked her. Anya was much more earthy than the other Highborns, probably because she had no Imperial aspirations to speak of. The ceremony certainly gave them time to talk. Dahnai spoke for nearly all of it, nearly half an hour, which was stark contrast to Sk'Vrae's three-minute declaration.

After the ceremony, the Master Builders of the Academy, Makati and Kizzik mainly, offered both Sk'Vrae and Dahnai little switch boxes, and in unison, they turned them on. The huge holographic image of Bellar's moon, visible over the podium, showed the shield take shape, starting as lines of coherent energy between the satellites, and then expanding, filling in between them in all directions, until the entire moon was encased in a coherent energy field that would trap the radiation inside, and then be safely leeched off to prevent particle buildup inside the containment area. The radioactive particles themselves had certain value to some, so they'd probably be sold off. Everyone applauded when the shield took form, and that was basically that. The ceremony was over.

But the ceremony wasn't the only bit of business going on today. Jason was swept up by Aya and the guards, and they boarded his heavily armed and armored dropship to return to the *Dreamer*, part of the new security protocols. Any time Jason left Karis, Aya would not be satisfied with putting him in anything smaller than a battleship. And as usual, the captain, Joint Admiral Marayi Karinne, wanted him in her quarters during the trip so he would be close to the bridge and so she could show him proper

hospitality. He didn't mind, because Marayi's quarters were quite interesting. Much as Jaiya collected archeological artifacts, Marayi was a movie nut, and Terran-produced posters of many Faey classics were all over her walls, including, much to his surprise, an original poster from the old Terran classic *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, complete with a brown fedora and coiled whip on a stand under the poster, much like the blaster and monomolecular sword used by Hanae the Huntress in the *Huntress* movie series rested on a stand under a poster from the original movie.

Jason picked up the whip and found that it was real enough, much as the monomolecular sword was a real one, a very real reproduction of the movie prop.

Their destination wasn't Karis, it was Terra. Jason settled in with a glass of iced tea as the *Dreamer* and his ten escorts, a task force protecting the Grand Duke, made their way to the Stargate leading to Aurigae, which would give them access to the other Stargates to get them to Terra, a trip that would take about 90 minutes due to the three Stargates they'd have to travel to and use: Bellar to Aurigae, Aurigae to Draconis, Draconis to Terra. Jason put the whip down and took the panel Aya offered him, then he sat down and started reading up on what was going on.

Their warnings had taken hold.

Jason was going to meet with a dignitary arranged by the Academy in secret. Officially he was there to visit the Academy and have lunch with Kiaari, but secretly he was going to meet with diplomats arranged by the Zyagya. The Zyagya wanted to meet with him because relations between the Alliance and the Zyagya had been deteriorating as of late. The Zyagya were an unaffiliated "empire" of a single star system completely surrounded by Alliance space, but that wasn't because the Alliance hadn't tried to annex them more than once. Quite simply put, there was nothing in the entire universe more scary than an angry Zyagyan. They were bipedal badger-wolverine looking creatures, and they had the temperament of a wolverine in spades. They were the most tenacious, nastiest fighters in the entire galaxy, and of that fact there was absolutely no dispute, by *anyone*. However, they weren't an aggressive species as one might expect. They were actually peace-loving beings who were very isolationist and wanted to be left alone, it was just that if they were forced to fight, they threw



themselves into it like it was a religious experience. The Alliance had learned the hard way that the last thing anyone ever wanted to do was make the Zyagya angry. The Alliance and the Zyagya had had amicable relations the last couple of centuries, a Zyagyan even sat in on the Alliance council meetings as a neutral observer, but now the Zyagya wanted to meet with Jason in secret, and most definitely a secret from the Alliance. Not even Zaa was entirely sure what they wanted, since she had no children that deeply into Zyagya; it wasn't high on the list of priorities, because so long as they were left alone, the Zyagya were quite happy to get along with everyone.

Marayi wandered in after they made their first Stargate crossing to Aurigae and flopped down on one of the couches in her quarters. *We're about twenty minutes from the Draconis gate*, she told them easily, brushing her bone-white hair out of her brilliant lavender eyes. Marayi's eyes were her most striking and beautiful feature. *We're about an hour out from Terra, Jason.*

*Sounds like we're right on schedule*, Jason added. *So, what's with the Indiana Jones hat?*

Marayi laughed. *Well, for one, Harrison Ford was a handsome man back in his prime*, she winked. *And I loved that movie. I saw it in the middle of the night on Terra TV not long after the network started up. Given a choice between watching Kaera Huranne or Harrison Ford kick ass, I'll take Harrison Ford.* Kaera Huranne was the star of the *Huntress* movie series, nine movies in a series about a rogue starship commander and her crew of pirates dodging every government and organized mercenary organization in the sector that tried to stop them as they searched for a mythical place called the *Ley Nexus*, which supposedly held the greatest secret in the galaxy. It was an adventure movie series much in the spirit of the Indiana Jones movies, just with starships and MPACs rather than whips and machine guns. *I love getting replicas of the movie props too, it's part of my collection, and you can't be a Jones fan and not have the hat and whip. Just as much as you can't be a Jarae fan and not have the sword and blaster. At least what they call a blaster anyway*, she chuckled. Karinne Pulse weapons were often called *blasters* or *pulse blasters* in the military, because of the spectacular effect they had when they hit something.

*Faey and their collections*, Jason chuckled. *I swear, you're a race of pack rats.*

*Faey women like trophies*, she winked in reply. *Husbands are just the trophy proving we get some every night.*

*Well, that explains Kumi's porn collection*, Jason mused, which made Marayi laugh.

The task force got him to Terra just a bit before noon local time, and he descended to the Academy for his lunch date with Kiaari. Jason still managed to get out to see his old friend as much as he could as time permitted, trying to have lunch with her at least once a takir. She greeted him at his private landing pad, giving him a rough, warm hug and licking his cheek playfully, then scrabbling her short claws against his armor. "You don't need this with me around," she smiled.

"Blame her," he said, jerking a thumb at Aya. "She won't let me out of it unless I'm in my house."

"Meanie," Kiaari winked. "Well, lunch is waiting, Jason. We're having tamales and chili con carne."

"Chili? Sounds good!"

"The culinary arts program is on their Terran phase, doing Mexican right now," she told him. Their lunches had exposed Jason to quite a lot of different foods, since Kiaari allowed the students in the culinary arts program to prepare their meals, and they didn't *just* learn how to cook one culture's foods. Jason had sampled Menodan, Makati, Bari-Bari, Shio, Urumi, Moridon, and Skaa cuisine in addition to human and Faey food and found that sometimes it was potluck. He rather liked Skaa food, since it was meat-heavy, rich, and hearty, but he hated Makati food, which was unbelievably bland. A Makati chef cooking in their traditions did not know what *spices* were. Menoda ate everything raw, since they were an aquatic species, but there was quite a bit of seasoning that went on with Menodan dishes that made them interesting.

The guards ate at a separate table in the cafeteria as they sat down to eat, again part of their habit, to reinforce the Karinne ownership of the Academy. They talked of unimportant matters, just catching up, and Jason found the food to be quite delicious.

After lunch, however, they got down to business. They went to Kiaari's official office, and from there they used her secret exit to go to her *real* office in the basement of the engineering building. Waiting for him there was a Zyagya, and just seeing one face to face was an intimidating experience. The Zyagya was seven feet tall, covered in grayish-blue fur everywhere but two black stripes that went up the outsides of his arms, hidden under his blue jumpsuit, and a black mask-like band over his eyes, like a badger or raccoon. The tips of his triangular ears were also black. "Grand Duke Karinne," he said in a deep voice, bowing quite gracefully, then offering a four-fingered hand, each finger thick and heavy and tipped with a wicked unretractable claw that could probably rip a human apart in short order if used as weapons. "I am Ambassador Graw. At your service."

"Ambassador," Jason returned, nodding towards a conference room. "Shall we?"

Jason, the Zyagyan, and Kiaari entered the conference room with Dera and Aya to serve as Jason's guards. Graw curled his bushy tail around and sat down at the table after Jason and Kiaari seated themselves, and he got right to the point. "We have reason to believe the Alliance is about to make another attempt to annex us," he declared, which made Kiaari whistle. "They've held six secret meetings of their council outside of the ears of our observer, which is a violation of the treaty we signed. There's also a buildup of Alliance forces around our border. They claim that they're staging their forces in the center of Alliance territory so they can respond to any border, but that's a bald lie."

"That's serious enough," Jason grunted. "You have no solid proof though?"

He shook his big head, one of his chops rising enough to let Jason see one of his four-inch-long fangs. "Nothing solid, nothing concrete. But we Zyagya pay attention to our histories and traditions, and we see now what we've seen the last time we went to war with the Alliance. We believe the attack will be unprovoked and out of nowhere to try to take us by surprise."

"Kiaari?" Jason asked.

"This is news to me, my friend," she said seriously. "But I think the Ambassador does make a point. I'll start digging and send this up to

Denmother to investigate.”

“Well, what can we do for you, Ambassador?” Jason asked. “I’m sure you have a reason to come to me.”

“We want to buy or lease one of your interdictors,” he declared. “Immediately.”

“It’s not quite that easy, Ambassador. Without a Stargate—”

“We don’t care about having access in or out of Zyagyan space,” he cut off. “We are self-sufficient. We can live without Alliance trade. All we care about is protecting Zyagya from attack.”

Jason looked at Kiaari, who simply shrugged. “Well, we can do that for you, Ambassador, but it’s still not quite as easy as towing one in and parking it. Those interdictors are the only thing protecting us from the Consortium, and we can’t just let one out of our control. If we agree to this, we’ll demand presence at Zyagya to protect the interdictor—”

“Name your terms,” the Zyagyan interrupted him. “We are willing to agree to them. All that matters to us is protecting our sovereignty.”

“Making a deal with a Faey splinter house might threaten that sovereignty,” Kiaari chuckled. “You know how the Faey are, Ambassador.”

“The House Karinne is *not* the Imperium,” he declared bluntly. “Any agreement will be between Zyagya and the House Karinne, *not* the Imperium.”

“Any terms?” Jason asked.

“As long as they are fair,” he answered simply.

“All right. We’ll send you an interdictor, but it means we’re allowed to send a task force of six Karinne ships to Zyagya whose primary and complete responsibility is to defend the interdictor. The interdictor stays there so long as Zyagya is not threatened by the Consortium, Ambassador. We can’t risk them getting their hands on an interdictor and learning how they work so they can get around it. If the Consortium sends an attack fleet against Zyagya larger than we feel can be repelled, the interdictor leaves.”

“As will the Zyagya,” he said calmly. “We will not live under a Consortium yoke any more than an Alliance yoke. In the case the Zyagya

must flee homeworld, we demand sanctuary in Karinne territory, behind the safety of other interdictors.”

“Deal,” Jason said immediately. “I think the Zyagya would do smashing on Exile if it comes down to that. It’s a lone planet far from everything, where nobody will ever bother you.”

“That is our primary objective in all things,” he said gravely. “To be left alone.”

“We *will* need a Stargate there,” Jason grunted. “Hmm. That may not be easy, but I think I can swing it. I’ll have to really sweet-talk Dahnai.”

“If anyone can, you can, *amu dorai*,” Kiaari winked.

“We can place the terminus Stargate here at Terra, a neutral site,” Jason said aloud. “Actually, it’d have to go to the Terra Entry Station, now that I think about it. We’ll just have two gates there, one to Terra and one to Zyagya.”

“The gate would have to be protected by Zyagyan military forces to prevent illegal use,” the Ambassador declared.

“That’s fair,” Jason agreed. “But they’d be sharing defensive space with Confederate forces. If you can bargain a limited military cooperation treaty out of Dahnai and Sk’Vrae concerning the defense of that Stargate, then you’re good to go.”

“Confederate?” the Zyagyan asked curiously.

“That’s what they’re calling themselves,” Jason chuckled. “The Imperium and Collective entered a formal confederation against the Consortium, and they’ve taken to calling the military forces Confederate forces, because in that respect, the two empires are acting as one. Two nations, one military until the Consortium are defeated.”

“We’d heard about the articles, but hearing that word is new to us,” the ambassador smiled, which was a bit chilling given his teeth were all sharp and wicked looking. “Very well. If we can secure the cooperation of the Confederation, we can close a bargain on the interdictor?”

“We can,” Jason nodded. “And we’d better move fast. Kiaari, I think we’ll need to cut our visit short. I’ll take the Ambassador back to Bellar on

the *Dreamer* so he can talk to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae. Think you can get the two of us back to my dropship under the table?"

"Like I can't manage under the table," she winked. "Give me a few minutes, I'll have things arranged."

The Zyagyan sighed in relief. "Thank Skarg," he breathed as Kiaari rushed out. "The Leader told me not to come home until I had this deal struck, that the safety of all Zyagya was in my paws."

"Well, we'll make sure you can get home soon, Ambassador," Jason chuckled. "This is more or less what I offered to everyone before we closed off the Imperium and Collective. We're more than willing to help you defend yourself with a minimum of intruding ourselves in your business."

"That is why I am here," he said with a nod. "The word of the Karinnes is the word of truth. Should Empress Dahnai had made this offer, I would not be here now."

Jason pondered the significance of it as Kiaari called his dropship off the pad and had it pull into a large bay in the back of the engineering building where students looked over ships and other large mobile units, a place where Kiaari often embarked or disembarked passengers in secret. If the Zyagya were that worried, that nervous, about the Alliance, then the Shio couldn't be very far behind them. The Shio bordered Alliance space on the far side of the Imperium, which put them within striking distance. The equalizer, however, was that the Shio were heavily armed with Torsion weaponry, including about 1500 mobile weapon platform satellites scattered through the 4 systems and 6 planets or moons the Shio inhabited, which were fearsome defenses. A single platform could destroy an enemy ship, and when there were 200 of them bristling around a planet backing up any orbital stations or defensive ships present at the planet, well, that would make any attacker think twice.

That was why there were now nearly 3,000 of those platforms in orbit around Karis, and more were added every day.

It was an honestly pleasant trip back to Bellar, because Ambassador Graw was a surprisingly good conversationalist. Jason figured that had to be a job requirement for a diplomat, and it also proved that the Zyagya weren't as fearsome as they appeared. Much as the Moridon looked

extremely intimidating and were actually pacifistic in nature, the Zyagya looked brutish, like the Goraga, but were actually highly intelligent. Graw was a typical Zyagyan, however, in his love of sports. Zyagyans were the ultimate sports fans in the galaxy, because the concept of the game, of competition at its noblest form, resonated in their cultural identity in a way it did for no other race. Evolved from animals with a pack mentality, like the Kimdori, the Zyagya idolized team sports as the ultimate expression of how cooperation brought about victory. And being large, physical creatures, Zyagya had embraced American Football to a degree that made the most rabid human football fan look like a granny by comparison. The formalized rules of territorial acquisition and the velocity and power of the game were close to the Zyagyan national sport, which could best be described as a cross between rugby and no holds barred wrestling, so football had become popular as a less violent, more structured version of their game, which had no name. It was simply known as *the game* on Zyagya, but off of their home world, it was known by the Zyagyan word for *game*, which was *grazkaur*.

There was one issue of contention, however. Graw was a Jets fan, and Jason, being from Maine, was a Patriots fan. But they laughingly agreed to disagree on that point.

They spent most of the trip talking football, of all things, and Jason was stunned that Graw knew more about the history, strategy, and players of football than some ESPN analysts. Graw was also quite the expert on the European Premiere soccer league and the Interstellar Batchi League, the major league of batchi in the Imperium. It also showed Jason that some things could cross racial and governmental boundaries. Batchi was growing to be a popular sport on Terra—though Jason suspected that men liked to watch batchi to watch sleek Faey women wearing sports bras and tight shorts running around the field—even as football, baseball, and soccer were rather popular in the Imperium...and probably for the same reason batchi was popular on Earth. Professionally, there was now an IBL team on Terra. The Warriors, one of four IBL teams in the Arctus system, had moved to New York City last year, and the team's home games had sold out the entire season, at least so far, despite the fact that the Warriors were close to the cellar in their division and had no hope of playing for the Empress' Crown this year, a bona fide Imperial crown donated by a Merrane Empress nearly

two hundred years ago that served as the championship trophy of the league. Outside of the IBL, there were human batchi teams and minor batchi leagues on Terra, and though football hadn't taken hold in the Imperium yet as anything but a spectator sport, soccer had become a popular game to play. Soccer leagues had popped up all over the Imperium, and it was quickly becoming the second most popular sport among young girls behind batchi. Baseball as well had gained a significant foothold in the Imperium, and was more popular among boys than girls, quickly becoming the "boy's sport" in the Imperium much as softball was the "girl's sport" on Terra.

"Huh," Jason chuckled after Graw explained the rules of *grazkaur* to him, which were pretty few and far between, where injuring your opponents to get them off the field was as much a tactic as claiming the entire field by placing flag markers at every flag point on the field, which was the condition of victory. Fatalities weren't uncommon on a game field, though the intentional killing of an opponent was the highest form of poor sportsmanship. "You know, Terra celebrates an event we call the Olympics \_\_\_\_"

"Ah yes, the Olympics!" Graw interrupted. "The Winter games just ended a few days ago! I enjoyed watching your hockey!"

"Why am I not surprised you know about the Olympics," Jason laughed. "I wonder if we could get your people to contest an exhibition match of the game on Terra."

"I'm sure it could be arranged, though many Terrans would find our game to be perhaps too bloody for them. I know of no Terran or Faey sport that counts opponents injured and removed from play as a player's statistic."

"We could put up disclaimers," Jason chuckled.

"I think we could arrange it, your Grace," Graw told him. "I'll put out the offer to the various leagues and see who's interested. Perhaps teams from two different leagues will take up the offer and contest each other, which is something we rarely see at home. It would make it very interesting."



By the time they reached Bellar, Jason was fully at ease with Graw, and he was fairly sure that Dahnai would like him.

Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were intrigued by Graw's offer, and while Jason and Zaa listened in as observers, the two of them haggled with Graw over his request, trying to drag the Zyagya into a formal alliance against the Consortium. Graw looked brutish, but he proved that he was a wily politician as he artfully evaded their traps, and managed to bargain a fair and equitable agreement out of the two matriarchs where the Zyagya defended the Stargate leading to their home system, the Karinnes defended the gate and interdictor within Zyagyan territory, and the Zyagya would have a small office in the Terra Entry Station where they could coordinate what little traffic would use the Stargate. Graw wasn't lying when he said that the Zyagya were self-sufficient. They had very few formal trade agreements with other nations, so there was only a trickle of traffic in and out of their lone system. Outside of Karinne ships, their Stargate would only see use maybe twice a week. Zaa managed to touch Graw at the tail end of it, just before they took a break, and she imparted Graw's mind to Jason as they enjoyed a cup of coffee. "He is sincere," she declared to him. "Or at least he believes in what he is doing. If the Zyagya have any ulterior motives, he doesn't know about it. Personally, I'm inclined to believe him. The Alliance has a long history of trying to either conquer or lure Zyagya into their government. That they are thinking of another attempt is not outlandish."

"I wouldn't put it past them. They're in an expansionist mood, and Zyagya has always been a thorn in their sides. A sovereign state smack dab in the exact center of Alliance territory."

When Zaa told Dahnai and Sk'Vrae that her intelligence sources couldn't find any treachery, Graw waited as official documents were drawn up. It took about six hours for Graw and the two rulers to hammer out every detail, requiring several drafts of the treaty, but by about midnight Karis time, they had an official treaty. Dahnai and Sk'Vrae signed it, Graw signed it on behalf of the Leader, the self-descriptive title of the Zyagyan ruler, and then Jason personally took Graw back to Terra so they could formalize the agreement between Karinne and Zyagya. That only took about an hour, where the duties and responsibilities of each side were spelled out, and Jason made sure to stress in the language that the interdictor would be

pulled if the Consortium threatened Zyagya with a force deemed too large to repel, and also that the Zyagya had the right to relocate to Karis and Exile if that happened. “Have your Academy ambassador get in touch with Kiaari when you’re ready,” he reminded him. “We can have the interdictor and Stargate there in two hours after you give us the go-ahead.”

“Expect it in about two days,” Graw nodded in reply. “My people will need a little time to get ready.”

“We’ll move as soon as you’re ready.”

“Very good. It was a good day, your Grace,” he said, shaking Jason’s hand.

“It’s always a good day when someone goes to bed feeling safe,” he answered.

There was House business, then there was private business, and Jason’s personal life was just as busy as his life as the Grand Duke Karinne...and damn it all, he was going to *live*, not spend every moment fearing the Consortium.

The day after meeting Graw was busy. Jason did have a lot of work to do with 3D and his house duties, but he managed to squeeze in some personal time as well. He had lunch with Jyslin, a lunch date where no business was discussed *at all*, then he devoted some time training Rann in telekinesis after he got home. Rann had gotten the hang of it, and now he could move small objects without much trouble. Jason was teaching him the finesse aspects of the ability, how to manipulate things delicately, and his son was quickly getting good. Danelle as well was expressing her telekinetic ability, but Myleena had been the one teaching her. After the lessons, he had dinner with the family, Tim, and Symone, but after dinner he went out on a date. That was the strange part, at least for a human. Here he was, happily married, but he went out on a literal date with Aura, taking her to see one of the local opera companies. Jyslin not only didn’t mind, she’d helped set it up, because in Faey society, husbands were expected to socialize with single friends that way. And just like many dates, they ended up in Aura’s bed after dinner.

Aura was his one guilty pleasure. He enjoyed her in ways that almost made him feel guilty, and it was nothing but pure physical attraction. Theirs was an almost textbook friendship in Faey society, because they did like each other, were very good friends, but they also each thought the other was drop dead sexy, so they explored that physical attraction. He spent nearly as much time with Yana, but that was a case of being what Yana needed. He couldn't deny that he enjoyed it, but that time was for Yana, not for him. Going out with Aura was for *him*. Jyslin not only approved of their relationship, she often set them up on their dates, something virtually no human wife would ever do. But that was because of the power of the telepathic pair bond. Jyslin knew beyond absolutely any shadow of any doubt that she held Jason's heart, and that meant that she didn't see extramarital affairs as any kind of challenge to her ownership of him whatsoever. Besides, she liked him coming home and telling her all about it, and maybe learning something new to use with her.

It was at Aura's house where his staff had to track him down, because he spent the night with her. Her vidlink was beeping demandingly, waking them up, and Aura groaned and threw an arm over him as he sat up enough to see what the ruckus was. Aura's vidlink was giving the emergency warning, how the house spread information about dangerous situations or impending attacks, then it came on by itself when the call request riding under that warning siren wasn't answered. She's face appeared on the monitor, and then the vidlink's holo trideo feature activated, projecting a much larger version of her face into the air in front of the unit.

"Your Grace," She called. "Wake up."

"Shey," Jason growled, "unless there's a Consortium fleet knocking on the front door of my house, I am going to skin you."

"Don't blame me, your Grace, I'm just following orders," she answered, with a touch of a slight smile touching her elegant eyebrows. "There's an urgent communiqué awaiting your immediate attention."

"From?"

"Kiaari. Wait one moment. Now that you're awake, I'll patch her through."

*Who is that?* Aura asked, putting both hands over her face. The move pushed the covers down to reveal her exquisitely lovely breasts, and Jason couldn't resist reaching down and fondling one. Aura giggled girlishly and moved her hands enough to give him a sultry look. *Don't start. I think you're about to be needed, and I don't want either of us to leave here frustrated.*

*Actually, that's a valid point,* he agreed, removing his hand. But he did overtly ogle her, which made her grin preeningly at him. *But do keep your schedule open later today.*

*For?*

*Didn't you want to learn how to fly? I told you I'd teach you. That wasn't just an empty platitude, woman.*

*Oooh! Yes! You call and I'll be there!*

Kiaari's face appeared, and she grinned toothily. "I believe I'm interrupting something," she noticed.

"Yes, me threatening my comm officer with painful death for waking me," Jason grunted, which made Kiaari laugh. "Kiaari, this is Aura. Aura, Kiaari."

"A pleasure to meet you," Aura said in improving modern Faey. Aura and the other Exiles had been working very hard to master the changes in the language, so they could more easily integrate. The vast majority of the Exiles still lived just off Embraijn, but a few, like Aura, had moved into the general Karinne population. Aura had already chosen her profession; what she'd do after she finished her language work and mastered the basics of modern technology. Aura wanted to be a pilot, a commercial dropship pilot, and Jason was going to personally train her for her Class 3. He hadn't told her yet, but he'd already had a dropship built, one of the Karinne models from Cybi's memory, for her personal use. But to be a commercial pilot, she'd probably be flying Sticks once she got a job, that or a Karinne P-xxx line of personnel transports, ranging from the P-101, an 8 passenger dropship, to the P-680, a massive 600 seat passenger liner, twice the size of a Boeing 777. A Class 3 rated commercial pilot could pilot any of them. The Karinne P series were most commonly used by the house to move

people around, but they were mainly used to move workers up to Kosigi and back down.

“So this is the girlfriend,” Kiaari grinned. “I wondered when you were going to show her off. Looks like she’s got a lot to show.”

“She’s moderately spectacular when she’s naked,” Jason said without batting an eye, which made Aura smile rakishly. “Now why are you calling?”

She snorted. “The word got out, Jayce. I don’t know how, but the Alliance got wind of what the Zyagya intend to do, and they’re rattling the sabers, to use a human term. Sister Mimmi tells us that the Alliance jumped a fleet into Zyagyan territory as a threat to try to force them to join the Alliance. The Zyagyan ambassador here is begging for you to move the interdictor and Stargate as soon as possible.”

“Well, shit,” Jason grunted. “Tell him I’ll get it moving right now.”

“Will do. Lunch?”

“Only if it’s here.”

“Sounds good to me, I haven’t seen Rann in a while. I’ll be there in a few hours.”

Her face vanished, and Jason sighed and leaned back. *Well, I guess work’s calling*, he noted. *You’re absolutely prophetic, Aura.*

*I spent too many years in the Chieftess’ chair*, she answered seriously.

*I don’t doubt it. [Cybi, patch me through to the command center.]*

*[Certainly. Go ahead.]*

*[Alright Shey, who’s there?]*

*[I am,] Myri’s voice came over communion. [Kiaari warned us something big was going on. What are your orders?]*

*[We need to move the Zyagya interdictor now. Get the task force going and go get the Stargate moving out of Draconis. It’s already sitting there waiting.]*

*[Alright. The ships are already on standby, so they’ll be on the move in thirty minutes.]*

*[Sounds good. Warn the War Room while you're at it, tell them the Zyagyan interdictor and Stargate are being positioned. They'll work the rest of it from the TES.]*

*[Alright.]*

*[Who's slated for the first Zyagya picket duty?]*

*[Trelle's Gift commanding the new tactical cruiser, a cruiser and three destroyers. Umm, the Revenge and Aravalo, with the Veriven, Merro, and Tikanne.]* Hiae had decided to keep the name *Revenge* for her ship, just as Jeya had decided to keep the name *Steadfast* for hers.

*[Jaiya, eh? Good, she'll keep a handle on things. What's big that we have at the TES?]*

*[Outside of the usual picket task force? The Jefferson and its task force are pulling a hot response sentry watch, but it'll be replaced by the Arabax and her task force in about nine hours. It's duty rotation day.]*

*[Alright. Put the TES pickets on hot standby, just in case.]*

*[You expecting trouble?]*

*[No, but if it happens, I don't want to hang Jaiya's ass out a window for everyone to see. I want help there within two minutes if she calls for it.]*

*[You got it. We'll send the orders down. You coming in?]*

*[I guess I'd better,]* he grunted.

*[Alright. We'll get the "stay out of our way" corner ready for you.]*

*[Oh, ha ha, ha ha, ha ha,]* he retorted dryly, which made Myri laugh. *Dera!* he boomed. Not even visiting Aura was allowed without escort, though when he went on dates with Aura, he only had two guards with him. Dera and Shen had accompanied him on his date last night and had stayed the night to protect the Grand Duke while he had his fun with Aura. *Dera, we gotta go! Where's my armor?*

*Well, it was scattered all over the living room, hallway, stairs, upper hallway, and the outside of Aura's bedroom door last night,* she replied cheekily. *We collected up what we could find, but we're missing a couple of pieces. Mainly the codpiece,* she trilled naughtily.

*Okay, so I was in a hurry, he retorted coolly, which made Aura grin. The Alliance is on the move, so things are serious today. I'll be down as soon as I find the pieces I managed to get past the door.*

He did get one more really good kiss out of Aura and got his hands in a few places that she enjoyed him touching but didn't enjoy him not touching enough, then Dera brought in his armor for him. Aura sat demurely on her legs in the bed and watched him start to put on his armor, a slight smile on her face as she sent privately with Dera.

"Yeah, yeah, keep talkin'," Jason teased aloud as he started buckling his breastplate and backpiece together.

"I'm just telling her about the opera," Aura protested.

"Suuuuure," he drawled, which made Aura giggle impulsively. "Why don't you come to lunch and meet Kiaari? She'd love to meet you."

"I'd love to. Is Jyslin going to be there?"

"Should be, her and Rann," he answered.

"Then I'll be there."

"Sounds like a date."

"Not the fun kind," she winked.

"You just had the fun kind. Now live with the boring kind."

Aura had her morning classes, so she started dressing after Jason got fully armored up and went out. Hovering just over her house were three sleek black Wolf fighters, hovering over her house because they had no room to land without ruining someone's lawn. They were model numbers 003, and 004, and 005. Model 003 was *his* fighter, and it was fully operational, not just a stripped-down show unit. That was a combat capable craft. Justin Taggart had earned the right to fly the first combat operation model off the line, flying 002, and the first production model, 001 and its prototype production model, 000, were being held back at Karinne Propulsion Industries, KPI, which built all the dropships, fighters, and other small flying craft. Those two ships were the control models, one of which was a test unit while the other was purely a historical artifact, fully

operational but meant not to be used. That was 000. Should disaster befall 001, however, 000 would become the test unit.

They were part of a new way of doing things that Jason was testing out. When he went out by himself, instead of flying a dropship, he would instead be flying his Wolf, with his guards flying their own. It was simple safety. Jason was actually far safer in the Wolf than he was in a dropship, because if he ever came under attack, well, the attacker was going to have lots of fun trying to kill him. Wolves were that damn fast and agile. Because of that, the Grand Duke had commandeered six Wolves, 003 to 008, and all his guards were working to rate to fly them even now. Dera and Shen had been chosen to go with him mainly because they could fly their fighters. So far, it had worked fairly well. Aya didn't object *too* much to him flying a fighter instead of a dropship, if only because the Wolf was so damn hard to kill. She'd never have let him try out this new system in a Raptor.

The Wolves were being cranked out by the boatload. They had the production lines all fully tooled now, stock parts being delivered on tight schedules, and the line was going into overdrive. They'd been producing units for five days, and now that they had all the bugs worked out, a new fully operational Wolf was coming off the production line every 22 minutes, and there were 3 factories producing Wolf fighters. That was 3 fighters every 22 minutes, or about one every 7 minutes or so. Jason wanted the entire fighter fleet upgraded to Wolves in two months, and if they kept their production lines going without interruption, they'd meet that objective. The Raptors and the few Dragonflies they used would be relegated to reserve status, kept operational but not used in front-line situations. He wanted the problem to be not enough pilots to fly the Wolves, not that there were not enough Wolves for his pilots. Given the production schedule, that happy condition wouldn't take long to come to pass.

They also had a few modifications to the system. Since the Wolf was a two-man fighter, they decided to stick not just a telepathic striker in the cockpit, but a remote unit controller. Each Wolf would have six stripped-down, small, highly mobile Torsion weapon platforms attached to it that would be controlled by the weapons officer, six drones under the control of what the pilots were now calling the "window seater." All the weapons could be controlled from either cockpit, but the operating procedure would be that the Wolf pilot would control the pulse weapons on the fighter, and



the weapons officer would be directing the drones against Consortium opponents or telepathically attacking non-Consortium enemies or both, which simulations and test runs had already proved was an absolutely deadly combination. Torsion weapons that small didn't do a whole lot of damage, would barely scratch the armor of a standard starship, but they did more than enough to kill an enemy fighter or other small target. With the weapons officer defending the Wolf from enemy fighters using the drones and the pilot attacking with the powerful pulse weapons, a Wolf was a nightmare of an opponent for just about anyone now.

His Wolf was just like the others, so he could see where the drones were attached under the angled wings like missiles, in their carry configuration, then they'd unfold like a Transformers robot into flight mode once they were released. Jason could control the drones from the cockpit, but that was a lot of distraction. The Wolf's computer could *also* control the drones, which was what would happen if Jason ever got caught out in the open in a combat situation in his Wolf. The computer would control the drones to defend the fighter, and Jason would run like hell. If he ever engaged in willing combat, if he lived through it, just about everyone on Karsa would take turns beating the hell out of him for putting himself in danger.

He floated up into the belly opening that led to the coffin-like cockpit of his Wolf, and felt it lock him in and rotate the cockpit into flight mode even as he lost all sense of gravity. The Wolf came out of sleep mode once the cockpit was secured, and Jason assumed control over it. *Step it up, ladies*, Jason chided as the Wolf's camera views flowed into his mind, as well as the telemetry of the craft, telling him it was ready to go. *You're making me wait here!*

*Hush, you arrogant man, you*, Shen teased as she disappeared into her fighter in his camera view. Jason launched two spinners to get a look further up, even though the gravity-based sensor system that used the mass effect on gravity to passively search for objects already told him exactly where everything was all around him. But he still liked to *see*, a throwback of his old pilot training. VFR meant VFR, so he liked to be able to see that he wasn't about to run into someone.

*You'd think he'd be too tired to be pecky*, Dera called.

*Aura does look like an energetic type*, Shen agreed.

*I'll show you two energetic when we get home,* Jason retorted, then instantly winced.

*Oh, really?* Dera called. *Will this be an individual demonstration, or will me and Shen get to see it at the same time?*

*I don't mind sharing,* Shen called lightly.

*Oh, shut up,* he growled, which made them laugh mentally.

With his guards flying escort, Jason made the very short trip to the White House, and the jokes faded when he got to the command center and saw that everything was already on the move. The interdicator was sitting out there waiting to go, being towed by the *Trelle's Gift* and surrounded by the cruisers and destroyers in the task force, with Raptors and the first full Wolf fighter squadron, Justin Taggart's 76<sup>th</sup>, swarming around the ships, performing visual inspections before docking for the jump. Myri, Sioa, Juma, and Navii clustered around the main monitor holding the tactical situation. To the left was a diagram of the Zyagya system, and there were three lines of ominous red dots on the edge of the display.

"Let me guess," Jason grunted as he pulled off his helmet. "That's them."

Navii nodded. "That's an Alliance fleet. One hundred and ninety-four ships. They'll reach Zyagya in sixteen hours, but their position in hyperspace puts them inside the interdicator effect once it expands to full size."

"How far out?"

"A third of a light year," Myri answered. "The Zyagya warned us that they jumped. The Kimdori got a probe out there, it's feeding us that," she said with a point at the Zyagya system. *How are we going to play that?*

*We offer to tow them out, after they power down their ships. If they refuse, well, I hope they have a year's worth of supplies on their ships,* Jason answered.

*No, I have a better idea,* Navii called. *We have a second interdicator on standby. Let's put it in front of them and knock them out of hyperspace from a safe distance, tell them to turn around or starve, then jump out. If they don't turn around, we let them starve. The Alliance can't say shit about it*

*since we gave them plenty of warning, and after their crew gets desperate, we go back and offer to save them if they surrender their ships. Then we ransom them back to the Alliance after we go through their ships with our engineers to see what they can do, up close and personal.*

*Navii, that's evil!* Jason gasped, then he laughed. "I like it!"

"Let's do it," Myri called, then she issued the orders aloud for the benefit of the humans, Makati, and the two Kizzik in the command center. A second task force was scrambled, the *Temeron* and the standard single cruiser and four destroyer escorts for a heavy cruiser task force, and 18 Kimdori ships, and they got their orders.

Jyslin and Rann hurried into the command center, as well as Kyri and Danelle, all of them in armor and escorted by five of the Ducal Guard, with Aya leading them. *Hey there*, Jason greeted. *What are you guys doing here?*

*We were in the neighborhood*, Jyslin answered. *I had work over at 3D and Maya needed me to take the kids today, so I brought them along.*

*Works for me. Oh, Kiaari and Aura are coming over for lunch.*

*Sound good!*

*What are you doing, Daddy?* Rann asked.

*Watching Myri do her work*, he answered.

*And getting under our feet*, she teased.

*You love me anyway.*

*Sadly, I do*, she sighed forlornly, which made Danelle giggle.

Jason engaged the kids in smalltalk both to pass the time and catch up with them, since two were his children and Danelle was as good as, since she saw him literally as her own father. Jason never minded bringing Rann into places like this, because he had to learn, had to learn how to interact with Myri and the other very important people in the house. Someday it would all be his, and it was his duty to be a good Grand Duke. Part of that was being engaged and involved in both the professional and personal lives of the people who made the house work. That was why he was on a first name basis with just about any KMS officer higher than the rank of Lieutenant, and he often had them over for dinner or barbecues.

But the chatting was put on hold when the operation began. The first group to jump out was the battleship *Trelle's Gift* and his task force, taking the interdicator to Zyagya. Included in the formation were three Kimdori ECM ships, ships specifically and solely designed to attack an enemy indirectly. Those ships could effectively jam any and all sensors pointed at Zyagya, which was *very* important due to the highly advanced Alliance sensors that would be in very close proximity to the interdicator, and would also scramble light leaving the system to prevent telescopic surveillance. Those ships were as important to the operation as the interdicator was, because preventing potential enemies from being able to analyze the interdiction field kept them from engineering a way to get around it. And when it came to electronic warfare, the Kimdori were the best in the business. The Stargate would start out after the interdicator was up and running, which was standard procedure for them. The second task force jumped out about five minutes after the first, and Jason split his attention between the engineering team with the Zyagya interdicator and the tactical team that was moving to intercept the Alliance fleet.

By the time the intercepting fleet had calculated where they needed to be and how long the interdicator had to be running before it reached the Alliance fleet, the Zyagya operation was in full swing. The interdicator was inserted over the north pole of Zyagya Prime, a huge terrestrial planet that was nearly twice the size of Terra but had gravity only 1.25 Earth gravity due to a lighter density and a hell of a lot of water. Zyagya was *almost* classified as an ocean planet, since water covered 78% of its surface, and Faey astrogeologists classified a planet as an ocean planet when it had 80% water coverage. The land that was there was still more than four times the area of available land on Earth, however. In all, Zyagya was a rather pretty planet, he decided, a blue and green jewel with fluffy clouds, and surprisingly few satellites or large orbital structures. Like the Faey, the Zyagya had learned how to industrialize without drastically altering their planet. Jason watched as the E-suit wearing techs roamed around the egg-shaped interdicator, the precious device encased in a thick, heavily armored shell, with the massive *Trelle's Gift* hovering over the egg-like device it like a protective mother swan. Jason watched the technical feed, and when the spike generated on the hyperspace sensors, he knew the interdicator had been activated. The spike settled into that smooth waveform pattern that marked

an interdictor in operation, and the waveform slowly began to increase in amplitude, expanding the interdiction field.

Out in deep space, the second operation was setting up. They had the interdictor in place, and he saw that one also activate. They had to make sure to shut it down before the interdiction field from Zyagya reached it, else that field would monkey with the other one; interdiction fields could operate in the same space if they were synced, but they hadn't had time to sync the two interdictors they were using. That was not a quick process. Unsynced interdictors affecting the same area of hyperspace caused both interdictors to use way too much power, and since both fields would be building, it would significantly slow down the field expansion of both interdictors throughout their entire interdiction area as the two interdictors basically fought with each other over who was going to interdict the contested space. They didn't want that to happen, so there was a time limit involved with the Alliance warning operation. It was a moot point, however, for the interdictor was put in a place that gave it four hours to do its job, and they didn't expect it to take more than twenty minutes.

Jason listened in as the captain of the *Temeron*, Yura Goralle, hailed the Alliance fleet after it was knocked out of hyperspace. It was typical Yura, dry and tinged with hidden digs. "Attention Alliance fleet," her voice called over Alliance hailing channels. "You are entering sovereign Zyagyan space. The Zyagya have contracted with House Karinne to defend their system from invasion, and as such, the Karinnes have installed a hyperspace interdictor to protect Zyagya. If you do not turn around right now and get at least one light year away from the Zyagya star, you will be trapped in normal space and will most likely starve to death before escaping the interdiction effect. And be assured, Alliance commander, you *will* starve. No one can help you. No one can reach you. But far be it from me to deny you the right to kill yourselves," she drawled, which made Jason chuckle. "So we will remove our local interdiction effect and allow you to either turn around and jump back to safety, or keep going and die. That choice is yours."

And with that, the interdictor was shut down and the task force jumped out.

"Hmm," Jason mused.

“What?” Jyslin asked.

“That’s a damn good idea,” he said. “I’ll have to ask Myli about it.”

“About what?”

“If we can install an interdicator *inside* a starship and have it still work,” he answered. “I’m not entirely sure if it will, because of the spatial warping the engines put out and the velocities the ships reach. She’d have to look over the tolerances.”

“What good would that do?” Myri asked.

“Well, interdictors *will* work at very low power levels if they’re moving, but as a rule, interdictors don’t like to move when they’re operating. That wouldn’t stop a huge fleet from jumping into a system, but in a battle, it would keep enemies from *retreating*.”

“Oh. Ohhhhh!” Myri called, her eyes widening. “Put Myli on that right now!”

“With everything else on her plate? *You* do it. I want to see if you get out of her office with both eyes.”

Myri laughed. “Well, we’ll just have to keep an interdicator in reserve to jump to a battle site to prevent retreat until I work up that much nerve.”

Jason watched as the Alliance fleet sat there, most likely getting orders from their commanders, as the Zyagya interdicator continued to expand, getting closer and closer to its “bell curve” expansion phase. On the far side of Zyagya, the Stargate dropped out of hyperspace right where it was supposed to, being towed by the battleship *Victory* and with a cruiser, two destroyers and 18 Kimdori ships in escort, beginning a leisurely five hour sublight cruise to Zyagya Prime. Back out in interstellar space, the Alliance fleet did something rather curious. There was a flurry of small ships running around between them, activity that took more than long enough for the Zyagya interdicator to begin its logarithmic expansion, and after all that was done, all but three of the Alliance ships jumped out. The three remaining ships, a cruiser class and two destroyer class ships, jumped back into hyperspace on their original course.

“Get scramblers on those ships!” Myri barked immediately. “Get Jaiya to have the Kimdori ships in her formation blind those ships before they

come out of hyperspace!”

“What did they do?” Danelle asked aloud, following what seemed to be a custom in the command center.

“They put all their food on those ships and sent them ahead, most likely to get detailed sensor readings on the interdiction field from the inside for analysis,” Myri answered her. “The Alliance have some of the best sensors in the sector, little miss. We don’t want them to have *any* chance to analyze our interdiction field. They may find a hole in it.”

“Oh. That seems smart,” Danelle said seriously.

Myri smiled at her. “I’m glad you agree,” she winked.

“That was fairly clever though, putting all their food on those ships,” Jyslin murmured, to which Jason nodded.

Predictably, the three Alliance ships were knocked out of hyperspace when the Zyagya interdiction field reached them and were effectively blinded by a Kimdori ECM ship. Not just blinded, but also communications jammed, preventing them from communicating with their commanders. The three ships stopped and stayed there for about ten minutes, then they turned around and started what would be an 8-month trip back to uninterdicted space.

And also, somewhat predictably, Chirk called him and told him that High Staff Graith wanted to speak to him *right now*.

Jason chuckled when her voice came over his gestalt, which he made audio so everyone could hear it. “Alright, I’ll come witness his explosion,” Jason told her. “May as well track down Brall and get all the paperwork ready for me.”

“It is already prepared and waiting for you,” her monotone translator answered.

He was expecting this call, but he wasn’t entirely sure how it was going to go. Graith was a politician right down to the marrow of his radioactive, glowing bones, and an oily one at that. He had no doubt that Graith would be utterly pissed off at this intrusion of the Karinnes into what the Alliance had always seen to be an internal matter, but after that initial explosion, he was honestly unsure what Graith would do after that.

He took the call in his office, putting Graith's hideous, noseless, skull-like face up on his holographic monitor, a two-dimensional image projected into the air in front of his wall. Jakkans were intelligent and friendly, but they were also *ugly*. "Well, I can't say I wasn't expecting this call, Graith," Jason said easily, leaning back in his chair.

"We formally protest this action, your Grace," he said in a tightly controlled voice. He was furious, but he was keeping his demeanor.

"Protest what? The Zyagya are sovereign, Graith," Jason said simply. "And the fact that you were jumping nearly two hundred ships into their system sort of tells me that they had every right to come ask us for help. You want to visit Zyagya? *Ask them first*. And I don't suggest trying to do it with an attack fleet."

"But we have trade treaties with the Zyagya!"

"That's between you and the Leader, Graith. The Zyagya hired us to interdict their system, and that's exactly what we've done. If you have any problems with that, take it up with the Leader. We're just doing what we were *hired* to do. No more, no less."

"Hired? Hired? You mean the Zyagya are not allying themselves to the Imperium?" he asked hotly.

"Nope. They signed a contract with us to place an interdictor in their system. They'll sort of have to deal with the Imperium a little since my house is part of it, but that's the deal. It seems they were afraid the Alliance was going to try something. I think they had about two hundred good reasons to think that."

"This is not a matter for the Imperium," Graith said icily. "I demand you remove the device preventing lawful traffic from reaching Zyagya *immediately*!"

"Damn, I had no idea the Alliance formally declared war on Zyagya to make an invasion fleet legal," Jason answered bluntly.

"You tread dangerously close to war, Karinne!"

"Oh, and you haven't been trying to get us into a war all along?" Jason retorted. "Being best friends with a Handmaiden means I get my hands on all sorts of interesting information, High Staff. One little tidbit I managed to



get my hands on was a front company owned by the Organization was trying to secure cargo space on a Skaa smuggler that happens to have some legit ships, to move a package to the Academy,” he mused lightly. The Organization was the title of the Alliance’s intelligence service. “That doesn’t seem like pertinent information until you pair it up with the Organization trying to secure Skaa weapons, then lo and behold, it looks suspiciously like the Organization was trying to get a bomb into the Academy.”

The High Staff gave him a cold look, but Jason saw his gnarled brow edge upward ever so slightly.

“I’m a peaceful man most of the time, Graith, but if you *ever* try to blow up my Academy again, you’ll find out how vindictive I can be.”

“That’s a slanderous accusation!”

“It’s not an accusation, Graith, it’s a *fact*,” he declared bluntly. “I have names, dates, and locations. Would you like a copy sent to you to see how well it pairs up with the Organization’s own timetable?”

Graith glared.

“Let this be your one and only warning, High Staff,” Jason declared in a grim voice. “We know what you’re up to, and we are watching. If you try to incite war between the Urumi and anyone else again, you’ll find *yourself* at war with the Urumi. Oh, and since they’re allied with the Faey at the moment, odds are you’ll be staring down Dahnai’s entire fleet. And you *know* how the Faey make war, Graith,” he said in a voice of doom. “With the Consortium out there building up its strength and preparing to take over our entire sector, the last thing I need is dealing with your shenanigans. So *back the fuck off*, or I will *do something* about you. Is that abundantly clear?”

Graith’s face vanished as he cut communication.

After that little adventure, Jason sighed and decided to start on the paperwork. The Zyagya operation was more or less over as far as watching went, though he had a readout of the interdicator on his panel to keep track of its expanding interdiction field. Luckily for him, though, Jyslin and the kids weren’t willing to just abandon him to his administrative hell. Jason got to introduce Chirk and Brall to Danelle and Kyri, and his Kizzik

assistant showed extreme patience putting up with three animated six-year-olds, who had their hands everywhere and violating the sacrosanct order of Chirk's domain, his office. The fact that she was a seven-foot-tall insectoid with two of her four arms ending in chitinous sword-like blades didn't bother the kids enough to behave. Brall decided to abandon Chirk to the kids after ten minutes, excusing himself to go to the Shimmer Dome on some made-up errand.

When Dahnai called to inquire about the Zyagya operation, he filled her in and also told her about Graith. "I told him we know, so he's had his warning," he told her holographic image. "We can't really afford a war with the Alliance right now, but he doesn't know that. I sort of hinted that you'd all but orgasm at the thought of invading Alliance territory, and no doubt he's stewing over risking war with the Confederation knowing full well we have the Kimdori watching him."

"Oh, I could do with conquering the Alliance," Dahnai purred. "So, when are you going to be here? You know, you still owe me a visit. You and your entire family."

"How about tomorrow?"

"Fair enough," she smiled.

It wasn't as easy to arrange a trip as it used to be.

Aya didn't see it as a trip to Dracora to see Dahnai, she saw it as a nightmare of vulnerability of the entire Ducal family, and she put her foot down in ways that got *all* of them mad at her.

Firstly, she was *extremely* unhappy when Jason decided that taking the family to see Dahnai meant he took *all* his children, not just Rann. Rann may be the heir and betrothed to Shya, but he had four other kids who probably felt all kinds of left out when they were excluded from some parts of Jason's life, and he felt it was time to start rectifying that. Kyri, Aran, Zach, and Sora were absolutely giddy with excitement at the idea of going somewhere with their father, even if their mothers were going to stay behind, and Aya gave him a look that would scare a Goraga when she found out about it. She didn't want the stress of trying to herd all five of his kids around, and he knew she didn't, but she also knew she wasn't going to win

any argument she tried to start over it. So, she decided to do a little open seething, a hostile silence that broadcast her displeasure as well as her admission she couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Secondly, she absolutely insisted that nothing less than the *Aegis* would do to carry Jason and his family, the *Aegis* leading a task force of nearly half the entire Karinne fleet. That got Aya at odds with Myri, but no matter how much Aya was yelled at or threatened, she absolutely would not budge, to the point where she threatened to hold the Ducal family hostage in their own house *at gunpoint* should they try to leave on anything less.

Thirdly, Aya was almost militantly resistant to adding any extra passengers. Jason and his family weren't the only ones who wanted to go, and Aya almost treated everyone who asked to go like a potential assassin. Aya was suspicious but reluctantly agreed when Myleena asked to go, to take Danelle to meet some of her Merrane relatives, but it was clear she didn't like the idea, not one little bit. Now Aura he could at least understand, since she was an Exile and Aya didn't know her very well, but Jason won that little argument. Aura wanted to see Dracora, see the legendary capitol of the Imperium with its towers and parks, its trees and glass, and the breathtaking crystal-spired Imperial Palace atop Imperial Hill, visible throughout the city...at least if one was standing in the right place. Jason saw nothing wrong with taking Aura along, especially since she was going to stay with Myleena over at her aunt and uncle's villa, not in the palace. She wouldn't cause any trouble, and she'd never set foot off Karis if it wasn't in the company of someone she knew and trusted. But, when Kumi, Meya and Myra asked to go along, Jason felt she was going just a little bit too far when she initially told them no. Kumi wanted to go see her mother, who still lived in Dracora despite being a Trillane, and Meya and Myra had friends in Dracora they wanted to visit. They didn't want to stay at the Palace, they just wanted to hitch a ride with Jason, and Aya almost bit their heads off.

Aya then got the palace pissed at her when she sent a text message to them telling them that *everyone* would be in the palace. Jason's family, Myleena, Aura, Kumi and the twins, everyone, and every single one of them would have full guard escort and protection at all times. The commander of the palace guard erupted on Aya for those orders, but Aya held firm, seeing everyone going with Jason as a potential target, a way to

get at Jason, and in need of full protection from the guard. Dahnai had to intervene on that one, telling the guard that while Aya may be overstepping herself a little bit, she did have a point. So, rooms were prepared for everyone in the palace, and guards were assigned to Myleena and Danelle, Aura, Kumi, and the twins.

The next morning, after Jeya grudgingly shuffled the deployment of damn well near the entire fleet to accommodate Aya, the leader of the guard almost faced a rebellion from within when Symone flatly refused to wear armor. “We’re going to fucking *Draconis*!” she screamed in outrage when Aya issued the order. “On the fucking *Aegis*! We don’t need armor, you paranoid bitch! Push *off*!”

And Symone learned not to piss off Aya. After the bleeding stopped, she grudgingly went home to get in her armor. Aya had Dera and Hara go through their things and remove all their clothing except one robe and a bathing suit each, making sure that if they went out when they got to Dracora, it was going to be going out in armor or being woefully underdressed. Not that any of them would much more than bat an eye at going out naked in public—Jyslin had utterly subverted him in that regard—but there were customs involved that made sure that Symone would never dream of going somewhere underdressed. Faey women cared as much about clothes as human women did.

So, after all that, 14 guards herded a very excited, sulky, or annoyed extended Ducal family on a heavily armored dropship escorted by no less than an entire squadron of Wolf fighters. Jason flew the dropship, as usual, with Aya in the copilot’s chair and his kids babbling excitedly both with their voices and their minds behind him as the excitement got the best of them. Ilia, Zora, Maya, and Yana waved goodbye to them from the landing pad, then went on to work.

*Now remember, we’re gonna be on the Aegis for a while,* Jason warned the kids. *So behave.*

*Why? Can’t we get there in like a half an hour?* Zach protested, his sending a little slow, but quite clear. Ilia and Ryn had been training Zach very quickly and very well.

*We could, but it's still dark at Dracora, he answered. They're about four hours behind us right now. So, instead of you guys driving your mothers crazy waiting, I decided we could just waste a few hours on the ship. You know, take a tour, let you look around, that kind of thing. When Empress Dahnai wakes up, we'll stop wasting time and get there.*

Aya gave him a murderous look, because now she and the guards would have to herd five hyper six-year-olds around the ship for hours. That scowl only got darker when Jason winked at her. "Revenge is a dish best served coo-ooold," he said in a low, sing-song voice.

*I will get you for this, Jason.*

*You'll try,* he sent back patronizingly, reaching over and patting her cheek.

It wasn't as hard as Aya feared it would be. When the dropship landed, it was met by a whole bay full of KMS sailors wearing class A uniforms and standing by the hatch stairway was the captain of the *Aegis*, Fleet Admiral Palla Karinne. Palla had only been captain of the *Aegis* since its repair and return to service. The former captain had moved up into the command staff, and Palla had taken over when she got her promotion. Palla was *damn* good. Married to a Generation male, Travan Karinne, she was one of the youngest upper echelon officers in the KMS, a very young and spry 52, which was only just approaching middle age. That meteoric rise hadn't just been in the KMS. Palla had been the youngest officer ever in the Imperial Navy to reach the rank of Commander, which gave her the right to command a ship. Navii had plundered her from the IFN, one of many officers and non-coms she had lured away from Dahnai and into their navy. Though she was young, she was a gifted military tactician, and she'd been pulled out of the command staff and put on the *Aegis* after the battle, and Haema had replaced her temporarily on the command staff. The real reason for the switch was because Haema needed more time before returning to combat duty due to an ill grandson, and she would be the captain of the next command ship, which the Kimdori were building at Kimdori Prime and would be ready inside two months. That ship, which Haema named *Iyaneri*—a Faey word that loosely translated to *unstoppable force*—would be fitted with a GRAF cannon as its main weapon, where the *Aegis* was going to be refitted with a tactical CBIM.

Part of the marvels of modern manufacturing. They'd laid the keel of the *Iyaneri* only 23 months ago, and it was only 2 months from completion. The docks in Kosigi could build a destroyer from keel to launch in 23 days and could build a cruiser in 42 days. The first few had taken much longer, but as production was fine-tuned and parts were mass produced and in abundant supply, the build time came way down thanks to highly advanced robotic assemblers assisting the flesh and blood workers. It had taken much longer to build the *Aegis*, but the lessons learned and the parts they needed to build a second ship were brought into play when they started on the next one, and the third ship, which was half built and still a year from completion, was being built even faster compared to where the other two ships had been after that much time. This wasn't just an advantage for them. When they were serious about it, the Faey could build ships just as fast, probably even faster, because their ship designs had long been standardized for construction. They had brought half-finished ships from other shipyard to Kosigi, and those ships were already quickly fleshing out, using them as test runs to get their production routines set up within Kosigi. Once they had those all set up and the bugs worked out, they'd probably crank out a cruiser class ship every 20 days.

It had roots in American history, he recalled. The famous Liberty Ships from World War II, built so fast that they were literally launching them on a schedule every day, built for function, not for style. That was what they were aiming to mirror in Kosigi, a massive shipbuilding operation where new ships were being produced so fast, they wouldn't have places to park them. Jason wanted to see at least five ships a day come out of the base, be it Karinne, Faey, Urumi, or Kimdori, and that was not reaching. Dellin was absolutely positive that kind of sustained construction could be achieved given the base's unique advantages and an unbroken supply chain. Just like in World War II, industry was going to be a critical aspect of this war. If they could build enough ships and enough drones and other weapons to break the Consortium before they could get within striking distance of a planet, then they win.

Palla was typically Faey in that she was quite attractive and had pointed ears, but she was very different from most Faey. She was from Jerama, which was the fifth largest food producer in the Imperium, one of their arable farming planets. Jerama's star was white, and it produced a curious

coloration in the Faey who had lived there long enough to adapt. Palla was blue, but she was a very deep, very dark sapphire, like the deep sea, she had *pink* eyes, and shimmering silver hair she kept in a short pixie style. She saluted sharply when Jason led his kids off the dropship, then put her hands on his upper chest, just under his shoulders, and patted his armor. "You'd better be in this," she grinned at him.

"Yeah, yeah, you just wait 'til this is over, I have a long list of asses to kick," he noted, giving Aya a light look as he said it. She gave him a wolfish smile. "Don't get your name put at the bottom of it," he teased.

"Pfft, you'd be lost without us," she retorted. "For one, you'd have nobody to kiss your children!" she grinned, moving away and leaning down with her arms out. "Ranny! You're getting so big!"

*Miss Palla! Do you have cookies?* He asked as she grunted a bit to pick him up with his armor, which made him a bit heavy.

"Trelle's combs, but you send so good!" she said, kissing his cheek. "And it's too early for cookies, you silly boy! Kyri! Zach! You brought them all, eh?" she said to Jason.

"I figured they earned it," he chuckled as she set Rann down, knelt down, and accepted hugs and kisses from all the kids. They surprised her with their sending, and they introduced her to Danelle, who wasn't well known to his KMS officers...but was she ever well known to the engineering department and 3D.

After everyone disembarked and Palla was introduced to Aura and Kumi, she took them on a long, grand tour of the *Aegis*. It took nearly three hours, and while Jason knew most of it, he was impressed at Palla's depth of knowledge of a ship she'd only been commanding for a few weeks. Ship officers were like old U.S. Navy submariners, expected to be able to perform any critical job on the ship, and with that requirement came a great deal of knowledge about ship systems. She led them into the various sections and explained exactly what they were for and what was going on, which enthralled his kids. They were excited to tour engineering, where the massive main jump engines were located, four pods with each pod the size of a country village, a virtual city devoted solely to the jump engines deep inside the massive flagship. She showed them the theater and the gym, the

main medical bay which was the size of the Karsa Medical Annex, then one of the many typical residential deck sections, a cluster of crew quarters with a small arboretum serving as a little central park for the residents. She ended the tour with the huge bridge, which wasn't just the tactical command center, but the nerve center for the entire ship and all its functions. The bridge deck was filled with operations officers and non-coms going about the business of monitoring the ship's operations and issuing orders, but the tactical control center, what most would call a bridge, was at the forefront, where sixteen tactical officers, the first mate, and the captain did their work.

*You could make a workout out of just walking around this thing,* Kumi noted, a touch sourly, as they looked at the tactical ship display, showing a map of the ship with a series of colored dots to note readiness of critical systems.

*It's nearly two kathra long,* Kumi, Jason answered. *This thing is more of a moving city than it is a ship.*

*Well, give me a nice desk and an office anytime.*

*This coming from the girl who has a fit and goes on a crash diet if she thinks she's gained even a quarter of a konn,* he teased.

*Bite my ass, Jayce.*

*I did that once. I didn't find the experience very enjoyable,* he answered smoothly, which earned him a *clang* when her armored hand slapped his armored shoulder.

Meya and Myra sidled up to each side of him and put their hands on his shoulders. *Girls,* he greeted. *So how goes the dastardly plot?*

*It's coming along,* Meya answered with a sly smile. *You'll certainly know when we've finished it.*

*I hope so. I'll be terribly disappointed if I don't.*

*You're not the only one,* Myra winked.

*How goes the education? Outside of the official reports.*

*Pretty fast,* Meya answered. *The Exiles were already highly educated. They know all the theories, they just couldn't put anything into practice, and*



*they had historical references to all the Karinne technology. Using the technology intimidates them a little at first, then they get the hang of it. The language is taking a little longer. Some of them almost think that modern Faey is an entirely different language.*

*I'm sure you'll manage it.*

*This wasn't exactly what we signed up for when we joined up, Meya grinned.*

*You'll serve me like the slaves you are, he replied lightly. In any manner I please!*

*Oh, listen to this, Myra snorted mentally. I think a certain someone has had his title go to his head. We're going to have to do something about it, sister.*

*He certainly forgets who owns him, Meya agreed.*

*That's right. I do, Jyslin called, which made Meya and Myra laugh. Don't worry, girls, he'll get his dose of humility tonight.*

*This kind of taking-down has to be done personally, Myra winked.*

*Better women than you have tried.*

*Impossible. I'm the best, I just haven't tried yet.*

*And who's got the inflated ego now? he challenged.*

*My ego is in no way inflated. I can back it up.*

*Keep digging that hole, girl, it's going to be a long drop when you fall in.*

Palla let Sora give the commands to get the ship moving, which made his daughter absolutely beam, and the task force started a slow, leisurely cruise towards the Stargate. Jason let the kids stay on the bridge to watch the ship in action, ensuring that they didn't cause any trouble by keeping them close to the tactical display, patiently answering all their questions. When the ship started its run on the Stargate, they got even more curious. *Why turn everything off?* Zach asked, since he didn't have as much travel time as the other kids. Ilia kept him close to home.

*Plasma systems can't run while we're inside the Stargate, Jason answered. And the engines can't be running either. We'll build up enough speed and turn them off, then just coast through to the other side.*

*But why do we need to sit like we're gonna do hyperspace?*

*Because the ship is too big, Palla answered for him. Ships don't like being halfway through a Stargate, pippy. They want to get through as fast as possible. When the bow hits, the Stargate will suck us in, and that'll yank us forward. It's not really felt on most ships because they go fast, but the Aegis is so big that we have to secure ourselves or we'll get all thrown against the back wall, she winked. So, into the jump restraints, kids!*

Jason helped the kids into chairs, where the maglocks on the chairs locked their armor backs in, then he sat down between Jyslin and Aura. *Is it that bad?* Aura asked, a bit nervously.

*You'll feel the ship accelerate, but it won't be so bad that it's scary,* he answered her. *It'll be like being in a hovercar when Myra's driving.*

*Oh. Yes, restraints are definitely necessary,* she nodded.

*Bite my ass, Aura,* Myra teased playfully.

"Secure for Stargate passage!" Palla barked aloud. "All sections report readiness! Show me a green board, Commander," she said calmly to her operations officer as she sat down in her chair and activated its restraints.

The snap effect of a Stargate passage in a capital ship was definitely interesting. The ship lurched forward when the bow hit the Stargate, as the wormhole yanked the ship in, which was why the largest ship always went through first. They'd be going faster coming out than the other ships, and that prevented collisions if a ship had problems restarting its engines with a bigger ship bearing down on it from behind. But it was still just as fast as any other Stargate passage, and almost instantly, they went from Karis to Draconis. The blue and green jewel hovered before them in the holographic image, about twenty minutes away at standard cruising speed. "Return to normal running," Palla called. "Comm, hail Draconis control and warn them we're coming."

It took about a half an hour to reach Draconis and settle into orbit, and nearly a half an hour more to get to the landing bay and get everyone settled

in. The same squadron of Wolf fighters would escort them down, the first display of their new fighters to the outside world, and Jason found himself booted out of the pilot's chair by Aya. *Hey!* he protested indignantly when she grabbed the back of his armor and yanked to keep him from sitting in the pilot's chair.

*Not this time, Jason,* she answered, her tone dead serious. *In the back, where you're more protected. Sitting in the cockpit is no place for you here, especially when it's common knowledge that you tend to pilot your own ships. I'm not putting that big of a target on you.*

*Nobody's going to attack me here.*

*Really? And what was that incident on the Suralle yacht? An excited hello?*

He was about to protest, but he fell silent and nodded in assent. He *had been* literally attacked in broad daylight and in full view of everyone once before. He somewhat sulkily sat down in the passenger cabin beside Jyslin as Aya and Shen took the cockpit, Aya intending to pilot them down.

*Poor baby,* Jyslin smiled, patting him on the cheek with an armored hand. *I'll have to make it up to you tonight.*

*Good luck with that. I'm sure Dahnai's going to have a few words with you.*

*I can handle her,* she winked.

Surrounded by Wolf fighters, the dropship left the hangar and started a controlled descent into Draconis' atmosphere. As soon as they'd cleared the heaviest turbulence, the fighters launched their drones and spinners for additional defense, creating a small cloud of automated weaponry and sensor equipment. Imperial Raptors joined their formation, with a bit of shocked and amazed sending from the Imperial pilots at the Wolves, and the entire procession made its way to the palace. Aya landed them on the largest of the landing pads, where Dahnai, her family, several Grand Duchesses of the *Siann*, and Brood Queen Sk'Vrae and her retinue of Urumi, surprisingly enough, were waiting to greet them.

Predictably, Shya and Rann met at the hatch, hugging each other, but they were shooed forward as the Grand Duke and his family and friends

made their way out to greet the others. Jason and Dahnai embraced as well as they could with him wearing armor but no helmet, and she gave him a passionate kiss. *Hey babes*, she sent with a smile. *Wow, I see you brought just about everyone.*

*All my kids, and I had a few passengers here for their own reasons*, he replied with a nod at Kumi as she came down after the kids.

*Jys said you brought the girlfriend.*

*Aura? Yeah, she wanted to see Dracora. She's going to hang out with the twins while she's here.*

*Well, I want to meet her, if we have time.*

*We're not going to spend the entire visit in your apartment*, Jason chided.

*No, but we may spend it in the conference room*, she answered. *I think you haven't heard yet.*

*Heard what?*

*The Alliance declared war on Zyagya about an hour ago, over the interdicator*, she told him seriously.

*Fuck! Can't Graith keep his dick in his pants?* Jason growled.

*I know, I know. So, this won't quite be a social call. Sk'Vrae rushed over as soon as we got the news, and Zaa said she'd be here as soon as she got in some intelligence from her operatives.*

*Yes, this is something we all need to discuss immediately*, Sk'Vrae sent, which shocked Jason a little bit. It was the first time she'd ever done so. *There are some very delicate issues involved here, mainly involving the Academy and the entry station.*

*Yeah, I can see that*, Jason growled mentally. *Like how we keep Alliance traders from trying to make a run at the Zyagya gate, then claim we fired on them for no reason when we stop them.*

*Among other things*, Dahnai nodded. *But that can wait, there are more important things to do*, she added, kneeling down and opening her arms. "Kyri! You look beautiful, little girl!"

“Hullo Miss Empress!” she answered folding into Dahnai’s arms. “May I send to you?”

Dahnai grinned. “Yes you may, little miss manners,” she answered. “I see you’re teaching them well,” she added to Jason.

“When they listen,” Jason smiled down at his blond daughter.

Zach was gaping at the hulking, imposing Brood Queen, so Jason decided to break that ice quickly. “Zach, this is the Brood Queen Sk’Vrae, ruler of the Urumi Collective. Your Majesty, this is my youngest son, Zachary Karinne. Say hello,” he prompted.

Zach bowed, a bit clumsily. “Your Majesty,” he said in a nervous voice.

“Do not fear me, child,” she said in a gentle voice, leaning down, her thick tail slashing behind her to keep her balance. “For I am a friend of your father and of the Karinnes.”

“It’s just you’re so big and, er, bony,” he blurted.

“It’s just the way we are,” she said with a toothy smile, touching the thick, chevron-shaped dermal bone plate on her chest, which protected her lungs and hearts from injury. “But how we look has nothing to do with who we are, broodling. It’s wise never to judge a person or a species by how they appear. That’s a quick way to be surprised.”

“Brood Queen Sk’Vrae is full of surprises, son,” Jason chuckled.

“How well I know that,” Dahnai grunted, touching her face impulsively, no doubt remembering what it was like to get a face full of Urumi venom.

Jason introduced all his children to Sk’Vrae in turn, from Zach to Rann, then introduced Aura to them. Aura was *much* more nervous than the children and gawked at Dahnai like she was Trelle herself in the flesh. The introduction itself was amusing and memorable. “Sk’Vrae, Dahnai, this is Aura. She’s my—”

“Girlfriend,” Aura interrupted as she took Sk’Vrae’s scaly hands in greeting.

“Whatever,” Jason sighed, which made Jyslin giggle.

“Y-Your Maj-jesty,” Aura stammered, gaping up at Sk’Vrae. Then she remembered herself and hastily bowed.

“She looks something like you, Dahnai,” Sk’Vrae noted.

“That’s why he likes her, most likely,” Dahnai grinned. “She’s the surrogate when he wants me but I’m here.”

“You’re the surrogate, not her,” Jason called, which made Dahnai laugh.

“Boy, you just earned yourself some punishment,” she warned, pointing at him.

“Like I’m afraid of a *girl*,” he snorted.

“Let us keep our minds on business,” Sk’Vrae warned. “There will be time for frivolity after Zaa arrives and we talk.”

“Always keeping us on the path,” Jason chuckled with an honest smile at his large, scaly ally. “You’re right, of course. Let’s get everyone inside and settled in, then you can get me up to speed on what’s going on.”

# Chapter 3

*Brista, 12 Suraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 21 February 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Brista, 12 Suraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*The Imperial Palace, Dracora, Draconis*

There was a lot to talk about.

Jason spent nearly six hours with Dahnai and Sk'Vrae, and then Zaa when she arrived, discussing the myriad problems that this war declaration by the Alliance could create. The Alliance was incensed at the interdictor, and even more incensed when the Leader of the Zyagya basically made public the deal between the Zyagya and the House Karinne, even to the point where they admitted that the interdictor would be pulled if the Consortium attacked. Jason would have rather the Leader not reveal that, but that was the Zyagya. They had a tendency to be blunt with their truth.

The official reason the Alliance had gone to war was over the three ships trapped in the interdiction field. According to their propaganda, they had made repeated attempts to get those ships back, ships they claimed were on a scientific mission, ships that were now trapped months away from any safe port. They claimed that they'd made several attempts to have the Karinnes rescue their people, but now their ships were being actively jammed to prevent them from relaying their status or condition, and that was an act of war the Alliance could not ignore. Since the Zyagya were the ones in control of the interdictor, it was the Zyagya against whom the Alliance had declared war. Jason thought it was an amusing leap of logic that the Alliance went right after the Zyagya and ignored the Karinnes, because the Alliance wanted absolutely nothing to do with declaring war on the Imperium, and the whole sector knew it. Always before, the infighting

between the houses of the Imperium had prevented them from banding together and having a serious war with anyone. Even the war with the Skaa Empire had been nothing but a series of skirmishes fought over some contested territory, because neither side had been particularly inclined to escalate; the Skaa Empire was the only foreign nation in the sector that could match the Imperium in a war scenario, and that was through sheer force of numbers. But everyone knew now that the entire Imperium was unified behind Dahnai, and that was a force *nobody* wanted looking in their direction. Even without the support of the Urumi, the Imperium could steamroll any neighbor save the Skaa Empire.

The Consortium had caused some opportunities, but it had also caused more complications than the other governments cared to face, and the unification of the Imperium into a singular military force was one of those ugly complications.

The biggest issue they saw was that the Alliance would make a run at the TES and the Stargates behind it. That was the only way into Zyagya now, and they absolutely did not want to have to destroy the Alliance invasion fleet under any circumstances. They did not want the Consortium's spies to see what happened and know what to expect if they tried it themselves. Jason had drilled it into Dahnai and Sk'Vrae, and Zaa had certainly reinforced it, that the Consortium *were not stupid*. They would exploit any intelligence they managed to glean from any action the Alliance undertook, and any weapon or tactics seen by the enemy was a weapon or tactic the enemy had a chance to circumvent. They had to keep the Consortium as ignorant as possible about the capabilities and extent of the Confederation's military and tactical strengths.

Even as they discussed the matter, Zaa's spies and the hyperspace probes they had in Alliance space showed them the buildup of forces the Alliance had undertaken before they declared war. Just about the entire damn Alliance fleet save the 200 or so ships they jumped into Zyagya was clustered at the three systems closest to Zyagya, which was the heart of Alliance territory. The Alliance had, according to Zaa's intelligence, 785 ships in their fleet, which counted any ship corvette class or larger. That was a fairly large fleet, at least until one saw that when the 843 ships making up the myriad house fleets were folded into the 512 ships making up the Imperial Navy, the Imperium currently had 1,355 ships at its



disposal. The Skaa had nearly twice that, 2,303 ships, but they lacked the firepower of Imperial ships, which equaled things out. Those big three accounted for the vast majority of ships in the sector, with the Skaa Republic's 290 ships being the next largest fleet thanks to the destruction of a large chunk of the Urumi fleet at the battle of Karis.

Of course, those numbers changed daily for every nation. The Imperium wasn't the only government rapidly building up its navies.

They debated the matter well into the Dracoran night, until Sk'Vrae needed to stop. She had a 10-hour circadian rhythm based on her planet's day cycle, and while she was capable of extended activity, she still needed to rest earlier than anyone else. Urumi slept for 2 hours out of every 10, but that was all the sleep they needed. Jason retired to Dahnai's apartment with his family so they could catch up, and much to her nervous surprise, Dahnai insisted that Aura come with them. Dahnai wanted to get to know Aura, that Faey need to see what a man sees in another woman. Saelle was with them as well, since Saelle almost never left Dahnai's side anymore.

Dahnai was in a mood, he noticed. She spent a lot of time talking to Jyslin and Symone about their pregnancies, asking them how things were going, and then she patted her own flat belly. *I just can't help but wonder what our kids will be like*, she mused honestly. *I wonder if Raisha will have blue skin or not.*

*That's your child with Jason?* Aura asked.

She nodded. *The whole reason she's here*, she said with a sly look at Saelle.

*I'd say me being here is your fault, Dahnai*, she retorted dryly, pushing her dark, charcoal gray hair out of her face, hair that drove quite a few Faey men crazy.

*Miyai is my daughter with Kellin*, she continued, which made Kellin beam with pride. *She'll be born first, of course, to at least lessen the scandal.*

*How bad has it been?* Symone asked.

*I've managed to keep a handle on it. If anything, this Consortium war at least gives the tabloids other things to talk about than the fact that the*

*Empress is carrying two children by two different fathers, and one isn't even Faey.*

*Well, if she's not born with it, I'm sure it won't be long before it turns blue,* Jyslin noted. *Jason starts getting a bit dusky after just a few minutes under the sun here.*

*And that's why I stay out of the sun whenever possible,* he declared. *I do not look right like that.*

*I dunno, I like it,* Dahnai smiled. *You're very handsome when you're blue.*

*I look like a mutant smurf.*

*Watch it, buster, you're married to a smurf,* Jyslin warned with a grin.

*What is this smurf?* Kellin asked curiously.

*An old Terran cartoon about blue-skinned people about this big,* Jason answered, holding his hands a foot or so apart. *Some of us look proper when we're blue. I'm not one of them.*

*I dunno, daddy, I like it when I turn blue,* Rann objected. *I look neat.*

*You're young enough to enjoy it,* Jason told him.

*Well, I like it,* Shya declared, wrapping her arms around Rann possessively. *I hope you turn blue and stay that way.*

*Wow, she's sending very well,* Jyslin noted to Dahnai.

*The perk of being the Empress. I have an entire board of top-level talents training them. They train for six hours a day.*

*The professors say we're good students,* Maer declared proudly.

*Very good students, Maer,* Jason agreed. *You send almost as well as some adults I know already.*

*I send okay, but sometimes it's hard to make things out when more than one person is sending at the same time,* he admitted.

*That's something experience can fix, Maer,* Jyslin assured him. *Just keep practicing.*

*Can you private send yet?* Symone asked.

He nodded. *It's easy. Miss Saelle taught me.*

*Just one of the things I'm doing while waiting for something to do, she smiled. I'll have more to do when Sirri decides to stop pretending she's less than she is.*

*I dunno, Sirri protested. I mean, mommy can do it, but I don't really know if I can.*

*I know you can, pippy. I can sense it. We'll just keep practicing until you get it.*

*Do what?* Symone asked.

*Saelle's convinced that Sirri has some telekinetic ability, Dahnai answered. They've been working to see if she can develop it.*

*It wouldn't be a stretch, baby girl, since your mom's one hell of a TK,* Symone assured her.

*And of course, a certain someone makes me look like a weakling, she sent with an accusing tilt, directed at Saelle.*

*Hey, I've got a bigger toy than you, she smiled in reply, tapping the collar of her armor pointedly. Like Jason, Saelle was wearing her armor, and her armor contained a tactical gestalt that radically increased her telekinetic power.*

*What I wouldn't give to be able to do that, she sighed, her sending envious.*

*What you give may be far more than what you get back, given current circumstances, hon, Jason warned her seriously.*

Jason tuned out the chatter to discuss a few things with Saelle personally. *[How are the Kimdori working out?]* he communed privately.

*[Fairly well,]* she answered. *[It's hard to tell they're not real giruzi. The palace had a fit when I brought them with me. Speaking of pets, where's Rann's vulpar?]*

*[Amber? Home. She doesn't like to travel, so Ayama and Surin are taking care of her. She likes them.]*

*[Ah. Anyway, not even my husband knows the giruzi are Kimdori. Only Dahnai knows. We decided that keeping them an absolute secret was imperative.]*

*[Damn right.]*

*[Those Kimdori know how to act,] Saelle told him with an amused texture. [They're so giruzi that even I find myself treating them like animals even when we're in private. They think it's funny when I do it.]*

*[It probably makes them happy that they're so good at it they can even fool you,] he answered. [Any problems you didn't care to discuss over the radio?]*

*[Nope. I really like Evin. Not only do we get along, but the sex is fantastic. My Gladiator is doing just fine, and I've been keeping an eye on things around here. Things are going great.]*

*[Good. I feel way better with you here.]*

*[I know. She's a wonderful woman, Jayce, and I'm happy to keep her safe for you,] she smiled warmly.*

*[I'm glad you think so. How's it been being in the inner circle?]*

*[The Siann is violently jealous,] she told him with a slight smirk. [They have no idea who I am, and then bam, here's this absolute nobody Karinne showing up and standing at the Empress' left hand. The viciousness prevailed for all of a takir, until they realized that I had a direct path to Dahnai. Now they're all almost sickeningly sweet to me, and I get invitations to private conferences daily.]*

*[Heh, keep 'em on their toes, girl.]*

*[Oh, I do,] she grinned.*

*And what are you two gossiping about? Dahnai asked, giving Jason and Saelle a sly look.*

*Not much, just talking about my adventures with the Siann, Saelle answered.*

*You certainly have enough stories about that, Dahnai laughed.*

They basically just chatted and caught up, let Jason's kids renew their friendships with Dahnai's kids, and then they retired for the night. Dahnai made sure to claim Jason, as she always did when he came to the palace. Symone decided she'd rather spend the night with Kellin, so Jyslin wandered off with Tim.

And naturally, they were woke up about four hours after going to sleep. Dahnai's comm panel beeped annoyingly, rousing both of them. She sat up and growled "lights!" which caused the lights to turn on, then used her telekinetic ability to hit the buttons on her comm station near the bed to bring up the wall monitor. Lorna's scarred face appeared on the wall, and she looked a little serious.

"What is it, General?" Dahnai asked sleepily, but her annoyance was clear in her voice.

"A small Alliance fleet just jumped out of Torvalt, and it's heading for Terra," she answered. "The Kimdori have confirmed the jump."

"Fuck," Dahnai growled. "How long 'til it gets there?"

"Five days," she answered. "The fleet numbers sixteen ships."

"What on earth is that glowing asshole trying to accomplish?" Jason snapped as he sat up. "He sends a fraction of his fleet knowing what it has to go through to reach the Stargate? That makes no sense!"

"Sure it does, he's going to throw them away and decry Confederate butchery when we blow them out of space," Dahnai grunted darkly. "He's going to force us to take the first shot. Then he'll play the martyr and try to turn the other governments against us. Remember, he *wants* us at war with just about anyone but him, so he'll pull every dirty trick there is to try to make it happen."

"Fuck," Jason snapped, touching his gestalt. *[Denmother Zaa,]* he called. He knew that if she was wearing her memory band, it would pick that up and make it audio through a tiny speaker on the device. If she wasn't, it wouldn't put it through into audio and her memory band would warn him she wasn't wearing it. *[I need to talk to you, Denmother.]*

*[I'm awake, and I already know,]* she answered. *[Get out of bed and bring Dahnai with you. I'll inform Sk'Vrae.]*

*[And just how do you know I'm with Dahnai?]*

*[Cousin, I didn't live this long and remain quite that blind,]* she answered lightly. *[Now get moving.]*

*[Yes ma'am,]* he replied automatically, which never failed to amuse Zaa.

By the time they were dressed and in a council chamber, Lorna already had a presentation ready. The scarred general presented it as soon as they were seated, using reconnaissance images and tactical maps to display the developments. "Sixteen Alliance ships, mostly corvettes and destroyers, left Torvalt about two hours ago," she began, showing a hyperspace probe image of a task force of small ships assembling for a jump, then a second still image with them gone. "We've confirmed through energy signatures and Kindori intelligence that half of them are military logistic ships. Transports and one medical frigate," she added, pointing at the largest of the small ships on the first image, the side of which was emblazoned with the green circle with a star inside it which marked an Alliance medical ship. "It has every appearance of a relief convoy."

"Graith is making his move," Dahnai grunted sourly. "He's going to force us to fire on a logistics fleet."

Lorna didn't speculate, she merely continued. "The fleet will arrive at the incoming sector at the start of the lane leading to the TES in four days, twenty-eight hours, and sixteen minutes," she told them, pointing at a map beside the photo showing the TES, Terra, and a shaded area where ships jumped in to begin their run to the TES. "I've alerted the TES and the picket ships protecting it, as well as put the entire Confederate military on stage two alert."

"Wise move," Sk'Vrae nodded. "This may be a diversion. We should be alert and prepared."

"Outside of that, there's little more to report. The ships the Alliance are sending are no match for our defensive picket. What the war room needs, majesties, is to know how you want to do this."

"We cannot back down," Sk'Vrae grunted. "We have set the rules. We cannot make any changes to them. If those ships enter the corridor without authorization, we must attack them. We said no warnings, no exceptions. We cannot do anything but what we have warned we will do."

“That’s true, but that’s exactly what that radioactive bastard wants. He wants viddy of us firing on a medical ship to put on auto repeat and blare on every frequency his comms can emulate,” Dahnai growled.

Jason was quiet, leaning back in his chair and pondering the situation, not from a military or political standpoint, but from the outlook of Graith. The High Staff was a cunning, manipulative creature, but he also wasn’t stupid. Sure, them firing on a medical convoy didn’t look good, but it also really accomplished nothing from Graith’s point of view unless he was looking at who was pushing the firing button. Nobody would really care all that much about what happened, because the medical service wasn’t quite as venerated to other nations as it was to the Faey, who saw doctors as very nearly religious figures to be protected at any and all costs. It would be with a trembling hand that any Faey weapon officer would press the button to fire on a medical ship, and the High Staff knew it. Some Faey would flatly refuse to attack a medical ship, so deep were their convictions about protecting the doctors.

No, this wasn’t some kind of propaganda ploy by Graith to discredit the Confederation military in the eyes of the other governments. This was a serious attempt to get his ships to the TES by shielding them behind a medical frigate, the one ship no Faey would attack without a great deal of trepidation. The bigger question, though, was what he meant to accomplish getting such a small fleet past the blockade. It was too small to threaten Zyagya, and the KMS would move to intercept them—

It wasn’t about the Faey, it was about the *Stargates*. They were trying to get their ships close enough to the Stargates to attack them.

No, that wasn’t it either. The ships would never get anywhere near the Stargates, they’d be intercepted at the TES. So, Graith wanted to get his ships close to the TES, but then what were they supposed to do? Attack it? He’d have a better chance putting a bomb on a freighter and blowing it up when the freighter was close to the TES if it managed to get past the sensor sweeps. So, if they weren’t supposed to attack the Stargates, and they weren’t supposed to attack the TES, then what were they doing?

They were there to get *captured*. Sixteen small ships, Graith could afford to lose those, and with them being shielded by a medical frigate, he figured they had a damn good chance of being boarded and captured rather

than destroyed. He'd get his rage points at his ships being stopped and boarded, then captured like Dahnai suspected, but what he was doing was trying to get people *inside*, even if they were prisoners. That, or he was trying to get those ships *inside*, to allow them to be captured so they could perform some other job.

That had to be it. It was the only really logical thing Graith could be after.

Okay, so, Graith was sending the ships with the express intent of them being captured. So, what could they do about it?

Destroying the ships was definitely one option, simply getting rid of them and eliminating whatever threat they or Graith's plan posed. But that wasn't only wasteful, it wasn't very smart. They could use sixteen Alliance ships themselves for some dirty pool if it came down to it. They could isolate—

That was a damn good idea.

"Ladies," he called, interrupting a debate between Sk'Vrae and Dahnai. "Zaa, a question. Can you get a detailed scan on those ships while in hyperspace?"

"Why do you ask questions to which you know the answers, cousin?" Zaa asked with a light smile in her eyes.

"I mean *detailed*, Denmother. As in a systemic sweep from bow to stern of every ship with so much detail that you can point out the metallurgical microflaws in the outer armor."

"Yes, it can be done. Easily."

"What's baking in that brain of yours, babes?" Dahnai asked curiously.

"Graith isn't sending them out to be destroyed for the cameras, he's sending them out so we *capture* them," he told the females. "He *wants* us to capture those ships, and he thinks that such a small fleet of non-military vessels would be boarded and captured rather than destroyed. If we destroy them, he gets to have his rage, but if we capture them, well, that's another story."

"To what end?" Sk'Vrae asked.



“Well, I think the Kimdori might be able to answer part of that,” he answered. “I get the feeling they have something on their ships they want on this side of the interdictors, be it some device or just spies to be sent to Confederate prisons to try to gather intelligence.”

“So, the prudent action is to destroy those ships,” Sk’Vrae declared.

“That would be safe, but hell, we could use those ships ourselves,” Jason smiled. “Alliance logistic ships? We can get our hands on their scanners and tear them apart to see how they work for one, but we could rig them up and let Yila smuggle with them. Besides, if we capture them, Graith will think we’re playing the game he’s setting up. We just have to make sure whatever it is they’re smuggling in doesn’t do them any good. Zaa, can your SCM ships stop passive systems?”

“If they’re utilizing some kind of new passive sensor that can look into hyperspace, yes, they can jam it,” she said with a growing smile. “Quite devious, Jason. I am impressed. That is almost Kimdori in its subtlety.”

“So, what do you have in mind?” Dahnai asked curiously.

“We capture them, make sure they can’t communicate with the Alliance, then take them to Exile,” he answered. “That’s so remote that any spies they have will never get any messages back, and it’s the same deal with their ships. That far away? They’ll receive any messages those ships transmit in, say, six hundred years or so. They can’t jump a beacon out to pick up the message then have it jump back, not *that* far out.” He leaned back in his chair. “They’re almost certain to put some telepaths on those ships to try to get by the Faey, so I think we can put the Alliance crews to work at New Karsa until we’re ready to send them back, which prevents them from gathering any intelligence on anything other than how many square *kathtera* of wheat we have planted on the south tracts and how much *benkonn* of food we’re shipping every day. Maybe a little honest farm work will do them some good, and the telepaths among them will have all kinds of fun trying to use it on the Kizzik overseeing the farming operation. This way, Graith gets to have his little temper tantrum over the capture of his ships, yet whatever the real reason he’s sending them will be a failed mission. Their ships and crews will be held so far away that they’ll be unable to do what they’re supposed to do.”

Dahnai gave him a *huge* smile. “Babes, what would we do without you?”

“Fail miserably, I’d imagine,” he retorted with a light smile, then laughed even as he winced when Dahnai punched him in the shoulder.

“I see nothing wrong with the idea,” Sk’Vrae agreed. “I suggest tranquilizing the Alliance crews so they have no idea where they are or how many Stargates they traversed to get there. Let them go to sleep in their own ships and wake up in a farm barracks on a planet they’ve never even heard of.”

“A sensible idea,” Zaa agreed. “It seems we are concluded until my children investigate the approaching ships, unless you have more to add, General?” she asked, looking at Lorna.

“No, your Majesty,” she answered, nodding slightly.

“Then I think we can return to our rest,” Zaa declared. “I will have my children report their findings directly to the war room, General. In the meantime, I believe I will have some of my children in the Alliance investigate the true intentions of this fleet from the other side. Surely someone in their command structure knows the truth of things. Getting that information should not be too difficult.”

*Sometimes you amaze me, babes,* Dahnai sent lightly as they returned to her apartment. *I remember the day you were standing in my throne room, looking so nervous you’d jump if someone touched you.*

*Sometimes that feels like it was another lifetime,* he answered. *Things were way simpler back then.*

*Would you go back to it if you could?*

*No,* he answered immediately and without hesitation. *I may be hunted for who and what I am, I may be fighting a war for the very survival of my people, but when Miaari sent me to Karis to find the ring, she sent me home. Karis is where I belong. Karis is my heart, and Cybi is my soul now. I would never go back to my old life, even if I had the chance.*

*I’m glad to hear that, since I’m part of that new life,* she smiled.

*I love you, Dahnai, he sent with simple truth. Maybe not quite the same way I love Jyslin, but I love you deeply. I couldn't imagine a life without you in it as my friend, my amu dorai, and the mother of my child.*

She gave him a look of tenderness, stopping to touch his cheek, then she leaned forward and kissed him with pure, intimate love.

*And, of course, someone to bitch at when I'm feeling cranky,* he added dryly.

Dahnai laughed and slapped his shoulder. *Jerk.*

*I love it when you call me names,* he murmured mentally as she pulled him back into her apartment, past her smiling guards.

Jason's idea was simple, it was effective, and it was quite easy to carry out.

Jason kept trying to get back to Karis, but Dahnai had managed to sidetrack them three times, keeping them there long after Zaa and Sk'Vrae returned to their homeworlds after they got all the business worked out concerning Kosigi and the shipbuilding endeavor. Jason did return to Karis along with the three matriarchs two days before the Alliance fleet arrived at Terra to attend the ceremony when the Kosigi station opened its capital doors for the first time. They were monstrous things, four triangles rather than two rectangles that opened like a flower at the touch of the sun, revealing a vast gulf more than large enough for the *Aegis* to enter the lunar base. It wasn't the *Aegis* that had the honors of being the first ship to use the new doors, it was the *Jenda*, finally released from its prison after being rebuilt and put back in service.

Dahnai's reasons for keeping them around were entirely personal. She certainly wasn't feeling constrained by her marriage to Kellin, she just felt particularly lonesome for Jason, and wanted a few days with him. Jyslin and Symone didn't mind, since they had Kellin to play with, but it wasn't all adult fun. Jason's children made it almost seem like a family reunion of sorts, and Dahnai loved having them around. They and Dahnai's children stayed with them during the day, then they all went to Sirri and Shya's foster parents to stay the night, like a big slumber party.

Dahnai held one court on what turned out to be his last day on Draconis, and naturally, she made him attend. But court wasn't quite ready for Jason Karinne that day, since he brought his wife, *amu dozei*, her husband, and his five children along with him, and his kids being present radically altered the normal court experience. For one, the Grand Duchesses were a bit astounded that all five of Jason's children had active talent, and all of them sent with far more experience than the teenage children of the nobles who were attending court themselves. They were also wearing full armor without helmets, which was very much unlike the elegant, expensive robes, dresses, and suits the nobles wore to impress each other. They gaped when Kyri pulled a tray of sweets off one of the side tables with her talent, then had it trail along behind her as she brought it back to her siblings; they had never seen such a young child with expressed telekinetic ability, and that kind of control over it.

Rann had it worst, though. While his four siblings got to run around and play, watched over by both the guards and by Jyslin and Symone, he was stuck formally greeting the other members of the *Siann* as the heir. It was the first time Jason had *officially* brought Rann to court in that capacity, and he looked a little more nervous with every introduction. The Grand Duchesses were nice enough to him, trying to engage him in what they thought was suitable talk for a six-year-old, but Rann was a bit too mature to be cooed at like a toddler.

Anya and Yila understood. When Jason went over to them, Anya didn't make smalltalk with him, she just grinned and picked him up, wincing a bit under the weight of both him and his armor. *Trelle's garland, kidlet, you're heavy!* she declared.

*It's the armor, Miss Anya,* he apologized. *But it's good to see you again!* he declared, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her on the cheek. *How are you?*

"I'm good, sweetling, I'm good," she replied aloud in her rather nasal, grating voice.

"Hello, Rann," Yila called as she joined them.

"Miss Yila!" he declared. "Are you coming back home soon?"

“Actually, yes, I’m going to be back on Karis tomorrow,” she answered. “Kumi needs to talk to me face to face, and I have a couple of other important meetings there.”

“I don’t want to know,” Jason said immediately, which made Yila smile.

“I don’t think I like this new partnership,” Anya grinned in Yila’s direction. “The two most dangerous houses in the *Siann* making all these secret deals? I’m not the only Grand Duchess losing a little sleep over that thought.”

“Oh, you’ll never *see* anything we do, Anya,” Yila said calmly.

“That’s what worries me,” she winked at Jason.

“Posh, it’s all for the war,” Jason retorted lightly. “And I’m sticking to that explanation.”

Both Yila and Anya smiled lightly at him.

“Now, now, let’s break up this plotting!” Semoya called, swaggering over to join them. Of all the Grand Duchesses, if Jason had to spend an hour locked in a room with one, Semoya would be high on his list. She was not only powerful and politically savvy and an exceedingly dangerous woman, with her own secret aspirations to take the throne from Dahnai, she also happened to have a very rich sense of humor and was a very good conversationalist. Semoya demonstrated the maddening duality of the Faey that the other races both admired and feared, the mixture of affability and ruthlessness. She could be quite the chatty Cathy, talking and smiling, often to someone she intended to have murdered the next day. Jason never dropped his guard around her, but he had to admit, Semoya could help them pass the time with a smile.

“Rann, this is Semoya Dorrane. Semoya, this is my son, Rann Karinne,” Jason said rather formally.

“Welcome to court, Rann,” Semoya smiled, ruffling his hair while Anya still held him. “I really should have you meet my daughter Rama. I think you two would really get along.”

“Stop trying to work the Karinnes, Semoya,” Emae called lightly as she joined them. Semoya and Emae ruled the two largest houses in the Imperium, the Dorrane and the Shovalles, but they were also very good

friends. Not that their friendship would stop them from killing each other in a scheme to gain the throne for themselves, but they were friends. In a way, Semoya and Emae ensured that Dahnai *stayed* on the throne, since both houses were too large to join together against her, and any insurrection against the throne would have the rebel house face at least one of those two houses. If one rebelled, the other would side with the Empress in order to eliminate the rival.

That was a lesson that *everyone* had taken from the Trillanes.

“Rann, this is Emae Shovalle. Emae, this is my son, Rann Karinne,” Jason introduced.

“Such a cutie,” she smiled at him. “I’m sure all our daughters will look forward to seeing *you* in court, honey,” she winked, then she gave him a curious look. “Are you okay, dear? You look a little...I don’t know. Peakid, maybe?”

Jason chuckled. “He has the same problem I do, Emae. The sun here turns him blue.”

“Ah, that’s it!” she declared, touching Rann’s face. “Well, I think it looks good when your father turns blue, but he does everything he can to stay out of the sun,” she winked in his direction.

“Some of us are supposed to be blue. Not me,” he declared adamantly.

“I dunno, I think it looks neat,” Rann protested. “Shya likes it.”

“Don’t let Shya decide what you like and don’t like, cutie,” Emae grinned.

They had one more addition to the group, which made everyone go immediately silent. Maela Trillane, daughter of Maeri, padded over a little uncertainly. Maela was a younger version of the whip-thin, harsh-looking Maeri, though her face was little rounder and softer, and she was actually rather attractive compared to her mother. Maeri was still the Grand Duchess, but her exile from Draconis meant that Maela was the one that had to eat all the cold shoulder and hatred when she came to court, which was now mandatory for all houses because of the war. “I need to talk to you,” she told Jason in a calm voice, but the nervousness in her eyes

betrayed her fear. No, not just fear, but raw terror. Something had her *spooked*.

“Alright,” Jason said, a bit coldly. “Keep Rann company, Anya.” Jason took Maela by the arm and dragged her away from the others, leading her to a relatively quiet spot not far from the dais, a move that Dahnai did not miss. Jason saw Dera meander a little closer to them; Dahnai was putting a listener close to see what they were going to talk about, because she was sure they wouldn’t be talking. *What?* Jason demanded, a bit testily.

*I...here*, she blurted, pushing a memory stick towards him. *Mother got this yesterday. She was pretty sure the Empress needs to see it.*

*What is it?*

*The Consortium didn’t just forget about the Trillanes*, she replied simply, giving him a nervous look. *They’ve contacted us twice since—since that happened. Mother recorded this yesterday.*

*They contacted you yesterday?*

She nodded. *She tried to get it here earlier, but she didn’t think it was safe. They’re watching us, Jason. We can’t do anything or they’ll see it. She didn’t trust it with anyone but me. Jason, watch what’s on this. Quickly. Right now. You’ll understand*, she told him, wrapping his gauntleted hands around the stick, then she took a step back, turned, and hurried away.

Jason watched her go, then looked down at the stick curiously. He used his talent to pick it up—it was a bit too delicate to try to pick up with his armored hands—and instead of taking it to Dahnai, he opened a port on the forearm of his armor, just under the gunport, and slotted the stick in a stickjack put there just for such emergencies. It was actually a remote stickjack data port combo port for software updates and external device hardlines, but it could easily read a memory stick.

In his mind’s eye, a recording began. It showed Maeri on the right of a split screen, and one of those energy beings of the Consortium on the left. The telemetry attached to the bottom showed that it was some kind of tightband threaded hyperspace communication, something that would be very hard to intercept by the Kimdori. This was not Imperium technology; the Consortium must have given it to the Trillanes.

The Trillanes were still dealing behind Dahnai's back.

*"Have you considered the proposal?"* the energy being asked in a mechanical voice, obviously through some kind of translation device.

"Proposal? You mean having Dahnai take my house banner down from the throne room?" Maeri asked in a harsh tone. "What kind of answer do you think you're going to get?"

*"We can arrange your survival, Maeri Trillane. And when we conquer the Imperium, we will need a loyal noble to place on the throne. The Faey need an Empress. They cannot function without one. That could be you."*

Maeri laughed harshly. "I once thought I deserved the throne far more than Dahnai. I've been taught the foolishness of that fantasy," she said, a bit bitterly. "The Trillanes will survive without your help."

*"You will be destroyed when we conquer the Imperium,"* the creature warned. *"We reward the loyal and punish the disloyal. Such was the fate of the Urumi."*

"I don't think you can break the Imperium," she snapped in reply. "I saw what the Karinnes did to your grand armada. With the rest of the Imperium and the Urumi behind them, I think you'll lose. You have no idea what pod of *kaba* nuts you opened when you picked this fight, Grand Merchant," she sneered. "The Faey are more than a match for you. If I'm going to pick a side, I'll pick the one I think will win. And it's not *yours*."

*"You really believe we don't know what your Imperium is doing.?"* It asked lightly. *"We have spies everywhere within your Imperium, within the other empires surrounding you. We know everything."*

"Then you know the Faey don't run from a fight. And I am far more loyal to Dahnai than I am to *you*. I've seen what you do to allies who no longer serve any purpose to you."

The being was silent a moment. *"Then so be it,"* it declared. *"I think tomorrow, you will understand the grievous error you have made today. You could have been the Empress, Maeri Trillane, far earlier than you ever dreamed."*

And the recording ended.



Far earlier than—

He looked at Maela. Now he understood her fear. It was the fear of a woman who thought she was already dead.

Fuck!

He whipped a furious face at Dera, who looked a little confused. *Get Dahnai out of here now!* Jason snapped at her, whipping around to find Maela. *[Cybi, link up with Dracora's security net and find out what the hell they're gonna do!]* he barked as he motioned towards his helmet, which was sitting up on a table on the dais, causing it to float towards him quickly. Maela was sitting on a chair against the wall, head down, and from the trembling of her hands, he had an idea of just how serious it was about to get. *[Saella, get in your Gladiator right fucking now!]* he ordered, in a tone that brooked no questions, just obedience. *[Aegis, Aegis, answer!]*

*[This is--]*

*[I don't care who you are! Bring the fleet to immediate battle stations!]*  
*Aya, Captain Harae, get Dahnai's family into the fucking bunker! Lock down the palace!*

*Jason, what the fuck—*

*DON'T QUESTION, JUST DO!* he blasted back at her, snatching his helmet out of the air and putting it on, then he quite literally ran right out of the throne room. He engaged the gravometric drive in the armor and pulled his feet off the floor and literally flew through the hallways, knocking a few people over as Cybi finally got access to the Imperium's defense network and displayed a tactical for him. He saw nothing unusual, just regular merchant traffic, and nothing unusual in orbit or moving in or out of the gates.

He burst out onto the landing pad, where ten Wolf fighters rested in a perfect row, waiting for their pilots to return.

He didn't even think. He rose up into the closest one and activated it, feeling the armored box of his cockpit rotate into flight position. To their credit, behind him, his KMS pilots were boiling out onto the pad not ten steps behind him, no doubt being warned by someone else. He'd taken

Justin Taggart's ship, so his displaced pilot lifted up and landed in the opening cockpit. *What the fuck is going on, Jayce?* he asked.

*I don't entirely know yet, but whatever it is, I don't want to be asleep when it happens,* he answered as Taggart took control of the drones even as Jason lifted the Wolf off the landing pad. The *Aegis* and the task force were launching fighters and scanning anything and everything all around them, searching for, well, something, since Jason didn't tell them *why* they were at general quarters.

A quartet of large merchant Makati design freighters, literally gigantic flying boxes, came out of the Stargate leading from Makan, and Cybi's tap on the Imperium net showed him that when they powered back up, they had energy signatures far weaker than a merchant class freighter of that class should be generating...almost as if they were shielded from sensors. They were going too fast for the energy they were putting out. It was a minor thing, a tiny discrepancy, and he'd never have noticed if it he wasn't actively looking for something out of the ordinary. Justin launched the spinners as Jason pulled the Wolf into a defensive position over the palace, then marked those four ships. *[There!]* he barked to anyone and everyone that could receive his gravband. *[Palla, sweep those ships coming out of the Makan gate!]*

*[Sensors active,]* the comm officer he'd cut off replied.

Cybi showed him what happened next. The four ships literally broke apart after about fifty ships turned active sensors on them, and a dense cloud of missiles erupted from them. Telemetry showed that they were aimed directly at the Palace. Both the KMS and the Imperial Navy reacted to those missiles, which accelerated at relativistic speed, betraying the fact that they had gravometric engines. A riot of explosions bloomed along their trajectory as every ship in range opened fire on the missiles, and the missiles made no attempts to dodge, relying purely on speed to avoid destruction. But there were thousands and thousands of them, and they were moving at extreme speeds, and Jason saw that they weren't going to stop them all.

That was when Palla did something that was either brilliant or desperate. The massive *Aegis* and every ship in the task force surged forward and spun on its lateral axis, and the two-mile-long behemoth turned

and presented its belly to that onslaught of missiles, blocking their path. Around it, the other ships in the task force did the same, trying to stop those missiles by giving them something else to hit, presenting the largest possible aspect to them to cover as much of the city as possible.

The explosion was absolutely blinding. The smaller ships were equipped with Torsion Shockwave generators, which activated as the fast-moving missiles reached them. The missiles plunged into that sudden sphere of distorted space, an angry red boil of energy around the ships, and they were ripped apart in the flux, their armed warheads exploding safely away from the ships' shields. The *Aegis*, however, was too large to have a shockwave generator, so it took the full brunt of the majority of the missiles, missiles that had nothing between them and the ship but its shields. The capital ship's shields rippled into visibility as thousands and thousands of missiles tipped with high explosives pounded on them, but those shields *held*, resisted the destructive inferno, even as the kinetic impact managed to push the massive ship back towards the planet. The other ships in the task force held firm because their Torsion fields were protecting them from the missiles, but the *Aegis* was at the center of the missile cluster and took the vast majority of the blows. But not all the missiles were stopped by the *Aegis* and the other ships, the tactical showed him. About two hundred managed to get past the ships and the swarm of fighters and drones chasing them, filtering through the spaces between them, and they were leaving streams of fire behind them as they lanced into the atmosphere and dropped towards the Imperial Palace like a rain of fire.

*Stop those missiles!* Jason sent to his pilots.

Ten Wolf fighters exploded into motion, as they and several squadrons of Raptors and Dragonflies from Dahnai's planetary defense forces responded to the attack. Justin launched the drones, as the drones fired from the Wolves around them, even as Jason enabled the pulse weapons and started firing. Drones danced between the blazing white streaks that erupted from the Wolves. Explosions brightened the Dracoran sky as the fighters whittled down the numbers of missiles quickly, the Wolves attacking from in front of them and the defensive Raptors and Dragonflies attacking from the flanks and behind. Several more exploded when struck by pulse and plasma fire from orbit, as the KMS and Imperial ships used their atmosphere-capable guns and targeted the missiles that made no attempt to

dodge or evade the incoming fire. More and more were destroyed as the Wolves rose up to meet them, but not all of them. Jason had to veer his Wolf out of the way of the path of the lead missile, but it exploded in a brilliant flash when four drones fired on it and destroyed it. He targeted and destroyed another missile as it streaked past his stationary fighter, then he and the other Wolf pilots dove after the last nine missiles with the Raptors and Dragonflies hot on their tail. But the palace wasn't defenseless, as red streaks of MPAC fire erupted from batteries around the perimeter of the palace, targeting the remaining missiles. Jason had to pull up and get out of the way as a curtain of MPAC fire lashed out from the palace grounds, which managed to destroy the last of the threatening missiles in a matter of seconds.

Fuck...that was too close. Too close! Had those ships managed to get into orbit and launch those missiles from that close, they'd never have stopped them all! The palace would have been obliterated, and everyone inside it killed. Dahnai, her family, his wife, Symone, Tim, Saelle, his *children*, they'd have all perished.

To say that the Imperial Navy was in overdrive was an understatement. They had the remains of the four freighters surrounded, already sweeping them with sensors as about ten thousand guns were pointed at the floating debris. The Makan gate was already quarantined, the color of the swirl telling him it was actively being delinked from its sister gate in the Makan system, entering an active standby mode that would allow them to quickly relink, but wouldn't allow any traffic to go through while it was in standby mode. For that matter, *every* Stargate was in the act of delinking into standby mode, to isolate Draconis from any possible follow-up attack. The KMS maintained its defensive position directly over Dracora, with the *Aegis* descending into the upper atmosphere, a looming monstrosity visible over the city, then it slowly started to ascend. [*Palla! Palla, is the ship alright?*]

[*He's a little cooked, but otherwise alright,*] she answered personally. [*That brought his shields down, but his armor held against the attack. I have some damage in the lower decks, but we're spaceworthy. Fuck, Jayce, where the hell did that come from?*]

*[I have no idea, but we'd better fucking damn well find out immediately,]* he answered. *[Get in touch with the Kimdori and have them go over the entire Makan system with a fine-tooth comb while we figure out who owned those ships and where they came from.]* He blew out his breath. *[Woman, I'm going to kiss you repeatedly when I get up there. That was brilliant!]*

*[That was desperation,]* she laughed in reply. *[It was the only thing I could think of at the moment.]*

*[Palla, you saved the palace. I couldn't be more proud of you, or more grateful. My wife, amu, and children were in there!]*

*[Well, if you want to give me a few kisses, I certainly wouldn't object,]* she replied lightly, though he could sense the gravity behind her words.

Jason and the other pilots landed back on the same pad from which they launched, and there were no congratulations or high fives as the pilots exited the ships, just quiet, grim relief. That was *too close*.

The Consortium had just proved that they too could play the underhanded game. That had been nothing less than an assassination attempt against the entire *Siann*, for it was no coincidence that attack was timed to come during court, and when Jason was attending as well. Clearly, the Consortium had a few little operations left that the Kimdori had yet to root out.

"Get us ready to leave," Jason told Justin aloud. "My family is no longer safe on Draconis."

"Aye-aye, your Grace," he answered in a tightly controlled voice.

*Jason, what in the bloody fucking hell is going on?* Dahnai demanded in an open sending.

*The Consortium just tried to kill you, your Majesty. You, me, our families, and every member of the Siann. Jyslin, gather the kids and get them on the dropship. We are leaving now.*

*At once, your Grace,* she answered with absolute seriousness.

*Well, Jayce, you thought you were in a war. The Consortium just reminded you that this is a real one,* Jason thought to himself as he listened

to Justin issue commands via sending. *Yila, get your ass out here, you're going with us. We're going to have a long talk. And find Jinaami and get her on that dropship even if you have to drag her by her tail.*

*I don't—yes, Jason, I'll be right there,* came her uncertain, worried answer. If it dealt with dirty, underhanded tricks, then the Trefanis either had a hand in it or they knew about it. How this got past Yila *and* Dahnai's intelligence *and* the Kimdori was something he wanted to know and wanted to know *right fucking now*.

*[Cybi, lock down Karis and get Miaari ready to have a little chat when we get there. Make sure you bring a paddle.]*

*[Let's not be overly harsh, my friend. Let's find out what happened first. Then we can start paddling,]* she answered without humor.

*[Works for me.]*

Their dropship landed about five minutes later, along with literally every single Wolf fighter in their arsenal except the ten already parked on the pad, surrounding it like warrior ants defending their queen. Those fighters hovered in midair, settling in just as his family rushed out of the door leading into the palace. Yila and Jinaami were with them, and they were surrounded by Rann's guards. Aya was glaring absolute death at him, but he was in no mood for her protectionist tirade. Jason herded his frightened children, wife, *amu dorai*, best friend, Kumi, the twins, Aura, and his two passengers in just in front of their guards, then he followed them in.

"What goes on, Jason?" the honey colored Kimdori asked as she took a seat. Aya glared at him again as she rushed to the cockpit, but she didn't see the cold look she got in return, since Jason still had his helmet on.

Jason unlocked a gauntlet, freed his hand, then reached out and put it on her neck, in the Kimdori ritual that probably looked quite odd to Yila to see it being done the other way around. "The Consortium had attack ships disguised as Makati freighters and hidden in Imperium territory, and they tried to kill us all," he declared. "We need to find out if there are any others."

Jinaami gaped at him. "You are serious?" she exclaimed, and her expression turned astounded when he gave a single nod. He felt her reach

out and touch his mind, felt that expansion as two merged into one through her Kimdori ability to connect to his nervous system, and he let her sift through everything he saw and heard and suspected. She needed that information as much as Miaari needed it, because Jinaami actually had quite a lot of power in Kimdori society and she was exceptionally clever. He trusted Jinaami as much as he trusted Miaari, Kiaari, and Zaa. “By the Denmother!” she gasped.

Yila gave them a strange, intense look, but that look was cowed quickly when Jason pinned her with a hawkish stare. “Alright, Yila, the Trefanis know *everything* that’s going on. So explain to me how four Consortium-controlled ships managed to come through a Stargate from Makan and nearly kill us all, right under your nose.”

She gaped, her jaw working several times, then she shook her head in dismay. *I swear to you, Jason, I had absolutely no idea. No idea!* She lunged out and put both hands on his face and completely lowered all her defenses, inviting him to look into any part of her mind he pleased. *Look! Look and see I send the truth!*

Normally that act of trust would have been enough, but this was *not* one of those times. He delved into her labyrinthine mind, and while he didn’t look *too* close at many of her darkest secrets, he did shuffle through her memories and her thoughts to search for any hint that Yila knew anything about it.

After searching through her mind, he saw she wasn’t lying, and he also got an idea of both just how smart and how dirty Yila Trefani was. Good God, the woman had scams scamming her scams and kickbacks on her kickbacks.

He pulled her hands off his face and nodded grimly. “Alright,” he said aloud. “But we seriously dropped the ball here, and we can’t let a mistake like this happen again. Someone may get killed.”

Jason breathed a sigh of relief when the dropship entered the landing bay of the *Aegis*, because now they were about as safe as they could possibly get when not on Karis. Palla was there to meet him when the hatch opened, and he did indeed give her several kisses when she flung herself

into his armored arms. “Thank God for you, my guardian angel,” he breathed, resting his forehead against hers.

“I’m just glad I was there when you needed me, Jason,” she answered, then she kissed him on the cheek. “Now let’s get everyone to a cabin for the trip home!” she called in a commanding voice, the voice of an Admiral. “Commander, if you’d take them to the closest suitable quarters?” she called to one of her officers, a very tall, willowy Faey woman with hair the color of wheat. “Excuse my bluntness, your Grace, but we are *not* sitting out here with our asses hanging out where everyone can see it. We are getting you back into Karisian space *now*.”

“My thoughts exactly, Captain Palla,” he said calmly, urging Rann ahead with a hand on his back.

The Commander only had to take them about fifty feet once they entered a companionway, bringing them to a waiting room of sorts filled with comfortable chairs and with a window looking out...if the armored casing wasn’t up covering it, which was standard operating procedure during general quarters. The armored casing was nearly five feet thick.

His icy demeanor melted the instant he dealt with his children. They were a little nervous, a little frightened, and he was nothing but gentle and reassuring with them as he helped them lock in, being the father they needed in a time of stress and uncertainty. He kissed Sora on the forehead as he locked her into her chair, ruffled Zach’s hair, then patted Kyri on the shoulder as she settled herself into her seat and the maglocks in the chair. Aran tried to be brave, but he could see the fear in his son’s eyes; Aran was much smarter and had a better idea of what really went on than the other kids. Jason just smiled at him and patted him on the cheek, sending privately to him to reassure him. He nodded, then put on a brave face and remained resolute, staring at the closed window.

Aura was the one that needed the most comforting. She sat beside Jason and kept a hand on his, and he sent constantly to her as the task force started moving, splitting time between calming her down and sending to the twins and Kumi to fill them in on what happened while they were out having fun in court.



It only took 32 minutes to get from Draconis to Karis, and that included waiting six minutes for them to get the Karis gate out of standby so they could pass through, six very nervous minutes where the task force defending the *Aegis* bristled and threatened to fire on anything that got within a thousand miles of the ship. But everyone calmed down considerably when they were safely in Karis space, and Palla turned them home as the Stargate behind them began to delink back into hot standby to prevent anything from following.

They split up once they got into orbit. Jason sent everyone home except himself, Yila, and Jinaami, and with Dera and Ryn escorting him, they took a dropship directly to the White House. Once he was there, he got Dahnai on the comm, with Miaari, Yila, and Jinaami attending him in his study. She appeared wearing armor, rather ornate and decorative armor, but armor nonetheless; Jason really had to get her into a Crusader. “Alright, babes, *now* will you tell me what the fuck is going on?” she asked intently.

Jason uploaded the data on the stick still jacked into his armor, and he played it for everyone. Dahnai watched, and he saw her glare at the image of Maeri Trillane, then frown, then she took on an ashen look. “I think you’d better go through the *Siann*, Dahnai. I think someone is making backroom deals with the Consortium. Though now whoever that is might come forward, since the Consortium just tried to kill *her* along with everyone else.”

“I...you may be right,” she grunted, scratching her cheek. “*Someone* had to help them set up that attack.”

“I believe the first step is to learn about those freighters, while my people conduct an extensive survey of the Makan system,” Miaari proposed, thinking quickly.

“I think it’s time we swept every corner of the Imperium, Miaari,” Jason told her. “The Consortium might have a few more little surprises hidden in our own territory. I don’t want to find them the hard way.”

“I believe that is wise,” Jinaami agreed. “The one thing we did not do was tighten security behind the interdictors. We let a false sense of security lull us.”

“Amen,” Jason agreed.

“I think I’ll have Lorna draw up a security plan for inside,” Dahnai said with a nod.

The screen split, and Zaa’s face appeared with Dahnai’s on the monitor. “I just received word,” she said in a strained voice. She was *furious*. “Jinaami, what do you do on Karis when you belong with the Empress?” she asked immediately and with heat, which made Jinaami shrink back.

“I brought her here, and I didn’t give her a chance to refuse,” Jason answered quickly, which made Jinaami almost sigh in relief. “I needed her.”

“Alright, I will give that to you,” Zaa replied frostily. “I am quite wroth! Miaari. Explain this!”

“I have just learned of it myself, my Denmother,” she replied meekly. “I’ll contact sister Kiaari and take measure from her. She has more contacts with the outside.”

“Then why do you sit there, child?” she snapped, which made Miaari almost squeak in fear, jump up, and rush to another, smaller vidlink across the room. “This is an *inexcusable* failure!” she raged. “We cannot even keep eyes in our own territory? The Empress is very nearly killed under our own noses? I will know who had responsibility for this, and I will have his fangs!”

“Denmother, calm down,” Jason said soothingly. “I know you have reason to be angry but terrorizing the Kimdori that have to do the legwork isn’t the best approach,” he said, glancing at a visibly trembling Jinaami.

She snorted almost like a bull, then exhaled and relaxed a little. “Very well, cousin,” she stated, her voice betraying her more relaxed posture.

Jason had to admit, Denmother Zaa was *intimidating* when she was mad. “I would ask you to come here so we can talk face to face,” he proposed, more to give her a little time to calm down more than anything else.

“Agreed. I will be there within the hour. Send any and all pertinent data to my office, they will forward it to me for my inspection as I travel.” And her image vanished, just like that.

Jinaami didn’t look all that excited over the idea of facing the Denmother.

Sk'Vrae joined them minutes later, having to be woken up because it was night on Uruma, and they discussed the attack and their response to it with Jinaami and Yila as Miaari made extensive contacts through the Kimdori spread through the Imperium and gathered intelligence. Zaa arrived about fifty minutes later, and the first thing she did was put her hands on both Miaari and Jinaami's necks to take measure of what was going on. After that was done, she took her seat beside Jason and did the same thing. He felt the expansion as she joined to him and felt her sift her claws through his mind openly, not hiding it as Kimdori usually did, absorbing everything. "Alright, then," she said in a much more composed tone. "Let us discuss how to ensure this *never* happens again."

With Lorna and the war room conferenced in, Zaa brought a series of Kimdori up on the screen and all but interrogated them, until the method of the attack fell into place. The four Makati freighters had falsified registrations, and Kimdori investigators now in Makan traced them back to an asteroid base at the fringe of the system, an ice-covered piece of rock that had been hollowed out to serve as a hidden base, and which was now abandoned. Evidence left behind, however, showed that it had been Faey that had prepped the ships and launched them, probably mercenaries hired by the Consortium before the attack, and paid well for their betrayal of their own kind.

But then again, betrayal was part of Faey nature, because an individual Faey looked out for herself far over looking out for anyone else. It was no surprise to anyone in the conference room that there were freelance Faey out there doing the bidding of whoever paid them the most money. It was a personality flaw the Faey shared with humanity.

But the implications were clear. The Consortium had agents within the Imperium.

And that was where Yila came in. Where the Kimdori would take time to find these freelancers, Yila could track them down very fast using her underworld empire to cast the net. Such Faey would need criminal contacts to do their business, and Yila could hunt them down using those contacts.

Yila got to work on that as Lorna proposed a framework of an internal security plan that the war room was hastily assembling, literally taking it right off their desks and reading it to the rulers, which would significantly

increase security within interdicted space and introduce stringent protocols for ships trying to use the Stargates. *Every* ship would now be extensively scanned before being allowed to pass through, and ship crews would have their licenses re-evaluated to weed out anyone whose paperwork was forged or expired.

Zaa didn't allow her temper to go unreleased, however. She read the riot act to both Jinaami and Miaari, then got Kiaari on the vidlink and let *her* have it. Those three were supposed to be the central figures in the Kimdori's eyes within the Imperium, and Zaa clearly was placing the blame for this right at their feet. It wasn't really their fault, but Zaa didn't particularly care about that at the moment. She just wanted to yell at someone, and her three Gamekeepers were a convenient excuse to do so.

After things were more or less settled, Jason went home and spent a *long* time hugging his children. They could sense his mood, so they didn't complain. If anything, them seeing their father so visibly shaken made them want to comfort him.

And it went beyond steeling his resolve. The Consortium had tried to kill his *children*. He was beyond any form or matter of simple anger at that thought. This was *way* beyond that. He was enraged beyond all reason, but it wasn't the kind of rage that made him want to throw things and order thousands of innocent bystanders executed. This was the cold, logical, icy fury of a man who fully intended to give back as good as he got.

They tried to kill his children. They would pay with their egg-laying queens. He would stab them in the heart. In the fucking *heart*.

And in his icy fury, he knew *exactly* how to pull it off.

Every idea they'd thought up so far all depended on trying to sneak something into the nebula or trying to get ships close enough to attack them. None of those would work, because the Consortium was reinforcing the nebula more and more with every passing minute, building their castle walls. Well, in the metaphor of the castle, when one wanted to breach the castle walls, there were four main ways to go about it. One could try to batter the walls down using siege engines. One could try to tunnel underneath using miners. One could try to go over them using ropes and ladders and siege towers.

Or, one could walk right through the open gate.

In the middle of the night still sitting at his desk in his office at home, Amber purring contentedly in his lap, Jason made the call to get things going. He called the command center, and Shey's handsome face appeared on the monitor. "Good morning, your Grace," she called in her sober tone. "What do you need?"

"I want you to find thirty Naval personnel who are willing to go on the most dangerous mission of their lives. Stress the fact that it's highly unlikely they'll survive it," he said in a tightly focused voice. "But, if they succeed, they'll deal a blow to the Consortium that might permanently cripple them."

"It will be done," she said immediately. Like most of the command staff, she knew just what it would cost their compassionate Grand Duke emotionally to make a request like that, so she took it *very* seriously. "I'll call you with status reports by the hours."

"I'll be here," he said, and he cut the call. He then made another call. It beeped demandingly for the person he was waking up, until she finally answered. A slightly annoyed looking Siyhaa looked back at him through the monitor, still looking like a demon. "Ah, your Grace," she said, her annoyed look vanishing. "What may I do for you?"

"You're going to build me a *Trojan Horse*, Mahja," he answered evenly.

"A what?"

"An old Terran myth. I want you to wake up your team, Mahja, and get to work immediately installing a new computer core in the Consortium destroyer. I want that ship to have a working computer core in a week. It doesn't have to be perfect, Mahja, it just has to last *long enough* for that ship to get where it's going to go. After that, it won't matter."

She gave him a startled look, but then she narrowed those glowing red eyes. "It will be done in four days. On that, you have the word-bond of a Moridon," she declared formally.

"Then get to work," he declared. She nodded and cut the call.

Jason leaned back, petting Amber absently, who still purred away. She was a tiny little bundle of soft fur and attitude, barely weighed more than a

batchi ball, and at least at that moment, he took a great deal of comfort from her presence. “It’s the only way, Amber,” he sighed, admitting a truth he’d been avoiding. “They’re too well defended. Tricks and toys won’t work. This is going to take deception and courage, not technology. God, I hate the idea of asking *anyone* to die for this house, to throw her life away in a suicide mission, but there’s no other way.”

He sighed, closing his eyes. “There’s no other way,” he repeated in a bare whisper.

Jason’s idea had merit, everyone agreed. Even with the Consortium at heightened alert and looking for anything unusual, knowing how cunning their opponents were, everyone agreed that the idea of trying to bluff them with one of their own ships was the only real viable option. They’d hammered their heads against the wall trying to come up with some way to destroy that facility, a facility that was now a complete fortress, but flying one of their own ships would work, so long as they took the necessary precautions, covered all the bases and made the Consortium see what they wanted them to see, not the truth.

First Myleena set up a schedule to put the ship back together, but not to make it shiny and new. They’d introduce real damage to the ship, make it look like it went through hell, even to the point where its weapons would be disabled. The ship would appear to be held together with duct tape, venting plasma into space through gaping holes, burn marks all over it, a piece of its starboard wing blown off. They wanted the Consortium to see a heavily damaged ship that, when they scanned it, would show that its transmitter comm systems were destroyed, the receiver array had been jerry-rigged to where it mostly worked, its weapons were down, its life support was hanging by a thread, and its hyperspace jump engines were on the verge of melting into slag. But its signal lights were working, and with those, they could communicate over distances using the light language of the energy beings, a language they had completely cracked.

They knew all the Consortium protocols. They knew their language. They had everything they needed to lull them into taking no action before the ship was close enough...because when it was close enough, it was going to destroy that base.

The trick of it was to use an old trick inside an old trick and cover it over with one of the oldest tricks in the book. This ship would serve one function and one function only: get within 1,270 *kathra* of all four of the satellite pods orbiting the main base. Each pod held a queen, they knew, which they had to keep separate because queens had an instinctive need to destroy the eggs of rival queens, and that was something that the Consortium still had not managed to stop. Broodlings from different queens had no problems working together, but the queens themselves would tolerate no *alien* insectoids around them and no eggs of rival queens to survive. The queens in the pods laid eggs, then they were taken to the main base for incubation, and that was why the nebula was ideal for them. It was a nearly weightless environment that had a great deal of favorable radiation emanating from the newborn star at the core of the nebula, a perfect environment for incubating the eggs. They would let the eggs bask in that sunlight at a specific distance for maximum incubation efficiency, something for which technology was not as effective as nature.

The trick would be simple sabotage, hidden inside a diversion, and covered over with a trojan horse. The ship would be a flying bomb. All they had to do was get it close enough, and it could wipe out the ability of their enemy to replenish their insectoid crews. The diversion would be them bringing the damaged ship in, probably giving it the once over, but finding nothing on their sensors that would say the ship was anything other than what it was...and the Consortium had no idea they captured that ship. All they had to do was fix up the ship so it looked like it went through hell escaping and invent a plausible backstory and ship's log that matched up with the time difference between when the ship vanished and when it reappeared. And the oldest trick in the book was using their own ship to get past their defenses. The crew would have to jump the ship into the nebula, it was too far for a computer to do it, and once there, their job would be to get the ship to the base using the signal beacons to communicate, precluding the need for face to face contact. It wouldn't be a complete suicide mission. All of their armor would be CMS enabled so the Faey crew within were hidden from sensors, and they'd be furnished with a Karinne dropship that was CMS enabled, and if they managed to escape the nebula and get out to where they could cloak, then they'd be on their own for nearly ten days or so until they could get someone there to pick them up. They'd be deep behind enemy lines in a ship carrying technology they could not allow the

enemy to have. If capture was imminent, they'd have to destroy the dropship. But their advantage would be that in that nebula, the dropship's smaller size and Karinne engines would allow it to go faster, less friction from the gas, which would give them at least a chance to escape. They'd be able to outrun pursuit, and once clear of the nebula, they could cloak to evade their pursuers.

Rigging the ship as a bomb was child's play. Just disable the safeties on the power plants while making it *look* like the engines hadn't been tampered with when they went over the ship with their sensors, and the thing would go up like a baker's dozen of antimatter bombs when the power plants were breached, wiping out everything for a thousand *kathra* in every direction. That was why they had to get it close enough to the pods, so one bomb could wipe out all four queens. The trick was to make the ship appear to be what they wanted them to see, a battered, damaged, barely operable shell limping towards a safe haven, yet still be able to perform its task. Appearances, appearances, appearances. Lure them in with a damaged ship, let their sensors see what they wanted them to see, then the ship communicates using beacons because its transmitter array is destroyed, yet its receiver array is working, which was how they knew to go the nebula, pray they took no action as the ship limped towards the base within the nebula....

That was the plan. And while it was a hare-brained scheme, while the Consortium had just pulled a similar trick themselves just yesterday, it was also just about the only one anyone had proposed that even came close to having a chance to succeed. The main difference was that the Consortium *did not know* they had one of their ships, and because of that, pulling the same trick they did actually had a reasonable chance of success.

He had his thirty volunteers. In fact, he had nearly four hundred, but thirty were chosen for their skills and, sadly to say, their status as single women with no families. There had been 57 human men that also volunteered, but the sheer thought of a man going on such a dangerous mission—a survival probability of 6% according to the computer's odds—was absolutely unthinkable. The Faey in the house had made many strides towards gender equality, but that one stepped on the most sensitive, rawest nerve a Faey woman had. A man was *not* going to volunteer for a suicide mission, and that was *that*. He could *risk* his life in service to the house, but



he would not *surrender* it. Jason constantly pushed a Faey woman's protective conditioning, but that one went beyond the pale.

The very thought that he was doing this tore at Jason's soul like a rabid wolverine, but God help him, he couldn't think of any other way. He spent a lot of time the night after the plans were made seeking solace in Jyslin's arms, since she knew what he was going through. To him, who had worked and fought so hard to protect every single person in his house, the idea of ordering some of them to die was the worst thing he could possibly do. He put on his brave face in public, but in the privacy of his own house, he wept like a baby.

Amber did her own consoling, in her special way. She was curled up against him under the covers when he woke up, woke up almost two hours late for work, feeling weary and drained, and as soon as he was awake and conscious, she started purring, kneading her tiny, needle-like little claws against his belly. Those little thrills of pain focused his mind, and he rose up on his elbow, engaging his brain to work through what he had to do that day. Amber wriggled out from under the blankets and jumped up onto the pillow, then reared up and put her tiny paws on his wrist, leaned over, and licked his face, just to the side of his mouth. Her little tongue was always unnaturally hot, and it never failed to do what she wanted it to do, make him pay attention to her. He looked down at her, and she sat on his pillow and bowed her head nobly as he scratched the thick fur between her shoulder blades. "Well, at least one girl around here still likes to wake up with me," he told her with a rueful chuckle. "What's wrong, girl, Rann not home?" Usually when Rann wasn't home, it was Jason or Surin she sought out when she wanted attention. Amber was just a boy's girl.

She gave a tiny little yip, then pushed against his propping arm like a cat. That never failed to amuse Jason. Amber, and all vulpars, was like a mixture of cat and canine in behavior, and a few physical feline traits, like the claws and the ability to purr. He petted her for a moment more, then sighed and started his daily routine. First, he reached out to find Jyslin, and found her over at 3D, no doubt getting a very early start on the day. She and Myleena basically ran that place, so she had a lot of responsibilities. Tim was at work, and Symone was again over at the army base, piloting a Gladiator. Rann and his kids were all with Meya, just starting morning lessons. He contacted the White House and gave Chirk and Brall warning

he was about to come in, then got a status report from Myri. After hearing about what was most important, he sat up and picked up his panel and read through the high-priority reports that ran through the network over the night, many of them just rehashes of what Myri told him. One, however, got his attention. It was a tagged addition to a routine report, a code that told him that someone at 3D needed to talk to him as soon as possible, and if they used that tag, it meant it was one of their ultra-top secret projects.

Then Aya came in, alone, and she was wearing only a sports bra and a pair of very tight shorts, showing off her highly toned body, complete with several scars. This, Jason had been expecting. She'd been furious with him for not seeking out shelter during the attack on the palace, and she'd had over a day to stew on it. This confrontation was inevitable, and Jason wasn't exactly looking forward to it either. Aya wasn't just the captain of the guard, she was also a friend and in many ways a mentor.

He patted Amber on the head, then regarded Aya with a steady eye as he stood up. "Can we at least take this outside? I'd rather not break anything."

She gave him a look, then smiled ruefully. Then, to his surprise, she came over and sat on the bed beside him. Amber bounded up onto his lap, then she reached over and patted the vulpar fondly on the head. *No, this won't take fighting, Jason*, she said, addressing him informally. *It might have come to blows yesterday, but not today.*

*And what's different today?*

*A whole lot of people reminding me of just who and what you are*, she answered. *You're too much a grizzled warhorse like us, Jason. To put it in a metaphor, you rose up to a command position through the infantry, so you're not afraid to pick up a pulse rifle and jump in a dropship with the grunts. Your family was in danger, in personal danger, and you protected them. I'd actually think less of you if you'd done as I wanted and hidden in a blast shelter and let others take responsibility for the protection of your family. It's not who you are.*

*I'm glad you appreciate that.*

*It doesn't mean I have to like it*, she replied bluntly. *Or that it doesn't give me gray hair. All I can ask is to limit these protective impulses only to crisis situations. I couldn't have stopped you the day before yesterday, but if*

*you get this idea in your head to start flying combat sorties, we're going to have the kind of discussion that requires me to take off my vambraces, she warned. If you ever pull a stunt like that in a situation where I deem it was unnecessary, you won't be able to walk for a week.*

He had to chuckle. *Duly noted*, he answered. *So, I'm forgiven?*

*You are conditionally forgiven based on those unique circumstances. Don't try to take a single step outside that box, Jason. I'll have to pull your leash. Hard.*

*Trust me, I won't*, he answered, reaching over and patting her shoulder. *And thank you, both for understanding and for caring enough to understand.*

*I'm not just the captain of your guard, Jason. I'd like to think that I'm also a friend.*

*Oh, you are that, Aya. You most definitely are that*, he answered, kissing her on the cheek. *Now, it's time for me to get the day going, so track down whoever you're sending out with me today.*

*We'll be ready before you're done with breakfast.*

Aya sent Dera and Ryn with him that day, and the three of them first went over to 3D, where he stole a few kisses from his wife, then tracked down who had set that tag, who needed to see him. The secret unspoken remains a secret, as Miaari often said, and that tenet was very much used in 3D. There were some things that weren't even *hinted* at over gravband. If Jason wanted to know, he had to go to 3D and find out in person.

And it was good news. It was *very* good news. Gerann was the one that had put the *come to 3D* tag on his status reports, and he had a lot to report about his broadcast power project. So far, Gerann had built two test models and two prototypes of increasingly larger and more complex design, and all had more or less worked thus far. The last prototype had had a few bugs that Gerann needed to work out, but he was fairly confident that he could track them down and eliminate them quickly. Jason sat down in his office with Jenny, Jyslin, and Myleena, who was in the office to get caught up before heading to Kosigi to put the Consortium ship back together. "The short of it, your Grace, is the final prototype is a success," he declared.

“You *built* it? Why wasn’t I informed?” Jason demanded.

“Because I finished it four hours ago,” he answered, yawning. “I just got back to the office. And, to put it short, it’s up and working right now.” He held up a panel whose screen was showing a cascading series of numbers. “Telemetry from the array. The array is on the surface of Kosigi. This panel runs on broadcast power.”

Jason couldn’t constrain himself. He gave a whoop of joy, pumping his fist. “You really got it working!” he declared. “Any problems?”

“I’m having a few issues with clean demodulation at the outer edges of the array’s range, but I think some software tweaking will clear that up,” he answered. “Right now, Jason, I could take the PPG out of just about anything and replace it with a broadcast receiver module, and the device will run. As long as my array is up and running, they’ll run.”

“That’s outstanding, Gerann!” Myleena told him with a big grin. “I’m *so* glad I lured you away from Black Ops!”

“I’m glad you did too, your toys here are cooler,” he winked. “I’d like to stress test the prototype, your Grace. Give me about ten days to run my tests and observe, and I’ll have a final report for you on the project.”

“Final as in a success?” Jenny asked.

“Complete success,” he nodded. “After I get all the bugs out, I’ll sit down with that Makati that manages the planetary power grid, and we’ll work out a changeover plan.”

“Have you thought of how to do that?” Jenny asked.

“It won’t be hard,” Gerann answered. “Power demand surveys already show us that we’ll keep the physical conduit power system for industrial applications, they’d stress out the broadcast transmitters too much, but we can run virtually everything else off broadcast power. I’ve already designed replacement modules to replace PPGs in every common size. First, we build the broadcast transmitters and hook them into the power system and make sure they’ve got some heavy load connections to the plants, since a majority of the power demands are going to shunt to those transmitters. Then, once the system is up and running, we just unplug the PPGs, plug in the new power modules, and keep on going. I’m also designing some nanoscopic

variants for use in nano-robots, at Myleena's request. The kinds of robots we can't build because we can't miniaturize PPGs or batteries down to that size."

"Which is what this was all about, at least to me," Myleena stated. "Give me nanites, and I can design a killer damage control system for our Crusaders, fighters, and smaller ships using the same design theories we use on the big boys using standard robots. And that's just *one* application. They're going to be useful in just about everything. Industrial, medical, commercial, military, civilian, hell, even entertainment."

"Gerann, consider yourself the new king of 3D," Jason told him seriously. "You now have total priority over every other project. Anything you need, you ask for it."

"I can abuse that, no problem," he said with a sly smile.

"Mind that the hand that brings it to you might slap you a few times after delivering it," Jason noted lightly.

"That's half the fun," Gerann answered.

"I want regular updates, Gerann," Jason told him. "I want this broadcast power system up and running *as fast as possible*," he stressed. "Don't blow shit up trying but go as fast as you can."

"I'll go as fast as I safely can," he promised.

"Come over to the White House in an hour, Gerann, I'll have the secretaries of both the broadcast system and power generation departments there for you to brief." Jason added. "Since this intrudes into both their spheres, they should both be there."

"Yeah, I'll need both of them. I'll need to tell them which Teryon comm blocks to devote to the power system, and I'll have a *lot* to talk about with the power guy."

"Girl. Her name is Rund Hervakk."

"That's a Makati name," Gerann noted.

"I'd hope so, since she's a Makati. So's the broadcast secretary. Havann Ronn."

Gerann laughed. “Someday I’m gonna walk in and find a Goraga handing me my cup of *oye* juice,” he noted.

“Hey, we reward on ability,” Jason shrugged. “If the Goraga wants the job and can manage to do it without crushing the cup, he’s got it.”

“Speaking of the rare Imperium races, have you seen the *oye* trees the Parri are growing?” Myleena asked. “They’re getting *huge*!”

“Actually, I haven’t, and I haven’t visited them in a while. I should have that put on my calendar,” Jason mused.

He went on to the White House in a much better mood after the last couple of days, so much so that both Chirk and Brall took notice of it. Brall arranged the meeting between Gerann and his secretaries while Jason went through the stack of stuff Chirk prepared for him, as the huge Kizzik stood beside his desk and pointed a few things of interest out to him, things that caught her compound eye. Jason had come to trust her when it came to things like that, because she was *much* smarter than he was, and she had a nearly eidetic memory, capable of linking together disparate pieces of information that looked innocuous when taken alone, but were important when put together. Chirk would make one *hell* of an intelligence analyst, since Tim had the same knack, and Tim was the best analyst on Miaari’s staff. He was in a good mood, but he knew he’d brood again if he started thinking about how close he came to losing his family or the subsequent death orders he’d had to issue. So, after only an hour or so in the office, he decided to go out. He decided to take Chirk and Brall with him, so they piled into a dropship rather than his Wolf. He decided it was time to go out and look around a little.

His first stop was Embraijn, where he popped a surprise visit on the twins and the Exiled. The Exiled were doing very well, they were quickly integrating into the house, and in fact about 300 of them had already found jobs and were in the process of moving over into the city. They had all decided to live near each other, so a section of Karsa was probably going to become an ethnic neighborhood akin to Chinatown in New York City. Jason didn’t mind. If they felt more comfortable living close to each other, he’d make sure it happened. After all, on Karis, commuting was no problem whatsoever. A person could live virtually anywhere and never be more than an hour’s commute from work.

His next stop was the continent of Virga, where he dropped in on the Kizzik who had migrated to Karis to build the new colony. He was, quite simply, *astounded* by their progress. In just a few weeks, they had fully excavated out their hive and had installed all utilities. It was a complete underground city half the size of Karsa, mostly empty because the bulk of the migrating Kizzik had yet to arrive, but a full and complete city in every detail. And, it had everything one would find any city in the Imperium. The dwellings had power, water, and all services, the industrial sectors both above and below ground were either already built or were just days from completion, and the offices of the nobles were waiting for them to arrive. They'd even built more conventional buildings underground for the non-Kizzik who would live and work here, offices, and homes any human or Faey wouldn't think twice about occupying. Chirk looked up their schedule after he met with the noble in charge of the build efforts, and he saw that the drones and residents would start transporting over in just three days. In a week, this empty underground city would be swarming with nearly 15,000,000 Kizzik. In a gesture to Karis, the Hive Leaders of the Kizzik, their ruling body, had dispatched one of the more respected and capable colony rulers to lead the colony, and thereby all Kizzik on Karis, including the smaller colony that was already here. The Kizzik would still obey him as the ruler of Karis, but such an esteemed Kizzik here on Karis would garner their respect, and they'd see her as something of the vice-president.

And Jason wasn't stupid enough not to have already made room for that hive leader on his personal staff as an advisor. Kizzik were *damn* smart, once you got past the language barrier and started to understand their very insectoid and alien personalities and mannerisms. Under all that chitin and greenish goop, there was a serious brain...at least for the nobles.

After that, he went up to see Admiral Dellin. Dellin was in his office, so they sat down and went over all the shipbuilding. Everything was nicely on schedule, and the whole lunar base was busy as a Kizzik hive. He and Dellin went out to attend the launching of one of the Imperial Navy ships that the Faey had brought to complete in Kosigi, a cruiser, applauding as the dock clamps were released and the ship floated out and away...which was a launching in Kosigi. Now the ship would be towed into empty space and the rest of it would be finished, which was all internal and mainly cosmetic.

Floors and walls would be installed, and then all the things people needed, like furniture, bathrooms, and so on, would be finished.

After attending the launch, Jason descended back down to Karis and landed at Kosiningi, and he had a nice visit with Cybi. He could talk to her at any time, and often did, but he still liked to take the time to come out and *see* her, to let her know he cared enough to physically come out to her core and be there with her in person. Cybi was very important to him, both as the heart of the house and as a close friend, and he would take those extra steps whenever he needed to in order to make sure she *knew* he cared.

It was after lunch after he left Kosiningi, and Myleena's mention of the Parri made them the last stop on his tour. He landed and greeted the small clan, only about a hundred, and he was again *astounded*. The *oye* trees now absolutely towered over them, the largest of them the size of a two-hundred-year-old oak tree, with broad leafed canopies that shaded entire acres of grass and the entire Parri village. The trees had yet to fruit, and would not for a while, but he was stunned at how fast they'd grown. That was nothing but a simple sign to the Parri that they belonged here, since they would go nowhere their trees would not grow...which was why all of them only lived on two planets in the Imperium, their home planet and Karis. Jason sat by an open campfire with Ryn and Dera in quiet attendance and shared tea with the Parri *shaman*, her *jaingi* markings catching Jason's eye now that he was familiar with the Parri's *jaingi* tattoos like the one on Saelle's back. They were very simple, but when one took in all of her markings, areas of bare skin painted white through her fur, they tickled at the back of his mind in a curious way.

"You are troubled, your Grace," the *shaman* noted in a calm voice as she sipped her tea through her feline jaw and muzzle.

"A little, honored *shaman*," he answered. "I've had a few bad things happen in the last few days."

"It is best to confront your troubles and work them from your mind," she told him. "To worry over them is to needlessly waste time and energy best suited for other pursuits."

"Well, I've already worked through them. I'm just not entirely happy I had to make those decisions," he answered honestly.



“I see, your Grace,” she told him, taking another sip. “These decisions. Was there another decision that could have been made?”

He sighed. “Not really.”

“And this bothers you?”

“Yes. I wish I didn’t have to make it, but there wasn’t another way. I’m coming to accept it, but it’s not easy for me.”

She smiled. “Then you have learned the first lesson of the ten lessons of the ancestors,” she told him. “You have learned that there are times when you are not the one in control, and it is then that you should simply move with the wind, rather than try to walk against it. To struggle against that which cannot be changed is a fruitless endeavor. You only have nine more lessons to learn before I could train you as a *shaman*, your Grace,” she noted with a gentle smile.

“I think I’ll pass, honored *shaman*,” he answered with a chuckle. “I’m already busy enough as it is.”

“As you wish, your Grace,” she said in a calm voice, taking another sip. “A boon of you?”

“What is it?”

“I would come to your place of dwelling,” she answered. “I have seen visions, and it is seemly for me to come to your dwelling and chase away the dark spirits that seek to gather around it.”

“What visions have you seen?” he asked with growing interest.

“The visions are hard to explain to those who cannot see,” she answered, a bit contritely. “But the feeling they leave me is that I need to take a firmer hand. There is a darkness creeping towards this place, your Grace. I would seek to push back its longest fingers.”

Given that the Consortium had them in their sights, Jason did not discount that feeling one little bit. He’d felt it himself quite a few times.

“So, might you allow me to come?”

Jason didn’t believe in what she believed in, but it was also decent sense not to aggravate the Parri. They asked for so little, he’d be a first-class dick

by saying no. “Of course, *shaman*,” he answered, taking a sip of the delicious *oye* tea, made from its bark. There was no part of an *oye* tree that was *not* delicious. “When would you like to come?”

“As soon as is convenient. All who are important to you must be there, your Grace.”

“That’s a whole lot of people, *shaman*,” he said mildly. “It encompasses the entire population of this planet.”

She gave him a kind look. “Those with whom your life is intimate,” she explained. “The protection I cast will encompass both your home and those who are connected intimately to it. And some are connected to it through you, even if they do not live there.”

“All of them?”

“It would help,” she answered. “I know her Imperial Majesty is at home, but her being here would help. It is not entirely necessary, but it would help.”

“Well, it only takes her a few hours to get here,” Jason mused.

“If she will come,” the *shaman* stated.

“She will if I ask her.”

“Then, if it pleases you, I would ask you to ask her. Both her and her family.”

“I will, then. How does sunset sound?” Parri didn’t keep time like everyone else. Sunset was as close to a specific time as he could get to her way of thinking.

“I would be pleased to do so. Might you carry me to your home in one of your steel birds as soon as convenient, so I may prepare? And a quiet place surrounded by nature, so my meditations are serene?”

“We have a lovely beach right beside my house.”

“That would be fine,” she agreed. “But first, we simply *must* finish our tea,” she added, taking another sip.

And so, after another half hour or so of tea and conversation, Jason was carrying the most unusual passenger he’d ever had in his dropship. The

*shaman* looked a trifle uncomfortable in her chair, but she also looked strangely resolute. He called up Dahnai en route back to his house, and her image appeared in tiny replica on the dash directly in front of him. “What’s up, babes?” she asked.

“How would you like to come to dinner tonight?” he asked. “And be here for something rather...unusual,” he added.

“Seriously? With all the new security protocols, you want me to just ignore them all and jaunt right over?” she asked, a touch acidly.

“Well...yeah,” he answered, a bit lamely.

“What’s that important?”

“Nothing *important* important,” he answered. “A Parri *shaman* asked you to be here. She wants to perform some kind of ritual at my house, and she said she wants you in attendance.”

“Oh really?” she asked with sudden curiosity. “One of the Parri that live there on Karis?”

“Who else would it be?” he countered. “She wants you and your family there. You, Kellin, and the kids.”

“I’ve seen viddies of Parri rituals, and I think Kellin would love to be part of one,” she mused. “Besides, it’s a chance to chase Jyslin out of your bed,” she winked.

“We haven’t had much time for that lately,” Jason grunted.

“There’s *always* time for sex,” she grinned at him. “Send that monstrosity over here, love, and we’ll be there.”

“I’ll contact Juma and have her dispatch a task force right away.”

By sunset, everyone was curious, because the Parri *shaman* had sat herself down on the beach outside the house as soon as he got her there and she was all but dead to the world, in one of the most profound states of meditation Jason had ever seen. Jason could meditate to the point where he could evade telepathic detection, but he couldn’t do it long. The *shaman* did it for *hours*, to the point where Kyri thought she was dead. Dahnai and her family arrived just before dinner, so Ayama had quite a few to feed, but

she'd been ready for it. Jason enjoyed the brief social visit with Dahnai and her family, but then, right after sunset, the *shaman* started.

The first thing she did was use a large pouch at her waist to sift some kind of dust onto the ground, and she went completely around his house, drawing a circle of sorts, even to the point of going right through the middle of the hot tub on the deck between their house and Tim and Symone's house. Then, she stood and chanted out on the deck for a few minutes, invoking some kind of prayer as she looked out to sea. Then she looked up at the sky and chanted again, then knelt down and put her hands on the sand of the beach and repeated the same words. Then, she clapped her hands twice and came inside.

First, she called in just about everyone in the strip with the explanation of not feeling the proper harmony of energies, which made it a packed house. The people who lived on the strip were, in their way, his extended family, and he cared for all of them, so it didn't surprise him much that she wanted them there. Then, surprisingly, she demanded the presence of Aura and Lieutenant Kyva. It took a bit to get them both to the house, and once they were there, she began. They watched as she chanted in the Parri tongue in his living room, swaying slightly, holding a staff made of the heartwood of an *oye* tree in her paw-like hands, a staff decorated with *jaingi* symbols that were oddly symmetrical to hers. Jason was more interested in her tail as it slashed behind her, looking like a lion's tail with the tuft of fur at the end. They watched in respectful silence as she conducted her ritual, and then, at the conclusion, she took her staff in both hands and rapped the end down on the floor.

And in that instant, he started *not* being quite so skeptical about things he didn't believe in. He felt...*something*. He had no idea what it was, but he sure as fucking hell felt *something*. A, a, a...*pressure* emanating from the *shaman*, like a phantom wind that pressed through them as it radiated out from her. And he wasn't the only one that felt it. Kyri, Aura, and Kyva also felt it, from their startled expressions...which probably explained why she wanted Aura and Kyva here.

Before he could rationalize that sensation, the Parri spoke. "This home is illumined by the glow of your ancestors," she intoned in a ritual voice. "May the light of truth, the radiance of love, the warmth of family shine

like a beacon and drive away those who lurk in the darkness. *Unda krah, anda trebarr.*” She then clapped her hands one more time, and that was it. She smiled at them. “Now, let us discuss tea,” she stated in a calm voice.

Dahnai and the others thought it was a nice ritual and enjoyed it, but Jason was far more interested in what that *other* thing was, and he wasn’t afraid to chase the *shaman* down after she had her tea and returned outside to get some answers. She sat on the sand of the beach with her staff in front of her knees and bade Jason to sit beside her. “There are more things in this world than what you can see, and taste, and touch, your Grace,” she told him in a patient, nurturing tone, the voice of a teacher. “You are more sensitive to the truth of things than I expected for you to ask that question.”

“But what was it?” he asked.

“It was something you cannot easily understand,” she answered simply. “It has nothing to do with science, or logic. It has to do with *love*, and there is no stronger force in our universe than love.”

“I don’t understand.”

She looked at him. “When you spoke of the decision that had to be made, why did it pain you so?”

“Because people are going to get killed.”

“And you care for them, even though you have probably never met those whom your orders affect?”

“Very much so.”

“That is love. Your heart is filled with love, Jason Karinne, and it makes you powerful. Far more powerful than you realize.”

“But...what difference does that make?”

“The heart that is filled with love is less troubled by other concerns that often blind the eyes,” she told him. “It makes you...sensitive, to things that others may miss, things others cannot see. What you felt, Jason Karinne, was the invocation of the love of your ancestors, be them human or Karinne, on your home. With them casting the light of their love upon you, it protects you from the fingers of darkness reaching for you. And since all whom your love touches were with you when you were granted this

benediction, they are similarly illumined. The dark spirits that have gathered around your house are now afraid to approach them, and you. Even now, they retreat from this place, driven away by the light of your love.”

“It sounds...*religious*,” he breathed. “I’ve never been all that religious, *shaman*.”

“There is religion, and there is truth, your Grace. Often, they are not the same thing,” she answered sagely.

“Still, this is like taking it on faith. I’m not used to thinking outside of venerated Karinne science,” he said, a little self-deprecatingly.

“Do you believe in souls, your Grace?”

“Yes,” he answered honestly, picking at the sand.

“So, you believe in something you cannot see or feel? Something that cannot be explained by your science?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why should you *not* believe in what you felt just moments ago?” she asked simply.

Jason almost replied, but then he just chuckled and looked up at her. “Point,” he quipped.

“There is more in this world than what your senses can detect, your Grace. The world is far larger than you know. Perhaps, if you open your eyes more, you might start seeing just how large it is.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind, *shaman*,” he answered, thinking of hyperspace. That was something that was scientific, measurable, documented, yet could not be seen or sensed by human beings. If hyperspace was there and intangible, then why not something else? That was what she was trying to get across.

“I would ask for you to kindly return me to my village, your Grace. We are not comfortable away from our trees, and my work here is done.”

“I’ll take you home myself, *shaman*,” he said respectfully.

“I am honored. Oh, and if it would further please you, please return to our village in the morning. There is a gift I wish to present to you.”

“I’ll be there at sunrise,” he promised.

Jason thought on and off about the ritual the rest of the night, even to the point of irritating Dahnai as she claimed him for the night. What he felt...it was odd, unique, something he’d never felt before, but he couldn’t deny that he felt *something*. Was it magic? No, he didn’t believe in magic. But, if it wasn’t magic, then what was it?

Something unexplainable. He could admit that even in a world where science could duplicate some of the miracles of God, there were still *some* things that just couldn’t be explained by science...but also didn’t make them any less real for being unexplainable.

The gift that the *shaman* presented him when he came back to their village in the morning quite literally blew his socks off.

She gave him an *oye* sapling.

He was absolutely *stunned*. The Parri did *not* give *oye* trees away. They were married to their trees in ways that seemed almost irrational by anthropologists, seeing their trees almost as extensions of their gods. *Oye* trees were sacred to Parri, absolutely sacred, and for her to give him one of their trees was almost like the Brood Queen giving him one of her Brood Princesses as a bride, or Dahnai just handing over the crown to him.

It was with shaking hands that Jason accepted the simple clay vessel holding a sapling that was only about ten inches high. “This is *your* tree now, your Grace,” she told him with a mysterious smile. “It belongs to you. It is yours to care for, as you are now the tree’s duty to nurture.”

“*Shaman*, I...I...I’m stunned. I don’t know what to say. And I’m absolutely terrified,” he said honestly. “I have no idea how to care for it. If it died, it would be a disaster. I’d never be able to face you again.”

“Just love it, your Grace,” she said simply. “And a little water from time to time will help,” she added with a growing smile. “The tree will thrive so long as you give it your love.”

“Ah, one of those lessons you were talking about?” he asked.

She just smiled, for almost a full minute. “Mind one thing, your Grace,” she finally said. “It must be *your* hand that transplants it from its pot and into the ground. Any other hand that does so will cause the tree to die. Until it is in the ground, nobody must touch it but you.”

“I...I have no idea how to garden, but I’ll do as you say,” he said uncertainly.

“It takes little skill to dig a hole, your Grace,” she told him, which made him laugh despite himself. “Once you have transplanted it, anyone who was there during the ritual may water it and care for it, your Grace. But it will still be *your* tree.”

Jason put all other business on the back burner as he called the gardening service Ayama employed to care for his yard and had them meet him at the house. They stared in absolute awe at the tiny tree in his hands, warned specifically not to touch it, and when he explained that he had to transplant the tree, he had them help him pick a suitable location in the yard where the tree would get plenty of sun, yet its roots wouldn’t threaten the foundation when—or if—it began to grow.

They decided to put it in the back yard, almost in the middle, and Jason dug the hole himself as the three gardeners watched on, told him how deep to make it. Once the hole was suitable to the gardeners, he almost reverently removed the tree from its pot and put it in the ground. He patted it in, covered it over with dirt, spread mulch over the exposed earth, then watered it. The gardeners then decided that such a rare prize had to be showcased, so they began to build a small viewing garden around it, a knee-high fence around the tree to protect it from wandering children, a few banks of colorful red and blue flowers behind it for aesthetics, a little walkway around it to further isolate it and draw attention to it, and a single bench so someone could come out and view the tree in comfort. Jason decided to keep the pot as well, which was a simple clay pot with *jaingi* symbols painted on it, washing it out and placing it beside the tree on a little tile they placed for it, and filled it with rocks and dirt so a storm couldn’t blow it over.



After that, he downloaded enough megastings of data to nearly fill his gestalt's memory, and it was all about gardening and oye trees. There was *no way in hell* Jason was going to allow that precious gift to die. He sifted through it and purged the redundant or useless information, leaving just enough for him to be a competent enough gardener to care for the tree.

The garden crew had the tiny accompanying garden done when he came home for dinner, and it was quite lovely. It cut a little into the free-ranging play space for the kids in the back yard, but it was worth it. He and Jyslin sat on the bench and regarded the tiny tree for a while in contented silence, then she leaned against him. *Give and take, love*, she told him. *You suffered through a personal trial, endured a heartaching decision, and now you have your tree.*

*I know. I, well, it's strange. I actually feel better looking at it. I don't know why.*

*Who knows, maybe that's why the shaman gave it to you. To make you feel better.*

*An odd reason.*

*Not odd at all, Jyslin protested. Wouldn't you want to help someone you care about?*

*Would you do the equivalent of giving that person the lock of hair the Templars claim to be Trelle's hair they keep in Trelle's cathedral in Dracora?*

Jyslin laughed. *No, but Parri are Parri, love. They're mystics. They do things based on their own views and culture, which are much different than anyone else's.*

*I'm starting to wonder just how mystic they are*, Jason noted, putting his arm around her.

*I won't complain. We now have something that nobody else has, our very own oye tree*, she smiled maliciously at him. *I can hear Dahnai screaming already.*

*You are such a competitive bitch*, he chuckled.

*I'm Faey, baby. Get used to it, she grinned. And speaking of me being Faey, why don't I take you upstairs and show you what else Faey do well?* she purred, sliding her finger up his thigh.

He almost shivered. *We should have time before Meya brings Rann home,* he noted, checking the time on his gestalt.

*Rann has the sense to wait outside until we're finished,* she winked as she got up, then pulled him up by the hands.

*Most of the time, anyway.*

*That's what makes it exciting,* she giggled as she pulled him into the house.

*Brista, 22 Suraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 3 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Brista, 22 Suraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

It was almost fucking *unnatural*.

Jason sat on the bench looking at his *oye* tree, which had, in just ten days, quadrupled in size.

It went against everything all the gardening data he had in his gestalt told him. It went against his own common sense. A tree shouldn't grow that fast. It seemed impossible. And yet, here it was, mocking him with its vertical expression, with its healthy blue-green leaves. The little ten-inch sapling was now over four feet tall, the trunk almost a foot thick, which seemed disproportionately wide for a sapling. The *oye* tree was both bulking up and shooting up like a weed. And while he was immeasurably relieved that the precious tree was thriving, just how much it was thriving both amazed and irritated him just a little bit.

It was almost like a shrine on the strip now. Everyone had come out to see the tree, a tree nobody would dare touch because of the rarity of it, and everyone thought it was quite lovely. Even Rann wouldn't touch the tree after Jason explained what it meant to the Parri, saying that it would be like not taking the hand offered by a Templar.

Templar...*Meya*.

That little war would be engaged very soon. He'd have to get Temika on it.

But he wasn't out here to admire his tree. He was out here to avoid thinking about what was going on right now. Because right now, halfway across the galaxy, the Consortium destroyer they were going to use to attack the Consortium would arrive at the nebula. They'd left two days ago, on a circuitous route that would take them to the nebula after laying a trail away from Exile that the Consortium could backtrack to further reinforce the idea that the ship had survived. And he'd been a very unpleasant person to be around for those two days.

He didn't want to think about it, but he knew he had to. There were 31 women on that ship, 31 women who were statistically already dead. There were 31 women on that ship willing to die to advance the interests of the house. It was indescribably proud, how it made him feel, but it also crushed his soul to think he had ordered that mission. Their deaths would be in no one's hands but his own. He had asked people to die, plain and simple. The one thing he hoped he'd never have to do.

He'd been dreading this day far more than looking forward to it, and he didn't want to see it leave. He didn't even want to *know* it was leaving. Myri and the generals were cautiously optimistic that the mission was going to succeed, but the only success Jason wanted to hear about was those 31 women coming back alive. The Consortium base could go hang. He cared far more about the 31 women on that ship than he did about the hamstringing of the Consortium.

But that was the *person* talking. The *Grand Duke* understood that the destruction of that base was a fair trade-off for 31 people. That base would crank out replacement crews for the ships the Consortium had that were crewless, and the elimination of the queens laying those eggs was the

single-most important thing at this moment. Those 31 women were risking their lives to save thousands and thousands of others. They knew the risks. They'd been exhaustively briefed about them, and they had willingly accepted them. Despite knowing that they were almost certainly going to die, they were more than willing to accept the mission. And if they were willing, then they would go, because the house needed them. The entire Imperium and the Collective needed them. Hell, the entire sector needed them.

And the person absolutely despised the Grand Duke for it.

And so, he sat in front of his *oye* tree, hating himself, but having no shame for the decision that he made. It simply had to be done, and he would live with knowing he had killed 31 women, just as surely as if he had taken a railgun and shot each one in the back of the head, execution style.

He sat there for over an hour, his gestalt removed and sitting on the bench beside him, a clear indicator to anyone he did not want to be bothered. He sat there far beyond the expected arrival time of the destroyer, knowing what the news would be, and both eager to hear it and dreading it. He would be eager to hear that the mission was successful, but he would dread hearing what he knew he would hear afterward, that the crew had died.

He thought about the other little problem they'd been facing, which seemed like a pale shadow now...Graith. They went ahead with their plans to trap his little fleet, but to their surprise, Graith seemed to have had some other agenda. The small fleet jumped into the system right on time five days ago, but instead of trying to advance and force a showdown, the little fleet instead sat there until they were challenged by KMS forces, warned that if they attempted to enter interdicted space, they would be attacked. As soon as they received that warning, the little fleet jumped out without so much as an acknowledging transmission. It was a highly puzzling development, nothing that anyone expected, but Jason had a feeling that the attack on Dahnai and the *Siann* had spooked the other nations, seriously spooked them. An unstable Imperium was a threat to *everyone*, and everyone knew it. If some nation had the bright idea to attack Imperium systems in the middle of a civil war, he'd find himself coming up against whichever house owned that system, and since Faey were paranoid, they'd find that system

heavily defended and extremely expensive to conquer. Even if they succeeded, any gains a nation made attacking an unstable Imperium would be lost the instant the war was over, and the new Empress went about the task of taking her now unified Imperium and blasting the absolute shit out of whoever dared attack them. And if they just left the Imperium alone and let them fight it out, as they did in the Third Civil War, they might find an Empress sitting on the throne with dreams of conquering the entire galaxy. The Merranes had been a very stable ruling family, not prone to aggressive expansion, and the other nations in the sector would rather see Dahnai's family stay on that throne.

But the Alliance was the last thing on his mind right now. All his thoughts were consumed by the mission, and the fate of the 31 women who had undertaken it. And yet, he was too much of a coward to pick up his gestalt and find out what was going on.

He sat with his head in his hands for another fifteen minutes, resisting the urge to reach out and grab the gestalt, resisting knowing what it would feel like to know he was a murderer, and cheering the circumstances that caused it. He sat there in silence until that shiver through him told him that Miaari was with him. He didn't have to look to know she was there behind him, he could sense Kimdori without seeing them now. She stepped around the bench and sat down, then patted him on the shoulder.

"Do you want to hear, Jason?" she asked quietly.

"Yes and no," he answered.

She sighed. "It is bad news."

"They're dead."

"They are dead," she affirmed. Jason sagged, feeling her hand on his shoulder, but taking no comfort from it. "The base?"

"It was only a partial success," she told him. "The Consortium allowed the destroyer to enter the nebula but intercepted it before it could reach the base. They either knew it was a trick or their sensors picked up something that made them suspicious, but as we have all said, it was our best chance to destroy that base. They tried to capture the escape dropship, but the crew partially completed the mission. They disabled the safeties in the dropship and used that, detonated the destroyer by remote command, and then

managed to destroy one of the pods when they got the dropship within range and overloaded the power plant and destroyed the ship. The singularity plant in the dropship created enough explosive power to penetrate the pod's shields and rupture its hull, and the queen within the pod was literally blown out of the rupture and into space. She is very dead. The queen within the second pod was killed by gravity shock when the pod holding her was struck by the blast wave from the explosion. Both of those queens are confirmed dead. The main base suffered moderate damage and nearly six thousand casualties, and the pods on the far side took no damage or casualties. Our crew also ensured that the Consortium will be unable to salvage anything to use to learn about our technology. Each Crusader was set so that if the wearer died, it detonated its onboard power plant as a self-destruct. In that regard, their mission was successful. They left nothing behind the enemy can use, and they managed to take quite a few of the enemy with them. But, as far as the base goes, we have managed to kill two of their queens and damaged their main base. Their ability to create new crews is halved, and they must effect repairs, and that buys us time."

He almost couldn't fathom it. He'd killed 31 women, 31 bright, beautiful women with so much potential, so much to live for, and for what? Killing two of the four queens, just slowing them down. Not stopping them, just slowing them down. One set of statistics divided the other set of statistics by two, and they did it with their *lives*.

He felt sick to his stomach.

"I have other news," she said. "In case of failure, there was a backup plan. That has succeeded."

"What plan?" he asked woodenly.

"There were Kimdori on the ship," she told him calmly. "They disembarked well before the ship was attacked. They have already successfully infiltrated the base."

He whipped up to look at her. "Why didn't you *tell* me?" he gasped.

"Because we did not want to further burden you," she said gently, touching his face. "Had the mission been a success, they too would have died, and you would have never known. We all agreed it was best that way. But with the ship being stopped, they were able to disembark and reach the

base in secret. They are already inside, and they are gathering intelligence as we speak. Ten of them have taken the shape of eggs in the incubation center, and the other two are in the shape of the insectoids. So, Jason, we have scored at least one victory. We now have Kimdori within the enemy ranks. We have eyes inside, and hands in position to sabotage.”

He was shocked. So shocked it took him almost a minute to think of anything to say. And when he spoke, it was the Grand Duke talking. “Can they kill the queens?”

“Given time, yes,” she answered. “The remaining queens are, understandably, under extreme guard, so it will take them time. That is the task of four of them. The other eight are tasked to fully infiltrate and gather intelligence.”

“How did they get in?”

She smiled gently. “Not every shape we take is quite this fragile,” she answered. “There is a species of worm-like creatures native to the star system IB-59 that can survive up to six hours in a vacuum, consumes a very wide spectrum of coherent energy like a photosynthetic plant which makes them hard to detect on most sensors, and is capable of limited propulsion using gas sacks. The Kimdori simply took that form and evacuated the ship, then were able to reach the base undetected, entering through the hull ruptures caused by the dropship explosion. The Consortium sensors could not find them within the gas cloud. Fortunately, that shape held sufficient mass for them to take proper shapes without attracting unwanted attention once they got in, and now they are safely inside and undetected.”

He was flabbergasted, both that they’d put Kimdori on the ships without telling him, and that he hadn’t thought of something like that himself. But he was intent on *destroying* the base. He hadn’t even thought once about trying to *infiltrate* the base and destroy it from within.

Sometimes it was easy to forget that the Kimdori were *shapeshifters*.

He sat up, sighed, then leaned back on the bench, looking up at the sky. “Well, that’s something. I’m not sure it was worth thirty-one lives.”

“They believed so,” Miaari said gently. “Honor their bravery, Jason.”

“Oh, I intend to do that, Miaari. Both officially and privately. But I don’t have to like it. I don’t have to celebrate the fact that I ordered thirty-one women to die. Their blood is on my hands, Miaari. I killed them, just as sure as if I’d called them into the kitchen and stabbed them in the heart with a knife right down the line. And what kills me most is they may have died thinking it was for nothing, dying knowing that they *failed*, that I sent them to die in *vain*. They may have died thinking that I didn’t *care* about them. That hurts me more than anything else.”

“Jason Karinne,” she said, leaning over and putting her muzzle under his chin and nuzzling him, almost like a dog would. “You are the most wonderful man I know, and there could be no one better to wear the ring I sent you to find. I am honored beyond words that you are my friend.”

He put his arm around her and held her close, and he had to admit, she made him feel a little better. “Thanks, Miaari. That means a lot to me.”

“It is truth, every word of it,” she answered, putting her head on his shoulder. “If half the rulers in the galaxy were half as *human* as you, there would never be another war.”

“We can only hope, my friend. We can only hope.”



# Chapter 4

*Koira, 28 Suraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Monday, 9 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 28 Suraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*“The White House,” Ducal Seat/Command Complex, Karsa, Karis*

It had taken a few days to get over it...but he knew he never would. It just wasn't in him.

He'd attended the ceremony with his family and every military officer ranking Captain or above, wearing the formal robes of the Grand Duke Karinne, an elegantly simple affair of white brocade slashed through with blue goading, the crest of the house embroidered on both sides of the fold-over chest, and tied in place with a wide blue sash. Unlike any other Grand Duke or Duchess's formal robes, however, Jason Karinne's robes had sleeves of equal length, and both ended at the wrist. And standing beside him in his first official capacity, wearing the blue and gold robes of the heir apparent, was Rann Thomas Fox Shaddale Karinne, looking both excited and nervous, doing his best to look serious, and with his youthful enthusiasm about being allowed to take part in the ceremony warring with the sense of *sadness* that permeated the air and hung on his father like a wet cloak.

It had been a simple ceremony, more of a funeral than a celebration, but there were reasons to celebrate. That day, Kyva Karinne lost her status as the only member of the house who had been awarded the Ducal Medal of the Champion. Jason Karinne had awarded the highest military honor the house could bestow on the 31 women who had sacrificed their lives in the interests of the house. The cameras had followed him as he somberly walked down a line of empty suits of Crusader armor trimmed in gold and

placed on stands, holographs of each woman visible behind and above them, placing the medal on the armor that represented the woman who had willingly died for the house. Not in battle, not in the heat of the moment, but in a calculated decision to destroy their dropship by overloading its power plant, the resulting explosion killing two of the four Consortium breeding queens.

Those suits of armor were now a permanent fixture of the White House. They stood in a double row in the entry hall, a stark reminder to any who entered that blood had been given for the house, and reminding him every day he came to work that his decisions cost people their lives.

Rann's part of the ceremony was the only real happiness, since there was a 32<sup>nd</sup> medal awarded, and that was to Fleet Admiral Palla Karinne. She too earned the Ducal Medal of the Champion for her critical decision to shield the palace using the *Aegis* and the task force, putting themselves in mortal danger and making the ship literally live up to its name as "shield," and saved the lives of her Grand Duke, her Empress, and every ruling matron of the *Siann* except for Maeri Trillane. Rann was given the honor of pinning the medal to Palla's Class A jacket, a move he had practiced for hours, then he kissed her on each cheek. Jason just settled for giving her a fond hug.

Of course, there were plenty of medals awarded that day, since Palla hadn't been alone on her ship. Every crewman in the task force was awarded the Ebony Cross, the third-highest honor. The ten Wolf pilots that chased down the missiles that got past the fleet were awarded the Emblem of Valor, the second-highest medal. Jason also awarded the Raptor and Dragonfly pilots in both the Imperial Navy and Infantry, the Imperium's army, the Karinne Medal of Distinguished Service, the fifth-highest honor, though those pilots weren't there to accept them. They'd receive them in ceremonies within their own militaries, awarded to them by Saelle Karinne, the more-or-less ambassador to the Empress from House Karinne.

That was yesterday. Today, there was nothing but the war, and his duty to protect his house...a house that was 31 women less than it was a week ago, but God help him, he couldn't say he wouldn't do the same thing if he had it to do over again.

And he hated himself for it.

Rann was a very empathic child, and he could sense his father's melancholy a little more keenly than his brothers and sisters. It could be that it was because he lived in the same house with his father, but Jason simply knew better. Rann absolutely insisted on going with him to work, shirking off his lessons with the reasoning that if he was allowed to participate in the ceremony, then he should start learning about all those other things his father kept saying he was going to teach him. It certainly wasn't the first time Jason had brought Rann along in an official capacity. Jason was amused at his attempt to be cunning about it, but he was happy that Rann wanted to stay with him. Sometimes, a man's child was better medicine over the raw wounds than all the good wishes and therapy in the world.

And so, Rann tagged along as Jason got the day's schedule from Chirk, and Brall got his marching orders to go out and kick shins until things were going the way Jason wanted them to go.

The first order of business were reports from both Zaa and Yila. Yila had managed to further track down the pirate organization that had launched the attack on Dracora using her criminal web, tracing materials through buyers and sellers to search for any other complicit parties and hunting down the other shadowy organizations that did business with them. Zaa, on the other hand, had less to report. She was still absolutely furious about the attack, and heads had rolled within the Kimdori spy ranks. Zaa called every Gamemaster in the Imperium back to Kimdori Prime and dragged them before the Hearth itself, and she read them the riot act. Kiaari had called him not long after, and she looked *terrible*, both mentally and physically shaken in the wake of Zaa's wrath. Zaa was almost like a deity to the Kimdori, the most revered Kimdori alive, and they took her displeasure *very* seriously. Miaari had removed her Handmaiden's mark in shame after returning to Karis, but after Zaa blistered her ear for doing so, it was right back on her the day after. Two Kimdori Gamemasters had killed themselves in shame when it was tracked back that the majority of the enemy activity had been in their spheres of control, feeling that they had brought such shame to themselves and their clans that their lives were forfeit.

It disturbed Jason a little that Zaa showed almost no emotion over that fact.

But there was little moving Zaa now. She had taken the attack on the *Siann* almost like it was personal, and she had the Kimdori within the Imperium racing around to find out just how the hell things got so far out of their control. In a way, Jason could understand some of it. The Kimdori had failed to prevent the Third Civil War, had failed to save the original Karinnes, and they did not take failure lightly. Zaa was *not* going to let something like that happen again, and that was that. Until she felt that things were back under control, she would be a tornado of fury raging through the Kimdori ranks.

The Alliance wasn't backing off, either. Two more small fleets had jumped out of Alliance space, heading towards Terra. The first had reached the edge of interdicted space just four hours ago, and they did the same thing the first fleet did. They appeared, and as soon as they were challenged, they jumped right back out. This puzzled just about everyone, and Zaa had retreated from her rage enough to send Kimdori to find out what Graith was up to, for that was curious behavior.

They'd see what the next fleet did in two days, when it was scheduled to arrive.

After he read through the reports, Rann sitting on his desk looking out the window behind his father, Jason sighed and pondered the day's schedule. A meeting with Dellin and Juma over the shipbuilding schedules. A "come to 3D" tag on a routine report, but not a high priority one. Someone over there just wanted to talk to him about something. Attending the launching of the destroyer given the interim name *Revara*, the captain's chair awarded to a human telepath, Lieutenant Commander Lisa Sheppard, who had already told him she intended to give her ship the name *Patrick Henry* solely for the famous line "give me liberty or give me death." That wasn't a very cheerful thought. Lunch with Rahne. A scheduled briefing and meeting with Dahnai, Zaa, and Sk'Vrae just after lunch. A briefing with the department secretaries after the meeting, their weekly meeting. Symone had managed to worm her way onto his official calendar, which was nothing but a joke. She'd had Chirk put her down for dinner. Eh, he hadn't gone out on a date with her in a while, he'd enjoy it. Maybe she could cheer him up a little, she was very good at things like that. Symone was just too damn charismatic. Then again, she'd been spending so much time piloting a Gladiator, he was starting to wonder if she loved him anymore.

But that was how she coped, he supposed. She often felt like a fifth wheel, dead weight, so she'd learned to pilot a Gladiator, taking quite a few lessons from Kyva and the KBB. Jason had little doubt that she was *nasty* at the controls of a Gladiator now, given just who was training her, and Symone had fast reflexes and a lot of prior combat training. He had little doubt she was more than a match for the average Gladiator pilot by now.

Dera handed Rann a cup of *oye* juice, smiling and patting him on the cheek, then she retreated back to the door. Jason mused that he often forgot that *Rann* was the primary mission of the guards, not him. Dahnai had sent quite a few to protect him and his entire family on top of Rann, given he was the *amu dorai* of the Empress, but their main mission was to protect the future husband of an Imperial Princess. Jason leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk beside his son, seeing that Symone was the last thing on his calendar, her block extending all the way into tomorrow morning. Boy, she was just telegraphing what she had in mind.

He could use some of her specialized therapy about now. Symone could make a man forget his own name when she was being militantly amorous.

*Why does it make you so sad?* Rann asked when he sighed again.

Jason blinked and looked at his son, with his beige-pink skin but Faey ears, his hair settling into a nice coppery red color after shifting through several shades of orange, blond, and red since he was born—Faey children's hair often changed as they grew, and it was almost unheard of that an adult had the same color hair she had at birth—a red not too far from his mother's hair, but with his father's eyes. Rann was going to be devastatingly handsome when he grew up. Shya should count herself damn lucky she was already engaged to him, else there would have been a major war among the women of the *Siann* over who got him...and him being the heir wouldn't have had anything to do with it.

A child of two worlds. A child of two *species*, for that matter. But with the best aspects of both rolled into one.

He knew what Rann meant. And if he was old enough to ask, he was old enough to hear the answer. *Come walk with me, son*, he sent, standing up. He helped Rann down from the desk, and with Dera and Suri escorting them, he walked with his armored son down the halls of the White House in

silence, then out the doors, then, much to the guards' disapproval, right out the gates of the compound and onto the streets of Karsa. Faey, humans, and Makati roamed the streets, with the occasional Kizzik visible in the distance; the Kizzik were more and more of a presence on Karis, and their numbers were steadily growing. Very few of the citizens recognized them, and those that did didn't approach, they simply bowed or waved.

"Look around, Rann," he said aloud, motioning to the street. A school class was on a field trip, walking behind their teacher. Two Makati were bantering at each other in their language, wearing KMS duty uniforms. A Faey mother was pushing her baby along in a floating stroller, heading for the Karinne House Bank, the main financial institution of the house and mainly controlled by Kumi...God help the house. A human teenager in goth black and wearing a *Blood Nugget* tee shirt tapping on her interface, no doubt accessing its memory using command thought, its visual display projected in front of her eye in a way that only she could see the hologram, a one-sided hologram. The faint shimmering in front of her eye gave that away. The sense she gave off told them that she was one of the human telepaths, no doubt between classes over at the telepathic training academy.

It was another day in the life of the city of Karsa, which, when one looked upon it from a distance, almost seemed as a living thing itself. The people were its red blood cells, traveling the arteries and veins of the city as the carried life to the cells, which were the buildings. Wolf and Raptor fighters flying overhead were the antibodies, and the power and comm systems that ran it were like the nervous system that kept everything running. Another day in the life of a city populated by 3,493,039 souls.

"What do you see?" he asked his son.

"Well," he hummed, looking around. "I see people, and hovercars, and buildings. It looks like it always does."

"That's right. And it's our job to make sure that it stays this way, Rann," he said calmly. He stopped and knelt down to Rann's level, his armor making a clacking sound on the plascrete sidewalk. Like Dracora, Karsa had no roads, only sidewalks splitting grassy parks that connected the buildings for foot traffic and the underground subway system, with the wide pads at regular intervals where hovercars could land, take off, and park. "Everyone you see here depends on us, son. They've put their trust in us to

protect them, to give them the chance to live their lives here. It's not a job you *ever* take lightly, because there may come a time when you make a decision that gets someone killed. That's what I had to do. Because of my orders, thirty-one people died, the women who wore that armor that's in the entry hall now. I know it doesn't sound all that big, but look, son," he said, pointing "It could have been her. Or her. Or him," he continued, pointing at a ten-year-old boy who was running to catch up to the rest of his class. "They're not numbers, Rann. They're *people*. Never, ever forget that, son, that there are *people* behind every decision you make, and there are *people* that might get hurt because of those decisions. That's what makes me so sad. I wish I didn't have to make the decision that got those women killed, but I *had* to. It's my duty to protect the members of the house, and I feel like I failed those women. Failure is a terrible thing when people get hurt because of it."

Rann was quiet a moment. "If someone was going to get hurt, why did you have to?"

"Because sometimes, son, you have to make a decision that hurts the *least* number of people," Jason sighed. "Those women who died were trying to fix it so the bad people couldn't get the ships we knocked out working again, and it was the only way we could do it. They felt that if they died, it was worth it if they managed to finish the job, since it would have saved a lot more lives later on. They volunteered for the mission, and they knew what might happen, but they did it anyway. But despite that, I still feel like I failed them, and I failed my duties as the Grand Duke, because they *died*. I failed my duty to them to protect them, and it makes me feel sad that I couldn't find another way. I had to let thirty-one women risk their lives to protect the thousands and thousands and thousands here on Karis, and no matter what, I still feel like I failed in my duty. I either failed my duty to the house, or I failed in my duty to those women who died, *because* I couldn't find another way. Can you understand that, son?"

"I, I guess so."

"What's the first thing I taught you about being the Grand Duke?"

"That the Grand Duke serves the house of Karinne."

"And what is the house of Karinne?"

“The people who live on Karis.”

“That’s right, the *people*. Remember that, Rann. Always remember that. You serve the house. The house does not serve *you*. Never forget that, son. Never. If there’s one thing I want you to learn, and understand what it means, it’s that simple saying. It’s what being the Grand Duke truly means, deep in here,” he told him, placing a gauntleted hand over Rann’s chest, over his heart.

“I serve the house. The house does not serve me,” Rann repeated, quite seriously.

“What does that mean, Rann?”

He was quiet a moment. “That I should do what’s best for the house over what’s best for me.”

Jason nodded seriously, impressed by his reasoning. “Always do your best, because the *people* are depending on you to do your duty as the Grand Duke. And never forget, the decisions you make affect the *people*. Not the house, not a column of numbers on a report, but *the people*. And eventually, you’re going to run into a decision that can’t serve *all* the people. You’ll have to choose which people your decision will help and which ones it may hurt. And when that happens, you must make the decision that best serves the house, even if it makes you sad. And it *should* make you sad, Rann. When you have to make a decision that might hurt someone, it should make you sad, no matter how justified you were in making that decision. When you can make a decision that will hurt someone and not feel sad because of it, then you no longer deserve to be the Grand Duke. No Grand Duke that serves the people could make a decision that may hurt them and not feel sad because of it. Can you understand that?”

“I...yeah. Suddenly being Grand Duke doesn’t sound as much fun as it used to,” he said honestly.

Jason chuckled darkly. “I came to that very same conclusion the first time I had to make one of those decisions, son,” he told him. “But this isn’t a job you quit. This job chose me, just as much as this job chose you, Rann Karinne. Like it or not, you’re stuck with it just as much as I am. So be the best Grand Duke you can be and serve the people of the House of Karinne like every one of them was your own son or daughter. That’s how I see



them. Everyone out here is like your brother or sister, and I work as hard as I can to be a good father.”

“You’re the best father in the world,” Rann told him, looking up at him with a smile.

“Well, that’s quite a complement,” Jason chuckled warmly, lifting Rann up with his telekinetic power and then putting his arms around to hold him at his hip. Rann wrapped his little armored arms around Jason’s shoulder and kissed him on the cheek. “And that makes it all worth it, pippy,” he smiled. “A father will move the world if it means he gets kisses.”

“I love you, father.”

“And I love you, Rann,” Jason returned, putting his forehead down against his son’s. “Now let’s get back inside before Dera and Suri drag me behind the woodshed and spank me,” he grinned.

*You’re getting very close to it,* Dera warned.

“I thought you were the one in charge, father,” Rann said, giving him a sly little smile. Clearly, he needed to keep his son away from Kumi. Or the twins. Or perhaps Miaari. Or maybe all of them.

“They let me think that, son,” he chuckled, winking at Dera. “You’ll find that in reality, you’re never as in charge as you ever think you are.”

Once they were back inside, however, Suri came up and kissed him on the cheek. *We think you’re the best father in the world too,* Suri told him.

“And all this time, all I had to do to get kisses from you was teach Rann right and wrong,” he chuckled.

Suri smiled. *Jason, you’re the only man who’s ever made me think that some people are just too good to be in politics,* she intoned seriously.

“Any self-respecting person would steer clear of it,” Jason replied bluntly.

Rann tagged along with him most of the day, attending his meetings and being relatively good, keeping quiet and not drawing attention to himself, just watching and listening. Juma and Dellin had to dote on him a little before and after their meeting, and Rahne didn’t mind him being there for lunch one little bit. Rahne got along very well with his family, and they saw

her something like an aunt, since she was the only other human Generation. After lunch, he considered having Dera and Suri take Rann somewhere as he met with the others, but decided to let him sit in. He had to learn how to be a Grand Duke, and one good way was to watch and see what a Grand Duke did behind the closed doors. Rann could be trusted to keep anything he learned quiet. He was actually very good at keeping secrets, no doubt an impulse introduced into him by that Kimdori DNA that helped make him a Generation.

It was a serious and enlightening meeting. Zaa took immediate control just after they were all present, not even paying the fact that Rann was sitting on Jason's desk and was in full view any mind as she got right to the point. "We've picked up the first intelligence packets from our infiltrators," she declared. "They have achieved full immersion and have managed to put themselves into positions where they have access to sensitive information."

"How did they do that?" Dahnai asked curiously.

"By taking advantage of the confusion after the attack and identifying important targets and assassinating them," she answered bluntly. "All they had to do to take over their identities was take their brain implants. They are how the insectoids both communicate and keep track of everything. The implant *is* the identification. And since my children can take them right out of the heads of the insects and put them into their own, they can assume another identity with relative ease. The Consortium's internal security is quite lax once you penetrate their outer barriers," she sniffed. "But, to move on, it seems that the Consortium has a vast network of intelligence threaded through our entire sector," she told them, bringing up a map of the sector and showing it shaded in red. There were a few holes, but that shaded red indicated areas where the Consortium had up to date intelligence about the activities going on. "I am not entirely sure about how it works," she admitted. "From what information my children are providing, they are receiving this intelligence in *real time*. They know every move we make almost as if they have hacked into CivNet and taken control over it."

"Which is basically impossible," Jason countered. "The Moridon are managing CivNet security, and I don't think the people the Consortium hired are *that good*."

“Unless they hired a different Moridon company to do the deed,” Dahnai offered. “If you’re dealing with computers, you want the Moridon.”

“That’s possible,” Zaa admitted. “But I considered that possibility myself, and after making a few discreet inquiries to a sympathetic member of the Mob, I am confident that the Consortium are not using the Moridon.”

“Why Zaa, you’ve broken one of the oldest rules in the sector,” Jason chuckled. “The Moridon and the Kimdori aren’t supposed to cooperate.”

“I am sure that if our relationship were made public, he would be chained to the Traitor’s Column and gored to death by children,” Zaa said dryly. “But this particular Moridon needed our help with something, and since then, we have maintained what you might call a distant friendship, much as the friendship between Handmaiden Miaari and Mahja Siyhaa.” She touched her memory band, and the map zoomed down to the Imperium, showing its teardrop shape, with Terra on the point end and Karis at the rounded edge on the far side. That was merely a two-dimensional representation, which became more irregular when the map raised up and took on three dimensions. Once it was viewed like that, it looked more like the hull of a Viking longship with Karis at the prow and Terra forming the stern. Draconis was closer to Karis than Terra, and that Viking hull was bordered by the Alliance and the Skaa Empire near the prow, the Republic near the stern, and the Urumi on the far side at Terra and bordering the Alliance. Alliance and Skaa Empire space extended out away from Karis, enclosing Imperium space, the two Skaa nations completely covered their side of Imperium space, and the space directly behind Terra was gray, unclaimed, if only because there really wasn’t anything out there for anyone to claim. That space was bordered by the Urumi on one side and the Skaa Republic on the other, though those boundaries were very shaky. The simple fact of the matter was, there just wasn’t anything around Terra but stars holding worthless planets or asteroids, so those lines on the map were just what each nation claimed, not what was actually controlled.

“This is what is most curious,” Zaa said, zooming in more and more, until three systems were highlighted. Arctus, Vrada, and Imbria, the three more or less next to each other. Arctus was the house seat of the Trillanes. Vrada was a holding of House Trebanne, one of the minor houses, holding two inhabited planets and one inhabited moon. Imbria had two inhabited

worlds, one of them a Faey mining colony, and the other Imbria Prime, the homeworld of the Parri and the sole producer of the *oye* fruit that Faey would kill for.

Jason saw what Zaa was fishing for immediately. The red shading did *not* cover Imbria.

“The Consortium seems to be completely blind about the happenings on Imbria,” she said. “They had detailed intelligence about the movements of our fleets, our flag officers, which they have identified by *name*, and even logistical schedules such as goods transport and raw material harvesting schedules. But when it comes to Imbria, they have no intelligence. None. This may be because the only goods that move from Imbria are copper, tungsten, and *oye* fruit, but it is a curious gap.”

“Given the Imperium’s absolute lust for *oye*, I’d think that would be something important to watch,” Dahnai chuckled ruefully. “If there was a disruption in *oye* production, we might have a revolt on our hands. I think the only thing that could come close was if Terran *strawberry* production were halted.”

Jason’s mind, however, wasn’t thinking about that. All he was thinking about was the Parri *shaman*, and how he had felt...*something*. He looked at the holograph, his eyes unfocused a moment, and for a second, he considered the *energy* that produced them.

Energy...weren’t those other beings of the Consortium not corporeal? Weren’t they just coherent energy?

Wouldn’t an energy being looking on with malicious intent be considered to be a *dark spirit* to someone that had that kind of sensitivity?

Something just *clicked* in his brain.

Jason blinked. That was a wild conclusion, but in a strange way, it made sense. What if...what if the Consortium’s energy beings could, could *see* across vast distances? Like clairvoyance? There *had* to be other kinds of psychic abilities, after all. The Faey were racially telepathic and had telekinetic traits. The Colonists had a large number of empaths, beings able to sense emotional states, as well as telepaths and telekinetics. Fully half of the Colonist race had some kind of psionic ability. And since the

Consortium's energy beings were a radically different type of life form, well, who knew what they were capable of doing?

"Zaa," Jason said quickly. "Has your intelligence showed a loss of intelligence around Karsa?"

She gave him a curious yet intense look. "Yes and no. From what my children report, the Consortium has only recently managed to breach Karis, and I mean within the last fifteen days. But now they are getting no intelligence from anywhere in the entire Karis system. I believe that Miaari has found and destroyed their agents, and simply has not sent on the report yet. There has also been a similar report of intelligence disruption at Dracora, which I attribute to Jinaami rooting out and crushing hidden agents. She has found six since the sweep began, sleeper agents in menial tasks that avoided the initial sweep because they were in non-sensitive positions, but they were all agents for local nations, not the Consortium. I ponder that perhaps the Consortium has enlisted the aid of the other nations to spy."

Jason, however, wasn't quite so sure. "It was the Parri," he breathed. "The Parri did it!" he called, then he laughed loudly, startling Rann. "I'll be a son of a bitch, the Parri actually did it!"

"The Parri?" Dahnai asked, and Sk'Vrae scoffed while Zaa gave him a steady look. "Jayce, love, the Parri are primitives. Mystics. They don't even know how to use anything that's not made of sticks and rope, and we've tried to teach them! They just don't want to know!" She brushed her bronze hair from her face. "I mean, I love the Parri, don't get me wrong. They're very polite, and they've never been a problem. But I think you're reaching a little here."

"I don't think so," Jason said. "The commonality between the holes in Consortium intelligence are where the Parri are. The Consortium can't hide from the Parri!"

"Explain," Zaa said, her expression intrigued.

"When the Parri *shaman* came here and performed her ritual, I felt... *something*. I couldn't explain it. I asked her about it, and she told me that it was because my heart was filled with love or something like that. A typical explanation from a mystic, something that was either way over my head or

something my logical mind would reject out of course. Now, speculate with me a little here,” he said, leaning on his elbow on his desk as Rann watched him. “What if those energy beings in the Consortium aren’t just their spokesmen? What if they have some psionic abilities of their own? What if they can *see* into the Imperium? I dunno, maybe astral projection or something? Or maybe clairvoyance?”

“Clairvoyance? We’ve had a few documented cases of it through history, but it’s exceptionally rare, and it never failed to drive the subject totally insane,” Dahnai said.

“Maybe it doesn’t drive *them* insane,” Jason said quickly. “If they’re getting real-time intelligence out of us and they’re moving that information halfway across the galaxy, and we *know* they can’t possibly be using any standard comm—we have enough of their own technology to know what to look for—then maybe they’re using some non-scientific means of getting it? Maybe their energy things can simply look over here using some power or ability we don’t have or have never encountered?”

“Theoretically? Possible,” Zaa conceded. “Even among the insects of the Consortium, the energy beings are mysterious and rare. There are only four of them in this galaxy,” she relayed. “And there is only one at the base holding the eggs. The other three are at other bases.”

“There is a hole in that. Dracora,” Dahnai said, a little victoriously. “There are no Parri here.”

“No, but *you* are,” Jason retorted immediately, pointing at her. “Remember what the *shaman* said? That the light she called was shining on everyone at the ceremony? *You* are there now, Dahnai, and that glow or whatever the hell it is is messing up their ability to see. And it’s bright enough to scare them completely away from Dracora. *You* are protecting Dracora.”

Zaa looked intrigued, Sk’Vrae looked skeptical, but Dahnai looked downright hostile. “Love, you’re letting their mysticism get to your head,” she told him. “They’re not capable of anything like that!”

“Oh really? Why not?” Jason challenged.

“Well...they’re *primitives!*” she retorted, a bit lamely.

“There are many *kinds* of advancement, Dahnai Merrane,” Zaa said simply. “Perhaps the Parri chose to advance themselves in a different way than your people.”

“But—”

“Remember when I broke those boards for you, love?” Jason interrupted her. “Remember that?”

“Yeah. It was pretty cool.”

“Remember how I said I did it? After all, that’s something that most people just can’t do. *You* couldn’t. Neither could your guards.”

“You said it was mind over matter. That’s such a weird Terran saying,” she mused.

“But what does that mean?” he pressed.

“It means that if you believe something hard enough, you can make it happen,” Rann supplied.

“Exactly,” Jason said, snapping his fingers and pointing at his son. “The point is, love, just because you don’t *think* that something’s possible, that doesn’t mean that it *can’t* be. I shouldn’t have been able to break those boards going on your thinking, yet I did. The world is much larger than we realize,” he chuckled, thinking about what the *shaman* said. “Just because we can’t see it or hear it, that doesn’t mean it’s not there. Maybe that’s what we’re dealing with here. Forces we can’t understand, yet the Parri *can*. Maybe the dark spirits the *shaman* said were reaching out towards my house were Consortium spies using their abilities to snoop. After all, if you want to know what’s going on here on Karis, my house is the best place to look, far over my office.”

“I don’t know,” Dahnai grunted.

“I think the easy way to test it is to simply summon a Parri and have it protect Draconis,” Sk’Vrae proposed. “If Zaa’s spies report that our enemy no longer has intelligence at Draconis, then we know.”

“Yes. If one Parri can protect the entirety of the Karis system, then one Parri should be able to do the same at Draconis. I think you should make some inquiries, Dahnai,” Zaa told her. “Have the Parri send a *shaman* to

Draconis to effect protection around your palace. And then we shall see if that protection blinds the Consortium.”

“More than that. I think the reason they can’t see anywhere in Karis is because we have *Parri* here,” Jason said. “They live here. And the *shaman* told me that she decided it was time to take a firmer hand. I think *she* is the one protecting all of Karis, that she decided they’d started getting too close and she’d better do something about it. That was why they managed to get eyes in here, then bam,” he snapped his fingers, “they lost them just days later, just about the same time she told me she was taking a firmer hand about things. She’s the one keeping them away from Karis. She just placed an extra-strong protection around my house to give me and my loved ones a second layer of protection in case they sneak by her. I think a *shaman* could protect the palace, but it would just be a stronger version of what Dahnai’s already doing. Now, if we had the Parri defend all of our critical positions with the same protection they put around my house, like the war room, shipbuilding yards, and so on and so on...” he trailed off.

“Put enough bright lights out to make it hard for them to see anything,” Zaa surmised. “Clever.”

“I think, despite my doubts about this, that there is enough evidence to at least pursue the matter,” Sk’Vrae said. “Maybe it simply requires us to keep an open mind and see how it goes.”

“I think it’s ridiculous, but it won’t really cost us anything to prove or disprove it,” Dahnai said, a bit annoyed. “I’ll get in contact with the Parri and ask them to send a *shaman* here.”

“I think I’ll go have another talk with our *shaman*,” Jason mused, looking at Rann. “Wanna go?”

“Sure!” he said with a grin.

The meeting went on without him as he flew to the north coast of Karga, where the Parri had colonized a nice tract of coastal foothills that had the perfect environment for their trees. There were naturally occurring slightly higher nitrogen concentrations in the soil there, which attributed to their favor for this place. Their trees needed nitrogen like most any carbon-based plant, but the Parri breathed nitrogen rather than oxygen. They were rather comfortable on both Terra and Karis, because both planets had



extremely high nitrogen content in their atmospheres. Jason landed on the edge of their village, and he saw them going about their business, moving about on all fours like animals but rising up on their hind legs to manipulate things with their prehensile front paws, which were more hand-like than paw-like. He was greeted by the *shaman* and two of her apprentices, who had not yet earned their *jaingi* symbols, but instead had them drawn into their fur with some kind of white paste. “Your Grace,” the *shaman* smiled. He knew her name, but he just couldn’t pronounce it, since it was based on her language. It sounded like a series of plaintive yowls from a cat. He couldn’t even rationalize it enough to contract it into a comprehensible sound like he could with Kizzik names.

“We need to talk,” he told her. “Could we sit and have tea?”

“Of course,” she said, stepping back and motioning towards the rude village, with its thatched huts. “Welcome to our village. Tea for our guests,” she said lightly to her apprentices, who scurried off on all fours like a pair of lanky bobcats.

After they were seated at the communal fire for the village, Jason and Rann enjoyed *oye* tea, following Parri custom so they didn’t offend their hosts, and then after he had taken the required four drinks from the cup, he got down to business. “*Shaman*, those dark spirits you sensed. Have you chased them away from this world?”

She smiled at him, toothy and knowing. “Yes,” she answered. “Their energies are harmful to our trees. Something had to be done,” she explained.

“And you believe the Parri on your homeworld are doing the same?”

“Naturally. They keep me informed.”

“You communicate with them?” he asked.

She nodded again. “The talking box can send messages, but we have our own ways that have nothing to do with your science.”

“Then I think I’m talking to the right Parri,” he said. “We think the dark spirits you’re sensing are our enemies in the Consortium, using some kind of ability to allow them to either see us or approach us in a way we can’t detect. How many of them have you sensed?”

“Many,” she answered. “Some are weak, some are strong. The weak ones come close, while the strong ones lurk in the far shadows and reach their fingers towards us.”

Jason considered that. “More than four?”

“Many more.”

“Hmm. That doesn’t entirely fit in with our own intelligence, but we’ll come back to that. *Shaman*, do you think it might be possible for the Parri of your homeworld to travel about the Imperium and cast a similar protection you placed on my house in certain places? Important places our enemies have a great need to be able to look into?”

“It could be done, but it is not easy if it is not a place intimately connected with someone,” she answered. “It would be no task for an apprentice. Only a *shaman* long with his *jaingi*, an elder, could accomplish such a task.” She noticed his curious and obviously confused look. “Such places are sterile. It is hard to bring love into a place that holds no love to begin with.”

“But it could be done?”

“It could be done,” she nodded.

“Would the Parri do this for us?”

“Of course,” she smiled. “As we give our *oye* fruit gladly to your people, so would we grant you our services dealing with these dark spirits. The dark spirits have no love in them, Jason. Such things must be opposed by any who has love in her heart.”

“Then I think it’s time we made a call to Empress Dahnai,” he said. “Would it offend you to use the talking box this one time?”

She chuckled. “I would be glad to do so,” she answered. “But after our tea,” she hedged. She quite deliberately turned their conversation to mundane, even trivial matters, and spent most of that time talking with Rann, getting to know him. Rann remembered all the lessons in etiquette Jason and the guards had taught him, so he didn’t do anything that would offend the Parri. They had some rather peculiar customs and views, and while they were extremely hard to anger, they were easy to offend. She even asked Rann to demonstrate his budding telekinetic powers, moving a

small leaf on the ground about two feet, which caused the *shaman* to applaud and put her paw-like hand on his hair. “Such a talented child,” she praised. “And so polite!”

“Daddy makes me take lessons,” he blurted, then blushed a little.

She smiled. “It is only proper. We should all take the time to learn the ways of our neighbors, so we may be good neighbors ourselves.”

“Listen to her, Rann. She’s very wise,” Jason chuckled.

After tea, they used the vidlink in his dropship to contact Dahnai. They were all still talking about other matters, so when Jason conferenced in, he was looking at all three of them. “Dahnai, ladies,” he nodded. “Our Parri *shaman* assured me that they can do what we ask, but only their most experienced *shaman* are up to it.”

She nodded. “Only the elders would be capable of invoking love into a loveless place,” she affirmed.

“Well, honored *shaman*, perhaps you should come and make the first attempt?” Zaa offered. “As you know the situation and are more comfortable than other Parri in dealing with the outside world?”

She shook her head. “I cannot leave Karis,” she replied. “The wounded soul of this world needs me far more than you do. I cannot leave him when he needs me.”

Dahnai gave Jason an *I told you so* look.

“But there are many others with the skills to perform such a ritual,” she continued. “I am sure if you ask around, you will find many elders willing to help you. In this, the Parri will be willing partners. The dark spirits have no love inside them, and they must be opposed.”

“Then we will make such a request,” Zaa said for Dahnai.

“Empress?” the *shaman* asked expectantly.

Dahnai flashed Jason an irritated look. “Alright. Alright! I’ll send the word down and dispatch a transport to bring the Parri back.”

“Ensure the steel bird has grass and trees within,” the Parri intoned calmly. “We find being surrounded by cold, dead metal to be very

frightening.”

“I have ships that have gardens inside. They can stay in them,” she said, then her image vanished from the monitor.

“Dahnai seems to have issue with this idea,” Sk’Vrae noted.

“She does not believe in what she cannot see,” the *shaman* said simply. “And considers the possibility that there is more beyond her sight to be a challenge to her world view. And since she rules, she does not like to be challenged in any manner.”

Jason blinked. That pretty much well defined Dahnai. This Parri was damn observant to figure that out.

“I will warn the elders of what is to come,” she continued. “So they will be ready when the steel birds arrive.”

“That would be appreciated,” Zaa told her.

“Alright, we’ll let you ladies go,” Jason told them. “I’ll call back later and tell you what’s going on.”

“Very well,” Sk’Vrae replied. “Have a good day, Jason.”

“You too.”

Jason and Rann escorted the *shaman* back to the fire, where one of her apprentices brought her her staff. She accepted and seated herself on the grass with the fire behind her, then placed it on her lap. “I will send out the call, your Grace,” she assured him. “This will take some time, so it would be best for you to return home. Might you allow us to come visit you tomorrow so we may see your tree?”

“Of course,” he answered. “I’ll send a ship for you a bit after sunrise, so you might have time to eat.”

“We will be waiting,” she said, then she closed her eyes and said not another word. Her apprentices seated themselves to each side of her and also closed their eyes, and Jason actually *felt* it as her mind went totally blank, dead to the world, having the same psychic impression as a rock. He wondered why she didn’t go straight to the vidlink they had in the village, which they kept in case they needed to contact someone in an emergency, but if she wanted to meditate first, well, that was her prerogative.

*That is so creepy, Rann observed. It's like she's dead.*

*I know. I can't even come close to entering a meditative state that profound. It's like she turned to stone. Her apprentices aren't anywhere close to it,* he noted, assensing the two younger Parri, a male and a female. He could still sense their thoughts; Parri were like humans in that they had no real defense against telepathy, though no telepath on Karis would dare invade their privacy on threat of severe criminal punishment. Those things *were not done* on Karis.

*No, Daddy. It's like there's nothing inside her.*

Nothing inside her. Maybe that was a good *literal* description. Maybe, maybe the Parri could astrally project, could separate their minds from their bodies and send them elsewhere. Maybe she was talking with the elders on Imbria *right now*.

It was certainly possible. Hell, when you got right down to it, almost anything was possible.

It was a long and interesting day, and it ended with Symone...sort of. After Jason got all the Parri business sorted out, he went back to the White House and finished up his paperwork, then took Rann home and met Symone for dinner. Tim was having a similar date with Jyslin across town, and it was a good decompression after the last few harrying days. Symone quickly took his mind off everything with her banter and her jokes, and she got him to relax as they enjoyed Texas-grilled steaks at a steakhouse run by a pair of native Texans and who knew how to prepare a steak. After dinner they went to a Faey opera by a local troupe, which was rather nice, then she took him on a long walk on the beach when they got home. It was a warm, windy night, and he lost himself in walking hand in hand with one of the women he loved.

One of...sometimes that still both amused and surprised him. He loved Symone, was as good as married to her due to their relationship as *amu dozei*. He loved Dahnai, again, one step from marriage due to *amu dorai*. He loved Jyslin deeply, their very souls entwined. His heart had three women in it, and there were stirrings along the edges for Yana and Aura, friendships that were a tiny bit more than the usual friendship. In Faey

society, he was Yana's boyfriend, and Aura was his girlfriend...and those were some pretty real distinctions. And through it all, despite the fact he had sex with other women and had a real attraction to Yana and Aura—especially Aura—the three women in his life had absolutely no jealousy, thanks to telepathy. They knew how he felt. They knew he loved them. They knew his interest in Yana was compassion, giving her something of himself because she loved him. They knew his interest in Aura was purely physical, that he liked her quite a lot and she was a very good friend, but it was her body that lured him into her bed. As Symone would rather crudely put it, his dick could chase any pussy it pleased as long as his heart belonged to them.

And this was one of those moments of *amu*, sharing an intimacy with Symone reserved only for those allowed to touch the edges of his telepathic pair-bond with Jyslin, a domain into which only Symone and Dahnai could step. They shared their deepest thoughts with each other through their touching skin, at a level no listener could pick up unless she too was touching them, as Symone told him all about her feeling of purpose piloting a Gladiator, feeling like she was *doing something* at last, as Jason more or less dumped a lot of his problems in her lap, relating to her the crushing weight he felt on him due to that mission, the feeling that he failed, and mourning the loss of his house members all over again. They both admitted they felt a little frazzled and out of touch, due to the very busy schedules they all had now. They hadn't joined together for a little foursome fun despite actively trying to arrange the time, things just kept coming up that pulled Tim back to work, or Jyslin back to 3D, or him back to the office. But this was Symone's time, Symone's moment, and he tended to her gently, lovingly, tenderly, sharing with her, then making out with her on the beach with the surf lapping at their ankles. Right about the time he was ready to suggest they retire back to the house, she pushed away enough to look at him, twirling her fingers in his hair. *My, you're all revved up*, she noted with a wink

*What can I say, you're just too sexy for me*, he returned. *So, let's go find an empty bed.*

*Oh, my bed's already filled*, she grinned at him. *Alright, he's all yours.*

He felt two pairs of hands grab him by the shoulders and under his arms, and he was literally dragged back and out of Symone's embrace. He looked up wildly and saw Meya on one side and Myra on the other, dragging him towards their house, which was quite conveniently right in front of them.

*Symone! You set me up!* he accused.

*Hook line and sinker, as the Terrans say, she grinned back at him. Have fun with the twins, lover. I'm gonna go stick my face between Jyslin's legs and show her how much I love her.*

*Bitch!*

*And you love it,* she winked, then sauntered away like she'd won an argument.

Meya and Myra literally dragged him up the beach, his heels leaving trails in the sand. *And you two are soooo dead,* he warned.

*No, we're about to make you forget all about Symone,* Myra winked down at him. *She got you ready for us. That bulge in your pants tells us more than your words do, Jayce.*

To his intense pique, he blushed.

*You lose again, Jason,* Meya teased. *You know we own you.*

*And we're about to own you in an entirely new way,* Myra added, licking her lips sensually.

He had to laugh. Once again, the twins had gotten the better of him... but he had the feeling he was going to enjoy what they had in mind.

He woke up almost in a haze, in an unfamiliar room, and with unfamiliar women on either side of him. It took him a moment to get his brain engaged, and when it did, he almost had to shudder a little.

Oh. *God.*

And he thought that Symone could be wild in bed. Meya and Myra made her look like a fucking *nun*. They had taken complete possession of him and did all kinds of—

He almost got an erection just *thinking* about it.

He had the feeling that half of that was just show, bravado, proving that they could make him forget his own name, proving that his trysts with Kumi were a pale shadow of what they could do to him. In some ways, they were wrong, since Kumi was an absolute slut and was utterly depraved, which meant she'd do things that would make the twins blush furiously and enter a convent at the mere *thought* of doing it themselves. But where the twins lost that battle, the fact that there were two of them, they were twins, and they had a guy in the same bed with them let them do things Kumi couldn't, let them win the war. Meya and Myra wouldn't touch each other—they weren't *those* kind of sisters—but they'd do a hell of lot of other things without crossing that line. And last night, they'd done them *all*.

They said they could rock his world. He had to admit, they were right.

Twins 117, Jason 0.

What was it about them that always let them get the best of him? Ever since their very first meeting, they'd always had the upper hand, always one step ahead, always able to take him down a peg. And in a way, he was glad for it. The twins kept him humble, kept him honest, reminded him that he was Jason Karinne before he was the Grand Duke. And damn, did they remind him last night that he was a *man*, and they were *women*, and men and women could do all kinds of very, very interesting things together.

He caressed Meya's bare butt lightly, which made her stir. He'd never be able to look at either of them again without remembering *last night*, and he guessed that was just one more way they were showing him just who *owned* Jason Karinne. Meya rolled up on her side and opened her eyes, then she grinned at him. *Mooorninnnnng*, she trilled.

*You are an absolute bitch, you know that?*

*I love you too*, she winked.

He stifled a laugh so they didn't wake Myra. *I swear, woman, I'm not sure I can walk. Ever again.*

*Then I'd say we owned you*, she teased.

*Bitch.*



*Keep calling me that, Jayce, it just makes me happier and happier.*

He did laugh that time, which made Myra stir. She threw an arm over him and pulled him against her, and he felt her breasts against his back in a very lucid way. *Morning, Jayce*, she sent lightly, kissing him just under his ear. *Did I hear something about you never walking again?*

*It's a common side effect of a Zoyanne Special*, Meya intoned seriously, which made Jason burst out laughing.

*You two are absolutely terrible!*

*You weren't saying that last night*, Myra retorted, kissing him again in a way that made a thrill go down his side, like a pair of hair clippers held next to his ear. *Last night you were calling us god.*

*I was not!*

*Really? Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!* she broadcast, a memory of his voice in the throes of passion. *Well, there was just us in bed with you, babes, so clearly you think we're right up there with Trelle.*

Jason tried to come back with a witty retort, but his brain failed him. Besides, Myra's lips on the skin under his ear was scattering his thoughts to the winds. *I don't care how long it takes. I will find a way, and I will get you*, he promised.

*There aren't that many years in a cycle, baby*, Meya teased. *Besides, you'll be too busy fending off a furious Kumi.*

*What? Why?*

*Look over there.*

Jason's eyes followed her gaze, and then he saw it. Sitting on a shelf over their dresser, there was a small camera.

*You didn't!* he gasped.

*Oh yes, we did. And right now, there's a little something for Kumi to watch sitting in the inbox of her panel*, Myra replied sweetly, sliding her hand up his chest, then cupping her fingers around his neck. *We told you you'd never forget it. We'll send you a copy so you can get a good look of it from outside the bed.*

He was completely at a loss. He just worked his jaw as if to speak for a moment, then collapsed back against Myra in helpless laughter. *I hate you two!*

*Oooh, that means we can get in a little angry sex before breakfast,* Myra cooed, pulling him down onto his back. *I get him first,* she told Meya.

*Just don't use him up, I want a turn.*

The twins finally let him go about two hours after breakfast, which absolutely murdered his schedule for the day given that the Parri were due to arrive any minute. But, as he wobbled back home along the walkway, the infuriated shriek that blasted out of Kumi's house told him that the twins *really had* recorded their night and sent Kumi a little taunting proof of it. Kumi and the twins had been doing things like that to each other since they came to Karis, but this was the ultimate dig on Kumi, and Jason knew it. She'd tried to get a vidy of him for a while, and the twins managed to beat her to the punch...and in true twins flair, they sent her a copy of it so she could stew in her own rage.

Jyslin was gone when he got home, off to work, as was Tim, and all the kids were at lessons. Symone had hung around to see him, however, meeting him at the kitchen table as Ayama served him some pancakes with a naughty little smile on her face. "Not a word!" he barked, pointing at her, which just made her grin at him as she put the syrup on the table. Symone burst out laughing, flopping down in the chair facing his, and he noticed for the first time she was wearing her flimsy little thigh-length robe that was belted so loosely in front that her left breast was hanging completely out of it. Not that it wasn't anything he hadn't seen a thousand times before, but often it was the presentation that made it appealing. She wouldn't have seemed half as sexy if she was sitting there nude. Symone looked where his eyes were and just smiled at him.

*I'm surprised you have enough left to get horny looking at my tit, baby,* she told him.

*Hey, the day my amu can't get me in the mood is the day I divorce you,* he retorted with a wink.

She laughed. *As if,* she teased. *So, how was it?*

*You know damn well how it was, he answered. I'm sure you heard me all the way over here.*

*Yeah. Jys really had a headfull of you, she grinned. That made our sex that much hotter, she purred mentally. Nothing gets Jys hotter than when you're getting some. It just bleeds through to her and makes her go totally nuts. I love doing her when you're between some other girl's legs feeding her pussy that big cock of yours.*

*Don't be nasty, he chided, though he had to admit, she had the same effect on him. When she was having sex with Tim, if he was similarly engaged, it just amplified the sensation since he was getting pleasure from both his body and through Jyslin.*

*You love it when I'm nasty, she retorted as he started eating. And from the feel of it, the twins are way nastier than I thought they were.*

*I'll tell you about it later. Right now, I'm sure Chirk has people searching for me. Besides, someone needs to be punished for her part in that little game, he warned, looking over at her.*

*She shivered a little. Oh baby, you know I love to be punished! she replied, which made him laugh.*

*Well, tell Tim to take Jys out again, because tonight, you will pay for your treachery, he warned, pointing at her.*

*Oooohhhhh, I'd better wear a maxipad today or I'll make a mess in my armor, she replied, which made him throw a pancake at her. The syrup-drenched disc splatted flat against her face, making her flinch so violently she fell backwards out of her chair.*

He managed to finish just in time to greet the Parri, a procession of six of them, two tattooed *shaman* and four apprentices. They viewed his tree and complemented him on his success, they shared a cup of tea with him, talked of minor affairs for about fifteen minutes, then they got right back on the dropship and went home.

But that was the Parri. They were very social, but they were also very considerate. They could probably see that he was fairly busy, so they cut their visit short.

He got to work right after seeing the Parri off. It was a very short day, basically just him catching up on the reports, but everywhere he went, he got snickers and sly looks. After a half hour, he found out that the twins told *everyone* about their little ambush, further grinding their heels in Kumi's face and taunting him with their superiority, and about an hour after he got there, a suspiciously large video file appeared on his panel's inbox, from Myra. He made sure Chirk and Brall were out of his office, then opened it. Ten seconds of viewing told him that beyond any shadow of a doubt that they *really had* recorded it. And he was going to *murder* them if this got anywhere beyond Kumi and him. If he *ever* saw this recording *anywhere* but on his own panel, they were going to die.

What he should have expected was the little visit from Kumi just after lunch. She barged into his office looking about ready to breathe fire, slamming his door and pointing at him like her finger was a pulse rifle barrel. *If you did that on purpose—*

*They didn't tell me they did it until afterward, he cut her off. I told you I don't want anything like that out there, and if I ever see it somewhere it better not be, heads will roll.*

She looked slightly mollified, but not much. *I'm going to kill them!* she exploded. *That was my idea!*

*You're just jealous,* he replied, digging just a tiny bit himself.

The look she gave him could have shattered the window behind him if it weren't armored glass.

Jason had to laugh. *C'mere,* he called, motioning her over. She stalked up to him, then squeaked in surprise when he dipped her down and kissed her on the lips. She clung to him, then hummed and started kissing him back just as he finished up. *You watched the whole thing,* he noted. Kissing her brought them in skin to skin contact, and her intense arousal was all but screaming at him. *That was most of the reason she came in here.* She'd seen that vid, and she'd spent all morning with her legs crossed.

*Five times,* she admitted.

*Self-punishment is the worst kind,* Jason chuckled, sitting back down. She sat in his lap, probably uncomfortable for her since he was in his armor, and looped her arms around his neck.

*Oh, come on, she begged. Just fifteen minutes out of your armor!*

*Any other time, I'd be all over that, Kumi girl, he answered. But I have a date with Symone tonight, and if I show up bandy-legged, you're gonna be answering to her. Just go grab some random lucky guy and give him fifteen minutes he'll never forget.*

She gave him a hot look, then laughed brightly. *That's not a bad idea,* she purred, kissing him on the lips, hot and dirty. *But you owe me, Jayce,* she warned. *And I'm gonna collect!*

*We'll talk about it tomorrow. The twins have to pay for recording that, and I have something of an idea.*

She grinned maliciously. *We'll fix their little garden,* she sent with a savage undertone. *Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go find some handsome guy and give him a permanent limp.*

Jason watched her sidle out, and he almost felt sorry for the first handsome man that crossed her path. Or the first man, for that matter.

By the end of the day, he saw that the Parri operation was under way. Parri *shaman* had already arrived at the palace and the command center and the war room, and they were starting their preparations for what his *shaman* said would be a difficult task. The viddy he'd seen of them certainly hinted at that fact, for all of them were elderly Parri, old and wise, and looked quite formidable. He put that out of his mind, though, for he had other things to do, and other fish to fry.

*Vesta, 34 Suraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 15 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Vesta, 34 Suraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

It took the Parri about five days to complete all of their protections.

Jason got reports and watched viddy of it from time to time, elderly Parri *shaman* hobbling about large command buildings and chanting, pouring that powder in shapes on floors or around entire buildings, shaking those *oye* wood staves at things that only they could see. They visited every important position or location, command centers, shipyards, critical strategic locations for fleet assembly, and naturally, the Academy and the United Nations. The Parri probably did more work on Terra than anywhere else, since it was the only place where foreign powers had any civilians or agents left, so it was very important to completely blind the Consortium to the entire planet.

There was also the twins. Jason and Kumi had a score to settle with them, each for their own reasons, and Jason knew exactly how to go about doing it. He sent them back to Exile to check on the Exiled that had returned, see how they were doing settling back into their city on the island by the sea, and let them catch up on some friendships they'd made with those that returned. He didn't feel it important to mention to them that he'd made some...modifications to their dropship, and that he'd managed to get his hands on their armor.

The twins landed and spent the night at Exile, but when they went to return home, they found out that their dropship had a mind of its own. It veered off course and flew out over the main continent, and by the time the twins managed to do anything to get back control, it landed in the middle of the vast grassland that dominated the equatorial belt of the planet. The dropship went completely dead when it landed, and after a few attempts to get it started or call someone, they decided to strike out using the engines in their armor to coast the 60 miles or so to New Karsa. For the engines, that was about a ten-minute cruise about a foot above the flat ground, since the tropical savannah was so flat it'd let them go very fast. But, as soon as they exited the dropship, their armor, quite literally, flew apart on them. All the seals ruptured, and the armor just dropped off anywhere it didn't surround them, leaving them literally only in their boots, codpieces, and gauntlets.

Right about then, they started getting suspicious that this wasn't entirely accidental. It was more or less confirmed when a Wolf's spinner descended down and hovered an exact 200 feet over their heads, just watching them. Jason got to hear quite a lot of cursing and threats and saw the shaking of fists at it, but the twins knew they'd been had, and there was nothing for

them to do but strike out for New Karsa on foot. Jason watched them raid the dropship's emergency supplies, finding it had been cleaned out of everything but food and water, and that food and water wasn't in any containers. No backpacks, no tents, no weapons, no emergency radios, nothing but food and water. And if they wanted to carry the food and water, they'd have to come up with some way to carry it.

Jason had made it clear; the twins would have to think their way out of this one.

He was impressed with their ingenuity. They fashioned sleds out of their armor's breast and back plates, piling their armor on one and the food and water on the other, then yanking some flexible conduit out of the dropship to serve as rope. Then they lashed it down, tied handles to them, and started pulling them along the flat grassland, which would let the sleds slide along without much resistance.

At 60 miles, it'd take them about three days or so to reach New Karsa, but they'd probably get spotted and picked up when they reached the edge of the farm plots, which should only take them about a day to reach. Jason let them start out, then, after they were about ten minutes out, they saw a large Stick drop down and pick up the dropship, then carry it off. They shook their fists at the spinner again, calling him out and promising revenge, but Jason just activated a holo of him and Kumi, which had them tell the twins to enjoy their walk, and that there would be *oh so much more* for them to be angry about by the time they got home.

It wasn't entirely a cakewalk for the twins. It took them a full day to get back, and during that time they had to cross two rivers without losing their sleds, got involved with a cloud of stinging insects they'd accidentally roused from a nest, leaving them covered in red welts, and had an encounter with a native mammal, a black-furred cat-like creature the size of a German Shepherd that had velociraptor-like middle claws on its back legs, oversized claws that were kept cocked back to snap forward and down and rip prey apart when the animal got hold of them and raked with its back claws. The little animal scared the life out of them when it investigated their sleds after they stopped for the night, but after the initial scare on both sides, the little animal actually followed them for a while, which made them

nervous. It eventually lost interest, however, going off to chase a rabbit-like mammal the size of a pit bull, and they didn't see it again.

And so, the twins were gotten back. By the time they reached a planter and got someone from New Karsa to come get them, they'd walked over a day in tropical heat, and they were exhausted, naked, muddy, covered in sting welts, and looked absolutely miserable. Jason had a recording of the whole thing, which he played back to dramatic music on a holo monitor in their dropship once they were picked up, putting a caption under it reading *Meya and Myra's Survival Adventure*.

When they got home, they each slapped him on the shoulder, then they each kissed him on the cheek, then they announced in unison that he was on the list. He replied by remarking that the geo surveys had found a sizable deposit of Vanadite on Exile, the ore of Vanidrium, under the polar ice pack, and he might need *someone* to go investigate and get more detailed sensor scans. That made the twins flinch, then laugh and kiss him again.

Jason made his point, though. Don't mess with the guy that can tell you where to go and what to do.

Thing hadn't had a chance to settle much when Zaa arrived unannounced. She met him literally as he got out of bed, opening the door just after his alarm went off. Jyslin gave her a cool look but couldn't hold it long as the tall Kimdori strode into the room. "Good morning," she called, which surprised Jason a little and made Jyslin chuckle.

"Denmother! When did you get here?" he asked.

"Minutes ago," she answered. "Put on a robe and meet me in your study," she declared, sweeping past and through the door leading to his private study, which opened to both the hallway and his bedroom.

*Sounds important*, Jyslin noted seriously.

*I think you're right. Have Ayama bring me some coffee?*

*Why are you asking, you weakling? Command!* she grinned.

*Alright, bitch, you go get me some coffee. Now!*

*You can't order me around, I'm your wife*, she retorted cheekily. *I order you around!*



*Oh really?* he asked archly. *I think someone else needs her own survival special.*

*You wouldn't dare! Besides, I can fix anything you sabotage,* she challenged. *We both know I'm the better engineer,* she added loftily.

*Alright, that's it,* he barked mentally, grabbing hold of her, making her gasp and giggle, then he kissed her quite seriously.

"Now, Jason," Denmother Zaa called from his study. "I do not want to have to come in there and break you two up in a compromising position."

They both laughed, since that was where things had been headed. He gave Jyslin one more kiss, then watched as she climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom, that cute but wiggling all the way. He sighed and again thanked God for the luck he'd been given to marry that woman, then he put on a robe and joined Zaa in the study. She immediately locked the place down, then she motioned for him to sit. "I've received more missives from our agents within the enemy base," she declared.

"And they must be serious."

"Yes. They are grim," she answered, touching her memory band. "Cybi, would you join us, please?" The hologram that represented Cybi formed in front of them, solidifying into that nude yet formless body with Sora Karinne's face and hair. She nodded to Zaa, then turned and stepped around Jason's chair, putting a hand on his shoulder, a hand that made contact since she was utilizing the solid-matter holograph projectors, which added simulated substance to the holograms in the form of coherent energy skin that could be touched. "*What is it, Denmother?*" she asked.

Zaa seated herself across the desk, her fingers still on her memory band. She used it to access his desk's vidlink, which wasn't secure and was more or less there just for things like this, and an image of the base appeared in a hologram that formed over the desk between them, just under Zaa's eyes. "Firstly, the Parri have had an effect," she told them. "Everywhere they have done their work, the Consortium is now blind. And we have come to learn how and why, thanks to the daring and valor of my children.

"There are four of those energy beings in this galaxy," she began. "It seems that you were right about them, Jason, but only partially. One of

them, and only one, had the ability to send parts of its collective consciousness far from its core.”

“Parts of?” Jason asked.

She nodded. “The beings are not like you or I,” she said, as an image of one appeared in place of the base. “See how it is made up of swirling lights? Each of those lights is what you might call a cell that makes up the entirety. But unlike other beings, each of those individual cells is sentient. These beings are more of a symbiotic assembly of smaller beings, all working together, but capable of independent action in a limited scope. They cannot physically separate from the symbiote construct, but they can utilize any psionic powers they possess independently.”

*“Intriguing,”* Cybi noted. *“They are quite unique creatures, are they not?”*

“Yes, they are. It seems that of the four, only one of them has this ability, and it arrived with the fleet we attacked. It took it some time to acclimate and begin its work to keep watch over us, and it also seems that it had a lot of trouble looking into Karis, mainly because of a resistance it encountered here.”

“Probably the *shaman*,” Jason mused.

“No. *Cybi*,” Zaa replied. “Cybi has an effect on that creature that made it hard for it to see Karis. It managed to penetrate the interference, and that was when the *shaman* took matters into her own hands and banished it from the planet.”

*“What kind of effect could I have?”* Cybi asked.

“I do not know,” she answered. “But something about you interfered with the symbiote’s abilities.”

*“Curious,”* she mused, no doubt pondering the matter with her vast, computerized mind.

“Yes, but it’s a matter for another time. To make this brief, the Consortium is now backed into a corner. They were absolutely depending on their ally’s ability to watch us, and now we have blinded them. They were planning to take their time and attempt to minimize the potential for

damage to the nations in the sector, because they intend to conquer this galaxy and they wanted to keep things intact.”

“But now they don’t care.”

“They have received orders from Andromeda,” she nodded. “They are to capture Karis as quickly as possible, and neither casualties nor the Consortium’s own laws are an issue. They must take Karis, no matter the cost, no matter what they must do. Something has happened in Andromeda to change things. We do not know what this is, but it has changed the Consortium’s plans. They have decided to break their own laws and customs, and they are conscripting the peoples of the empire they conquered to replace the insectoids on the ships. This is something that is quite remarkable for them.”

“How so?”

“It is against both their empire’s law and thousands of years of traditions to allow civilians to fight in battle,” she answered. “The only beings permitted to make war in the Consortium are the energy beings and the insectoids. For them to break this law and force a subject race to fight, well, it says a great deal. Whatever is happening in Andromeda, it must be quite grave for them to make such a drastic decision.”

“Well, didn’t they do that to the Urumi?”

“No, they did not,” she replied. “Remember, Jason, they did not *conquer* the Urumi. They *used* them. If they would have brought the Urumi into their empire, they would have been forbidden to fight. That was why they abandoned the Urumi at the end, to walk well clear of that law. They simply set the Urumi up, forced them to commit to the battle, then severed all ties with them and allowed them to attack to create a diversion for their own forces.”

“Well, that does explain a couple of things,” Jason grunted, thinking it over. “I couldn’t figure out why they just abandoned the Urumi like that.”

“When you understand some of *their* law and custom, it makes sense,” Zaa answered. “For us, it means this. They are desperate now. As soon as they train those subject beings to crew the ships, they are going to come, and they are going to come all at once.”

“We’ll have a year to deal with them,” Jason grunted, thinking it over.

“Maybe not. The reason I am here is because my children intercepted a communication back to Andromeda. It will take it 79 days to get there, and the reply will take 79 days to return, but the short of it is that the forces here are requesting information and plans to be transmitted back concerning some kind of faster than light technology. They intend to run the interdiction blockade using it.”

“Faster than light? Like warp drive from the old *Star Trek* shows?”

She nodded. “My children don’t know how efficient it is, or how fast it would allow them to go, but if they can get the plans for it and build it, then Karis is no longer safe.”

“Then we have to make sure they don’t get an answer,” Jason said immediately. “We need to find a way to jam their long-distance communications. If we keep them from getting what they need, it keeps them out.”

*“I have some theories about that,”* Cybi told them. *“I’ll discuss them with Myleena.”*

“Alright, I’ll leave that in your hands, Cybi,” Jason said, patting her holographic hand.

“With this order to take us no matter what combined with the blinding of their most effective intelligence gathering, it backs them into the corner,” Zaa grunted. “We have to be careful now. Even a mouse can be dangerous when it has nothing left to lose.”

“Damn right,” Jason agreed. “It also makes the attack we made on them even more meaningless, if they’re not going to need more insectoids. Yet another reason my girls died for nothing,” he sighed wearily.

“Jason, do not dishonor their memory so,” Zaa told him, a bit sternly. “It does help. Remember, those ships are designed *around* the insectoids. The other race will not be as effective.”

“I guess,” he sighed.

“What we must do is begin to prepare,” she told them. “Soon, the Consortium will attack. They have no choice now. And with them so

critically short on ships and personnel—”

“They’ll invade the other nations,” Jason cut her off. “They’ll take them over both for bases close to us and to conscript them into their navy to fight against us.” Zaa nodded grimly.

“I believe the war room considers the Nine Colonies the most likely target for the initial invasion,” she stated. “They are the least militarized of the nations abutting Confederate space.” Zaa’s eyes went distant a moment, and Jason could almost hear the communication between her memory band and the comm network, relayed at biogenic level akin to communion. “It has begun,” she said grimly. “I just received word from our sensor watchers. A force of Consortium ships have jumped in our direction.”

“How many?”

“Six thousand, nearly a third of their available fleet,” she answered. “They’re working the trajectory as we speak to get a destination.”

“Cybi, alert Myri and have Myli warm up 3D for rapid deployment,” Jason ordered. “And send word to the war room.”

*“I am doing so as we speak,” she nodded. “I am also calling Dahnai and Sk’Vrae to warn them.”*

“Wise,” he agreed.

“Let us wait for Dahnai and Sk’Vrae before making any plans,” Zaa offered. “And we need to get the others here.”

*“I’ll summon Miaari and Myleena at once,”* Cybi answered.

By the time everyone was assembled, the astrocartographers had a destination. It wasn’t the Nine Colonies as Jason thought, but it was the Shio, the entire force was jumping to attack the closest Shio system to them, Reglen. Dahnai made an emergency call to Grayhawk as Jason ordered the KMS to mobilize. The Shio were bristling with Torsion weaponry, but they were outnumbered some 100 to 1 even if they had their entire fleet at one system. Zaa brought up the status of Reglen, and Jason saw that they’d be overwhelmed in mere minutes, given it only had an orbital station and 14 ships there in defense. Even if the KMS and the Confederate forces attacked to intervene, they’d still be heavily outnumbered.

Grayhawk's green-skinned face appeared on another holographic monitor, pale and shaken. "Is this true, your Majesty?" he asked in a sick voice.

"It is true, High Prince," Zaa said gravely. "Some six thousand Consortium ships are currently en route to Reglen. They will arrive in a little less than two thousand Shio *dekka*."

He looked about ready to throw up. "We can't fight that many!" he said in a strangled tone. "Minister, how long would it take for our forces at Bregali to reach Reglen?"

"Two days, your Highness," came a voice off screen.

"I, this is, my poor people!" he wailed.

"Grayhawk, now is the time to do what you can," Zaa told him. "Send the warning. Evacuate what you can from Reglen. Save as many as you can."

"Send them to Terra. We will give them sanctuary," Jason told him.

"We will recall them to homeworld!" Grayhawk snapped.

"And what happens after they finish at Reglen, your Highness?" Dahnai asked simply. "Do you think they're going to stop there?"

He looked absolutely stricken. "She speaks the truth, young Emra," that same voice said from off the screen. "They would not send so many against our tiny nation unless they meant to crush us beneath their heels. They will not stop at Reglen."

"I won't blame you if you fight, Grayhawk," Jason told him. "But for God's sake, evacuate your civilians. They'll find safety on Terra, and they'll be welcome there until they can go back home."

He looked at them with haunted eyes, then slowly nodded. "I'll do what I can," he said. "As you know, I don't make the decisions. I can only warn in the most serious way possible."

"Good luck, Grayhawk," Sk'Vrae intoned grimly.

"I think we will all need it," he answered, then his image vanished.

The Confederate military went on full alert, and their conference included the other rulers of the local nations after only ten minutes. Zaa explained what was going on, using blunt terms, and then she finished things up. “The Consortium will consolidate its hold on Shio territory, then it will move on,” she told them.

“We *warned* you that this was going to happen,” Jason said in a weary voice. “For God’s sake, I all but got down on my knees and begged you to listen, but you were too interested in what you could get out of it for yourselves,” he added, looking right at Graith. “Well, now the Consortium is on the move. Do you think they’re going to stop at the Shio? Do you think they’re going to really just conquer one nation and not move against the others?”

“I think they will do exactly that,” Graith said stubbornly. “This only fits our own projections. The Consortium will need a forward base, and the Shio are the most logical choice. Their four systems are relatively close to Terra, and the Shio are the smallest and most easily conquered. They won’t risk their military forces trying to attack any other nation.”

“So, you admit you thought they were lying the entire time,” Jason snapped back at him.

“Since when does a politician tell the truth?” he shrugged.

“The Council is torn at the moment,” Magran, speaker for the rulers of the Nine Colonies, announced. “It is the right of any sovereign state to defend itself, but against such overwhelming numbers,” he sighed. “Some want to fight, some want to do nothing and hope that our neutrality is honored. But the Consortium did not honor the Shio’s neutrality, so I have little hope they will honor ours. We represent a strategic position for the Consortium, as we abut Confederate space. Personally, I believe they will attack us, and because an attack is inevitable, then we should fight. I am trying to sway my brothers and sisters on the matter and will redouble my efforts when this conference is concluded.”

“I intend to see what the Consortium says about this aggression,” the Prime Minister of the Skaa Republic declared. “The Parliament is close to declaring war and would most certainly declare war if the Nine Colonies

were attacked. It would put the Consortium on our border, a hostile force that would have attacked two nations that declared neutrality in the matter.”

“We will not wait that long,” the Emperor of the Skaa added. “If the Shio are attacked, then the Empire will declare war on the Consortium. If the neutrality of *one* nation is not honored, then the neutrality of *no* nation will be honored. Unlike our smaller neighbors, *we* carry enough military force to do battle with the Consortium, and we will not hide behind our borders and wait for them to conquer our smaller neighbors before they come for us. We will take the fight to them.”

“And all that is going to come about *because* of what you’re doing!” Graith complained. “If you just maintain your neutrality, you’ll be passed over! Look at the situation rationally!”

“There’s an old saying on my world, Graith, dating back to when one nation state on the planet named Germany tried to conquer the world. Forgive me for not remembering it exactly, but it goes a little something like this,” Jason said in a blunt voice. “*When they came for the seditionists and the traitors, I said good, let them be taken. When they came for the journalists and the reporters, I said good, they were stirring up trouble. When they came for the Jews and the homosexuals, I was troubled, but I said nothing. When they came for those I knew to be innocent, I was too afraid to say anything. And when they came for me, there was nobody left to speak.* It means that those who do nothing, those who allow tyrants to rule and don’t oppose them, are only empowering the tyrants and delaying the inevitable. They *will* come for you, Graith. Make no mistake about it. They’ve shown themselves to be the liars you knew they were. And when they come for you, Graith, will there be anyone to say anything, or will you simply be the only ones left?”

Graith said nothing, but he looked troubled.

“So, it just comes down to what happens in the next two hours,” Dahnai said grimly.

Jason wasn’t the only one that watched the feeds from Kimdori spy probes. He saw it all, and it was everything he feared. The Consortium ships, primarily battleships, dropped out of hyperspace and launched missiles almost before they had time to raise shields. Those missiles were



similar to the ones that attacked the palace, equipped with gravometric engines and accelerating with relativistic speed in the vacuum of space. The missiles had to be pre-programmed with targets, for they ignored the civilian transports fleeing Reglen III and struck the orbital platforms Jason and Dahnai had sold them, the few Shio warships in orbit that were staying to buy time for the fleeing transports, and their orbital station. The station and Shio warships were destroyed, but the majority of the platforms had managed to survive the attack, shooting down the missiles. The platforms surrounding Reglen came around the planet and concentrated in the path of the advancing horde of ships as it advanced into the planet's gravity well, moving at high speed to close distance on the platforms. And when they came in range, the platforms opened up on them.

But the outcome was inevitable. The 218 surviving platforms destroyed four ships and damaged 31 others, but they were wiped out in under two minutes in an absolute blitz of Torsion beams that were fired back at them. The Consortium ships then fanned out and started capturing the fleeing ships, tractoring them back towards the planet, some of them exploding as the pilots overloaded the engines trying to escape. It was a horrible scene, seeing those black, spiky ships spreading out and capturing transports and freighters, literally anything with jump engines the Shio could get in the air in the two hours they had to evacuate, then they surrounded the temperate, green planet and secured their prize.

In just under 17 minutes, Reglen III fell to the Consortium. There were 317 Shio transports and freighters jumping towards Terra from Reglen, which would arrive in about three days, and after that, the other three systems in the Shio nation had an exodus of ships away from their planets, moons, and populated stations, as the Shio tried to evacuate as many civilians as possible in the face of inevitable Consortium attack. The Shio Senate had even ordered their warships to abandon Shio space, using them to carry civilians away from Shio Prime, their homeworld, all but surrendering their tiny nation to the Consortium in exchange for getting just a few thousand more people safely away.

And as he promised, the Emperor of the Skaa declared war on the Consortium in a prepared statement broadcast through the sector.

This was it. This was the moment he knew was coming but had dreaded.

This was now a *real* war, a war that would involve fleets and battles, and the deaths of untold thousands. Because now the Consortium had invaded their sector and made its first conquest, which spurred at least the Skaa and the Colonists to admit that Dahnai had been right, and they could not sit and be neutral in the face of naked aggression.

But the question nagged at him a little as he listened to Dahnai and the two Skaa rulers negotiate them sending military advisors to Terra...why? *Why?* Why attack the Shio? Why invade, if their goal was to take Karis or die trying, no matter what it took? They'd only managed to whip up the nations of their sector in response to the attack on the Shio and they'd lose more ships, more resources, in the ensuing war to reclaim Shio systems from the Consortium. It just didn't make any sense! They should have pulled back, trained their troops, and sent absolutely everything at Karis in one massive attack. But instead they had divided their forces, were going to lose resources, and getting nations they *did not want to stir up* getting into the war. The Confederacy was a major threat, but when one stacked *both* Skaa empires on top of that, it was just insane.

What did taking the Shio provide to the Consortium? He pondered that. It gave them a foothold in the sector, for one, a safe haven very close to Karis to which they could withdraw damaged ships for repair and resupply. It gave them the natural resources present in the four Shio systems. It gave them a much closer base from which to try to analyze the interdiction effect to try to breach it without having to wait for that faster than light information to return from Andromeda. It gave them an intimidating presence very close to Karis, to worry at the Confederacy. It gave them access to the Shio themselves, to use as conscripted soldiers, making them fight their own people as the dispossessed Shio refugees reorganized to fight back, much like the French back in World War II.

And, he realized, it gave the nations of their sector something very close to concentrate on, to draw attention away from what was going on back over on the other side of the galaxy.

Well, that would work against the Skaa, but not against them. But it still forced them to deal with the Consortium right in front of them, and in that respect, it was a success for them.

Still, the invasion of the Shio had to give them some kind of advantage, else they'd never have done it. In time, he knew, he'd either figure it out or it would become apparent.

But, the one thing it did do was give the Confederacy three new allies, and one of them was *powerful*. The Skaa Empire had truly insane numbers of soldiers and thousands of warships, and now they would throw those numbers at the Consortium.

Two hours later, he got the answer to that question. The Consortium sent out a broadcast through all gravband and other energy frequencies used by every nation in the sector. In it, one of their energy beings addressed the sector. *"The Shio Federation of Planets have been legally annexed into the Consortium of Aligned Worlds,"* the being declared. *"The reasoning for this is that we have determined that we require a forward base for our operations, and the Shio systems meet our requirements. The Consortium has no interest in any other nation or system in this sector aside from our rightful jihad against the evil of the Karinnes and those they have tricked into protecting them from our righteous crusade. All Shio are required to submit to the rightful authority of the Consortium, as they are now legal Consortium citizens. But despite the hasty actions of the Skaa Empire, the Consortium has no interest in any other empire or system in this sector of space. Should the Revered Emperor rescind his declaration, then the Consortium will not consider itself at war with the Skaa Empire. Should he not, however, the Consortium will consider the Skaa a threat too grave to leave unresolved and would be forced to declare war against the Skaa out of the interests of protecting Shio citizens and territory from unlawful invasion."*

The Emperor wasn't buying it, Jason found out. He ordered a full mobilization of all Imperial forces...and those were a *lot* of forces.

Jason was glad that at least *one* ruler in the neighborhood saw the truth. What the Consortium was doing was a page right out of old Germany's playbook, annexing one nation at a time while using fear to hold the others in check, until they had enough territory and resources to simply declare war on everyone else. The Emperor wasn't going to let the Nine Colonies be next, as they would most certainly have been. The Emperor finally saw the light, and he intended to fight. And while the Republic and the Colonies

hadn't made any declarations either way, Jason knew they were spooked, they were very, very spooked. The Consortium might have made a big mistake by invading the Shio, they may not have, but one thing was for sure. They'd just got the one empire in the sector outside of the Confederation they *did not* want against them to declare war on them. Even without Torsion weaponry, the Skaa had their uncountable hordes to throw at an enemy, and that would beat down the Consortium through sheer attrition if nothing else.

Now things were going to get interesting.

# Chapter 5

*Chiira, 1 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 18 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 1 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Emergency Response Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (Jemia  
Province), Terra*

Aya was just going have to live with being perpetually angry with him.

In a fallow farm field just outside the city, which once held a suburb of Oklahoma City before the subjugation and was plowed over for farmland, hundreds of Shio transports had landed, and thousands upon thousands of frightened Shio were being processed through a hastily raised tent city. And Jason was right there, in person, with his wife and son, greeting scared Shio personally, taking hands, giving kind words, trying to reassure the refugees that they were going to be alright.

There were 597 Shio transports already on Terra, and there were another 2,193 Shio ships in transit, holding exactly 117,894 Shio refugees. They were the only ones who had managed to reach ships and escape when the evacuation call was issued, and on one of them was High Prince Grayhawk, who was transiting the TES at that very moment and would arrive on Terra in about an hour. The rest of the Shio government had stayed behind, quite bravely in Jason's mind, to deal with the Consortium, but they sent Grayhawk, the face of the Shio, so he could continue to represent the Shio from outside of their Federation. Grayhawk was very popular among his people, the handsome High Prince, and his presence on Terra would bolster the refugees and give hope to the 7 billion Shio who were now under the dictatorship of a conquering power.

Jason felt that as the house in control of Terra, it was only right that he was there to meet the Shio, over the strenuous and vociferous objections of Aya and his entire guard. She didn't want Jason and Rann in an uncontrolled environment, especially *now* of all times, but Jason had been quite adamant about it. He forced Aya to capitulate, under the stipulation that once she got him home, there was going to be another of those lessons that would make it hard for Jason to sit for a few days afterward. Aya had made all kinds of security precautions for the trip, including intense scans of the Shio ships and of each and every Shio that debarked to ensure none of them had any weapons. Jason was in his armor, but he went without his helmet, which gave a potential assassin a convenient place to aim.

But, after they got there and Aya saw how Jason managed to calm fears, she grudgingly admitted that he'd been right. The Shio were very scared, and to hear words of comfort from someone they could see was in charge calmed them, gave them a little hope. He boldly walked among the refugees, patting shoulders, assuring them that they were going to be alright, that they were welcome on Terra, and that they already had plans to settle the Shio refugees in prepared housing.

And they had plenty of plans. The Shio would be settled into five enclaves scattered across Florida: Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Tampa, Orlando, and Miami. Shio as a race preferred slightly warmer temperatures compared to humans and Faey, so they were going to be settled in warm areas. There was plenty of empty housing throughout Florida, and while they couldn't keep the Shio all together even in their enclaves, they made certain that no Shio would be less than half a block away from another Shio family. The house had appropriated quite a few of the old condo buildings scattered though Miami that had been sitting mostly empty since the end of the subjugation, where the majority of the Shio would be going, so they could all live close together and in a place where they'd feel like they had both isolation and a modicum of control. They already had stipends ready for the Shio and thousands of volunteers to help them navigate suddenly being thrust into an alien culture. The Shio language had been telepathically inserted into the volunteers, and Faey residents of Terra with sufficient telepathic power and training had offered to insert English and Faey for Shio that were willing to undergo the procedure.

It was taking some of the Shio more than three days to reach Terra, but it had taken less than a day for the Consortium to conquer them. That took them only about nine hours total. They hit Reglen first, and after two hours, they jumped 90% of their fleet to Bregali, leaving behind only a token force to defend their new holding. They hit Bregali with the same overwhelming force, then immediately jumped half their fleet back to Reglen to prevent the KMS or the Kimdori from jumping in and attacking the defenders.

That was both wise and foolish, for the Karinnes most definitely responded. Not with warships, but with weapons out of their toybox. Reglen was close enough to jump long-range hyperspace missiles into the system, and they launched several waves at the Consortium as other toys jumped in via disposable freighters. The missiles were just the first salvo of wave after wave of automated weaponry, continuing the Karinne tactic of wearing the enemy down with disposable weaponry as much as possible before warships were sent in. The ships defending Reglen were attacked by hyperspace cruise missiles, then freighters jumped in and dumped containers and jumped out, from which Buzzsaws, weapon platforms, automated drones, mobile mines, short-range gravometric missiles equipped with gravity shockwave warheads, and other nasty little surprises erupted and made war on Consortium ships. Consortium ships found their weapon batteries firing almost constantly against the massive counterattack, shooting at missiles, shooting at mines, shooting at Buzzsaws, firing on drone weapon platforms that fired back, but not shooting at what looked to them to be debris from destroyed weapons, which were themselves just decoys. Conduit smashers, Torsion shockwave generators, a new device Jenny called a gravity beam, and hollow debris holding Satan's Marbles drifted into the enemy formations, and it was too late before the Consortium commanders realized what danger they posed. The conduit smashers took out 14 ships by themselves, rendering them dead in space, and Satan's Marbles wreaked havoc in 23 other vessels. The Consortium knew about the marbles and knew how to stop them, but it still took them time to respond, and that delay proved destructive for their ships. The gravity beam weapon was more or less what the name implied, a device that induced heavy gravity in a cone in front of the device, a weapon more or less designed to use against the insectoids. It was a shield-piercing weapon, so the Consortium had no real defense against it except to destroy it before it killed too many of their crews.

The Consortium found themselves fighting a constant battle against machines to maintain control of Reglen, but that didn't stop them from finishing their conquering of the Shio. The fleet that attacked Bregali moved on to attack Ravarra, and almost before the smoke cleared from that attack, they jumped on to Shio Prime and captured that system. The Karinnes had been waiting for that, and once they had control of all four systems, they expanded their assault to include all four captured systems. Every Consortium ship in Shio space was kept on constant alert, its weapons almost constantly firing on freighters or missiles that dropped out of hyperspace, a steady stream of attacking devices designed to wear them down in preparation for a conventional attack by a fleet of warships.

That attack was in the works. The Confederation was not going to just let the Consortium settle in. They were going to counterattack as soon as they had a viable plan and their automated weapons did enough damage. With their huge fleet split, it was the perfect opportunity to hit the Consortium and take out more of their ships. Every ship they disabled or destroyed was one less ship that would ultimately attack Karis, and they knew it.

Over the three days, 3D had managed to completely exhaust its stockpile of toys, because they quite literally threw everything and the kitchen sink at the Consortium fleet occupying Shio territory. But it had done the job, for they had managed to destroy or damage ships at every system, and it kept the Consortium from relaxing even for a second.

Grayhawk wasn't the only one coming. Emperor Assaba of the Skaa Empire was currently in transit to Draconis himself and was due to arrive at the gate to Draconis in about 34 minutes, being at the tail end of his trip to the TES. He was on board the *Aegis*, the Karinne vessel and an escorting task fleet having jumped out to pick him up and bring him back so he could jump hyperspace in real time. It said much about Assaba's bravery that he accepted a ride on a Karinne ship, not demanding to ride in his personal ship. Assaba was on his way to sign the Confederation Treaty, to enter into the Confederacy against the Consortium, a move that Zaa had personally approved after she got a Kimdori close enough to him to touch him and ascertain his true motives. His motives concerning the Consortium were true, and he would be an honest ally against them. Once the Skaa Empire was in the Confederation, they'd get to work interdicting critical Skaa



systems. They didn't have enough Stargates to cover all 63 Imperial systems, they only had five pairs of Stargates available. Those five gates were going to be placed at the five most critical systems in Skaa space, their capitol system and their four most important industrial systems, giving them protection and the ability to rapidly deploy a large part of their fleet to Terra so they could get into the war.

Behind him, in hyperspace and in transit, where 2,000 Skaa warships, a huge chunk of their fleet, on their way to Terra as a staging stop. Even as they were en route, both Skaa and Confederate engineers were feverishly working on a conversion module to attach to Torsion weapons so they could be mounted onto Skaa ships with no other modifications. Skaa used plasma for power like many nations in the sector, but their plasma was the most basic of phased plasma, just barely phased to be usable as a power system. It was crude by Karinne standards, and it introduced a few challenges to adapt Torsion guns to use it.

Until they got that ironed out, Torsion weapon platforms, drones, would be issued to Skaa ships.

Engines, well, that was another matter. Skaa systems simply couldn't support Karinne jump engines, not without gutting their entire power system and redoing it. Hell, for that matter, Faey ships couldn't support a Karinne jump engine, they simply demanded too much power for standard jump engine power plants to support. The Faey used a form of high-energy interphased plasma to power their jump engines, they hadn't quite managed to adapt metaphased plasma to jump engine technology, and that wasn't enough. It took the form of striated interphased the Consortium used at a minimum to power jump engines capable of jumping hyperspace in real time. There might be a way to quickly adapt Faey ships to the Consortium's power system, since it was somewhat familiar, but there was little hope of doing the same for the Urumi or the Skaa.

This introduced a problem that they needed to address. Much as he didn't entirely like the idea of handing over real-time hyperspace travel to the sector, if they wanted to defeat the Consortium, they had to eliminate that advantage they enjoyed. Their ability to jump hyperspace in real time allowed them to strike virtually anywhere in the sector and do it without giving the target nation time to get defensive fleets in position to repel

them. The Faey could overcome this with Stargates, but that wasn't a technology that Dahnai was going to give to *anyone*, and Jason was more or less bound by her will on the matter. Though Karinne could build their own Stargates, if he did so and started handing them out, Dahnai might have him executed for treason against the Imperium. He *was* still bound by Imperial law, and Dahnai *was* his Empress.

Myleena and Cybi were discussing that problem. Myleena had actually tinkered with the idea of a hyperspace catapult, having thought about it after they did the math on the interdictors, and from what she showed Jason, the theory had some merit and the math hinted that it was possible. If a ship could be artificially boosted to sufficient speed to cross the relativity barrier and jump in real time, its own engines could *keep* it there. After all, it didn't take huge amounts of energy to hold a ship in hyperspace, and a ship moved at the velocity with which it *entered* hyperspace. That was where standard engines failed, they couldn't *enter* hyperspace with sufficient "hyperspace velocity" to jump in real time, they lacked the power to pull it off. If they got catapulted into hyperspace by an outside force and then used their own jump engines to *hold themselves* there, they'd just coast to their destination and do so in real time. They seriously doubted that they could come up with something that complicated on short notice, but still, it was worth pursuing. Giving other nations catapults was no threat to Confederate systems, since they were all interdicted anyway. And if they could run up some kind of prototype in a hurry, well, that just helped the war effort.

Until then, it would just take coordination to attack the Consortium, and an understanding that they could move just about their entire fleet to defend any one system in the time it would take an attack fleet to jump from Terra to any Shio system, even their fleets across the galaxy; Terra was the closest Confederate system to Shio space, just by a whisker. The other close system was Hedra. A jump from Terra to Ravarra, the two closest points between Confederate and Shio space, took 2.83 days by Imperial standard time. A jump from Hedra to Ravarra took 3.01 days.

And the Karinnes and Kimdori could jump from Terra to Ravarra in 43 seconds, as could the Consortium.

This was their first real plan to counterattack. They were going to have Confederate and Skaa forces jump *en masse* at Ravarra and force the

Consortium to deploy its fleet to defend. At the last minute, Kimdori and KMS ships were going to jump and hit Bregali with 1,200 ships, most of them Kimdori, not to free the system, but to destroy the defending Consortium ships. They would then jump out and hit Shio Prime in a similar manner, playing a game of tag with the Consortium. Whichever system they left the least defended, the strike force would attack that system. And when the Consortium jumped forces to reinforce them, they'd just take as many shots as they could at the defenders and then retreat, which would be a hell of a lot of shots from 1,200 ships. It was guerilla warfare designed to aggravate the fuck out of the Consortium commanders and damage their ships, make them consume resources.

Always it was about attrition, attrition, attrition. Every ship they damaged or destroyed was one ship less that would attack Karis when the time came.

It had merit. The Consortium only had 6,000 ships on their side of the galaxy, and they'd see the others coming if they jumped reinforcements. They had four systems to defend, so they either concentrated their defenses to fend off the Confederacy and the Skaa, or they spread them out and gave the Kimdori and KMS a chance to take a huge bite out of their fleet. Both sides knew that in a scenario of equal sized fleets, the KMS has the advantage due to superior range on their particle beams and their fighters, which the Consortium just didn't seem to know how to counter. Fighter combat was new and unusual to the Consortium, and when they tangled with the Wolves, they were going to be picking their asses up off the floor.

The way it was going to work relied on the Kimdori. The Kimdori were already at work on a jamming network that would completely blind all Consortium sensors pointing towards Confederate space, which would blind them to any ship movements. Those jammers backing up the more mystical protections the Parri had instituted at the systems where they intended to muster their fleets would leave the Consortium in the dark as to exactly what was going on. They'd know that the Confederacy was preparing to attack, but they wouldn't be able to see how many ships were attacking, when they left, where they were going, or when they would get there. As soon as those jammers went up, they were going to know that the Confederacy was going to attack, using the jammers to hide the size of the fleet that jumped towards Shio space, so it would leave the Consortium in a

reactionary position. All they could do was wait for the fleet to appear, then jump ships from other systems to get them there in time to fight off the attack. And when they did that, the real-time hyperspace capable ships were going to jump at any system they left weakly defended, then turn and jump out when they got reinforcements there to help the defenders...only to jump to another system and do the same thing.

Aya didn't understand why he needed to be there. She didn't understand why he needed to greet the Shio, comfort them.

This was all his fault.

There was no escaping that one crushing fact. The Consortium was here making war on their sector because of the Karinnes, and the blood about to be shed, the blood already shed, was on his hands. He was the Grand Duke. It was his ultimate responsibility. He hadn't known any of this was going to happen when he stood before Dahnai what seemed a lifetime ago and declared himself the Grand Duke Karinne, but that was no excuse. Zaa wasn't the only one that didn't accept *I didn't know* as an excuse. Damn it all, it was his *business* to know. That was part and parcel of what being a house leader was all about, staying a step ahead, keeping the house safe and prosperous. It may not have been his literal fault, but *he was the Grand Duke*. The buck stopped on his desk. It was his responsibility. Everything that was about to happen went right back to his desk, and soon, he'd be elbow deep in the blood of those who perished in this war.

But God help him, he wouldn't do anything different. The choice of leaving the ring on Karis and rolling his dice against the Trillanes was *no* choice. It wouldn't have been fair to his people, it would have been unfair to Cybi, and it would have been a crime to turn his back on the House of Karinne. It had the *right* to exist, and it was his responsibility to restore the house.

For better or worse, no matter what was going to happen and how many were going to die, he would not look back. He *was* the Grand Duke Karinne, and he would live up to his duties and responsibilities.

The job chose him.

It didn't change how he felt, however. These refugees had been driven from their homes because of *his house*, and he was going to do everything

in his power to take care of them, make it up to them. Even if it meant he walked among them as they waited for ID bracelets and housing assignments, shaking hands and soothing fears with calm words, sat on bunks in the temporary tent complexes where Shio could rest while waiting for transports to take them to Florida.

“It’s alright, honored mother, you can sit and rest in here,” Jason said in fluent Shio, helping an elderly Shio woman with weathered green skin and grayish blue hair into the tent so she could sit and rest. “Did you get your boarding assignment?”

“Yes I did, youngster,” she answered. “Where is this *my-ah-mee*?”

“*Miami*,” he corrected with a smile. “It’s a large city on the southeastern edge of this continent. It gets very warm there, at least as far as Terrans reckon such things. I believe you’ll find it quite comfortable.”

“These old bones don’t like the cold,” she agreed as Jason helped her into a canvas folding chair. Jason accessed the departure schedules and saw that the next transport to Miami was leaving in about fifteen minutes. It hadn’t arrived yet, since the dropships and personnel transports were literally landing, loading, and leaving, in a continuous cycle. They couldn’t let the Shio get too backed up here in Oklahoma.

*I need a hoverchair and an escort over here*, Jason sent openly, getting the attention of a relief worker. The Faey man nodded and hurried off. “I’m going to arrange a hoverchair for you, honored mother, so you don’t have to walk around. And an escort is going to make sure you find your transport when it arrives, so don’t you worry about anything. We’ll take good care of you.”

“You’re a good son for some proud mother out there, youngster,” she answered, patting his armored gauntlet fondly.

“It’s all a son can hope to be,” he answered, leaning down and kissing the old woman on the cheek lightly, which made her cackle in delight. An orderly hurried over with a hoverchair, and he helped her get settled in it as she asked him about Miami.

Not all the Shio were as calm as the old woman. Most of them were terrified, and they had quite a few people on hand to soothe them. Some of them huddled in the arms of a loved one, some of them were very

combative out of fear of the unknown, some just stood or sat with blank stares, silently allowing themselves to be herded about. It pained him to see the Shio like that, since they were a very amicable species, and such trauma was almost unknown to them. They'd lived in peace with their neighbors for centuries. War was a terrifying prospect to them and running for a transport when the evacuation call was given had to be very traumatic for them. Jason dealt with a fair share of each kind, from angry men shouting and demanding answers to frightened women shivering as they clutched their crying children to blank-eyed women who just sat there, staring at nothing. Jason knew that virtually everyone here had left someone behind. Siblings, parents, children, aunts, uncles, friends. There were a very spare few whole families here, and those that were were almost always just parents and one or two children. There hadn't been time to gather their extended families and flee as a group, and half of what they were doing was trying to find families that may have evacuated separately and reunite them, assigning them to the same housing quarters.

It was an efficient system. New arrivals were photographed and their names were taken, they were issued a bracelet ID they only needed until they got to their permanent housing, and they were asked the names of family members so they could be identified if they came on a later ship. They then moved to a tent or the open areas between them where they could sit or lay down and rest or talk among themselves, watch viddy being shown on holographic screens all over, so they never had to go far to see a screen and know what was going on, then, when transports arrived to take them to Florida, they would be called by name and helped on board. Once they arrived in Florida, volunteers would take them to the apartments, houses, or condominiums they'd be using while they were here, and then taught the basics of living in Terra as far as getting food and getting around. They were then issued cell phones to keep in contact and credit sticks that would allow them to buy food and clothing, would let them utilize any of the various entertainment facilities such as movie theatres or amusement parks, and then they were discreetly left to their own devices but fully knowing that a counselor was just a call away to answer any question or help them deal with the situation.

Jason was damn proud of Kim. He'd set this up in less than an hour, using one of the U.N. Rapid Response Units that responded to natural

disasters, and he called in damn near every emergency worker and grief counselor on Terra and put them in Oklahoma and Florida to help the Shio.

Rann ambled up just in front of Jyslin, and Jason introduced them to the elder woman. "This is my son Rann, and my wife Jyslin," he told her in Shio.

"Rann, eh? A sturdy name for a strapping boy," she declared, smiling down at him.

Rann put a finger on his gestalt, no doubt getting the translation, then he smiled shyly.

"Your Grace! Your Grace!" a staffer for Kim called, waving in their direction. The slender Asian man scurried up to them, then bowed sinuously. "The Secretary General is looking for you, your Grace," he declared.

"Alright. I'll be out by my dropship in a few minutes."

The man bowed again and rushed away, leaving the woman a little curious. "You must rank high around here, youngster," she noted.

"Just a little," he chuckled in reply.

"Him? Nah, he's nothing but my slave," Jyslin said, giving him a wolfish smile and elbowing him on the side of his armor. She spoke fluent Shio.

"Watch who you're calling a slave, woman, or you'll find yourself waking up with a dog collar around your neck," he retorted.

"Married a Faey, eh? And here I thought you had sense, youngster," the old woman noted, smiling in an evil manner that made it clear she was digging at Jyslin.

"I didn't give him any choice," Jyslin laughed, grabbing Jason's arm and hugging it to her armored side. "We Faey *know* when we've met our husbands. It just took me a little while to beat him into submission."

"Oh, listen to this," Jason retorted sharply, which made the old woman laugh. The assistant he'd flagged down earlier arrived with a hoverchair, and Jason helped the orderly transfer the elderly Shio to its padded contours. "There we are, honored mother," he told her, patting her on her

thin forearm. “This Faey gentleman will stay with you and help you board your transport, and then they’ll help you settle in down in *Miami*.”

“Well, many thanks, youngster,” she answered.

Jason walked gauntlet in gauntlet with Jyslin as Rann scurried just in front of them, as Aya and fourteen other guards quietly shadowed their every move, forearm guns deployed on their Crusader armor and ready to kill anyone who gave them a sideways glance. He had no doubt that all fifteen of them were constantly sweeping the crowd with talent, searching for even the most stray and innocuous though that might be construed as a threat. They reached the dropship without incident, however, where the portly Kim was waiting for them with a contingent of his own guards, Imperial Marines. The Marines still served as the global police force on Terra, serving directly under Secretary Kim and the U.N. Each country had its own police, but over them were the Marines, who were like the FBI compared to the Maine State Police. When crimes crossed national boundaries, the Marines had jurisdiction, and it rarely took them longer than two days to investigate the crime, then track down and capture their suspect. The Marines also made sure that the countries toed the line the U.N. drew in the sand. Each country was permitted to have its own military, like a national guard, but the Marines were a constant reminder that even *thinking* of looking over the established border and coveting a square inch of land on the other side was the mother of all bad ideas.

“How is it looking, Kim?” Jason asked.

“Right on schedule, your Grace,” he answered as another Shio transport was descending to land. “We should have all the Shio settled in Florida within twelve hours.”

“Any problems over there?”

“A few, but nothing major,” he answered. People getting lost more than anything else.”

“You’ve done a great job,” Jason told him, patting him on the shoulder.

“Yes, I don’t know what this planet would do without you, Kim,” Jyslin agreed, giving him a warm smile.

“We can do nothing but serve, my Lady,” he smiled back.



Jason, Aya called, a finger to her interface. *We need you back on the Victory now.* Right now, she sent adamantly.

*What? What's going on?*

*I don't know. Myri just sent down the order for you to return to Karis fucking now, even if I have to drag you to the dropship. So start before I drag,* she warned.

*[Myri, what's going on?]* he communed, using the *Victory* as a relay.

*[The Consortium just jumped out of the Shio system,]* she answered. *[They didn't even leave a defensive caretaker fleet. They just left.]*

*[Where are they going?]*

*[Sec, astrocart is working on it. Got it. Grevalt.]*

*Fucking Graith!* That was the closest Alliance system to the Shio systems. They were going to steamroll the Alliance!

*[Fuck! Send a warning, Myri!]*

*[It's too late for that, Jayce. They've already dropped out of hyperspace. The Alliance no doubt knows they're there now.]*

That was true enough. Grevalt was only about sixteen seconds from Shio territory, though it took nearly two days to traverse it in ships with old jump engines.

“God damn it!” Jason snapped angrily. “Kim, get ready for a *fuckload* of refugees!”

“What goes on, your Grace?”

“The Consortium just invaded the Alliance!”

Kim paled, then turned and started barking frenzied orders in Korean at his aides.

Aya gave him a fresh glare as they got onto a heavily armored dropship, with twenty escorting Wolf fighters, the lifted off to rendezvous with the KMS ship *Victory*, one of their battleships. Admiral Leta Karinne greeted them in the landing bay, her and everyone else in Crusader armor, and she walked briskly with him as soon as he got off the dropship, Jyslin and Rann

having to nearly run to keep up. *It came down the pike, Leta sent urgently. I'm to get you to Karis right the fuck now or Juma's gonna rip my*

*diamonds right off my Class A's.*

*Yeah, get us back as fast as you can,* Jason nodded in agreement. *I need to be where I can get up to date information and get under Myri's feet.*

After they got into a passenger cabin, Jason grabbed hold of Aya and looked right into her eyes. *Get over it. I needed to go,* he told her intensely, removing his gauntlet. She was about to respond, but he put his hand on her cheek, and through that contact he lowered his defenses enough for her to feel the powerful emotions boiling in him, his crushing feeling of responsibility, his need to *be there* for the people he was ultimately responsible for displacing.

Her eyes softened slightly as she felt what he was feeling, but then they hardened again. *That is no excuse,* she told him bluntly. *You cannot do this again, Jason. I won't allow it.*

*You won't—*

*I will not allow it,* she seethed. *When you get back to Karsa, you better settle in, because you will not leave the planet again, for any reason. And I mean any reason. Even if Trelle herself came down to Draconis and invited you to tea, you will send her your regrets, because your mommy has grounded you.*

Jason had to bark a laugh. *Can I at least go to Kosigi?*

She actually considered it. *Alright, I'll give you that much. But that's as far as you go. This is now far more of a war than you bargained for, Jason, and that means I have to take complete control of your safety. I simply will not allow you to risk yourself, Lady Jyslin, and Rann like this again. If you even think of trying to overrule me, I'll tie you to a chair in the basement. I swear I will.*

She was *dead serious*. He knew he'd pushed her as far as he could go, and she would take no more. She did technically have complete authority over the safety of him and his family, and he knew that if she ordered the entire KMS not to take him anywhere, they would obey.

He was grounded.

*I understand*, he sent seriously. *We are in your hands now, Aya. Take good care of us.*

She looked a little surprised, obviously expecting an argument from the usually headstrong Grand Duke, then she gave him a sober nod.

By the time he was back at Karis and in the White House, it was even worse. The Consortium seemed to abandon the idea of defending what they took, they simply attacked a system, destroyed any and all defenses, and once a planet or moon was defenseless, they simply jumped out *en masse* and attacked another population center. They'd hit three systems in the time it took Jason to get back home, and he could see their strategy. Since the Alliance couldn't jump their ships to any system in time to protect it, they were simply sweeping through and destroying all defenses, stations, ground batteries, orbital platforms, and much to Jason's concern, they were *capturing* any military ships in the system they could get when they arrived. They couldn't capture them all, but they were managing to capture about half of the military ships that tried to hold them off, destroying the remainder. Since a Consortium ship could jump from one side of the Alliance to the other in 48 seconds, they had no need to park any defense at any system, as their ships could beat any Alliance response to the system days before they arrived.

Grevalt was the first system to be attacked, and Jason watched as transports and civilian craft fled the two inhabited planets in the system. Grevalt was the home system of the Bari-Bari, the nine-foot-tall simian-like race, and he could just imagine the kind of chaos going on there right now. The ships were going in every direction, jumping to other Alliance systems, but Jason saw that when they got there, the Consortium would have already swept through like a wildfire, shattering all defenses and attempting to capture any military ships they encountered.

As he expected, High Staff Graith requested an emergency audience with the Confederate rulers, which would be relatively easy. Emperor Assaba was on Draconis now, in personal conference with Dahnai, so when Jason got to the conference room, he saw the Skaa ruler and Dahnai sitting at the same table...sort of. Assaba wasn't compatible with humanoid chairs, so a stool of sorts had been brought for him. The gems and jewels embedded in his red scales glittered with every movement. "They are

smashing us one system at a time!” Graith said in desperation. “They’re demanding our warships surrender and trying to capture them if they don’t!” He shuddered, then looked at his monitor gravely. “Empress, Emperor, Brood Queen, we beg the favor of the Skaa and the Confederacy. I...I request permission to direct all civilian transports to your space. My people need somewhere to go. They need—” he stopped, then bowed his head and took a long moment.

“Send them to Terra,” Jason said grimly. “I’ve already ordered Secretary Kim to prepare to accept as many as the planet can take in. If we can’t find room for them there, I’m sure we can somewhere else.”

“And I suggest you evacuate your warships to save as many as you can,” Dahnai added.

“But...where will they go?”

“Since I doubt the Confederacy will trust your ships, you may jump them to Skaa space,” Assaba declared. “Jump them to Treakk. That’s a nine-day journey on average, and that should give you time to tell them what to do by the time they get there.”

Graith looked broken. He nodded wearily. “I’ll order all civilian ships to Terra, and all military ships to Treakk. At least, Bierka be praised, they’re not staying to defend the systems. It’s almost as if they are *letting* the civilian ships escape after they leave. They aren’t even trying to destroy them sitting at the docks.”

“They don’t need them there,” Zaa reasoned in a calm voice. “They are letting them go. They want the warships. They want reinforcements to attack the Confederacy and allowing the civilians to flee to consume our attention and resources trying to deal with them. They knew we will not turn away civilians in need.”

“They are ruthless and heartless,” Assaba grunted. “I can see that I was right to declare war.”

“You need to redeploy your fleet so you can cover your most vital systems,” Zaa told him. “You can see what they are doing. If you concentrate your forces, you can more effectively resist should they jump into your space.”

“I will do what I can,” the massive reptile said calmly.

After the conference, he just sat in his office, leaning so far back in his chair that he was staring at the ceiling, dreading what he could see coming. They were doing exactly what he feared they would do, sweep in and conquer the sector. And God help him, he couldn't stop them. They exhausted most of their available Legion weaponry on the Shio attack, which, he saw now, was *why* they did it. They used the Shio as bait. They'd gotten enough intelligence from that all-seeing thing they had to know how much weaponry they had stockpiled, then they used their own ships as bait to trick them into using it up, throwing it all at their forces as they held the Shio systems. And now that they had to restock, which would take a few days, they were sweeping out to shatter all defenses in the sector for two reasons, to leave all the nations vulnerable to being conquered after they took Karis and to ensure that they didn't contribute anything but terrified refugees to the Confederacy. After they finished with the Alliance, they'd jump across the border and hit the Nine Colonies, then hit the Republic, and save trying to tackle the Skaa Empire last. They'd just go around the horseshoe. And once every nation outside the interdictors had their militaries and defenses in ruins, they'd turn their attention on interdicted space.

No. No, that wasn't all they were doing. He sat up so suddenly he almost pitched forward in his chair. They were forcing them to keep the TES where it is! With sudden allies like the remnants of the Shio and Alliance needing somewhere to go, and the TES being the only way into interdicted space, they were trying to make them keep that window into the Confederacy open. That meant that they wouldn't hit the Nine Colonies after they finished with the Alliance.

They'd make a run at the Stargate behind the Terra Entry Station. They would test the defenses, get intelligence to use for when they made their attack on Karis.

No. No, they already knew the defenses, thanks to that clairvoyant being. Zaa had said they had real-time information, ship deployments—

Deployments. They had no idea what kind of *weapons* those ships were packing.

No, that wasn't what they were doing.

But he did know one thing. The TES was simply a target that they could *not* simply overlook. The potential of capturing the Stargate behind the TES was a prize that they could not ignore. They would take a shot at it if only to take a shot at it, for the gains were worth the risks when it came to ship losses.

*Fuck! That was what they were doing!*

*Myri, we need to reroute all incoming traffic to the TES so they're sent clear!*

*We're way ahead of you there, Jayce, she answered calmly. With all the Shio transports, we saw a potential the enemy might try to attack the TES using the civilian ships as shields against attack. I've already routed all incoming ships into an arc that'll take them about twenty hours to get there.*

*I could kiss you, he answered in relief.*

*Well then, you add a little tongue to that kiss, and I'll be right over,* came her cheeky response.

*Stop thinking with the little brain, Myri.*

*I hope I never get that old,* came the scoffing reply.

He was so grim and unsettled when he got home that the girls sent all his children over to the house to surround him, soothing him with their presences, reminding him that life went on. And he was very grateful for them. Watching Rann and Zach play Seven Circles, watching Sora play with Amber, listening to Kyri and Aran squabble over something completely insignificant, it did sort of put everything in perspective, remind him just what he was fighting for. This was what it was all about. Not children, but *life*. And to him, his life *was* his children.

The day did catch up to him, however. Despite his best efforts to stay up for the next report that came in from Myri about Consortium movements, he eventually fell asleep on the couch.

He awoke bleary and a little unfocused, and with a serious crick in his neck from the throw pillow. Amber was curled up on his stomach, but it

was the ghostly light coming from in front of him that had roused him.

Cybi was hovering there, her holographic feet inches above the floor, that same nude yet formless silhouette and Sora Karinne's face stamped on her. Her feet gently alighted on the carpet, then she quite demurely folded down onto her legs to sit in front of him. His gestalt told him it was 0137, the middle of the night. If Cybi was here this time of night, something serious must be going on. The light also attracted Hara, commander of the night watch, who rushed into the living room with a pulse weapon extended from her forearm pod. But when she saw Cybi, she just nodded and went back into the kitchen.

*[Now what?]* he asked wearily, his drained emotions bleeding into his communion.

*[Nothing quite so important now that I know how tired you are,]* she answered, reaching out and touching his face. Her projection was that of a solid hologram, so he felt the pressure, which was hardened air molecules slightly warmer than ambient air temperature due to the effect that drew them into the hologram. *[This has truly tried you.]*

*[I wish I could be the heartless monsters the other rulers are,]* he sighed. *[Though that's not entirely fair. I think Graith's reaction was fairly sincere.]*

*[That is what news I thought you should know,]* she told him. *[Graith is dead.]*

*[Dead? Did they attack?]*

*[Not exactly. When they attacked the capitol of the Alliance an hour ago, Graith went out to negotiate with them. When he arrived on the Consortium ship, he self-destructed his shuttle. It did significant damage to the Consortium vessel in which it had landed. I guess he felt that was the only service he could be to his people after the mistakes he made,]* she pondered soberly.

*[Who's the new High Staff?]*

*[Ba'mra'ei Me'Ber. Not that it really matters, for the Alliance has formally surrendered to the Consortium.]*

*[Surrendered?]*

She nodded. *[Officially. Unofficially, they've sent as many Alliance ships into Skaa space as they could manage, and they have orders to join the Confederate forces for now, but ultimately attempt to retake the Alliance back from the Consortium. They placed their highest admiral in command and told them to reform as an independent military force. They will do so.]*

*[So, things are coming to a head.]*

*[Very much so,] she nodded. [The Skaa Republic has declared war on the Consortium, and we expect a declaration of war from the Nine Colonies any moment. The entire sector is now at war with the Consortium, save the Zyagya, but they have never in their history declared war unless attacked first.]*

He grunted, then yawned and scrubbed his face. *[Could you ask Hara to bring me some coffee please? I guess I'd better go see what's going on.]*

*[No, you will go upstairs and sleep. There is nothing you can do, and nothing that can wait until tomorrow.]*

*[There's work to do—]*

*[And others will do it for you,] she communed, rather sternly. [Your vital signs have been slowly yet noticeably deteriorating, Jason. You are under a great deal of stress, and it is starting to affect your body. You need to rest. So go upstairs, kiss Jyslin on the cheek, and go to sleep. You need it.]*

*[Alright, you mother hen,] he answered after a sigh, and the rather resolute expression on her holographic face. He gasped when she gestured, and he was picked up off the couch. She was utilizing the biogenic relays in and around the house to force her will on him, was effectively using telekinetic ability...though it wasn't entirely what she was doing. Not many knew that Cybi had this kind of capability, even among the Generations. It was one of the few secrets she and Jason shared.*

To Jason, it was just one of the many indicators that told him that Cybi was a sentient being. She, just like a Generation, could tap the biogenic systems to boost her own power. And just as she could commune, she could also employ an ability much akin to telekinesis.

*[This is cheating, Cybi!]* he protested.



*[Then I am doing nothing less than you would do yourself,]* she answered cheekily as she quite literally carried him upstairs.

It was a day that would go down in history.

In a hastily called and somewhat grim conference, every nation in the sector save the Alliance, the Moridon, and the Zyagya entered into the Confederation, unified under a single banner, against the Consortium. The Skaa Empire and the Republic and the Nine Colonies joined the remnants of the Shio that had managed to escape in signing the treaty, the same treaty that Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had signed, a treaty that stood in a glass case in Dahnai's throne room in the palace. The Consortium had managed to do what Jason could not, bring them all together in a common interest, and that interest was the preservation of their sovereign states, or taking their territory back from the Consortium, as the case may be.

Jason wasn't present at the ceremony, but he watched it live, as did most of the Imperium on *Courtwatch*. The Emperor Assaba and Empress Grizza of the Empire and the Republic arrived, one a real ruler and the other a figurehead, but whose signature was required for something like this. The Republic's Prime Minister was usually the one that handled important affairs, was the true power in the Republic, but Grizza did put her hand in from time to time. The Prime Minister Vizzie was present, of course, but Grizza had already made it clear she would be sitting in during the meetings along with the Prime Minister. Grizza and Vizzie were known to have a somewhat contentious relationship, so Jason figured those meetings might be lively. The Grand Master of the Nine Colonies *himself* arrived, the wizened old Colonist for whom Magran spoke in his position as foreign minister, a figure akin to the Pope on Terra. The Grand Master rarely involved himself in such things, for he was actually too old, too old to be able to endure the rigors of politics, and allowed the Council and Magran, the Speaker, to make the decisions and actually run the Colonies. Though he was still alive and still made the occasional speech or appearance, the Grand Master was actually more or less retired and simply waiting to die. Magran would be the next Grand Master once the kind old Colonist passed away, as it was long standing tradition that the Speaker would replace the Grand Master, and a new Speaker would be chosen, the successor selected

by the Council. Usually one of the Councilors became Speaker, but it had been known for someone outside the Council to be awarded the position in the past.

And with them, looking pale and shaken, was High Prince Grayhawk of the Shio. The others went out of their way to pat him on the arm and speak kind words to him, the Grand Master actually embracing the young prince on live viddy, and they all saw Grayhawk start to weep and put his head on the nearly skeletally thin old Colonist, taking comfort from his compassion. The Grand Master was a documented empath, so Jason had no doubt that he knew *exactly* what Grayhawk was feeling.

Jason didn't pay the ceremonies much mind. He wasn't in their echelon, he was just a house ruler, even if he was rather important in the overall war effort. Actually, that was the way he liked it. Let Dahnai make the speeches, he was happy sitting in the back.

His own work was chaotic at the moment. They were building as fast as possible, and the influx of Kizzik were helping with that. The Kizzik colony over on Virga was now fully populated, they were settled in, and they had entered the work force...and *fuck* was there a noticeable difference on daily production numbers even after the first day. After the drones were given their instructions and learned the job, they were as efficient as fucking *robots*. A gang of Kizzik drones being led by a noble or a non-Kizzik supervisor could outwork anything but a machine. The Kizzik drones had a little problem at first adapting to the translator modules, but once they got the idea of it and that the two-leg softlings could give them orders, in fact had been told by their nobles to obey the softlings as if the noble was giving the command, they quickly settled into the routines of production and increased speed and efficiency.

And a lot of them were working in factories to restock Legion weaponry. They'd virtually emptied out the armory going after the Consortium holding Shio systems, so there was a lull as the factories banged out more automated weapons even as large-scale production shifted to weapon platforms and Wolf fighters, anything they could build fast and could make a difference out there.

They also started working on Karis. Cybi and Zaa had fully intended to expand the interdiction field around Karis, and they were starting to do just

that. They had 116 interdictors already built and just waiting for deployment, so they used them around Karis. It would take 147 to fully extend the interdicted zone to three light years, so they simply deployed the ones they had and would place the others when they were ready, extending the no-jump zone around the Consortium's primary target. They had a three light year interdiction now and would have the last hole filled on the three light year interdiction by next Thursday. It would take a truly insane number of interdictors to extend the field to four light years, as it would take them 37 years to build enough to do it, so extending out to three was the practical limit.

They did always keep interdictors ready, though. For every pair of available Stargates, there was an interdictor waiting to pair with them.

Cybi was still working on jamming communication from Andromeda. Myleena, well, she worked on so much stuff, bouncing around, it was hard to keep track of what she was doing. Tom and Jenny were currently working on a new weapon to use against the Consortium, based on the budding nanotechnology. They were going to build nano-marauders that would invade an enemy ship and destroy power systems, attack and literally *eat* the silicon conduits, as well as a different set of nano-machines that would invade their crystal lattice computer cores and attempt to reprogram them to make the computers self-destruct the ships in which they were installed, and the irony of it was they were designing them to use the *Consortium's* own broadcast power network as their power source. Hell, that was pretty clever, and since they had all the specs and tech and even the protocols, they could build their own machines that used their enemy's power against them. Jyslin was working on something for Myleena, and Gerann was almost done with his broadcast network, having some viable theories on how to prevent their own system from being jammed, or to prevent someone else from doing to them what they were about to do to the Consortium.

Jason was at 3D, in his office littered with prototypes and other junk, looking over many of the projects and ideas that were not allowed to leave the building, as Dera and Ryn lounged on gel chairs made to use while wearing armor, playing a game. He was reading through a few reports from Bo about some weapon ideas, then paged through the projected downtime of the *Aegis* to install the GRAF cannon on it. The cannon was built and

ready, and now they were just wary of pulling their flagship out of active duty for the 12 days projected to install the weapon. The ship would be unavailable while the installation took place, since they had to take quite a bit of its power system offline to install and hook in the GRAF. The *Aegis* would eventually also host the tactical CBIM they had planned, but that wouldn't be for a while. Right now, the Shimmer Dome's extra factories were building the equipment needed to build the new CBIM at Karsa as well as build a new home for Cybi, not far from the strip. The first new CBIM in over a thousand years was already under way. They had most of the primary core's shell built, and as soon as it was done, the six-month process of painstakingly growing the crystal core that would become the heart of the CBIM would begin. They could move Cybi before that was done, the support infrastructure didn't take as long to build, but Cybi absolutely would not allow herself to be moved until another CBIM was online, just in case.

Jason couldn't dispute her caution. Cybi, in her own way, was more than just the heart of the house, interconnected into the planetary systems to such a degree that she could control anything if necessary. She was also their history, their link to the past, their very soul, and to lose her and everything she represented without another CBIM to take her place, well, that was absolutely unthinkable. There *had to be* a CBIM on Karis, both because of the way the planet worked and because a body could not live without its soul. Cybi was the soul of the house, and without her, or another like her, the house would wither and die. Jason was sure of it.

He was lost in a theory of dynamic Teryon field mechanics, an idea from one of Myleena's Black Ops steals, Faeri Heralde, who was now one of the Legion. Her idea was a dynamic hot field of unstable Teryon particles that would intersect Consortium interphased power and disrupt it, which would knock their jump engines offline. It was a localized concept like an interdicator, trying to find some way to prevent Consortium ships from escaping into hyperspace if they had a situation where they had a tactical advantage. It was absolutely imperative that they be capable of destroying any and all Consortium ships when given such an opportunity, so coming up with a more mobile and faster means of preventing hyperspace jumps was definitely on the board.

Attrition, attrition, attrition.

The only problem with Faeri's idea was that it also affected Karinne double metaphased power, which was used to power their own jump engines as well as their heavy-mount weaponry.

But that was why it was a theory. She'd try to refine it, get it to where they could filter or screen it out but would still affect Consortium ships.

Myleena came dancing in. Literally. She was in her armor, cavorting past the door, then coming back and swinging her hips back and forth in a little display as she jitterbugged her way inside. "Well, you're in a good mood," Jason noted aloud after looking up at her.

*[Oh babes, you have no idea,] she communed with the biggest grin he'd ever seen on her before. [I have some of the best news I think you've ever heard.]*

*[Really? You found a way to kick the Consortium out of our galaxy?]*

*[Not quite, but I just found a big piece of the puzzle,] she answered. She sauntered her way past the guards and around his desk, then waved her hand in front of his panel vidscreen to wake it up. She then downloaded something directly from her gestalt into his secure panel, using a security protocol only available to Jason and Myleena. [I was digging through some of the data Cybi keeps of old Karinne research, playing with merging biogenic and moleculartronic systems again. It gives me something to do when I'm sitting on the can,] she grinned widely. [Anyway, I stumbled across this bit of archaic research done by one Treban Karinne, a hyperspace propulsion specialist. He was also on the team that developed the interdictors, and he did a highly in-depth mathematical analysis of the interdiction effect. And I mean to the quanta frequency shift of individual hyperspace particles,] she told him. [It must have taken him ten years to develop this formula. It's the most complex mathematical research I've ever seen. I don't think even a handful of mathematicians alive could understand it. This guy was a fucking savant,] she communed reverently. [Anyway, this is what got my attention, right here,] she told him, causing the display to focus on about six lines of Faey calculus. [This, Jason, is a mathematical expression for the interdiction effect. This guy actually sat down and figured it out, right down to the fuckin' microstate.]*

*[And? The short version, Myli.]*

*Killjoy, she sent, making a rude gesture. [The short of it is that I crossed this against propulsion formulas and found a correlation.]*

*[Still Greek, Myli.]*

*[Alright, the I'm too stupid to understand my smarter cousin version,] she communed snarkily. [The dumb-down version is that this equation expresses the interdiction effect, and since it correlates to the power parameters of jump engine output, we can match them.]*

*[You mean you can jump through an interdicator?] he asked, gaping at her.*

*[That is exactly what it means,] she replied triumphantly. [I've already worked it out. We'll have to make a few modifications to engines to increase their overall hyperspace modulation and also install a small power plant to help boost engine output, but these'll take me a fuckin' day to do. So, I want the Veriven, right now. I'm going to boost the engines and write a program that makes the engines harmonize to the interdiction effect, and that will let them jump through an interdicator.]*

Jason stared at her for nearly ten seconds, then he laughed brightly.  
*[Holy shit, Myli! I can't believe it!]*

*[Know the best part?] she asked, to which Jason shook his head. [I ran this against Consortium engines, and they can't do this. Their engines are based on the designs of the original Karinne engines they captured, but their interphased power just can't put out enough to handle the dynamic harmonics required to maintain hyperspace integrity against the interdiction field. Hell, not even ours can without some additional power, which is why I need to install a new plant to make this work. Since it seems they were never able to crack double metaphased and instead developed their striated interphased to power the engines, they figured out something that would make the engines they had work just enough. Their engines might have the ability to penetrate an interdicator with a few modifications, just like ours, but their power systems can't. As long as they use interphased power, they'll never penetrate our interdicator using jump engines.]*

*[Holy fuckin' shit,] Jason communed with a whistle, then he gave Myleena a huge grin, even as Myri's face appeared on his wallscreen. "Myri, take the Veriven off the board. It's going to be undergoing some*

experimental engine modifications. So have them park it in the 3D bay on Kosigi and clear off the crew, and we'll be up in about an hour to get started."

"I'll have them move it right now," she nodded, then she grinned. "I'll have Zora do it, she's on pusher duty right now," she told him, then her face winked out.

*Everyone stop what you're doing right now, Jason sent, using expanded sending so the non-telepathic humans could hear him. We have a new project! Get your field tools gathered up and be ready to board a dropship in thirty! Move, people, this is important!*

*We're on it!* Jyslin answered lightly. *I'll have them send the kids up to Kosigi after school, it sounds like we'll be up there a while.*

*Good idea. Dera, can you warn Aya?*

*Right now,* she nodded.

The Legion was respected, almost revered, through the sector for both innovation and the ability to rapidly adapt theories into working models, and the engine modifications were no different. A heavily armored dropship holding most of the Legion arrived in Kosigi in an enclosed box which was their ultra-top secret private drydock, and they cracked open their tools and got to work. Cybi generated plans for Myleena's modifications on the spot, the Shimmer Dome built those devices to spec as quickly as possible, and then they were shipped up. While they waited for the parts, they called in the *Veriven's* chief engineer and some of his team and had them help them install a small tertiary singularity plant whose sole responsibility would be to power the additional modules that would be responsible for the harmonic flux match to the interdicator. According to the math, it would take *unbelievable* power to have the engines match the interdiction field effect, far more power than a Consortium power plant could generate. But, the engines had the ability to do it, and once they had enough power and some additional hardware installed dedicated to managing engine output against a dynamic interdiction field, they would be able to hold a ship in hyperspace against an interdiction field no matter what direction it traveled. They had the plant installed by the time their modifications arrived, when the ship's engineers were shooed out to give them privacy. The modifications would

become common knowledge among the engineers if it worked, since they'd have to maintain the new systems, but for now, everything was hush-hush.

It wasn't really all that difficult. The additional parts were for a sub-assembly attaching to the engines that governed the detection and modulation of engine output dealing specifically with the interdiction energy waveform, matching the engines to the interdiction effect dynamically rather than jumping with the "trough" in the outbound direction. The extra power plant was specifically for dealing with generating enough engine power to shift to match the interdiction effect: the amount of energy required to change speed in hyperspace was absolutely insane, because hyperspace seemed to actively resist any change in relative velocity. The engines needed extra power to be able to constantly alter their power to deal with the constant changes in velocity an interdiction field would impose on a ship. Cybi helped with the fine tuning of the assembly, but having it govern engine output was fairly easy.

Jason was strangely happy. For two days, he got to indulge in something he rarely got to do anymore, and that was crawl around in the guts of a ship and monkey with its innards. Jason was right there with Myleena as they built the assembly and installed it, Jason and Myleena the primary engineers that laid out the mounts for the assembly within the engine cluster pods, built the assembly, installed it, then hooked it both into the engine system and into the primary power and data lines. Jyslin was on the team that wrote the code governing the assembly's operation, when and how it took control of the engines, defining the unit to the main computer so it knew what this new piece of equipment hooked into the datalines was, and a good half of the code governing the unit's operation itself. Cybi had to do the programming governing the unit's active operation, since that dealt with math that only Cybi could interpret and convert into TEL so the unit could use the mathematical research Myleena had uncovered to match engine output to the interdiction field. Myleena or one of the other Black Ops engineers could have wrote it, but it would have taken them a *long* time. That was one of the advantages of having Cybi around.

That didn't stop him from keeping track of what the Consortium was doing. During those three days, they were both very busy and slowed down. They consolidated their hold on the Alliance's systems, then massed up and jumped across the back end of Confederate space, around Karis, and tried to



hit the Skaa...and just about everyone got their first shock. The Skaa were *much* better armed with Consortium weaponry than anyone suspected. They didn't send massive waves of ships to attack the border systems on the far side of Karis, and what ships they did send were beaten back by savage defenses, primarily orbital platforms whose designs were actually pirated from the Karinnes and fighters, some of which were converted to Torsion weaponry. The Skaa had seen the use of unmanned orbital weapons, basically flying guns, and had developed their own version of the idea. And while their platforms weren't as fast or as effective as Karinne weapons, they were effective enough when combined with the other major Skaa advantage, sheer numbers. The Consortium were not prepared to deal with the planetary defense forces, *tens of thousands* of fighters and corvettes reinforcing what few warships were present in the system at the time of the attack, launched from planets and orbital stations, a virtual sea of small ships, so many that the Consortium simply could not shoot enough of them down before they got in range and opened up with both ion and a smattering of Torsion weapons. The Skaa had lots of experience fighting the Imperium and knew that ion weapons, while they couldn't penetrate Faey armor, still damaged internal plasma systems by charging and polarizing hull sections and disrupting plasma flow. And while shields could stop ion weapons, the sheer firepower the Skaa could bring to bear utilizing their superior numbers would bring just about any shield down if they had enough time. The Consortium just couldn't destroy the Skaa fighters fast enough to prevent them from hammering down their shields, and once they were down, the ion weapons added to the few Torsion weapons they had managed to fit on fighters. The Consortium were forced to retreat from all six Skaa systems they attacked, because they were simply overwhelmed by an uncountable swarm of Skaa defenders.

And *that* was why nobody fucked with the Skaa.

So, the Consortium pulled back and mulled it over. They knew just as Jason knew that the only way to fight the Skaa was to match those hordes, and that would require them to concentrate their forces and take the Skaa systems one at a time. They couldn't just spread out and conquer them using a few hundred ships at each system the way they did the Alliance, because the Skaa were not impressed by that. It would take considerable

force to conquer a Skaa system, and that caused them to back off and repair their ships after the disastrous attempt against the Skaa.

After three days where Jason was basically disconnected from the rest of the world, the *Veriven* crept out of the Legion dock, looking no different from any other KMS destroyer. Koye and the crew were returned to the ship, and after Myleena explained what they'd done, Koye raised an elegant eyebrow and immediately kicked Jason off the ship. Jason protested vehemently, but she pulled rank on him, declaring that her Grand Duke was *not* going to ride on a ship testing an experimental engine modification... and there was little Jason could do about it. He may be the Grand Duke, but the captain of a ship had even more authority than he did when she was standing on her bridge.

So, a rather sulky Grand Duke Jason Karinne returned to Karsa and took residence in the command center, as the *Veriven* tested the engine modifications. The ship exited Kosigi and turned away from the planet, getting out to where it could jump, and Jason brought up a graph of the destroyer's engine output and put it side by side with the graphical waveform output of the interdicator. The research Myleena uncovered should allow the ship's engines to match that waveform, since they now had a mathematical formula to govern ship engine output. They could have done this before, but the time it would take for a ship's sensors to detect the change in interdiction effect and try to change the engine output would create a fatal delay that would knock the ship out of hyperspace. This formula allowed the computer to *predict* the interdiction effect, and since the computer would know what was coming, it could dynamically match the engine to the effect. When the ship first hit the interdiction effect, that would be the test. If it could react and begin modulation before it was knocked out of hyperspace, the experiment would be successful.

Myleena stayed on the ship, but Jyslin got off, bringing all his kids to the command center with them. Myri didn't mind, nor did the others in the center, taking a few minutes to talk to his five children and maybe spoil them a little bit with all the attention. Aya had six guards with them to watch over the Ducal family and the kids, and Jason saw that there were already requests for conference from just about every ruler in the sector, even the fucking *Jobodi*. The Jobodi were right on the very fringe of what they'd call their sector, actually in the next sector over, but they had just one

system in their empire that was considered in their sector, way on the far side of the Alliance, past a dead space region similar to the one within which Terra was located. They only had three systems, but the Jobodi were like the Zyagya in that they were especially savage when riled, and the Alliance had the sense not to mess with them.

Amazing how fast work can pile up when you close yourself off in a drydock for three days.

Jason watched both the visual of the *Veriven* and the graphs on the holographic display as he explained to Rann and Zachary what was going on. *This is what it's all about*, he told them, one on each knee. *If we did it right, the ship will be able to jump out of our system, jump in, jump in any direction, and the interdictor won't stop it.*

*Oh. But what if the bad guys figure it out?* Zach asked.

*Well, even if they do, we figured out that their ships just can't do it*, he answered. *Their engines aren't strong enough to do it.*

*How do we know?*

*We had one of their ships, remember?* Jason countered. *We know.*

*Oh. That's good, I guess*, he replied in his understated way.

Dahnai managed to get someone to put her through to him while he was explaining what he was hoping to see to his sons. Her face winked onto the monitor just under the *Veriven*, and she looked a little angry. "Where the fuck have you been?" she snapped at him.

"Watch your language in front of my children, Dahnai," he shot back.

She gave him a contrite look. "Sorry. Hey Ranny, hey Zachy," she smiled waving at them.

"Hullo, Miss Empress," Zach replied as Rann waved.

"Now, back to the question. Three days! Three days that obstinate Kizzik has stonewalled me, babes! We've *needed* your opinion out here in the real world! What's going on?"

"We've been working on something *extremely* important," he answered. "And in about two hours, if it works, it might change the way things are

developing.”

“Well, they’re developing!” she told him. “The Consortium took a run at the Skaa and got their butts kicked, and now they’re massing to attack the Nine Colonies!”

“I know. They’ve been keeping me up to date in here.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it?”

“In about two hours, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do about it.”

She gave him a face, then looked to the boys. “So, what’s he doing, guys?” she asked.

“Nuh-uh,” Zach said, shaking his head. “We know better, Miss Empress.”

She laughed. “Damn you and that Karinne brainwashing,” she winked. “Rann, Shya wants to come visit for a few days. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure!” he replied happily.

“Alright, you nag your father into making it happen, and I’ll send her over,” she replied.

“There’s no nagging necessary,” Jason scoffed. “We love Shya and would be happy to have her.”

“Then send a ship for her when you have the time.”

*Myri, arrange a pickup at Draconis, Shya’s coming. And warn Aya.*

*Sure. When are they picking her up?*

*As soon as you can arrange it.*

*Okay then, I’ll send down the orders.*

“Done. Myri’s arranging some ships to come get her, so I’ll let you work that out with her.” Jason leaned back. “Just so you know, Dahnai, sending your listener daughter over here isn’t going to get you anything.”

She gave him a hot look, then laughed ruefully. “Hey, I wasn’t the one. Shya wants to come all by herself.”

“And you’ll grill her when she gets home to see what she heard.”

“Well,” she sounded, then laughed again.

“So transparent,” Jason chided.

“I gotta be me,” she winked in reply.

Jason managed to get Dahnai off the comm so he could pay attention as the *Veriven* reached jump distance, and Jyslin looked over his shoulder, which attracted his other three children. Jason explained what they were watching as the *Veriven* ran extensive tests on its engines in a hot state, then it turned, paused, and vanished.

It jumped out.

Jason watched the real-time telemetry coming from the destroyer as it jumped through the three light years of interdiction surrounding Karis, and it jumped *exactly* as they projected. It had no trouble jumping through the all three layers of interdiction, coming out of hyperspace about 800,000 miles inside the interdiction effect of the outermost layer, not leaving the effect for fear that the Consortium might see it and jump attackers to its location to try to destroy or capture it. It then turned and immediately jumped again, jumping across the layers roughly parallel to Karis, came out of hyperspace, paused to give the crew a rest, then jumped again. He watched as the destroyer jumped 14 times at varying angles to the interdiction field, from head on to nearly at tangent, and the engines had no problems compensating for the interdiction effect. They showed no spikes, no signs of overloading thanks to the extra power plant, and when the *Veriven* jumped back, a high-order diagnostic run on the engines showed that they were in perfect working condition.

The modification was a success.

Jason just had to smile as Jyslin gave a cry of delight and twirled Sora around. *[How fast can we get this done on every ship?]* he asked Myleena.

*[It's gonna take longer on the bigger ships, but maybe ten days if we took very single ship off the board right now. Clearly, we'll need a schedule.]*

*[Get one in place while I have a little talk with Dahnai and concentrate on the bigger ships first. We just changed the rules of this game.]*

*[How so?]*

*[Now we put an interdicator at every system that wants it,] he said. [If worse comes to worst, we can use KMS ships to ferry in supplies. I think the others would rather have a system isolated from their empires rather than a system in the hands of the Consortium.]*

*[Yeah. We need to show this to Denmother. I think Kimdori ships can use this modification,]* Myleena noted.

*[I'll call her right now,]* Jason promised, and he excused himself from his family to enter the conference room and do so. Rann followed him in, and instead of shooing him back out with Jyslin, he let his son climb up into a chair and sit and listen. Denmother Zaa's face appeared on a monitor, then it switched to a full body, free-moving hologram much like Cybi. She smiled and caressed phantom fingers over Rann's head, which made him giggle, and nodded to Jason. "They said it was fairly important?"

"Just a little bit," he answered, accessing his private panel. "I want you to jump a courier over here and pick up some data and technical specs. This is *not* something I want transmitted over open comm, no matter how many safeguards it has," he said strongly.

"You have my attention, cousin," she said seriously.

"We cracked the interdicator," he declared. "We just finished testing an engine modification that lets our ships jump through the interdiction effect freely."

She raised her furry brows, both of them. "I understand your caution," she said. "You think Kimdori ships can use it?"

"Your engines are similar to ours, even if you won't let me see the guts of them," he said with a slight smile. "And your power generation systems can handle the power requirements. So, we want your techs to look it over and see if they can adapt it."

"I'll send a courier immediately," she told him. "How many ships do you have capable of this?"

"Just one right now, but we're already setting up a schedule to convert every ship. The upgrade is actually fairly simple. It only took us three days to upgrade the *Veriven*. Now that we know what we're doing and we can mass produce the parts, we could probably upgrade a destroyer in about

twelve hours. It's a *simple* fix." He then beamed at Zaa. "And it's something the Consortium *cannot* do. We ran the specs using Consortium ships as a baseline, and they just can't generate enough power to do it. Their engines are *capable* of accepting the upgrade, but they lack the *power* to use it."

"Interesting. Very, very interesting," she mused. "You realize this can radically change the Consortium's plans?"

"I'm about to call Dahnai right now," he told her. "I'm going to offer to interdict *every* friendly system, and if worse comes to worst, my ships can ferry supplies. The *Aegis* can tow enough freighters to feed a planet for a week in just a single run."

Zaa looked off to her left and nodded, then she looked back to them. "The courier is dispatched. He should arrive in an hour," she told him. "And I'll let you get to that, cousin."

"Thanks."

"But before I go," she said, leaning down and pushing her nose against Rann's neck, which made him laugh. "There, now I'm content," she said with a toothy smile, then her image wavered and vanished.

"She can be so silly," Rann complained, putting his hand to his neck.

"She likes you, pippy. Be very honored she does, the Denmother is very picky," he told her as he had his comm officer get hold of Dahnai.

"I like her too," Rann announced as Dahnai's face appeared on a flat hologram against the far wall.

"Hey boys, you confirming the pickup?" she smiled.

"Not entirely," Jason answered. "I'll make this short, love. Tell the others that I want to interdict *every* system in the sector. The Consortium can't conquer what they can't reach."

"And starving billions of civilians helps how?"

"We've cracked the interdictors," he declared. "In about a week, I'll have most of my fleet upgraded to be able to jump through the interdiction effect freely."

She gawked at him, then laughed brightly. “Trelle’s garland, babes, that’s what you were working on?”

“Yup,” he nodded. “Think it was important enough to not take any calls?”

She laughed again. “Alright, I’ll give you that one,” she winked.

“So call Magran and tell him what we intend to do. The Consortium’s probably gonna hit him very soon, so we need to get those interdictors there *right now*. As long as his systems have enough supplies to last a week, they’re set. After that, my ships can ferry in supplies as needed.”

She gave him a huge grin. “Babes, sometimes you amaze me, and I should know better than to think you ever sit still,” she winked. “I’ll send out that information right now. Get your interdictors ready to move, cause I’m sure Magran will agree.”

“So am I.”

Dahnai winked out to get that done as Jason called up Myri on his monitor. “Hon, I hate to say this, but we’re going to have to disassemble the layers of interdiction around Karis,” he told her. “We’re going to need those interdictors for the other systems.”

“You can have the third layer, Jason, but *not* the second,” she declared adamantly. “That’s not many interdictors anyway. Don’t forget they’re after *us*, so we need at least two layers of defense.”

He saw the set of her jaw and simply nodded. A wise Grand Duke knew when *not* to argue. “How many interdictors do we have on standby?” he asked.

“Eight,” she answered. “Four just came off the assembly lines.”

“Alright, we’ll start with those. Go grab one more and arrange nine separate task forces to deploy those interdictors to the Nine Colonies. As soon as Magran gives us the go, we’re going to interdict the Colonies.”

“I’m going to need help. I’ll need to call in the Kimdori.”

“That’s why they’re here,” he answered with a nod.

*Now what?* Rann asked as Myri’s face vanished from the monitor.



*Now, we see how fast we can get this done*, he answered.

It turned out, it could get done pretty damn fast.

They had Magran's permission to interdict the Nine Colonies within five minutes, and that meant that they were behind schedule. Myri hastily assembled task forces, primarily composed of Kimdori ships, and they jumped out as soon as they had the interdicator in tow and had their chain of command ironed out. Even as that was done, the *Aegis* and *Victory* were pulled into Kosigi to begin the modifications. The extra engine modules would be standard through every ship, since they just monitored and regulated engine output against the waveform, but the power requirements would be different from ship class to ship class. They determined that the *Aegis* didn't need any additional power for its engines, they only had to shunt extra power off the grid from other sections to augment the engines enough to overcome the interdiction effect. The *Victory* and other battleship class ships, however, would require an extra plant installed to augment the engines.

Within an hour, they had all nine of the Nine Colonies interdicted, their fields growing and the task forces circling the interditors like protective wolverine mothers defending their cubs as they waited for the critical logarithmic expansion phase. The Kimdori helped that effort out as well by blinding Consortium sensors to the goings-on in the Colonies, hiding exactly what they were doing behind white noise. The Consortium knew they were doing *something* since all their sensors were blinded when they looked in that direction, but they didn't know exactly *what*. they didn't seem inclined to hasten their plans to invade the Colonies, either content to continue tightening their grip on their captured territory or indecisive about attacking the Colonies when they would do so blindly.

And that indecision paid off. The nine interditors all entered their logarithmic expansion mode without incident, where every second that passed would add *days* to any invasion's travel time to reach the systems.

The courier arrived and took the information back to Kimdori Prime, and within an hour, Zaa called back and told him that their fix would work on Kimdori ships. So, Kimdori vessels were added to the rotation in Kosigi to upgrade their engines.

Five hours after the Colonies were interdicted, they received a request from the Republic to do the same to 7 of their critical systems, on the condition that a means to supply their planets could be worked out. The Skaa's overwhelming superiority in numbers worked against them when it came to the interdictors, for it meant that those tens of billions in each system had to be *fed*, and there were only so many supply ships capable of jumping across interdicted space. The Empress and Prime Minister had the ugly task of looking at their systems and deciding which ones were capable of functioning with limited supplies, which were primarily planets of temperate climate that had their own farming. In the end, they saw that only seven of their systems could be interdicted and manage to feed their populations, and so they asked for interdiction at those systems.

An hour later, the Mob officially requested an interdictor to protect Moridon, fearing that the Consortium would not honor their centuries of stalwart neutrality. Three hours after that, they received the same request from the Skaa Empire, to interdict 14 systems that could feed themselves with either no help from the outside or with limited assistance from freighters to close the food gap. Four hours after that, the Jobodi also asked for interdictors; how they knew what was going on, Jason had no idea.

Both Skaa nations had the same plan; now that they could move supplies in and out of interdicted space, and the interdictors would prevent the Consortium from jumping huge fleets into their critical systems with no warning, they were going to strip their fleets from those systems and let the interdictors protect them. They would allow the KMS to move supplies in and out as needed, including towing warships in and out of interdicted space as required in case the Consortium made a run against an interdicted system, as they massed their fleets to use offensively against the Consortium. It was a viable idea, letting the interdictors play defense and allowing them to throw everything at the vast numbers advantage the Consortium enjoyed.

Jason had the house play its part. Every single ship capable of taking the upgrade would be upgraded, including freighters; *especially* freighters. Freighters would be the lifelines for the other empires. From the math, it looked like it would take 127 standard capacity freighters making supply runs every four hours to keep the average Skaa planet supplied with the staples needed to keep the population healthy, at least those planets unable

to produce for themselves. The Kimdori helped in this in that they already had a substantial freighter fleet, and those ships could be upgraded to jump through interdiction. Jason put the task of arranging a freighter deployment schedule to his transportation secretary, Jrz'kii. Kizzik were just built to deal with things like that, and he had no doubt that she'd have everything organized and running smooth as silk within ten hours after getting the assignment.

They also worked an old idea back into the forefront, replicators capable of producing food. They'd shelved the idea because the food the replicators supplied tasted *terrible*, but this was a situation where the taste of the food didn't matter very much. With replicated food enhancing local food production and limited supplies ferried in, it would allow them to interdict more Skaa systems and therefore rob the Consortium of targets to attack to add to their conquests. It took 3D all of five hours to revive the idea and come out with a prototype built out of parts easily attainable on almost any system in the sector, and then they pushed those plans out to the other empires, specifically warning them that eating replicated food was a measure of last resort due to the fact that it tasted like copper dust mixed with sand. The food was healthy and nutritious, but its taste...well, there was a reason they were only releasing the idea *now*.

Jrz'kii ironing things out in ten hours wasn't an exaggeration. Jason dropped it in Jrz'kii's lap himself, running down to her office and explaining what was going on and what they needed. The mottled tan and brown Kizzik, one of the largest Kizzik on Karis at a whopping ten feet tall and blade-arms sporting nearly six feet of sharp chitin death, absorbed the intent behind the orders and brought up a list of available Confederate assets. Within two minutes, she had a framework idea of piggyback towing Faey, Urumi, and Skaa freighters and transports behind Karinne and Kimdori transports, doubling carrying capacity. After conversion and power plant upgrades, Karinne and Kimdori freighters were capable of towing a ship of roughly 68% of their own mass and still manage to jump through interdicted space, according to Myleena's figures, so Jrz'kii ran with that. She called up the merchant marine commanders from the Faey, Urumi, and both Skaa empires, explained what was needed, and secured cooperation. They released their freighter fleets to her control, and she quickly huddled up with her main aides and hammered out a schedule. Within six hours, she

had a full schedule of ships and planets, a very comprehensive system that would keep every friendly system fully supplied without their transports running around like madmen. Merchant marine crews weren't going to get any days off any time soon, but they would at least get some downtime between runs.

In just one day, they had interdictors at over half of the friendly system in the sector, *including* the Jobodi. The Jobodi entered into the Confederacy even as the interdictors were being delivered to their three systems. The Jobodi themselves were a curious species. One look at a Jobodi and Jason knew where the old Yeti legends came from on Terra, they were probably Jobodi explorers. The Jobodi were yeti-looking simioids, about nine feet tall, burly, covered in shaggy white fur, with arms that reached their knees. They came from an arctic planet, with temperatures above freezing only at the equator, and on a good day, but their home planet was heavy gravity, like Draconis. And since like the Faey they were from a heavier gravity world than normal, they were *monstrously* strong. All that muscle on top of their heavy gravity origins gave them the ability to tie a crowbar in a knot. The Jobodi didn't speak, however, for their vocal cords were incapable of delicate manipulation. Like Chewbacca from the old *Star Wars* movies, they were capable only of the kinds of sounds an animal might make; growls, howls, barking sounds, that kind of thing. Their species had never evolved the ability to make more expressive vocalizations, because they had very primitive vocal chords, incapable of a wide range of vocalization, and their jaws were "fixed" and unable to do anything but work up and down. Human jaws were capable of moving along all three axes, but Jobodi jaws could only move in one, just like a housecat's jaws. One would be surprised how much a prehensile jaw was required for speech. Their entire language was either written or sign based, which was no problem for them because they had extraordinarily dexterous seven-fingered hands and could sign as fast as a human could talk. However, they *had* integrated into intergalactic scene by inventing a mechanical vocoder, a machine that spoke for them based literally on their typing. They "typed" in midair using those wondrously agile and fast hands encased in sensor gloves, and the vocoder spoke for them so fast it was like normal conversation speed.

The Jobodi joining the Confederacy didn't really mean all that much in the big picture. They only had a fleet of 92 ships, and most of them were

fairly old and lacked in any real firepower or defense. The Alliance had never tried to annex them because, quite simply, the Jobodi would be far more trouble than they were worth. Their three systems had little in the way of exploitable resources, the Jobodi themselves were highly aggressive when riled and would be a nightmare to try to manage, and their three systems were far off the beaten path, out across a dead space area and requiring a seven day jump to reach.

It did, however, put one more chair around the Confederate conference table. The Field Marshall of the Jobodi now sat at the conference table; the Jobodi lived under a militaristic dictatorship style of government, where the military ruled the nation and any Jobodi in the military could challenge one of higher rank to his position in a duel to the death. The Field Marshall had literally killed his way up the ladder to reach his position, but despite that, he was a very intelligent fellow and a capable ruler. As a matter of custom, since the current Field Marshall was seen as an effective ruler, nobody would challenge him until he started making bad decisions. And no Jobodi thought that allying themselves to the Confederacy was a bad decision, not if they wanted to remain independent.

Eight rulers sat at that table. Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, Zaa, Grizza, Assaba, Ba'mra'ei had escaped the Alliance and fled to Terra to represent Alliance refugees and military vessels joining the effort to get their nation back, and Grayhawk represented the displaced Shio population, and now Field Marshall Grran was part of the council. Jason was technically part of it, but he didn't see himself as a ruler, just as a representative of the Karinnes. He was present, however, listening as Assaba gave feedback on the food replicators. "It tastes as bad as you warned, your Grace, but they are worth it," he declared. "I have replicators being built on every system. Every time a system's projected replicated food capacity equals population, we'll have you interdict that system."

"How long do you think that'll take, your Majesty?" Jason asked, looking at him. Jason had each of the rulers on a separate hologram arrayed in front of his desk in his office, a semicircle around him.

"I believe we'll have every system interdicted in four days," he answered. "Building those food replicators is our most pressing task. I have tens of thousands of factories working on them. That includes the fact that

we'll have the interdictors up before we have the replicators built," he added. "Right now, I have our merchant fleets stockpiling food at our import planets to hold them over until the replicators can take over. Our people may not like the rationing but getting them protected matters more than missing a meal a day."

"Alright, your Majesty. Just let us know when you're ready for an interdictor and it'll be sent out within ten minutes," Jason assured him.

"We're doing the same thing," the Prime Minister of the Republic added. "We're getting everything ready and should be calling for you to interdict the rest of our systems within twenty standard hours."

Cybi's pseudo-nude form shimmered into visibility beside him, her glowing eyes regarding him calmly, then she sat on the edge of his desk. There was no reason for her to hide anymore, all the leaders knew that the Karinnes were protecting a sentient computer. Cybi was the "great evil" the Consortium was claiming they were here to destroy. But, not all of them had met her. "Esteemed rulers, those of you who haven't had the pleasure, might I present Cybi. She's the heart of House Karinne. She's what the Consortium is after."

*"It is my honor to address you, respected rulers," she said, nodding her head gravely to them. "Jason, I bring you news from the command center, but this news is important to all. The Consortium is massing a fleet at the captured Alliance system of Trieste. The War Room believes they are preparing another offensive."*

"Trieste? That's far back from the border with the Imperium," Ba'mra'ei noted, clicking her teeth against her lower tusk-like teeth that jutted out from her lower jaw. Bari-Bari were friendly enough, but to Terrans and Faey, they were not a very attractive species. They looked like eight or nine-foot-tall stocky orangutans with those tusks that reached all the way up to their nostrils, extending out of a protruding lower jaw. Jason wondered idly how they ate with those teeth all but blocking the corners of their mouths.

"Given they can jump hyperspace in real time, it doesn't matter where they mass their fleet," Assaba noted in his deep bass voice. "Could this be a response to the interdictors?"

“Very well may be,” Dahnai agreed with a frown. “They were probably content to take a takir or so to consolidate with the sector open to them, but we’re starting to close the doors. That’s bound to make them react.”

Jason wasn’t so sure. They had orders to take Karis *immediately*, casualties be damned, so them backing off after taking the Alliance and giving his factories time to manufacture more Legion weapons to throw at them didn’t make much sense. They should have pressed their advantage and tried to take every system in the sector. The only plausible explanations for it was that something had happened to force them to stop, a breakdown or some kind of problem somewhere, or they were waiting for something to arrive before continuing, like reinforcements. But no reinforcements had come in from their bases on the far side of the galaxy, only standard freighter traffic keeping the advance forces supplied.

“*They are moving,*” Cybi said, her glowing eyes looking off into space as she accessed other information. “*They have jumped out of the system. Calculating destination. Destination is the Raxxad system.*”

Assaba’s hologram immediately vanished without warning, as he no doubt ended comm to go find out what was going on. Raxxad was an Imperial system, on the far edge, an outpost system of a single deep space station that acted as a hub for mobile mining colonies, which mined considerable mineral deposits from the ten different asteroid belts in the system. The system had no terrestrial planets, only those ten asteroid belts and a single gas giant at the outer rim of the system. But, that station was the size of Phobos, and it housed nearly five million Skaa. There were nearly three million more Skaa in the system, living in the mobile mining stations that roamed the belts searching for ores among the asteroids.

The Prime Minister didn’t waste a second. “Grand Duke, our people will just have to be hungry for a few days. If the enemy is moving again, then we have no time. I would ask for you to interdict *all* of the Republic’s systems. We will just have to ration until the replicators can sustain the populace.”

“We can do that, Minister,” Jason nodded in reply.

“*I will inform Myri,*” Cybi volunteered.

Jason figured that it was going to be another quick grab, like they had done with the Alliance, but he was very, very wrong. The conference broke up so they could arrange things, and Jason watched a tactical display of Raxxad supplied by hyperspace probes that looked into the system.

God, how he wished he hadn't have done that.

The Consortium jumped in and attacked the deep space station that was in orbit around the gas giant, and within six minutes, they had destroyed all defenses and opposition, mainly due to the fact that the station didn't have the kinds of defenses a planet did. It had a few thousand fighters, but not the uncountable swarms with which the Consortium had to contend during their first attempted attack on the Empire. But they didn't stop. As Skaa ships poured out of the station, the Consortium continued to hammer it with Torsion and dark matter weapons long after all its defenders were destroyed and the station's weapons were knocked out, two thousand ships firing on it in unison, just firing and firing and firing in an unceasing, endless display of utter mercilessness, even firing on the ships trying to flee, destroying nearly half of them. The Consortium was sending the Skaa Empire a message: *you defeated us once before, and now we will slaughter your civilians in retaliation.*

The result was as predictable as it was ghastly. Jason watched in horror as the moon-sized station was shot to pieces, and then its primary power plant exploded, tearing the huge station in half. The two jagged pieces of the station went dark, and the momentum impelled into them by the fire on it, the explosion, and the explosive decompression of the station had pushed it out of its orbit. The remains of the station were caught in the gravity well of the gas giant and was already beginning its slow fall into the atmosphere and certain doom.

The attack took all of 21 minutes. And in that 21 minutes, *millions* of Skaa either died or had their fates sealed. Those that didn't escape died during the attack, and those unlucky enough to survive the explosion and decompression of the station burned up nearly an hour later as the station was consumed by the planet it orbited.

The Consortium didn't wait around. The entire fleet of two thousand then broke up into elements and fanned out into the system, where they systematically hunted down and destroyed every Skaa mobile mining



station. The miners had enough warning, however, to abandon their stations and flee, either jumping out of the system or hiding in mined-out asteroids.

But still, that was just a drop in the bucket to what he'd just witnessed. He'd watched *millions* of Skaa die. *Millions*. It was almost beyond comprehension, that so many would die, and the Consortium would be so ruthless as to kill so many.

So *many*.

He couldn't think. He could only bury his face in his hands and weep. Cybi slid her arms around his shoulders until she embraced him from behind, giving him what little comfort there could be in knowing that the ultimate responsibility for those millions of lost lives was squarely on his own shoulders.

# Chapter 6

*Chiira, 11 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Saturday, 28 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Chiira, 11 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

The Consortium was now blind.

The jamming network the Kimdori built was now fully operational. The Consortium's sensors were blinded when they even turned in the general direction of Confederate territory, all thanks to the Kimdori's mastery of hyperspace. Only the Karinnes, the Kimdori, and the Consortium could plant static devices in hyperspace, but the Kimdori had had a thousand years to develop their technologies for it. They could lock a device into a static position in relation to normal space with far more precision than the other two, and it was that precision that made their jamming network work.

For the Consortium, no sensors worked. Hyperspace sensors were saturated with Teryon bursts, blinding them. Passive sensors only returned static, gravity-based sensors were convinced that the gravity wells of all those stars and planets didn't exist, and energy detectors only found background radiation. Even telescopes were blinded, though they wouldn't find that out for another year. The light that wasn't scrambled was still leaving the systems, and it would take it about a year to reach the closest point where the Consortium could drop a telescope, a light year out from the system upon which they intended to spy. The jamming beacons were packed with cutting-edge Kimdori ECM technology, and they absolutely shut down the Consortium's sensors.

Only now, those jamming beacons were *inside* the interdiction effect. The Kimdori had planned to seed them in the voids between interdicted

systems, but now that they could jump interdicted space, they had adapted the technology to their static probes to lock them within interdiction fields, and therefore absolutely out of reach to Consortium hyperspace-based weaponry. Hyperspace missiles could hit a probe in hyperspace just as they could drop out of hyperspace and hit an object in real space, but it was far harder to hit something in hyperspace than real space. It took one hell of a good targeting computer. Usually the irrational speeds present in hyperspace made the idea of hitting a jumping ship with a missile impossible, but a static probe, which was stationary within the frame of hyperspace, that was a viable target. The Consortium had learned that the hard way, when the Kimdori started destroying their spy probes. Though the Karinnes and Consortium knew far more about hyperspace than others, both of them were far behind the Kimdori. Jason had once wondered how far along they would be had the Karinnes not been destroyed and looking at the Kimdori was a good estimation. They had stagnated in some ways but had continued to progress with their technology in others, mainly involving their national pastime, espionage.

The jamming network went online three hours ago, and the Consortium reaction was immediate and not happy. They jumped scout ships around the edges of interdiction, searching for the source of the disruption, and it didn't take them long to figure out that the jamming was coming from *inside* interdiction, and therefore beyond their reach.

Only about half of those scout ships made it back to Alliance space.

It was a little victory in the face of the absolute disaster at Raxxad. The final death toll was just staggering. 6,281,002 Skaa died. *Six million*. It was barely a fraction of a fraction of the population of the Skaa Empire, but that was like the entire population of a large Terran city. It was the number of Jews slaughtered during the Holocaust.

It was a number that would haunt Jason for the rest of his life.

It took him nearly a day to get over the shock...and it was *shock*. They rushed him to the hospital, they called in Songa, then they called in Myleena. His brain just...shut down after hearing that number. There wasn't really any other way to explain it. It took Myleena to coax him out of it, one of the most powerful telepaths alive, but using her power in one of the most subtle and delicate ways possible.

Everyone backed off after that. They gave him a few days to recover, and Jyslin managed things in his stead, as she tended to do.

He'd be lost in black melancholy even now if it wasn't for his duty to his house, to his people, and to the wonderful support of his family and friends. Rann and Kyri, with Shya in perpetual tow behind Rann, went out of their way to be around him almost all the time, because the presence of his children soothed him far more than anything else. They were all with him at some point in the day, be them all five or just one of them, a constant support network there to make their father feel better, and he loved them for it.

At night, there was only Jyslin, but she was little defense against the night terrors he'd started to suffer since recovering from his shock. She could only console him when he woke up, sometimes screaming, sometimes shivering like a terrified child, sometimes whimpering and whispering in French, calling for his mother. But, when he was shocked awake by the shadows in his mind, she quickly and effortlessly calmed him down, comforted him in ways only a telepathically pair-bonded mate could. Just a single touch told her everything about his mental condition, and she knew exactly what to do or say to best nurse him through the aftershock.

He'd just gone through another rough night, leaning over the sink with his head low, the water running merrily under him. He still had his babysitters with him, though. Amber circled his ankles in a figure eight pattern, rubbing against them, curling her tails around his legs, a fearless, tiny little bundle of fur and attitude. She then jumped up onto the edge of the sink—kinda amazing how high that tiny little vulpar could jump—then gave a commanding little *yip*, demanding attention. And nobody in the house lived under any illusion that that vulpar didn't rule them all. He gave her a weary little smile, then reached out a hand to scratch her between her ears, which caused her to close her eyes and purr.

"I'm alright, you mother hen," he told her, but it was a lie. He could never exactly remember what the terrors were about, and part of him was glad of it. It would be far worse if he could remember those nightmares. The days without any real sleep had taken a toll on him. His eyes were a little sunken, his cheekbones a little more prominent due to the fact he hadn't really eaten anything for about four days, and at both temples, there

were noticeable strands of gray hair. It seemed a bit irrational that his hair had turned gray that fast, so he was only just noticing what had probably been there for a while. He picked Amber up, stroking her soft fur absently as she purred away, looking at his reflection. It wasn't fair. Dahnai had just as much pressure as he did, but *she* never looked like this. But then again, there was a ruthlessness about Dahnai he'd never have, and he could admit that it was there. Dahnai only saw numbers. Jason saw *people*. Maybe he needed to see the numbers too to save his own sanity in this war, but he just couldn't. It wasn't who he was, and the day he *could* do it, he no longer had the right to lead the House of Karinne.

He sighed and looked at his reflection, reading through the reports they were afraid to send him by cheating, accessing his work panel using his gestalt. Things were coming to a head. Now that the sensor jammers were up and running, the Confederacy fully intended to go on the offensive, intended to follow the initial plan of jumping in a massive counter-attack fleet to Bregali to draw the Consortium into defending the system they attacked, then use the KMS and the Kimdori to attack any system they left weakened.

But, not all the KMS ships were available. The most notable loss was the *Aegis*, which was in Kosigi being refitted with the engine upgrades, but also having the GRAF cannon installed. Only a capital ship could mount that beast, because only a capital ship could both power it and handle the recoil. But it virtually guaranteed that the *Aegis* could kill just about any ship that faced it, even one of the Consortium's surviving capital ships. The GRAF cannon wasn't the most technologically advanced weapon out there, but the sheer, raw power it could unleash made it the king bull in the corral. It was a one shot one kill weapon, and *nothing* survived a direct hit from it. They had the ship in for the engine upgrade, so they just went ahead and started installing the cannon at the same time. Fully one quarter of the rest of the fleet was also off the board, undergoing the upgrade. But that was still enough to do the job, since they intended to attack weakened systems.

He sighed and nuzzled Amber's thick, soft fur, which she never minded. She even licked the tip of his nose with her curiously hot tongue.

*Oh so now I'm competing with a vulpar?* Jyslin asked with amusement. He looked at her, and his breath almost caught when he looked at her. The

light of the bedroom backlit her, hiding parts of her with seductive shadow while showing off her perfect figure, showing him the edges of blue skin that told him she was nude, and her gray eyes almost seemed to glow in the dim light reaching them. She paused there when she noticed him looking at her, preening for him a little bit, then she padded in and pushed herself into his arms. *Why don't you come back to bed, love? You're still tired.*

*No. I've already been out for three days. I, I have to get back to work. People are counting on me, love.*

*And they understand, she sent gently, putting her hand on his cheek. In fact, if I let you go to work in this condition, I very well may get lynched in the streets.*

*You are such a bad liar.*

*It's not a lie, it's an awkward truth, she answered. Now, you willful, unmanageable man, you are coming back to bed!* she declared, taking his hand and pulling him. Jason didn't have either the strength or the heart to resist, glad for her distracting teasing, letting her drag him back to the bed. Amber did protest a little when she pushed him down on his back in a flop, but he didn't let the vulpar jar or fly out of his protective hands. Jyslin found the vulpar between her and snuggling with her husband, and again, Amber's total domination of the house displayed itself when Jyslin laid down on her side against him, draping an arm over his chest and nuzzling her chin up over his shoulder, her forehead against his temple. *I do love you, you difficult man, she sent tenderly. I love you more than I ever thought possible.*

*You just like the perks that comes with being a Grand Duke's babe, he sent lightly in reply, then he laughed when she slapped him on the belly.*

*Now there's a sound I haven't heard in a few days. It's a beautiful thing, she told him, kissing him on the cheek.*

*There hasn't been anything to laugh about.*

*Well, there's something for me to laugh about, she mused in a wicked tilt, rolling over and grabbing something off her endtable, then coming back around with a leather collar. Just seeing it made him laugh helplessly. Now then, slave, let's find out who's wearing this in ten minutes, she sent with an evil smile.*

Jyslin was sent from Heaven, of that there was no doubt. She reduced him to silliness in the span of five heartbeats, and a little harmless goofy play did take a great deal of weight off of him, if only for a little while. Amber protested vociferously when the two of them got far too energetic to provide her with a bed, then she actually got into the mock-fighting as they struggled over the collar, yipping excitedly and playfully licking and biting them on the ears and noses, all the while nimbly avoiding getting caught under them as they concentrated on each other rather than the distracting little monster.

The noise and laughter did attract others to the war. Rann and Shya burst into the room, saw and heard what was going on, and they too decided to get involved. Jason was suddenly under attack from his wife, son, son's betrothed, and their pet, since they all decided that ganging up on the biggest guy in the battle was the best way to win. After nearly ten minutes of therapeutic battle, they eventually conquered him, all of them holding him down as Amber licked his nose and cheeks with ruthless authority. *Ha! Daddy's not so big now!* Rann declared smugly, his whole body holding down Jason's left arm, but then he squealed in surprise, as did Shya and Jyslin, when Jason swept them all up and off of him, pulling them into the air over the foot of the bed. He hung them all up there and put his hands behind his head, crossed his legs, and let Amber lick energetically at his ear as he looked up at them with a smug little smile. He usually couldn't pick all of them up at once, but the tactical gestalt installed in his basement gave him enough support to handle it with complete ease.

*What was that I heard? Did someone say that I'm not so big now?* he retorted, causing the collar to drift up off the floor, where it had ended up after the kids entered the battle. He twirled the collar around his finger, then casually flipped it into the air, where it zipped up and locked itself around Jyslin's neck with flawless aim.

Jyslin laughed and gave him an imperious look. *You just soooo upped the ante, buster,* she warned. *If you want to cheat, then I'll have to start cheating too.*

*Like you can cheat.*

*Oh, I can cheat, boy,* she sent scornfully. *Now put me down or I'll show you just how much I can cheat.*

Jason weighed that threat. The ways Jyslin could cheat were mainly through her intimate understanding of him. Just like how she gave him an erection in front of the guards with measured words, she knew just what to do, say, or send to send him off kilter. He decided that he'd see just how she could cheat, but not in current company. He set them all down gently, then sat up and grinned impudently. *I win.*

*Aww! I hate losing to boys!* Shya complained, which made Jason laugh.

*That's alright, I won't tell anyone,* Jason told her as he got out of bed, picking her up and giving her a little twirl that made her giggle. He poked at the adorable little white kitten face on her nightshirt, almost sighing with dread. About ten years ago, there was this cartoon character that was popular on Terra called *Hello Kitty*, mainly because of its merchandising, but it took off mainly in Japan to the point where it had its own online video game. Well, the Faey had discovered *Hello Kitty* along with a lot of the other Terran entertainment, like Scooby Doo and other icons of American child entertainment, and it had become all the rage in the Imperium among little girls. This, Jason found very curious. Faey girls were like human boys in what they liked, how they thought, how they were raised, and for Faey girls to embrace something so *girly* was almost bizarre. But, the popularity of *Hello Kitty* was undeniable. As much as Faey tweens and teenagers went around with their *Bounty Hunter* and *Blood Nugget* tee shirts and outer robes and listened to American heavy metal and Faey goth, Faey girls had at least one thing on or with them stamped with that insufferably cute little bow-eared cat face.

*Hello Kitty* was one of those unforeseen things popping up as humans and Faey got closer and closer, as much as the invasion of Faey actors and entertainment workers into Los Angeles and the astounding popularity of the heavy metal band *Blood Nugget* among both human and Faey teenagers. Or maybe the popularity of American football in the Imperium and batchi on Terra.

*Alright, troops, it's about time for me to get up and get going,* Jason told them. *I feel much better now, and it's time to go to work.*

*Aww, can we come?* Rann asked.



*Well, sure, why not?* He shrugged. *Go armor up, kids.* He expanded his sending to touch all of his children. *I'm about to go into the White House. Anyone wanna come with Rann and Shya?*

He got back enthusiastic replies from all of his children, so he warned their mothers he was taking them to work. This was one of the perks of being a child of the Grand Duke, these trips that pulled them out of school. The teachers would be warned that Jason was taking them today, and that was that. Their homework would be sent to their home vidlinks telling them what they missed, and they'd catch up on the work tonight.

He grabbed a quick shower and came down to a waiting breakfast. Amber was sitting on the table eating scrambled eggs from a little bowl, eggs made specifically for her, with spices, bits of browned *guya* sausage stirred into it, and a touch of tabasco sauce just the way she liked it. Not every vulpar had someone cook just for them, which more or less just ensured Amber stayed in the house rather than move on. Amber knew a good deal when she saw one. Vulpars were horribly spoiled in the context of pet care, but that was what it took to keep a vulpar in the house. They *demand*ed being spoiled as part of the deal, and among the image-conscious Faey, having a pet vulpar was a major status symbol, so they went to great lengths to keep a vulpar that decided to live with them for a while.

Vulpars had all the luck.

Rann and Shya were there as well, eating pancakes, and Kyri rushed in just in front of Yana, already armored up and carrying her helmet, sending excitedly. She did have Jason pick her up so she could kiss him, though. *I'm glad you're feeling better, Daddy,* she sent with sincere concern.

*Thank you for your concern, pippy,* he answered, rubbing his nose against hers.

So, Aya had ten guards with her as she escorted the Ducal family out of the house and off to work. Two guards went with Jyslin when she went to 3D, and the other eight stayed with Jason and the kids. Chirk and Brall were always very patient and forgiving of the kids when they came to the office, since their loud, boisterous natures and endless questions disturbed the organized harmony with which Chirk ran the office. But for Jason, he saw it as an important lesson for his kids in dealing with the non-human and non-

Faey elements of the house. Karinne had, by proportion, the most diverse population of any house, with a huge number of Faey, Makati, and Kizzik compared to the dominant species, Terrans. Every Terran was considered a Karinne due to the fact that the house had settled on the planet, turning its population into the commoners under the house banner. Faey and other Imperium races were also present within the house, but there were far more humans among the commoners. But when it came to the nobles, there were far more Faey than anything else. Most of the nobles he initially recruited to help run the house were Faey, the Generations were all Faey except for two, and since most of his newer nobles had earned their titles through military service, about 65% of them were also Faey. But he had nobles of every race in the house. Chirk and Brall were both titled, both Zarinas, and he'd awarded a Zarina title to the Parri *shaman* leader when she first brought her Parri enclave to Karis, though that title meant absolutely nothing to her. Every member of his cabinet was titled, and most of them were Kizzik and Makati. The new Hive Leader on Kirga was titled. The town councils and mayors were awarded a title if they won re-election enough to serve four consecutive years, since if they managed to win four straight one-year terms they were good at their jobs and thus had earned the title. Among his nobles, 64% were Faey, 20% were human, and the other 16% were Makati, Kizzik, and the lone Parri. But those proportions changed with every quarter, with the other races gaining ground on the Faey majority.

Chirk had everything ready for him, as usual. He had a meeting with Chirk and Brall as the kids roamed around under the eyes of the guards, but Rann sat on the edge of the desk and listened intently. Chirk briefed him on the status of all the important topics, Brall briefed him on the status of the important domestic projects, such as broadcast power and ship conversion and construction figures. New ships were now pouring out of Kosigi, Imperial ships, Collective ships, Karinne ships, and Kimdori ships. New ships were being pushed out to park in orbit literally every hour as they waited for their first crews to come man them, and the pusher pilots were really being worked hard. Wolf production was through the roof, with the projected complete replacement of all Raptor fighters with Wolf fighters by the end of the month. The pilots were being rated for the Wolf with the same speed and should be ready for their new fighters when they were delivered. They were also cranking out orbital weapon platforms by the boatload every day, most of them slated for delivery to their new allies to

help bolster their defenses. Most of them were going to the Empire, getting their defenses beefed up so another disaster like Raxxad *did not happen*. Karinne weapon platforms would reinforce the Skaa hordes and their own knock-off weapon platforms.

Jason should sue for patent infringement, but he was more than glad they'd had the initiative to copy the idea.

One idea he should pass out to the others but wouldn't were the planetary shields. It was technology beyond the others, shields on a scale they couldn't copy, where their power systems couldn't handle the demands. They'd have to install singularity plants to power the planetary shields. The shields had proved that they could slow down or outright stop an invasion of a planet when the Consortium attacked Karis, and the if the Consortium had any weapons capable of hitting the planet's surface, they hadn't used them in the Karis attack...but then again, the shield probably would stop them, so they didn't bother trying. It was like the Great Wall of China, it slowed down barbarian invaders but didn't stop them, basically there to make it very difficult for them to get over it and get out with any booty...and if you couldn't keep your plunder, there was little reason to raid in the first place. The Karis shield had significantly slowed down the Consortium ground attack, forced them to stop and deal with the shield first, and prevented any kind of bombardment of surface assets from orbit.

After the briefing, Jason looked at some images from Terra, and *fuck* was that impressive. Ships from every nation in the sector were clustered loosely around the planet, being kept at a distance so their mass didn't affect the planet's orbit or rotation or mess with the tides. Faey and Urumi ships were sharing space with dispossessed Shio and Alliance warships, and with the bulky, blocky Skaa ships, as Kimdori ships prowled the outer edges and KMS ships hung in close orbit to the planet. They had a force of nearly 6,000 ships there, the significant bulk of almost every fleet in the sector, the counter-attack fleet that would take it right back to the Consortium. And with them deep inside interdicted space, orbiting what was being seen more and more as the hub of all international activity, Terra, they were protected from Consortium attack.

Terra. The Academy was hosting everything now. The Skaa, Alliance, and even the Jobodi had their flag officers at the new command center for

the war effort. They'd had it on Draconis but decided to move it to Terra after the Skaa and the others entered the war...mainly due to paranoia. Dahnai didn't want potential enemies to see the insides of her military operation. They were allies now, but in twenty years they may be enemies, so she forced them to move to a dedicated building on the Academy that had been devoted to military science, and was now the new headquarters of the Confederate Combined Military Forces, or what they were now calling the Big C. Differing military ranks had to be sorted out to establish chains of command, fleets had to be created and filled in with ships, and ground forces had to be merged, from individual infantry squads all the way up to exomech, tank, and robotic fighting unit brigades. In all, Jason was fairly surprised at how quickly the diverse militaries had managed to come together, but, naturally, there was a lot of friction.

The primary problem was between Dahnai and Assaba, and their militaries. The Skaa-Faey war was still fresh in their minds, though it was more of a series of silly skirmishes over some contested territory more than a full war, and while they both saw the Consortium as far more of a threat, the Empire and the Imperium had some problems. For one, the Faey elements of a task force didn't want to be under the command of a Skaa admiral, and vice versa. For another, the same mentality Dahnai had was pervasive through everything. Both sides wanted to keep secrets, and while that was fine, it wasn't like sailors were manning each other's ships, something as simple as establishing common gravband frequencies became an issue of contention.

But, again, the KMS served as a buffer, just as Terra served as a buffer for the disparate species to come together to learn in the Academy. Myri grew tired of the endless niggling between the Imperial and Imperial officers (funny thing there) and basically pulled rank on *all* of them. It was Myri and Juma that established the fundamental groundwork around which the other fleets would operate, and it was Sioa that beat the establishment of the chain of command through the various ranks into the ground forces, which the naval forces grudgingly adopted. It was the venerable Navii who tailored basic tactical formations and operations for the combined task forces, using the same strategy they'd already been using; KMS and Kimdori ships forming the core of the fighting formation and with the largest KMS ship in the fleet serving as the flagship for the fleet

commander, for they were much more rugged. That put external officers on KMS ships, but that was a small price to pay for keeping the overall fleet commander alive and capable of commanding during battle. But, that demonstration of basic trust, allowing outsider command officers to work from a KMS vessel, set the tone for the other militaries. The fleet commander wasn't commanding the ship, that was the job of the KMS captain, but he was there on the bridge, able to see how a Karinne ship operated.

After the briefings, he called Dahnai and told her he was back at work. She looked quite relieved, and it had taken something so serious as the war to keep her from coming to see him; he was her *amu dorai*, after all. Wrangling with Assaba and Vezzi and Grizza took up most of her time, as the preparations were being made to strike back at the Consortium. The massive fleet at Terra was going to be used, and if the current schedules held firm, they'd be used tomorrow. Tomorrow that fleet was going to leave for Shio Prime, and it would take it about three days to get there. The KMS and Kindori would mass up just before they arrived and identify the system to attack, then jump at it as soon as the Consortium redeployed its forces.

It was no longer a war of toys, a remote-control battle where the only thing they risked was disposable equipment. It was now *real* war, where lives were on the line, where the races of the sector would fight back against the invaders on behalf of one of their own. The toys would still be used, but they were no longer the primary means of battle.

Just thinking about that made him sigh. Maybe...he wasn't really cut out for this. But the job chose him. He would see it through.

"You shouldn't be there long, baby," Dahnai told him with honest concern. "You're looking a little pale still. Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"I'll be alright," he assured her. "If I wasn't here driving Myri nuts, she'd think I was really sick."

"I get the same complaints from Lorna," Dahnai laughed. "Where's Shya?"

"Aggravating Brall," he answered. "How are the figures looking?"

“We’ll be ready,” she answered. “There’s two fleets en route from the Empire, and they should arrive at Terra in about six hours.” She glanced to the side. “Lorna wants to know when the *Aegis* will be back in service. She had plans for it, but your Myri pulled it out of service.”

“Eight days,” Jason answered. “It’s undergoing a refit.”

“A hell of a time to pull it out, lover.”

“Well, deal with it,” he answered. “We’ve put off this refit too long as it is. When we pulled it in for the engine upgrades, we decided to just go ahead and take care of it. The *Dreamer* and *Jenda* are more than capable of acting as fleet command vessels for one assault, and the *Trelle’s Gift* and *Victory* will be spearheading the other.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not as big as the *Aegis*. Lorna was looking forward to sitting on the bridge of that bad boy.”

“Faey,” Jason sighed, which made Dahnai laugh. “I take it the Skaa admirals didn’t mind folding under Lorna?”

“Reluctantly,” she answered. “Command by committee doesn’t work very well, and Lorna more or less came out on top as far as ranks go. A few Skaa admirals claim to have higher rank, but the Confederation is *our* creation,” she said haughtily.

“If Sk’Vrae hears you talk like that, she’s going to spray you with another shot of venom,” Jason warned. “You’re not the top dog in this, love. You’re just one seat at the table.”

“But my seat’s biggest,” she retorted.

“Faey,” Jason growled again, with much less humor. “I need to go, love. I need to talk to Myri, I haven’t gotten down there yet.”

“Alright. I’ll talk to you later, lover.”

He ended the communication, a little irked. Dahnai might need some leash pulling, she was starting to think in a predatory manner. If she thought that she had natural rights to lead the Confederate Council, well, she had another thing coming. Most likely, that was the source of most of the friction between Dahnai and Assaba. The Confederacy wasn’t even

permanent, it would dissolve as soon as the Consortium was defeated. It was a wartime necessity, that was all.

Rann and Shya went with him when he went over to the command building and got under Myri's feet. She didn't mind all that much, glad to see him feeling better, and she caught him up on everything, from ship engine upgrade schedules to ship assignments in the counterattack. With the *Aegis* down for refit, the four battleships were going to be spearheading the two attacks, supported by cruisers and destroyers and an absolute swarm of Wolf fighters and automated drone weaponry. The *Arabax* was slated for the Ravarra attack, being the fleet command vessel for the attack on Ravarra VI, but the *Temeron* and the *Jefferson*, the other two heavy cruisers, were being held back in reserve, ready to jump in if needed. The *Dreamer* would act as the command flagship for the Shio attack with the *Victory* escorting, and the *Trelle's Gift* would command the secondary assault with the *Jenda* escorting.

The other ship on reserve was today's distraction. The first of the tactical battleships was complete, and it would be commissioned today. Hiae was leaving the *Defiant* and taking command of it, and Jeya had been promoted to take the *Defiant's* chair, which put her first in line for the next big ship that came down the pike. Jeya wasn't happy to leave the *Steadfast*, but they'd found a good captain to put in her place, a Makati female named Grendi Trunn who pretty much well aced the command exams on her first attempt and was well liked and respected by about everyone who'd served with her. In a way she replaced Travka as the only Makati captain in the KMS, and he hoped to God she didn't meet the same fate he did.

The tactical battleship was a *mean* looking ship. He looked at a live feed of it parked just outside Kosigi, just a bit bigger than a heavy cruiser, but much sleeker, with sharper angles. It just looked more menacing than other KMS vessels, which all followed the "pie wedge with stub triangular wings" design model. The tactical battleship reminded Jason of the Super Star Destroyer from *Star Wars*, long and sleek and narrow across the keel, but it maintained the flared wing design aft and utilized the same angular plating model that helped the armor partially deflect off hits. Jason wasn't sure what Hiae was going to name that monster, but he'd find out in a few hours when he attended its christening.

It was one side of tactical thinking. The other side was half-built in Kosigi, and he looked up the progress of it. This was a carrier, a large ship whose main task was carrying fighters. Where the tactical battleship was long and sleek, the carrier looked like a whale, with a fat bow and even fatter stern. But that gave it more room for its primary mission of carrying fighters, some 6,500 of them. The carrier was easier to build than they'd expected, since it didn't have some of the exceedingly complex systems required for a ship sporting particle beams; the carrier only had pulse batteries for its own protection, relying almost completely on its fighters and escort ships for defense. That was letting them build it faster than Jason expected, and if they stayed on schedule, it would be finished in about three months. If they could get that thing in a theater, it might swing a battle in their favor. Every sim they ran showed that Consortium ships were vulnerable to Wolf fighters, so their main focus now was putting as many Wolves as they could get into a battle theater and let them eat the Consortium ships for lunch.

With limited time, building 14,000 Wolf fighters was preferable to building 140 warships.

That was the Consortium's fatal flaw, and the one advantage they could exploit. Their ships, their tactics, they were all based on naval fleet warfare, big ships slugging it out. They had those mantis mecha, but that was about it. They weren't used to fighter combat on the scale the Faey employed, and which forced everyone else to deploy fighters to deal with Faey tactics. This, Jason saw as unusual, given that they could miniaturize Torsion or Dark Matter weaponry to fit it on fighters...yet they had not. He had the feeling that it was the weaknesses of the insectoid race that did their fighting that prevented them from using fighters, their frail bodies not up to the rigors of fighter action. Even with inertial dampers, there was *some* pressure involved in it, and that was something the insectoids couldn't tolerate.

It took almost three hours to wade through most of what Myri had for him, so much so that he was honestly surprised when Ryn reminded him about the christening. So, Jason collected up the kids and his guards and boarded a corvette, loosely built on the Scout Ship model but heavily armed, another of the newer developments. Corvettes were smaller than destroyers, attached to Sioa's army rather than the navy, and would be



smaller than frigate class ships if they employed them. It was a small ship with a crew of 12 meant almost exclusively for planetary defense as a forward tactical relay for army fighter and ground forces deployment, like an AWACS, but now they were being employed as a VIP transport, since they could land without requiring entire city blocks be cleared out for them. Corvettes were the “cream of the crop” in the army, like commanding a heavy cruiser or above in the navy, where Sioa’s best were stationed because field commanders had far more control in army combat than they did in naval combat. The captain of a corvette was serious fucking business in the army. The corvette that picked him up was capable of landing on the large landing pad out behind the command center, if only just barely fitting. The bow was almost against the building and the stern was hanging over the fence. But with Aya’s increased security protocols, Jason wasn’t allowed to travel on a civilian ship. A corvette ferried him around, even in the safe expanses of the Karis system, if he left Karsa. This corvette was named *Spectre* and had a painting of a nude male Faey ghost with lightning coming out of his hand across the bow. It was commanded by Colonel Traea Karinne, one of Sioa’s hand-picked tactical field commanders. Traea was a warhorse, an ex-Marine with more than twenty years of experience, which made her perfect for the demanding job of tactical field commander. In the KDF, the army, the generals made the plans, but it was the colonels that carried them out on the battlefield. Sioa would send down orders to Traea, but she could change them as conditions on the battlefield required.

Shya rode in the lap of the pilot, mystified by the view of Kosigi expanding in the viewscreen as Jason talked with Traea and the other kids roamed around the small ship. The bridge was really just a cockpit, since Traea spent most of her time back on the tactical deck watching feeds and readouts and issuing commands, but Traea did have a captain’s chair on the tiny bridge for those times when the *Spectre* might be called on to enter naval combat. As usual, she put him in the chair and stood beside it as Traea gave him her unbiased opinion about the new flight pod regulations for Gladiator mecha. Flight pods were now standard equipment on Gladiators to allow them to rapidly deploy to any location, as were spinners and ground-based drones, ideas stolen from the Wolf fighters, but Traea had seen some issues with how the pilots were treating the pods, which they jettisoned before combat because they were a detriment to a Gladiator’s performance when it was on the ground. Jason listened to officers like

Traea, because they were *right there* and had a more intimate understanding about some things than the command staff. Traea's main beef was with how carelessly the mecha pilots were treating the pods. She wanted some regs sent down that made the pilots actually care about the pods and not treat them like a piece of disposable, one-shot equipment.

*So that's the new ship, eh? It looks fucking mean,* Traea noted privately to him. She was devout in her worship of the Faey gods, and that meant she wouldn't curse in front of the children.

*That's the general idea.*

*No, I mean it looks way more intimidating than the regular ship,* she elaborated.

*And that's the general idea,* Jason answered with a slight smile. *It was designed as much for its appearance as its capabilities. We want an enemy to wet himself when he sees that drop out of hyperspace in front of him. A few of those mixed in with a carrier in a task force, and it should give them nightmares cause they know they're about to get shafted from both ends. Swarms of deadly fighters biting them in the ass with bulldogs like that smashing in their faces.*

*Jayce lovey, they already wet themselves when we show up,* she grinned. Traea called virtually every male *lovey*, it was one of her quirks.

*Yeah well, we'll be there in a minute, so I better round up the kids and get them in the zip ship. This cow is too big to fit in their landing bays.*

*Cow? With all due respect, push off!* she retorted, which made him laugh.

Corvettes were too small to cater to a standard dropship, so their tiny landing bays had zip ships in them. Zip ships were very small shuttles, only having room for six inside, literally a flying box with absolutely no amenities or comforts. A corvette had two zip ships in its landing bay and room for just one more, giving the crew of 12 a means of escape if they had to abandon ship. It took all three zip ships currently in the *Spectre's* landing bay to ferry over the Ducal party, and they only had to go about 150 yards, because the *Spectre* pulled up so close to the tactical battleship's primary landing bay that their artificial gravity fields were interacting, creating some vertigo on the smaller corvette as the battleship's field overwhelmed the

corvette's. Jason could have put on his helmet and all but jumped across. The transfer over to the ship took about six seconds of flight time, where the new crew of the ship was in formation and awaiting the Grand Duke's arrival. The tactical battleship had a standard crew complement of 2,750, much fewer than other ships its size, but it didn't take as many sailors to maintain and operate a ship that had a limited mission, and that mission was to carve things up with its nine particle beams and blast the shit out of enemies with its batteries of heavy pulse weapons, plasma torpedoes, and hyperspace missile batteries. Tactical battleships had one function and one function only in a formation, and that was to deploy overwhelming firepower. Other ships would be supplying fighter defense and detailed sensor sweep data to the ship, leaving it free to just hold down the fire button and bulldog its way through a fight.

Hiae, wearing her new Fleet Admiral's gold diamond on her Class A's, greeted him as he exited the hatch of the zip ship. She bowed deeply, then opened her arms and gave him a hug when he came up to her. "Hey there, Jinx," he told her with a smile, referring to her name, which meant *bad omen* in Faey.

"Stop calling me that!" she protested with a smile. "Rann! My, you're getting so big!" she greeted, leaning down and kissing him on the cheek. "And this must be Princess Shya! Welcome aboard, your Highness," she said, bowing to Shya, then laughing and picking her up and giving her a hug.

"See, *someone* remembers I'm a princess!" she said imperiously to Rann.

"If you think I'm bowing to you, you're crazy," Rann told her, which made Shya give him a dirty look.

"Well, are you ready for your inspection of the crew and tour, your Grace?" she asked.

"Yup. Then we can slap a name on this beast and get him on the board."

"Then let's begin, shall we?"

The inspection of the crew was one of Jason's more favorite activities, since he spent more time talking to them than inspecting them. The new ship had more of a balance of races in it, with the typical Imperium races

represented, but the ship was also sporting two Kizzik *officers*, two lieutenants that had just passed exams and entered service just a couple of weeks ago, along with ten Kizzik drones under their command, all ten of them wearing enlisted rank. Both of them worked in the engineering department, which more or less ensured that the ship was going to purr like a vulpar. Kizzik were natural builders, and as much as their minds were oriented towards complex tasks, they were also oriented towards maintenance, building, and repair. Kizzik had built their hive-city on Virga *fucking* fast, so they proved they had the technical skill to be just as effective as any Faey or human engineer, but that was coupled to the absolute inexhaustible nature of Kizzik drones to carry out the work. The two Kizzik nobles and their drones could be depended upon to be told to find a problem and fix it *fast*, which was an advantage in combat. Damage control robots could only go so far, sometimes it took a thinking being down there to make bypasses, jerry-rig conduit, do the creative “oh shit fix it now or we’re gonna die” things a programmed repair bot couldn’t.

And it wouldn’t be possible without Jyslin’s translators.

It took about three hours to tour the ship, from bow to stern, from the depths of engineering to the cutting-edge bridge, as Hiae answered an endless stream of questions, but editing her answers because of Shya. Jason had Dera monitor private sendings as well. Nobody knew Shya was a listener, and they intended to keep it that way; it wasn’t his secret to reveal. But Dera was there to make sure Shya didn’t hear anything he didn’t want getting back to Dahnai. Once they reached the bridge, they maintained the tradition. Jason sat in the captain’s chair a moment, then stood up and offered it to Hiae. Cameras caught the moment as she sat down, then he asked her *the question*. “Congratulations, Captain,” Jason told her. “Now, what are they going to stamp on the bow?”

She gave him an impish look. “I have decided to name him the *Prophet*,” she said, using the English word for it.

Jason gave her a start, then laughed helplessly. Only a native Terran would understand the reference, tied in with Hiae’s name and its meaning. Hiae was a bad omen, and a prophet would often deliver it. So, when the *Prophet* appeared in a combat theater, it would be carrying bad news for its

opponents. Hiae wasn't the bad omen for the KMS, she would be the bad omen for the enemy.

"Well done, you clever minx, well done," he told her as many of the Faey bridge officers looked a little confused.

"I thought you'd like it," she winked.

And so, the tactical battleship *Prophet*, the first of its ship class, entered active service in a ceremony held on the bridge, as Myri then presented the charter of commission and a ceremonial flag to Hiae, both in a gold-framed case, which she would keep in her ready room. Every ship had a flag and a charter, which most captains displayed prominently. Faey tradition for christening wasn't a bottle of champagne smashed on the hull, it was the presentation of the ship's charter of commission. Old American naval tradition could christen a ship before it was ready for service, but not Faey tradition. A ship's christening was its commission, and a ship wasn't commissioned unless it was operational and ready to enter active service. So, when Hiae put the case in her office, she came back and issued her first commands, and that was for the ship to join a small task force of five ships, all recently built, to conduct exercises for the crew to get acclimated to the ship, its shakedown cruise. The captain and crew would get used to the ship, and get used to operating in a task force, which Hiae would command as the highest-ranking officer in the formation. Once they finished shakedown, they'd enter active combat service. The crews of the ships had already been trained for their posts but training just wasn't the same as actual hands-on experience. They needed at least one operational mission to get the bugs worked out before they went into battle.

The ceremony ended, and Jason got his kids and Shya off the ship so Hiae could get her small task force moving to begin shakedown. They were again transferred to the *Spectre*, and Traea took them home.

Not that anything good was waiting for him at home. Zaa was there, and she was there in person. Usually he was very happy to see her, but here lately, every time she showed on Karis it wasn't good news. He greeted her warmly, putting their hands on each other's necks in the ritual Kimdori way, then she confirmed his fears by dragging him into his study and putting it on secure mode. "Uh oh," Jason sighed, flopping back in his chair. "I take it you were waiting for me to feel better before dropping something on me?"

She gave him a compassionate look. “Sadly, yes,” she confirmed. She sat down on the edge of his desk and looked up. “Cybi, would you join us?”

Immediately, a solid hologram formed from the emitters in the room, the familiar nude-yet-silhouetted form Cybi preferred, wearing Sora Karinne’s face. She nodded to Zaa and floated up behind Jason’s chair, putting her hands on his shoulders familiarly. “Firstly,” she said, touching her memory band. An image appeared before them, a three-dimensional hologram of the Andromeda galaxy. “My children have managed to build a picture of our foe’s home situation,” she began, and the image turned two shades, red and blue. The blue side of the galaxy was smaller than the red side. “The Consortium is at war with a rival in their home galaxy, which we shall call the Syndicate,” she began. “The Syndicate currently enjoys a territorial advantage in the war, provided that this information is approximately one hundred twenty days old. As you can see, these two powers utterly control their home galaxy, and also as you can see, the Consortium is starting to lose. The Consortium, as dominating powers go, do not have ruthless policies. The Syndicate, however, does not share the Consortium’s moral compass. They have invested all their efforts into defeating their rival, and they have enslaved all who fall under their banner into the war effort. To put it simply, my friend, the Syndicate is a *worse* version of the Consortium, willing to commit vast atrocities in order to achieve victory. The common tactic of the Syndicate is to totally destroy planets to make them uninhabitable if they cannot hold them, much as what was done to Karis, or send automated planet killer weapons against Consortium systems. They have killed *trillions* this way, by destroying anything they cannot control.”

A simple white dot appeared outside the galaxy. “This is why the Consortium has changed its policies to match their more ruthless adversary, Jason,” she said grimly. “We have confirmed it. This is a *Syndicate* fleet. They have managed to evade Consortium forces and have jumped across Consortium territory and out of their galaxy. They are coming here.”

Jason just didn’t have the energy to sigh. “How many?” he asked woodenly.

“We have no solid data. They have only just appeared at the extreme edge of our long-range hyperspace sensors. But Consortium reports we

have intercepted places the numbers somewhere between twenty and thirty thousand ships.”

“Holy God,” Jason said woodenly. That was roughly equal to what the Consortium had been willing to risk sending here, proving that things were probably even between them.

“The fleet will be here in three years. But the Consortium is at an impasse, as I see it. If they attack Karis, they will lose the majority of their fleet, and therefore lack the resources to face the Syndicate. If they fortify and dig in, they only give us more time to prepare for them, which they absolutely cannot allow us to do. Give the Confederacy three years, and the Consortium will be facing defenses they cannot defeat. And when the Syndicate enters the theater, everything changes. The Consortium will be fighting a war on two fronts and will be outnumbered and outgunned.”

Jason leaned back in his chair and put his hands over his face. When would there be *fucking* good news? First the Consortium, now this Syndicate. Even if they quickly defeated the Consortium, they had another war looming on the horizon, for Zaa made sure to paint these foes of the Consortium as ruthless warmongers. He leaned back towards the desk as Cybi’s hands massaged his shoulders gently, then looked at Zaa. “We have to tell the others.”

“There’s more to talk about, my cousin,” she told him. “The Consortium is taking a page from their foes’ playbook, to use your idiom.” She touched her band again, and an image of what looked like one of the Shio planets replaced the map. Zaa pointed at what looked like a large industrial complex under construction. “That is a planet killer,” she declared. “It is designed to introduce a reaction in the atmosphere that will cause the oxygen and nitrogen to ignite the very air in a firestorm, which will totally destroy all life on the planet, down to the last microbe. They are building these devices on *every* planet they control and are planting similar destruct mechanisms into the stations they captured. This is their response to our intent to retaliate. My children have confirmed that if any Consortium system commander feels he cannot hold the system against attack, he is to destroy it and retreat. Scorched earth, I believe your people call it.”

He looked grimly at the device, which only looked about half done. “Can we attack before they get those built?”

“Yes, we can, but it is something we have to take into consideration after our initial offensive. We’ll have to send in my children to sabotage those devices where they get them built. For that, cousin, we need your help.”

“Just ask.”

“We need the specs for the CMS cloaking device,” she told him. “I want to install it on my infiltrators.”

“Done. Send your techs to 3D and I’ll have them trained immediately.”

“I will send them presently. Now, as to the other matter of importance,” she said, touching her band again, but nothing happened. “This is information that cannot leave this room.” Jason nodded in acknowledgement. “The Consortium knows they are compromised,” she told him. “They know enough about us to correctly guess that their recent setbacks are not just due to Karinne counter-intelligence. The capture of one of their ships explained some of it to them, but now they know that Kimdori have penetrated their security and are gathering information from within. Twice already, my children within have had to change identities or take proactive measures to evade security sweeps, and the lack of results has not convinced our foes we are not there. What this means, Jason, is that they have shifted several projects so that their existence and their progress are secret, even within the Consortium. There are projects they have undertaken on captured planets which my children are unable to track, because no information about them is leaving those planets. My children can’t learn of anything like that from their current position, where the Consortium is actively throttling the flow of information through their main headquarters base. That is another reason why we need your CMS. I need to get children into those positions to find out what they work on, and what danger it may pose to us.”

“So, they’re going to be changing their codes and protocols.”

“They have already done so, but since I have children on the inside, they have transmitted the new codes and protocols to Karis, and Miaari simply adjusts. That is another reason why they know we are inside. Every move they make, we counter far too easily. The initial breaking of their codes and the understanding of their ships and sensor systems they attribute



to us capturing a ship, but the other things, they know that comes from a spy among them.”

Jason nodded, his mind already working. They had three years to defeat the Consortium and prepare for the second invasion, which would be much nastier if Zaa’s information was correct. Logic told him to try to negotiate with the Consortium, strike a deal because they seemed the lesser of the two evils of Andromeda, but he had too much Faey in him to accept that. The Consortium could not be trusted. They had attacked Karis, betrayed the Urumi, killed his people, caused mayhem and destruction throughout the galaxy. If he made a deal with them, they’d stab him in the back at the first available opportunity and doing so would earn him the eternal enmity of Sk’Vrae. No, the Consortium had to not just be beaten, but crushed. They had to be *destroyed*, eliminated to the last ship, to show this Syndicate that the residents of *this* galaxy were nastier than their Andromedan foes, and convince them to turn their happy asses right around and go back to their home galaxy. The best kind of war was the war that was never fought, as the old adage went.

They had to throw themselves utterly into one war to avoid a second one.

He considered the problem from the Consortium’s side for a moment. They were trying to assault a heavily defended fortress, and they knew they were going to take ghastly casualties in the attack, even if they succeeded. They knew that more than half of any fleet they sent at Karis would be destroyed, and probably even more than that now that they had to navigate two light years of empty space at sublight, and do so against an enemy that could jump hyperspace freely at the same time—he was almost sure they knew that by now, they still had their spies and ears in the Imperium, no matter how good Zaa had cleared them out. They’d have to go for two years while facing constant attack that would whittle their fleet down to almost nothing by the time it got to Karis, then face fearsome, almost impenetrable defenses protecting the planet. Either way, when the smoke cleared, they weren’t going to have the forces on hand to defend against the Syndicate when they showed up.

They weren’t building those planet killers to discourage attack. They were going to leave nothing behind for their enemies. If they succeeded in

taking Karis, they would plunder the planet, take Cybi, enslave the Generations, take enough Faey and Terran prisoners to breed more Generations, then they would *exterminate absolutely everyone else*.

They were going to commit *genocide*, on a fucking *galactic* scale. And do it all over here where their Andromedan subjects would never know what they did, never know what kind of monsters they were. Out of sight, out of mind.

Jason rubbed his temples, then sighed. “Someday you’re going to bring me *good* news, Zaa,” he told her wearily. “You understand what they’re doing, don’t you?”

“I suspect they intend to destroy us all,” she said simply. “They will not be able to defend against the Syndicate if they attack Karis. Their orders are to take Karis no matter what atrocities they must commit, so I believe that they intend to use the populations they have conquered as slave labor to help conquer Karis, execute the attack as soon as they find a way around the interdictors, take what they want, and leave nothing behind for the Syndicate when they arrive. Their plan is for their enemies to arrive and find the galaxy in ruins. The Consortium will kill anyone they can manage and destroy anything they can to deny their enemies any spoils.”

“*It does seem to be their intent,*” Cybi agreed. “*The attack on Raxxad only reinforces the theory. They did not have to do what they did unless they intend to leave nothing behind.*”

“That’s what I think too. God, why did I get up this morning?” he sighed.

She gave him a compassionate look, then put her hand on his neck. “I must come visit soon just to visit, so you don’t begin to believe I am a harbinger of doom,” she said lightly.

“That would be nice. The kids love you. In the meantime, I think I’d better call a meeting, then talk to Dahnai. I’ll let you break it to the others and let them decide what to do, then discuss it with Dahnai afterwards.”

“You should be there,” Zaa told him.

“No, I’m just a house ruler, Zaa. I’ll leave the politics to you and the others. If they want my opinion, they can ask me to join their conference. In

the end I know what has to be done, so I'll just get started on doing it while they talk and posture and try to impress each other with how much better they are than everyone else, and eventually agree to do what I'm already doing in the first place."

"You prove yourself worthy of that ring more and more, cousin," she said with a gentle smile.

Zaa left him to his work, which first was a hastily called conference over at the White House. His cabinet, which included Kumi, Miaari, Cybi, the leaders of the Legion, and the military command staff were called in, making the cabinet meeting room a bit crowded, and when Jason sat at the table with Cybi hovering behind him, he got right to the point. "The enemies of the Consortium are coming to this galaxy," he declared, which made Myleena curse, Tom and Jenny frown, and Myri clench her fist. "We have three years before they get here."

"How many?" Juma asked.

"From what Denmother said, approximately thirty thousand, give or take ten thousand. They're not close enough to get an accurate count," he answered. "This game just changed, people," he said with a weary sigh. "From what Zaa told me, they're building devices on every planet and station they've conquered that will eradicate the entire population, and I believe they intend to *use* them," he stated, then he explained his fears and his reasoning behind them. "It's the only logical reasoning behind what they're doing and what we know. They intend to blitz Karis, take what they want, then burn everything behind them so their enemies find nothing but smoldering wreckage and dead bodies when they get here."

"If that's the case, then why are they risking resources attacking the Skaa?" Jenny fretted.

"Because the Skaa pissed them off, most likely," Kumi interjected.

"And what did they do when they finally broke Skaa defenses?" Myleena asked, glancing at Jason. "Their intent is pretty clear. They're going to kill anyone they don't need and take those few they do need back to Andromeda along with Cybi and the secrets of biogenics. You don't build planet busters unless you intend to *use* them," she stated bluntly.

*“I have to concur with the Grand Duke’s reasoning,” Cybi declared. “They will use those they have conquered to prepare for the attack on Karis, then kill everyone that remains after they have what they want.”*

“I’d better get my troops ready,” Sioa growled. “It would be best for us to *capture* one of those half-built planet killers, so we can see how they built them and give the Kimdori solid info to take with them if they try to sneak onto a planet and sabotage one. Those things would have to be sabotaged to attack any planet, and that’s what the Kimdori do.”

“That’s a damn good idea,” Navii nodded. “The coming counter-offensive will definitely require ground forces, and the KDF outstrips everyone else.”

“Sounds like a job for the Marines, and possibly the KBB if it’s particularly hairy,” Sioa looked towards Myri, who nodded. “They’re the offensive arm of the KDF,” she said to Jenny and Tom, who looked a little confused. “And the KBB are the *best*, by Trelle’s garland.”

“Get them ready,” Myri agreed. “Have them start drilling for a surface invasion.”

“They already do that. I just need to have them start drilling for the planets we’ll attack. And they’d better do it fast, I think they’ll jump out the first attack task force tomorrow. That gives us four days to be ready for a ground attack.”

“You’ll have everything you need,” Jason told her. “I’ll ask Dahnai and Sk’Vrae for some backup. The Imperial Marines are damn good, as are the Collective Stormtroopers.”

“Jenny, did that gravity beam weapon ever pan out?” Tim asked. “If we’re going to invade, that thing might take out those mantis mecha easy.”

“It sorta works, but it’s not exactly an infantry weapon,” she said with a rueful chuckle, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

“Gladiators totally overwhelm their surface mecha,” Sioa said professionally. “I’m more worried about conscripted Shio or Alliance infantry. I don’t want to fire on people I’m there to liberate, but I have no doubt they’ll make them fight. With guns pointed at their backs, they’ll have little choice.”

“Now there we can help,” Jenny said quickly. “Jayce, you still have the design plans for that subsonic inducer? You know, the one you used in Washington?”

Jason gave her a start, then laughed. “That would work!” he declared. “And it wouldn’t affect anyone in Crusader armor!”

“Sounds like an idea,” Sioa said. “Provided someone tells me what it does.”

“It emits a harmonic subsonic field that feels like a million biting ants,” Jason told her. “I think we could whip something up. Turn that bad boy on, and everyone in a few dozen blocks under it won’t be doing anything but rolling on the ground feeling like they were dunked in itching powder. I doubt it’d affect the Consortium’s insectoids because they have exoskeletons, but it’ll incapacitate just about everyone else without doing any real harm.”

“Now that’s damn clever,” Sioa grinned.

“Clever is what we do, General,” Jenny grinned right back.

“Think you can whip up something in two days, guys?”

“Sure, shouldn’t be a problem,” Tom nodded. “You used a bunch of little ones, but we should be able to build a freakin’ big’un. We’ll have to dig up the design plans out of the database. I’ll put Jenny and Luke on it.”

Myri was looking at a series of holograms in front of her seat, then focused on one. “Here, Sioa. Get your ground forces ready for Ravarra and Shio Prime,” she said, pointing. “I’ll suggest we focus on Shio Prime to the others in the War Room. We’ll send the others to Ravarra, and we’ll attack Shio Prime. Once we have those secured, we can take the other two Shio systems, then jump across to Grevalt. We’ll take them back one at a time.”

“I will get detailed intelligence about both planets, particularly where they are building the planet killers,” Miaari noted.

“We’ll need it to generate an attack plan,” Sioa told her. “I’m not sending my girls down there with no information.”

“We’ll dig some toys out of the box, they can be useful,” Tom added. “There are a few new weapons we’ve been dying to try out. Using them in a

battle is as good a test as any.”

“Like what?” Myri asked curiously.

“Well, we weaponized the Satan’s Marbles into a missile warhead, for one,” Jenny answered. “We also have weapon versions of conduit smashers piggybacked on shield bores. The bore gets the package through the shield, then the smashers deploy and try to disable a ship without destroying it. It was an idea we came up with to capture Consortium ships, but now I think we can focus on using them against captured Alliance ships, so we’re not slaughtering unwilling combatants.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jason nodded.

“We also have our first nano-weapon ready for testing. I call them spiders,” Myleena said, causing a hologram of one to appear over the table. It did resemble a spider but was microscopic. “These are programmed to invade Consortium ships and attack their computer cores. But they don’t work very fast, because they have to physically travel to the computer core to do the job. For a microscopic robot, traveling from the point of entry to the core can take a while. It’d be the equivalent of like two hundred kathra.”

“Hmm,” Miaari mused, looking at it. “Myleena, could you adapt them to invade a planet killer and disable its computer?”

“Easily,” she shrugged. “You capture one of those planet killers and let me look it over, I can design spiders to take them out.”

“Then that is what we will do,” Miaari declared. “These nanites will be the insurance that an infiltration mission is a success should the Kimdori fail. They can deploy them before they make their attempt, so that if they are thwarted, the machines can accomplish the mission.”

“Speaking of toys, how are the inventories?” Jason asked Tom.

“Not back up to where I’d like them,” he answered. “Most of the factory slots are going for military orders. That and Myri keeps stealing what we have for the military.”

“Hey, they work for us as well as you,” she protested.

“Indeed, launching a salvo of Buzzsaws in front of a task force sets the tone of the battle immediately,” Navii chuckled.

“I only have so much space,” Trenirk Bruun, the Makati Secretary of Produced and Replicated Resources, which included the management of house factories, noted. “Most of the industrial output right now is tied up in Wolf production.”

“And finding outside factories to take orders is damn hard at the moment,” Kumi concurred. “Everyone’s busy building stuff for the war. This is why I’ll be glad when we get that extra industrial output up and running up on the north continent.”

“I think we can work something out,” Trenirk said, looking at Tom. “Come see me after we wrap up here, I’ll squeeze in some Legion projects around other orders where I can.”

“Are we going to have interdictors ready for the invasion without having to pull them from Karis?” Jason asked.

*“There are seven new interdictors waiting for deployment,”* Cybi answered.

“It’s too bad we can’t launch them at the systems we intend to attack and interdict them to keep the Consortium from moving things,” Jenny frowned. “If we did, they’d just blow them up, or capture them, and we can’t let them do that.”

Jason’s eyes widened. That was a *damn* good idea! They didn’t have to put the interdictors in the systems, they only had to get them *close enough*! Stick an interdictor half a light year from a target system, turn it on, and do everything under the fucking sun to hide the interdictor and its effect until it was too late for the Consortium to stop it, and the interdictor would spread over the target system after about 21 hours. If they could hide the interdictor and what it was doing for, for, for...fuck, he had to do the math...107 minutes, it would put the interdictor out of reach of a retaliatory Consortium attack. After 107 minutes, an attack would have to travel sublight for over nine hours to reach the interdictor, and even light-speed weapons would be far enough away to see them coming and stop them; they’d have 14 minutes to counter any weapon moving at light speed or just below. They could jump an interdictor close enough to where it covered a target system just as the interdictor entered logarithmic mode, but that was too dangerous. The closer the interdictors were to Consortium sensors, the better chance they

had to detect what was going on despite the Kimdori. It was better to set them up a good distance away, where Kimdori SCM could have peak effectiveness.

He looked at Myleena, who seemed to have the same idea he did, from the wolfish smile on her face. *[You thinking what I'm thinking?]*

*[Just get them close enough,]* he answered.

She nodded, then laughed brightly. "We just can't do it to a system where they have an active planet killer, or they'd set it off," she said aloud.

"Huh?" Kumi asked.

"Miaari," he said quickly, reaching out and grabbing her hand, letting her see what he had in mind. "Could the Kimdori hide an interdictor effect long enough to prevent the Consortium from being able to reach it? Say, if we parked one *half a light year* from a target system?"

She gave him a toothy grin. "We most certainly could," she answered, then laughed. "Ingenious!"

"*What do you intend?*" Jrz'kii, the Kizzik Secretary of transportation, asked.

"We intend to park an interdictor some distance away from a target system and turn it on. If we can hide it from the Consortium, the interdiction effect will cover the target system, robbing them of the ability to travel in and out. We just have to be *very* careful in how we use it," Jason said. "The Consortium has orders to destroy anything they feel they can't hold. We can't just go out and pull this trick at every system they've captured, or they'll commit genocide against the populations. But we can pull this trick against systems we intend to attack. If we time it right, the interdictor will prevent Consortium retreat or prevent reinforcements from reaching the system, allowing us to attack without fear of being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Hell, if it works just right, it would strand Consortium ships trying to jump in to reinforce defenders deep in interdicted space, forcing them to spend *months* trying to get out to where they can jump out," he said with an eager smile, clapping his hands and then rubbing them together.



The massive Kizzik, the largest one on Karis, seemed to ponder that, then nodded her mantis-like head. *“An effective idea,”* she complemented through her translator.

*[Jason, Empress Dahnai is calling,]* Cybi communed privately. He glanced at her and nodded, and he accessed her comm from the table. “Excuse me a sec, guys,” he said, then he looked down at the table. *[What is it, love?]*

*[We need you in council,]* she said, a bit irked. *[Denmother just dropped the fucking mother of all bombs on us, and we need you here.]*

He sighed. *[Alright, give me a minute, I’m discussing the same matter with my cabinet and commanders.]*

*[Making plans?]*

*[You know it. We have one partially fleshed out. Anyway, be there in a minute.]*

He extricated himself from the session and returned to his study, where Zaa joined him in person and Cybi materialized behind him as the room entered secure mode, and the holograms of the various rulers, and their highest assistants as the case may be, of the sector appeared in a row before him. Dahnai and Sk’Vrae were in the middle, with Assaba, Grizza and Vizzie, Grayhawk, Magran and the Grand Master, Ba’mra’ei Me’ber, Field Marshall Grran of the Jobodi, and now Brayrak Kruu of the Mob and Ambassador Hraga of the Zyagya had joined them as observers. This was every major power in the sector, both those allied against the Consortium and the two neutral powers. They were already arguing over the best course of action when he joined in, with the conquered rulers rallying for *their* empires to be saved first, along with Dahnai and Assaba trading barbs and Grizza and Vizzie arguing with each other more than the rest of the council. Clearly, he’d joined the meeting after it had degenerated into this shouting match.

Oh yeah, this was solidarity.

He gave Zaa a disgusted look, which made her smile toothily at him.

Things toned down after they realized Jason had joined the meeting, if only so they could rehash what they’d already gone over for his benefit.

The military plans hadn't changed, but they were arguing over exactly the best course of action to go about retaking friendly systems from the Consortium in light of their plans to destroy anything they couldn't hold. The threat of those planet killers put a wrench in their plans, since now they had to ensure that they could attack without threatening the population of the planet they invaded. Both Grayhawk and Ba'mra'ei were trying to convince the others to save *their* systems first, but Jason found it a little odd that they'd be fighting over something that was supposed to be in the purview of the war room. The leaders weren't military minds, with the exception of Field Marshall Grran or maybe Jason himself, because of his Legion days. They might dabble or believe they were excellent tacticians, but the honest truth was, they were not. But that was what their command staffs were for, to do the military things for them.

"We're already setting up an attack," Jason told them wearily after they caught him up on things. "The KMS and the Kimdori are going to assault Shio Prime in order to capture one of those planet killers *before* they can finish it. Once we have it, we're going to study it, learn how to break them, then allow the Kimdori to infiltrate and sabotage them in any system where they get it finished before we can invade."

They all looked at him, and Grran nodded knowingly.

"What we need is the diversionary attack from the Confederate forces," he told them. "We need them to attack Ravarra, the closest Shio system to Terra. That should turn the Consortium's eyes right when we need them looking the other way."

"So our ships will jump in, attack, then jump out when their forces arrive?" Assaba asked.

"Actually, you're going to attempt to capture the planet killers on both of the planets in the system, so jump in ready to launch a ground attack once you've defeated their defenses. We need it to be Ravarra because we're setting up a little surprise for them." He explained their idea to use the interdictors offensively, and Ravarra was perfect because they could set up the interdictor with the Kimdori sensor jammers protecting Confederate space behind it, helping blind the Consortium to what was going on even more. "It's going to be all about timing. If things are timed perfectly, the Confederate fleet will jump in just as the interdiction effect hits the system,

which will be expanding in logarithmic mode by then and will prevent the Consortium from either retreating or reinforcing. That's why we're doing this at Ravarra. They have barely a token force of defense there, all their ships are concentrated at Trieste at the moment, and we know for a fact that their planet killers are *not* completed on either planet. At the same time, we're pulling the same trick at Shio, using the interdicator to prevent Consortium reinforcements from jumping in and attacking. Using the interditors to prevent our enemy from exploiting his ability to jump in real time, we can march right back across the Shio Federation and the Alliance and take back every system they've conquered. As long as we're careful not to attack any system that has an active planet killer until the Kimdori can sabotage it, we can kick them back out of our sector one system at a time."

*"The idea has a great deal in favor of it,"* Grran said sagely through his vocoder device as it translated his sign language, nodding again. *"So long as the Consortium can't detect the interditors as they set up, and we time it correctly, it is a very effective strategy."*

"I take it you can get our ships out?" Assaba asked.

"We just jump a Stargate in and link it to the Terran gate," Jason shrugged. "My battleships can tow a Stargate through hyperspace, they've done it before. And my ships can jump through the interdiction effect."

"And why can't you help us do the same to ours?" Vizzie asked.

"Because your engines can't put out enough power to overcome the interdiction effect," he answered. "Not even ours can without upgrades. That's why I have so many KMS ships out of service right now, we're doing engine refits to let them jump through the interdiction effect."

"And the mythical Karinne technology rises from the past to save us in the present," the Grand Master said with a wry smile at Jason.

"The mythical Karinne technology is why you're in danger in the first place," Jason scoffed.

"No. They would have eventually come, no matter what," Sk'Vrae stated. "They came here once before. Eventually, they would have come again, if only to escape their foes in Andromeda. The resurgence of the Karinnes only hastened the inevitable."

Jason gave Sk'Vrae a grateful look. "So, unless anyone has any objections, we'll let the war room set this up?" he prompted.

Nobody objected, so Jason slapped both hands down on his table. "Fine then. I'll let you all discuss things, because I have a lot to do. Denmother and Empress Dahnai can fill me in afterwards. Good day to you all." He got up without turning things off, since Zaa was in his conference room using the comm. He patted her fondly on the shoulder as he stepped away, and she gave him that same toothy grin as he went back to his own cabinet, and mainly to his military staff and Miaari, so they could work out exactly where to place the interdictor and how the Kimdori could hide its effect from Consortium sensors without raising any red flags that might cause them to send out a hyperspace probe.

It took nearly sixteen hours of constant planning, consultation with Kimdori and KMS engineers, and then a hell of a lot of wrangling with the war room on Terra, but they eventually had a strategy and a timetable laid out. The orders were issued, and the necessary materials were marshaled and thoroughly inspected to ensure everything was in working order.

The plan was essentially the same. The Confederate forces would jump out, they'd lay an interdictor in deep space between Ravarra and Terra to use the blinding effect of the sensor jammer network to hide the interdiction effect, and then their forces would arrive literally with the interdiction effect chasing them from behind. The timing of that had to be absolutely perfect, to prevent the Consortium from jumping the fleet they had at Trieste to reinforce the ships they had at Ravarra. Ten minutes later, just as the Ravarra situation would have the full attention of the Consortium, the KMS and Kimdori would jump in and attack Shio Prime in *force*, designed to quickly overwhelm the more significant defenses they had at Shio and get down to attack and capture that planet killer before they could either get it finished or destroy it to prevent them from inspecting it. There would also be an interdictor set up to interdict Shio, and the effect should reach the system literally at the same time they jumped in, if they timed it properly. The wild card in this plan was how well they could hide the Shio interdictor. It wouldn't have the sensor jammer behind it giving additional aid in blinding Consortium sensors to what was going on. They'd have to

rely on a flotilla of Kimdori SCM ships that would cover the area in what they called a “gray blanket,” which would be a series of sensor jammer pods arrayed in front of the effect that would cause all Consortium sensors to return a false reading of normal when they looked in that direction. Much as the sensor pods returned the false impression that Karis was a ball of radioactive slag, hiding the truth, they were going to hide the interdiction effect behind a false normal. The uncertainty was going to be the last twenty minutes before the attack, when the interdiction effect would be like a tidal wave approaching a shoreline, making it very hard to conceal. At that point, the Kimdori were going to blind Consortium sensors and gamble that they’d see the attack on Ravarra and consider the blinding of Shio’s sensors to be a decoy to draw off reinforcements, or play on the time it would take for them to respond to the blinding and decide what to do about it.

Jason watched with sober eyes as the Confederate forces at Terra exited the Stargate to the TES, and began the journey out to uninterdicted space, beginning the attack. It would take them ten hours to reach the edge, then those 1,107 ships, a mixture of Faey, Urumi, Skaa, and Alliance vessels, would jump out in four waves and head for Ravarra. A squadron of KMS and Kimdori ships led by the *Dreamer* would join them at Ravarra, jumping in just behind them, to join the fleet and lend additional support.

Meanwhile, a task force of 870 KMS and Kimdori ships were already starting to mass outside Kosigi, the overwhelming force they would unleash against Shio to conquer the planet as fast as possible. It would be led by the *Trelle’s Gift*, and would include not only naval forces, but also Marine corvettes, troop transports, and ground assault ships, what they called jumpers, which would land on Shio and disembark Gladiators and pure foot infantry for the ground attack on the planet killer. This wouldn’t just be a battle between naval fleets, it would be a building to building slugfest on the streets of Shio Prime’s capitol city, Shial, as KDF ground forces invaded and captured the planet killer they were building literally in the heart of the Shio’s largest city.

The real war had begun.

It was all quite literally out of his hands now. This was now the domain of Myri and Navii, Lorna and the other generals and admirals in the war room on Terra. He could suggest, he could listen in, but this was now all

beyond his control. They would make the decisions. They would deploy the forces. They would be sending men and women to die...and doing it with his blessing.

*Daira, 14 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Tuesday, 31 March 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Daira, 14 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Ravarra II, Consortium Annexation, Former Shio Federation (Annex  
Control Sector EG-2811)*

The activity showed that they knew something was coming, but they were not prepared for what came down their throats.

Twenty minutes before the interdiction effect reached Ravarra, all Consortium sensors were blinded throughout their entire annexed territory, through both the former Shio and Alliance systems. They knew something was coming, and from the spy probes seeded through the area, they formed up a response fleet to jump wherever the enemy appeared, but only forming up 560 ships rather than their entire available fleet. Either they were confident that 560 ships could handle it, or that was all they were willing to risk.

Then, the fleets arrived at Ravarra.

Ravarra had two inhabited planets, a temperate farming planet, Ravarra II, and an inhabited moon around one of the outer gas giants that farmed the gas giant for rare heavy gases. The bulk of Confederate forces appeared at the edge of jump distance to Ravarra II, while a much smaller fleet arrived at Ravarra VI. Both fleets immediately surged forward in full attack formation, leaving a curious hole in their back center, which was filled almost before the Consortium could consider that empty area, filled by a tactical task force of 16 KMS and 48 Kimdori vessels, and commanded by two of the four known KMS battleships, ships the Consortium identified quickly as the *Trelle's Gift* and the *Jenda*.

The Consortium had been in the galaxy long enough to identify the other ships in the combined fleet; Faey, Urumi, Skaa, and Alliance vessels. The fleet outnumbered the 266 Consortium ships present at the planet by nearly five to one, and the Consortium realized quickly that the fleet attacking Ravarra comprised the majority of the Confederation's available fleet. As such, they called in reinforcements from Trieste, and the present ships took up a defensive formation around an orbital station that had been captured and hastily upgraded to fit Torsion weaponry.

Then the interdiction effect washed over Ravarra II. And that changed *everything*.

The effect couldn't be hidden from a ship being affected by it, because it was no longer a matter of detecting it with sensors. A ship's engines could register the effect even moving in normal space, and almost immediately, the Consortium occupying Ravarra realized that they'd been set up. Their adversaries had managed to hide them placing an interdicator and turning it on, and before they could even decide on a course of action, the interdiction effect had passed so far past the system that reinforcements wouldn't be able to reach Ravarra for over two hours...and that number went up by shocking degrees with every second that passed. By the time reinforcements could jump, they'd have to travel hours and hours to reach the system.

If they could even call for them. Attempts to contact the Consortium command to warn them of this development were met with active jamming. The Karinnes had killed their communications, utterly killed them. Interstellar, gravband, even threaded short range gravband, none of it functioned. The command station couldn't even call orders to the defending ships. But, for the Consortium, this wasn't a complete loss, for they had their short-range visible light communications, able to send complete orders to any ship in line of sight of the station using the light language. It was to this form of communications they reverted, relaying orders both to the ships and to their ground headquarters within the planet killer; there was no better place to put a command center than inside the one thing no attacker would dare fire on.

They were trapped inside the interdiction effect along with the superior force they faced and had no means of communications save light-based.

This was now a fight to the finish, and their adversaries had come armed to the teeth and ready to fight.

Like the opening of some kind of deadly flower, the ships rushing at them attacked. The armor of the lead edge of the Consortium ships around the captured station buckled as holes appeared in them, as they were struck by two-ton rail cannon slugs fired from the KMS cruisers. Those weapons had such sheer power and brutality that they ripped right through the shields and armor of the victim ships and sprayed their innards with white-hot metal slag and metal gas, as the slugs vaporized on impact and that vaporized mass of both slug and armor penetrated the interiors of the ships, tearing them apart from the inside out. Before they could react to that, a few dozen of those Torsion weapons screamed in at them, actively evading fire, and slamming into ten ships, burrowing deep into them and then exploding. Six of those ships went dead and started drifting, while the other four managed to keep power, wounded but still operational enough to fight. Then, the Skaa and Alliance ships fired their salvos of ship to ship missiles, a thousand shimmering dots leaving the Confederate formation and streaking across the void towards the defending Consortium formation. The damaged ships fell back as a blitz of defensive fire unleashed from the Consortium ships, shooting down missiles with precision and accuracy. Some missiles penetrated the defensive fire, causing shields to bloom into visibility as they exploded along the line. The Consortium returned fire with their gravometric missiles, launching them at the formation as it changed, as the Skaa and Alliance ships fell back and Faey battle cruisers took the lead, a move the Consortium would not find strange, given how much intelligence they had on the Faey. Faey ships were equipped with Torsion shockwave generators, an application of Torsion effect the Consortium had not fully explored or utilized, and those ships took the brunt of the retaliatory missile attack. Shimmering waves of red energy exploded around the ships, swirling and undulating like shields hit by fire, which destroyed the bulk of the missiles fired at the formation. Some did manage to penetrate the defensive screen, and those that penetrated unerringly knocked a ship out of action, the explosions either destroying the ships they hit or damaging them so severely they fell out of the formation as it screamed forward. The leading Faey cruisers then fired their plasma torpedoes, energy weapons that behaved like a missile, a coherent crush of phased plasma energy that would go right through shields and explode with



tremendous power once it hit the hull, melting into the hull before it exploded to amplify the destructive power. These weapons were the one weapon the Faey employed that the Consortium most intended to take for their own, even over their impressive MPAC weaponry. Plasma torpedoes were even more powerful than gravometric missiles, and since they were energy based, it meant that a ship didn't have to carry hundreds of missiles, it only needed a few torpedo launchers. Against these weapons, the Consortium could only evade; Torsion strikes on a plasma torpedo had no effect, since the Torsion effect couldn't disrupt the magnetic bubble holding the plasma together. The Torsion beam simply passed through the torpedo without causing it to detonate. Dark matter guns, on the other hand, could disrupt a torpedo's bubble, but at that close range the explosion would hit the ship's shields. It was best to evade the torpedoes, since they were line of sight weapons and couldn't change their trajectory; they were not really meant to be a long distance weapon, they were intended for short to medium range, where they couldn't be easily avoided. Most of the torpedoes were avoided, but one ship literally had nowhere to go, and ended up taking a torpedo strike in its starboard keel, which immediately blacked out all its lights as the plasma storm generated an ion pulse that blew out the plasma power of the ship, and it fell out of formation.

As the Confederate ships closed the distance with shocking speed, they again shifted their alignment, and thousands and thousands of dots of light bloomed around them, as every ship in the formation launched fighters. Fighter combat was relatively unknown to the Consortium, they had little reason to employ fighters against their Andromedan foes, but since coming to this galaxy, they'd been rudely educated as to just how nasty a single little ship could be. It wasn't that single ship; it was the thousand or so others along with it that made them a threat. It wasn't the single bee; it was the swarm. Those swarms surged ahead of the fleet vessels, and in just a matter of thirty seconds, coming in through defensive fire that missed almost every fighter, the lead edge of that cloud of fighters opened fire on the Consortium ships.

Not with plasma or Torsion weaponry, but with *pulse* weapons.

In his customary command position as the lead fighter of the formation, Commander Justin Taggart watched his tactical as his squadron completed the formation after launch, then he punched the throttle and sent his Wolf catapulting ahead of the multinational fleet behind him. Raptors, Starwolves, Dragonflies, Urumi *Krissha* fighters, Alliance Warhawk fighters, and Skaa *Un'Dara* fighters were slowly outpaced as every fighter moved at afterburner speed, his engine producing 180% normal thrust and the inertial dampers in the ship struggling to absorb the radical G forces involved with gravometric acceleration in a vacuum. Before him was a fleet of Consortium ships, tightening their formation in preparation to deal with the fighters, where a ship could fire on fighters attacking its neighbor.

This would be a turkey shoot, as far as Taggart was concerned. Consortium ships had no Torsion shockwave generators and no fast-track anti-fighter weapons, only heavy mount cannons meant for naval fleet combat, and heavy mount weapons had a hell of a time tracking on a fast, elusive fighter and hitting it. The key to this for Taggart and the other fighters would be a tactic they called shield-skipping, getting so close they brushed the enemy's shields, so close that their slow-tracking heavy weapons couldn't anticipate and lead a fighter and shoot it down. Consortium ships were like fat, wallowing deer to a nimble Wolf, unable to outrun him, unable to outmaneuver him, and unable to bite back once his Wolf started sinking its fangs into their fat carcasses.

This was a strange position for him. Taggart had been pulled from his usual station on the *Dreamer* and been temporarily deployed on the *Trelle's Gift* because they wanted him here, wanted his expertise with the Wolf fighter at this battle theater rather than Shio Prime, because Kimdori intelligence suggested that the bigger naval fight would be here, where the primary defense at Shio would be the thousands of weapon platforms the Imperium sold the Shio not long before they capitulated to the Consortium. Not all of those platforms had been destroyed, and intelligence said that the Consortium was using the remaining platforms for defense. That had to be at Shio, because there sure as hell were no weapon platforms here. Looking at the ships before him, the planet behind them, and close to an orbital station big enough to be sitting in orbit around any Faey planet, Justin Taggart had to agree. This was where he was needed. He was a fighter pilot, and it was his duty, even his calling in life, to sit at the controls of a

powerful piece of machinery and use it to defend freedom and liberty. He had devoted his life to it in the Navy, and now he devoted his life to it in the Karinne Military Service.

He was once again a naval fighter pilot. And he couldn't be happier.

*Deploy ECDs*, Taggart sent to his squadron, and as one every Wolf launched its spinners and drones. Lieutenant Joae Huralle was his Wizzo, his weapon officer up in the cockpit, and it was her commands that launched the drones as it was his that launched the spinners. The four drones attached to his ship would be under her control, while he would control the main weapons on the fighter. *Tighten up a bit, Houri.*

*Sorry boss.*

The targets hurtled towards them at radical speed, as each fighter shifted slightly in the formation to prevent an easy target lock by the fleet's heavy weapons. This was the most dangerous part of the operation, coming in through their optimal range and getting inside their capability to track them with their slow weapons.

*Remember, stay at attack speed at all times*, he sent in reminder as they neared maximum range for the main weapons. *Joae, now!* he barked when they reached the designated time-to-target.

Just as they reached the extreme range of Consortium Torsion weaponry, Joae executed a sensor burst, a little SCM trick the Kimdori had programmed into the fighters. Using their own transceiver antennae, they saturated sensor frequencies the enemy used for computer targeting, which blinded everything but visual tracking. The enemy could track them still, but now to their enemy's targeting computers, the Wolf fighters were the size of a destroyer, making it hard for them to focus down to the fighter itself. *Break into elements after the initial pass, and switch to STG channel 4 for local comm.*

*STG 4, roger*, his wingwoman replied, and after her the other 39 pilots in his squadron.

The sensor blinding tactic worked. Incoming fire wasn't even close to them, allowing the entire squadron to slip through the poorly aimed shots. Their sensor officers would counter their tactic after a few seconds, but in those few seconds, they'd be in firing range and too close for their enemies

to easily track them with heavy weapons. Taggart focused on the first undamaged ship in the formation, for the lead ships were burning or dead from the rail cannons that continued to fire into their formation. He locked onto a Consortium cruiser eclipsing a burning, dead hulk that had once been the ship in front of it, sideslipping a staccato barrage of dark matter fire with ridiculous ease, then both he and Joae opened fire. Blazing white balls of Teryon energy lanced away from the fighter and its four support drones, passed through their shields with no resistance, then impacted the hull. Brilliant goutts of reddish-green flame erupted from those holes as the Teryon bundles disintegrated matter until the resistance destabilized the packet, then the whole thing exploded into normal space with horrific energy. Taggart kept continuous fire as he slipped right along the edge of the ship's shields, varying his trajectory and speed enough to prevent them from leading him, the entire time a stream of white balls of death blasted from his Wolf and its four support drones. He turned the ship, so it flew backwards even as it shifted upwards to orbit the target ship, showing a light touch on the mental controls that made him one of the deadliest fighter pilots in the KMS. He'd taken to vector-based fighter combat almost naturally and understood the nuances of the flying style as if he'd been flying space-based for fifty years. His movements were subtle, delicate, slight, evading incoming fire *just enough* to avoid damage, sometimes having the red lances or blackish-red pulses of energy brush against his fighter's shields, but in vector-based flight, those slight touches were all it took. He spun a barrel roll to get his wing out of the way of an incoming Torsion bolt, then the ship skittered about twenty *shakra* to port to evade a series of dark matter blasts, and the entire time a continuous blaze of white balls fired from the nose, ventral ports, and wings of the fighter, the six Pulse Autocannons in the fighter blowing an eerily symmetrical series of holes in the cruiser's hull. His wingmate concentrated her fire along the same firing arc, so her blasts added to his own along that line, sometimes coming directly in after his shots at the same location and penetrating even deeper into the enemy ship. Taggart opted to swing under his target ship as the rest of the squadron broke up into elements, fighting teams of four Wolves that would split again into two flights of lead and wingman, but would attack the same ship at the command of the element leader. The 76<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron split up as Taggart stayed in tight orbit around the initial

target ship's shields, and his three element fighters followed him underneath their victim.

The Wolves were both the spearhead and the diversion, for it allowed the other fighters to get into firing range with much less resistance. And when they did, it was total chaos. Fighters were *everywhere* within two minutes, Wolves, Raptors, Starwolves, Warhawks, *krissha*, and *Un'Dara* were everywhere, firing on every ship, dancing between them. The Consortium was overwhelmed, firing every weapon they had almost wildly, barely hitting anything, as Taggart orbited his cruiser until his element hit something important and blew out all its power along its starboard side. Joae was focusing her drones against where they knew a critical power exchanger was located deep inside the ship, her drones coming to a dead stop and focusing all their blasts at one specific point for nearly five seconds, letting each Teryon blast sizzle into the hole caused by the last, allowing the drones to literally drill down through the armor and bulkheads, through deck after deck until they finally reached the exchanger. The drones streaked away just before a series of blackish-red dark matter blasts would have hit them, but the tail end of the Teryon pulses continued on into the ship, and the last few hit paydirt. A cataclysmic eruption of flame and debris exploded out of that hole as they hit the exchanger, and that knocked out all power to the entire ship.

Taggart's squadron of Wolves had scored the first kill in the Wolf fighter's service.

"Keep it up!" Taggart barked as he turned and focused on the next closest cruiser, corkscrewing through its defensive fire to close on it.

"Targets, two hundred *kathra*, 184 mark 120!" Joae called through the intercom. Taggart looked in that direction and saw several thousand Shio fighters rising up from the planet, being forced to protect the Consortium.

"Scan them!" Taggart ordered as he blasted a series of very deep holes along the narrow neck that attached the crescent bows of Consortium ships to their main bodies.

"They're *Shio*!" she replied with a laugh.

Taggart opened command frequency to issue a field order. "Starwolves and Dragonflies engage those Shio fighters, all other Confederate fighters

actively avoid them and continue assault on the Consortium fleet!”

“*Under whose authority!*” a Skaa challenged.

“Those are *Shio* in those fighters, you fucking idiot!” Taggart snarled in reply. “Let the Faey mindstrikers deal with them!”

There was a startled silence. “*Do as he commands!*” that Skaa concluded.

The fighters broke up to their assigned tasks just as another series of new signals appeared on Joae’s scanners. “Consortium fighter drones coming up from the planet!” she barked.

“Everyone’s gotta be a fucking copycat,” Taggart snarled as he glanced at the sensor readout. The Consortium drones were slapdash, almost comical in appearance, Torsion guns crudely mounted onto what looked like altered grav platforms, a totally rushed and piecemeal attempt to mimic the lethal Karinne automated weapon platforms. But they were fast enough to chase the slower fighters and had enough firepower to destroy them, so they had to be taken seriously.

The order came down from command. “*Alliance Warhawks, INS Raptor squadrons five, twenty-six, thirty, ninety-two, and KMS Wolf squadrons thirty-seven and forty-one engage those drones!*” an Urumi’s voice barked over command gravband. “*Try to destroy them before they reach the Consortium fleet!*”

“Glad it’s not us,” Joae murmured as she had her drones lock onto and fire on a Consortium Torsion weapon port. The four drones slashed in, pulse weapons blazing, and destroyed the gun battery, then screamed out, moving far faster and turning far harder than a mecha could while carrying a living pilot, which made them even harder to destroy than a Wolf.

Taggart yanked hard to port to avoid instant death; not from an enemy weapon, but from a plasma torpedo fired from the fleet. Taggart’s fighter orbited up and around the ship he was firing on and then disengaged when four rail cannon slugs slammed into it, knocking it out, and he stupidly almost collided with the fucking torpedo while evading dark matter fire. He cursed himself for not seeing that coming, then nestled in behind the torpedo, using it as cover from sensors and optical scanners before careening off as his wingwoman rejoined him, swooping down on another

Consortium ship, this one a heavy cruiser. He cursed again when two slapdash weapon platforms punched out of the heavy cruiser's landing bay, but he never gave them a chance. Joae's drones attacked those platforms immediately, destroying them before they even managed to turn on him and Houri, his wingwoman. That was the function of the drones, primarily as ship defense against other fighters and combat mecha. When not needed to defend the fighter, they attacked along with it.

*I bet they made them right there and launched them,* Houri mused to him.

*Probably. Spread the word about that little stunt while we beat the shit out of this ship.*

*Aye-aye, Commander.*

Taggart then got back to business, and that business was making these fucking bastards pay for ever messing with House Karinne.

The Consortium commanders were rocked back on their heels by the sheer savagery of the fighter assault. The ones firing the pulse weapons were larger than the other fighters, and from what intelligence the Consortium had, those were the new Karinne Wolf fighters, of which they knew little. The other fighters, Faey, Urumi, Skaa, and Alliance, lacked the same firepower, but they were armed with Torsion or MPAC weapons that were powerful enough to penetrate their armor and deal damage inside their ships. The fighters were almost dizzyingly fast, firing on every ship, moving fast and actively evading fire, which made them harder to hit than missiles. Every fighter that was destroyed was replaced by four others as the 248 surviving Consortium ships were harried and harassed by fighters, fighters that were doing *real* damage to their ships. The fighters destroyed yet another a Consortium cruiser with sustained fire, a thousand little cuts killing the whole, and just as the cruiser went dead and drifted out of formation, the Confederate formation plowed directly into the Consortium formation like two great rams clashing over rights to the herd.

The head-on assault was spearheaded by a formation of bulky Urumi vessels. Built to exchange fire with enemies at point blank range and just beat them down, the heavily armored and highly resilient ships rammed

right into the enemy formation, forcing the Consortium to evade their ships or be bulldozed out of the way. That tactic put the Consortium out of sorts for that critical first moment of the battle, as the rest of the Confederate ships fanned out behind the Urumi spearhead in a phalanx, giving them a wide field of fire against the Consortium that scattered before the Urumi assault. In the first seconds of the engagement, ten Consortium cruisers were destroyed. The Consortium retaliated quickly, pulling their ships closer to the orbital station as a barrage of red and black streaks erupted from every ship, Torsion and dark matter guns opening up on the enemy fleet...but they were outnumbered five to one. Their shots were swallowed in a blitz of return fire, most of it Torsion and dark matter as well, which withered the defending ships like wheat before a scythe. The only ships not firing Torsion and dark matter weapons were KMS and Kimdori ships, which fired even more destructive particle beam, pulse, and stream weaponry. Within two minutes, the Consortium's defending fleet and all its hastily constructed protective drone platforms had been eviscerated, the Shio fighters scrambled from the planet's surface had been subdued by Faey telepaths, had actually turned on the Consortium and had joined the battle against them, and yet the orbital station was almost untouched, as if the Confederation were actively avoiding damaging it.

Within four minutes, what few Consortium ships that remained turned on their attackers, employing suicide attacks to try to take them with them, as the Consortium forces on the station attempted to overload its core and destroy it. What they found, however, was that the Shio forced to work on the station were rebelling against them. The ones in engineering had overwhelmed their overseers and had unlinked all operations from the command center, then started to barricade themselves into engineering. They were led by a tall Shio male, who then, to their shock and chagrin, turned out to be a Kimdori infiltrator, taking his canine shape and barking commands to the Shio with him.

They were overwhelmed from without and infiltrated from within. They only had the planet killer now to fulfill their orders, which wasn't complete but had enough of a core to overload and destroy to poison the planet and kill its population. The Consortium agents on the planet wouldn't receive any orders because they were locked out on the station, but they'd perform their duty of their own volition when they realized they lost contact—



And then the commanders saw a large contingent of the invading fleet break off and descend into the atmosphere.

Again, they were a step ahead!

On the bridge of the *Trelle's Gift*, it was a much different outlook. Jaiya Karinne ignored the Skaa and Faey admirals overseeing the operation as she commanded the task force. The two battleships had hung back in the initial attack on the Consortium fleet, but now that they had been wiped out and the orbital station was secured by Kimdori infiltrators, they were free to lend all support to the ground assault portion of the plan. The fighters that had been swarming the Consortium ships were now dropping into the atmosphere well behind the jumpers and corvettes, and video feeds were already in place. Jaiya saw the first troop dropship's skids hit Ravarran soil and open, which allowed twelve sleek Gladiator exomechs to disembark, followed quickly by Faey Travalta mecha and a squadron of Skaa tanks, which were four-legged spider-like mecha that were actually quite fast and well-armed. Behind the mecha poured 1,750 Faey Imperial Marines, Urumi Stormtroopers, Karinne Marines, and Skaa Red Guardsmen, their elite ground attack force.

The only mystery they had was the weapon platforms. There were supposed to be Faey-made Torsion weapon platforms, part of the defensive package that the Imperium had sold to the Shio, but none of those platforms were here. The only platforms here were those hastily thrown-together platforms they'd launched, which were quite inferior to Karinne-designed platforms. Finding those platforms, however, wasn't her job. They weren't here, they weren't threatening her fleet, so they were not her concern. Her concern was the planet killer.

They already had detailed intelligence about the planet killer assembly, and the forces moved swiftly to their assigned positions. Wolf and Raptor fighters screamed down from the heavens and started attacking ground battery positions, destroying the main threat to the mecha, as the exomechs and Skaa tanks fanned out and secured the two main entrances to the planet killer, its loading bay and its secondary material cargo door. Karinne and Imperial Marines surged ahead on their gravometric drives, forming the vanguard behind which the Urumi and Skaa charged. The Faey were tasked

with finding and removing native Shio who might be forced to fire on Confederate forces, unleashing the power of telepathy. Once they had the Shio contained, they would push into the facility and capture its three main points; its power core, its main control center, and its main power exchanger assembly, from which the device could be self-destructed along with the other two positions.

But it wasn't going to be a simple cakewalk. Those Consortium mantis-mecha were stationed around the facility, some 270 of them, and they were already moving to engage Confederate forces, and there were Consortium insectoids inside the planet killer, and they were no doubt armed and would repel any invasion into the facility.

Jaiya focused on the main loading bay, where the bulk of the materials and building supplies were entering the facility. There was intense small arms fire emanating from the bay, from mantis mecha, Consortium ground units, and weapon batteries mounted at tactical positions around the landing pad and main warehouse door. The intense fire caused the invaders to take cover for a few seconds, until a Wolf fighter dropped down almost to where its wings brushed the plascrete and unloaded on the defenders with withering pulse fire. The fighter focused on the weapon bunkers, its assigned targets, but it also took out one of the mantis mecha before rising back up and allowing two Gladiators, two Travalts, and three Skaa spider tanks to charge into the facility's large landing area. The Gladiator gracefully slipped aside as one of the defending mantis opened fire on it, floating on its gravometric drive, then it blew the mantis into pieces with answering pulse fire. The Travalts and the spider tanks proved they were not outdated junk, as they moved with surprising swiftness, their weapons blazing as they fired on a gang of 14 mantis mecha that were coming up on them from what Jaiya would call the north side of the fenceline. After destroying the weapon bunkers and defending mantis craft, the mecha fired on the defensive bunkers, their heavy weapons blowing massive holes in the walls, setting fires, and killing insectoid defenders by the dozen. The mindstrikers then struck, sweeping the entire facility and knocking out every mind they could find, putting all the Shio within out of action so they couldn't be forced to take up arms and shoot at the Confederate forces. Once that was done, the Karinne Marines opened up on the remains of the fortified bunkers flanking the main entrance with railguns from outside the

range of hand-held Torsion rifles, the corkscrew trails going right into and through the armored bunkers, scattering the remaining defenders within as the mecha pulled back to give the ground forces a clear path to the facility but also where they could reinforce them. Unable to fire back in a coordinated manner, the defenders were forced to take whatever cover they could find against weapons that went right through their armored bunker walls, which allowed the Imperial Marines and Stormtroopers to get close enough to employ their small arms in addition to the mecha again opening fire against any position where they saw Torsion fire emanate. MPAC fire and hot plasma bolts raked the defensive positions, pinning down the defenders even more as the Skaa Guard charged forward and literally stormed the positions, followed quickly by Urumi and Faey units. The defenders did manage to return some fire, but it was erratic and light. That didn't mean that every soldier charging the bunkers made it, however. Several Skaa fell as they charged ahead, as well as several Urumi and Faey who were coming up behind them. But they managed to reach the bunkers in large numbers, and those large numbers overran the positions as a Faey battlefield technician knelt by the main warehouse door and attached a bypass to it, the slender Faey literally shielded from sight of the defenders by two hulking Urumi Stormtroopers, hiding what they were doing until it was too late. In seconds, the Faey field tech had the door open, and the combined elements of the Confederacy stormed inside. The mecha formed a defensive perimeter, searching for any firing coming from windows or murder holes along the walls as the ground forces raced across the landing field and into the facility after breaching the initial defensive positions, with Skaa Guard taking up the defensive positions they'd just stormed to support the mecha against attack...and that attack came quickly, as mantis mecha positioned around the perimeter converged on the landing bay. The three mecha types laid down a heavy suppressing fire, stalling the defenders' advance, slowing them down long enough for the Wolf and Raptor fighters lurking above to kill them. Advance medics with the Medical Service were already on scene there, brave battlefield doctors who deployed with the strike teams and who were now plying their trade, tending to those wounded taking the front door.

The secondary bay wasn't quite as far along. The Confederate forces were facing far more defenders in that location, and though all the weapon bunkers and mantis mecha had been destroyed, both the Travalt and spider

tank assigned to support the secondary door had been disabled by defensive fire, which robbed them of ground-level heavy firepower until replacement mecha could arrive. The constant and heavy stream of Torsion beams blasting out of the warehouse door and to each side showed just how concentrated they were. Again, the Karinnes turned the corner there, as the attackers retreated out of range of the Torsion weapons after taking surprising losses, the ground forces unshouldered their railguns, and they opened up on the defending positions. The angry beams firing in one direction were replaced by blue-white corkscrews going in the other direction, and the hail of withering slugs disrupted the coordinated defense of the secondary bay. Skaa and Urumi units rushed forward just in front of Imperial Marine units without waiting for more mecha to arrive to reinforce them as the Consortium tried to close the doors, charging right through enemy fire, and they made it before the doors could close. Two Skaa physically barred the doors with their bodies, preventing them from closing, until a Faey tech hastily attached a bypass to the door and made it open back up. Jaiya saw them crash into the insectoids through the video feed off the Karinne lieutenant commanding the lead platoon, the two reptilian species overrunning the insectoids with sheer bulk, for they were larger and much heavier than the defending insectoids. Jaiya focused on one Skaa in particular, a really big one, watching him slam the weighted end of his rifle into the helmet of one of the insectoid defenders, shattering the entire head and sending green gore flying in every direction.

The insectoids just were not built for hand to hand combat against species bred to heavier gravity.

It was a short, ugly melee inside the warehouse beyond the door as Confederate invaders engaged Consortium insectoids literally in hand to hand combat, point blank range, a type of combat the insectoids were doomed to lose. Though they were frail, they were *damn* fast, however, quickly skittering back and withdrawing, pulling back to a secondary defensive position deeper inside the facility, but doing so with the Confederate ground forces literally right behind them.

The secondary assault wave too secured the entrance, and the Faey elements designated to enter the facility surged forward as Medical workers in their red armor rushed in behind the assault, already hard at work tending

the wounded scattered across the empty field they'd been forced to cross to reach the building.

The fighting got more intense the deeper into the facility the Confederation penetrated. Pushed further and further back, the shattered elements of the insectoid defense joined up and utilized defensive positions to make the invaders pay in blood for every *shakra* they advanced, but there were only so many insectoids in the facility where more and more Confederate forces poured in to reinforce and secure every hallway, door, vent hole, pipeline, and dataline cluster they could find, securing the facility before it could be self-destructed or sabotaged beyond hope of understanding how it worked. The defenders had no reinforcements and were pushed back into the very heart of the facility, when Jaiya knew would be the moment of truth. Cut off from communication, the facility commander would eventually reach a point where it would order the destruction of the facility, the standard tactic the Consortium employed when faced with defeat.

Then, a squad of Karinne Marines breached the primary control center, their assigned target.

Jaiya watched the short, nasty firefight through the vidfeeds of the Marines, as the graceful, well-trained and highly disciplined Marines breached the control center and gained a foothold, killing most of the defenders and pushing the armed resistance back across the room. Jaiya simply moved her view to another camera when the feed she watched was cut, the Marine providing it hit, and saw the Karinnes drive the defenders out of the room, then managing to kill them to the last insect as they fled down a large industrial hallway, a hallway that led to the primary power core.

*“CCC, Lieutenant Zari, primary control room secure, primary control room secure,”* the commanding officer called in. *“Send some more squads, we have a direct path right to the core from here!”*

“Fifth, seventh, tenth squads, converge on Karinne Two,” a controller off to their left said in a calm voice, coordinating the battle for the facility from the safety of the *Trelle's Gift*.

*“Understood,”* a deep Skaa voice responded immediately.

With the primary control room under their control, Skaa and Urumi forces called in converged on the control room, then joined with the Marine squad as an element of Imperial Marines remained behind to secure the room. They rushed down the hallway and waited as a Faey swept the area beyond with a sensor pod, then nodded to the field tech to breach the door. “Watch your firing in there,” Lorna warned from behind Jaiya. “That core will be filled with lots of things that explode violently when hit with plasma fire.”

*“You heard the General, comrades,” the Skaa officer noted. “Single shots on sure targets.”*

The tech bypassed the door, which caused it to open with surprising speed. The soldiers moved swiftly to rush into the core, since standing in an open doorway was a quick way to get shot, entering a huge open area filled with vast pipes and cauldron-like nodes where they joined, with catwalks and control equipment against the walls and in clusters along the open floor area. Also within were nearly two hundred insectoids, armed with Torsion rifles and preparing for a last stand.

“Shit,” Lorna growled.

Zari took decisive command at that moment. She was outnumbered five to one against an enemy that would *not* be afraid to fire through pipes and equipment, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t ready to give up. She had the Faey and Urumi activate their flight pods and race up into the spiderweb maze of twisting pipes as the Skaa took cover and prepared to hold the door. The controller called all available reserves to reinforce, including the Imperial Marines in the control center, so just as the insectoids began firing on the invaders, the Skaa were reinforced by Imperial Marines boiling down the hallway.

It was a chaotic scene. Skaa and Marines took what cover they could against weapons that went right through anything behind which they could hide, relying on cover breaking sight and the interference of all the equipment making sensor goggles ineffective to see through obstacles. But the Faey and Urumi up over the insectoids had clear lines of fire as well as having the advantage of the high ground. They fired down on the insectoids and flitted back up among the pipes to prevent being shot in return, and what was most important, they fired on the insectoids that were using their

scrabbling legs to climb up the pipes and walls to get the same vantage point against the Skaa and Faey holding the open door. Torsion bolts, MPAC, Urumi plasma bolts, Skaa ion blasts, and pulse blasts seemed to be going in every direction in the core, mostly avoiding the obstacles, but numerous pipes were breached, pouring a greenish liquid onto the floor, and more than one equipment console was struck and exploded in cascade of venting plasma sparks. The insectoids had numbers, but they were outflanked by the flying Urumi and Marine units high up among the pipes, getting clear shots at them and taking them, steadily whittling down their numbers as more and more Confederate soldiers poured into the core through both the open door from which they began and another door breached soon after the battle started. The defenders found themselves surrounded on all sides, even from above, and they were quickly whittled down to a handful. That handful tried to destroy the station, turning their weapons on the equipment, but when they stopped firing on the attackers, the attackers rose up and mowed them down before they could get off more than one or two shots.

In about seven minutes, the Confederate forces had the core, and four minutes after that, they had the primary power exchanger, which had been overrun as the insectoids tried to use the control equipment to try to overload the core, but damage done in the core prevented it from being done remotely. It was now impossible for the remaining defenders to destroy the facility. The controllers ordered the facility swept from top to bottom with both sensors and physical inspection to ferret out any suicidal stragglers, and Jaiya called in their success to the war room.

Ravarra II was under Confederate control.

Sevi Aranne frowned in caution when the *Arabax* led a small attack fleet against the moon of Ravarra VI. There were only 61 Consortium ships defending the small moon that had a temperate if desert environment, capable of supporting life if that life didn't mind air pressure half the Faey norm. Arrayed before her were 117 Confederate vessels, which would make this close to an even fight. Beyond the small token defense force was the planet killer being built at the largest city on the planet, enclosed in a vast airskin shield to provide adequate air pressure within. There were also

supposed to be a few dozen Faey-made weapon platforms that had survived the initial attack on Ravarra VI and were now in use by the Consortium as defense, but according to sensor scans, they weren't present in the system. For some reason, they'd pulled them out...probably because they didn't see this system as worth that kind of defense. They must have put them over at Ravarra II.

She had to get her ground forces past that small defense fleet so they could land and invade the planet killer, and unlike Ravarra II, she was the one in command of this operation.

*Alright, let's get this done,* she sent through her beloved ship, then opened the comm. "Alright, deploy," she ordered brusquely, which caused movement through the fleet as it rushed towards the planet at flank speed.

The enemy accommodated her plan by surging forward to meet them, which played right into their strengths. They had no planetary defenses to hide behind or lure them into, so the ships were coming out to meet them, launching clouds of missiles. Sevi deployed her shockwave-equipped ships to shield the formation from the missiles, watching as the KMS and Faey ships intercepted the vast majority of the missiles, but she didn't take any other action. They would surely expect them to launch fighters, but Sevi was giving them no targets until her ships were in range and after their surprises had been used.

"Almost," she said aloud, watching the distance shrink. "Almost... now!" she barked, and her weapons officer did her job. The *Arabax* launched just two small missiles towards the Consortium heavy cruiser that commanded the formation. The missiles lanced right at their target, actively evading defensive fire that tried to shoot them down, then they impacted the cruiser's shields and exploded against them harmlessly.

That done, she then deployed the fleet. The lead enemy ship was carved into pieces by the six KMS ships in the fleet when it came within range of their particle beams, and once those white bars lashed across the dark sky, the Confederate fleet sprang into action. Fighters launched from every ship, Faey, Urumi, Skaa, and Alliance ships picked out targets, and then a massive exchange of fire one might expect in a large naval battle ensued. Her precious ship rocked a little when it was hit by a series of Torsion blasts from a Consortium cruiser, and Sevi avenged herself against it by



unleashing all five of her baby's particle beams against the offender, shearing the ship apart. The deadly vessel then peppered another Consortium cruiser with heavy pulse cannon fire, blowing massive holes in its crescent bow as the enemy ships got within dark matter range of the fleet, but at that close range, the Consortium was vulnerable to every weapon they could bring to bear. Ships that tried to lock dark matter weapons on Confederate ships were besieged by Wolf fighters, and the nasty fighters proved they were everything Sevi had been told as she watched two squadrons of Wolf fighters systematically blow a Consortium cruiser dead in space, pounding it until it lost power and drifted right into the path of one of its own, forcing the other ship to veer wildly to avoid a collision. She winced as a Faey cruiser had its entire bow blown off by a dark matter salvo, the bright flash lighting up the bridge as the *Arabax* maneuvered, then turned to protect the damaged ship, his port side particle beams hitting the enemy ship in the stern section, striking its engines, then blowing the entire ship apart in a fiery hellstorm. That hellstorm washed against her baby's shields harmlessly as she had her helmswoman maneuver them deeper and deeper into the heart of the enemy formation, driving a wedge into them as every weapon the *Arabax* had opened up in every direction, a one ship spear driving deep into the body of the victim. The ship rocked violently as the Consortium returned fire, but Sevi wasn't the least bit worried; her baby was tough, he could take it. She bore down on the heavy cruiser that had to be the lead of the enemy formation.

"Status?" she called loudly, swaying in her captain's chair.

"They're in."

"Alright, hit it!" she barked. Jenny Wilson, the 3D engineer along with her, grinned and put a finger to her interface as she issued commands to the cloud of nanomachines they'd unleashed against the ship, which had gone through their shields and impacted the hull. They'd worked their way inside, and were now in position, attached to the computer core in the ship. They had entered the low-power hyperphased plasma conduits running the external lighting and literally flowed right along with the plasma as it returned back to the primary power plant, getting them deep inside the ship, and from there they had navigated the low-power plasma network to get into the computer core like sailors navigating a little dinghy across a harbor. They were now inside the computer core, and as Jenny put her finger to her

interface and issued commands, the nanites responded. The results were immediate and dramatic. The ship shuddered, its lights flickered, and then it went dead in space. “Fire!” Sevi barked, and her weapons officer launched a series of gravometric shockwave mines directly at the ship. They streaked across the empty space between the two flagships, then impacted and exploded in almost perfect unison against the hull. They were deployed in a specific pattern that would inflict maximum casualties, projected to kill 87% of the insectoid crew outright and an additional 3% from the sudden violent movement of the ship in reaction to the explosions. The huge enemy ship flinched violently against the explosions, literally driving it into one of its escort cruisers, the cruiser’s shields erupting into visibility as the massive ship struck them.

The killing of the flagship complete, Sevi barked for her baby to pull back, let the other ships fill the hole the *Arabax* had created.

It was the killing blow, Sevi saw as her orders were obeyed. The other ships were now disorganized, not moving in unison, and that allowed her forces to quickly gain the upper hand even as it allowed her helmswoman to withdraw the *Arabax* out of the heart of them without taking too much extra damage. Within two minutes, the enemy was reduced to two small pockets separated by her main force, and seeing that victory was now impossible, the Consortium ships began making suicide attempts against their adversaries. Her fleet defended against the suicide attacks, destroying ship after ship as they tried to ram the smaller, more nimble Confederate ships, and they scored no hits against her forces.

After the last ship was destroyed, she took stock. She still had 67 ships operational, the damaged ships in varying stages of incapacitation, from totally destroyed to only moderately damaged. No KMS or Kimdori ships had been destroyed, and the *Arabax* had taken only moderate damage, was more than capable of continuing the mission. “Alright, proceed to stage two. Stage one ships, begin recovery and damage control procedures,” she commanded.

A portion of the fleet remained behind to aid damaged ships as the rest surged towards the planet. They expected very little resistance, because the planet killer here was only half-complete and Kimdori spying indicated there was only a handful of Consortium insectoids on the moon. The vast

majority of the resistance they would face would be Shio, and the Shio had no defense against Faey Marines.

Taking the planet killer would be a piece of cake.

Marayi blinked when the *Dreamer* came out of hyperspace, clearing away a nearly pleasant tingling sensation in her left arm, then took stock of the situation as the other ships also dropped out of hyperspace, the *Jenda* right beside them.

Ahead of them was Shio Prime, the only inhabited planet or moon in this system, a green jewel that any food-starved empire would covet. There were two main targets the fleet had to deal with, one being the Consortium fleet and the other being the main orbital station *Grebrel* and the very weapon platforms they'd sold to the Shio as defense, now in the hands of the Consortium and defending the planet against *them* because the Shio had surrendered before the Consortium attacked Shio Prime in force, leaving the majority of its defenses intact. However, they'd intentionally jumped so that the station was on the far side of the planet when they attacked, so it wouldn't be able to support what ships were here in defense. Initial tactical showed that the Consortium truly only had a token defense here, 87 ships, but where they expected to see several thousand blips from orbiting weapon platforms, platforms *they* built, they saw nothing.

The platforms weren't here. They'd been removed from Shio Prime.

That made this much easier for them, but also begged the question of just where those platforms had gone.

"The platforms, where are they?" Urumi Royal Admiral Fe'Brad hissed as he looked over the tactical. Fe'Brad was the admiral sent from the war room to command the overall assault, while Marayi had command over the initial engagement with space-based defenses. He was armored, wearing Crusader armor built specifically for the Urumi, and each suit was custom fitted to the Urumi because of their bony armor plates, crests, and spines, which were unique to each Urumi.

"I think they took them out," KMS Admiral Yoni Karinne grunted, looking to and fro on the tactical readout. She was one of Navii's personal

pets, and not because Yoni kissed a lot of ass. She was *good*. “Are they powered down?”

“No *ma’am*,” the sensor officer answered. “We’d still be able to detect them if they were. They’re either stealthed or they’re not here.”

“The Shio and Consortium don’t have that kind of cloaking technology,” Yoni said grimly to Fe’Brad.

“Troubling. We should alert the command staff immediately. The other attacks may encounter those platforms,” the Urumi noted, then he nodded to Yoni. “It should be done.”

“I’ll call it in,” she affirmed.

“Commence the initial attack, Captain,” he ordered Marayi.

“Aye sir,” she nodded, feeling odd calling anyone *sir* on *her* ship. On a Faey ship, only the captain was called *sir*, because she spoke for the ship, and all ships were male. Male officers were also called *ma’am*, though the human ones seemed to have an issue with that. But the Urumi outranked everyone, so he had the right to be called *sir*, outside of Faey traditions.

This was going to be an easy engagement, but a nasty finish. If the platforms weren’t here, there was little defense around the planet, but the taking of the planet killer was going to be *ugly* because they were building it right in the heart of the largest city in the Shio empire, Shial. That would mean thousands of civilians in the engagement area, and their ground forces would have to wade through civilians and conscripted Shio being forced to fight on behalf of their conquerors. On top of that, the Consortium had considerable ground defenses present, mainly their nearly 500 mantis mecha stationed in the city, which would respond to any attack on the planet killer. The ground forces were going to have a hard time.

And here she was, going into battle without her best squadron commander. She was going to miss Justin in this.

“Send out the order,” she called to her comm officer as she unlocked herself from her chair. “Commence attack.”

“Commence attack, aye sir,” the human male comm officer nodded, then he started talking with a finger on his interface, spreading the attack

order through the fleet of 570 Karinne and KMS ships, the majority of which being ground attack corvettes or infantry support ships.

The naval vessels bunched up in front of the ground invasion forces like a protective mother, and then the entire fleet surged forward, even as the Consortium took notice of the invading fleet and moved to bring their ships into position to engage, for they had obviously already tried to flee and found themselves trapped. If they operated as per normal Consortium behavior, they would attempt suicide attacks once all hope of victory was lost, trying to take them with them. But they didn't rush forward in a suicide attack, as they expected. They did rush forward at first, for only about a minute, but then they slowed to a stop, hovered there for a few moments, as the fleet launched fighters and started firing rail cannons, already beginning the assault, then they started to turn.

"What are they doing?" Yoni puzzled.

Marayi paled. "They're going to crash into the *planet!*" she gasped, touching her interface to send the order through the fleet. "Full fire, hit them with everything! Don't let them crash their ships into the planet!" She snapped her gaze forward. *Flank speed!* she snapped in sending, her sudden fear bleeding into her thought; not fear for her, but fear for the *millions* of Shio that would die if those ships crashed into the planet. The impact shockwaves, the firestorms, the dust choking the sky, it would kill the entire planet's ecosystem! Marayi felt herself being crushed against her seat, suddenly hard to breathe as her ship accelerated at flank, which was full throttle, damn the inertial dampers, *oh shit I need to be there NOW* speed. She knew the medics would be tending a few thousand cases of G-force induced injuries after they got there, but the protection of the entire planet of Shio was worth the injuries to her crew to close the distance and get in range of the *Dreamer's* particle beams *fucking now*. She watched through graying vision as the Consortium fleet turned and started back towards the planet, with her fleet literally right on their heels by the time they started accelerating, and she felt the violent shuddering of the ship, as its structure was stressed by the exponential acceleration of the ship, far beyond its design tolerance.

But this was important enough to ignore the safety alarms blaring. If they didn't get there *now*, the Consortium was going to *destroy the planet!*

The attackers raced forward far faster than even the Consortium expected, too fast to avoid incoming fire, closing the distance with their gravometric engines in mere minutes, covering in four minutes what would usually take 30. The fighters, far faster and more rugged, designed for such extreme speed maneuvers, got there first, and they opened up on the Consortium fleet like avenging angels. The Consortium ships at the back end of the formation fired back at the fighters with their Torsion weapons and missiles, but they found the Wolves to be agile, slippery targets, very hard to pin down and even harder to hit. For every Wolf that was destroyed, every ship in their fleet took considerable damage from the constant barrage of pulse fire, from both the fighters and their weapon drones. Two ships exploded into cataclysmic hellstorms as the Wolves managed to do enough damage to make them detonate, and by then, they were at the extreme edge of particle beam range. *FIRE!* Marayi boomed, loud enough to be heard four ships over. Every ship in range did so, and dozens of angry white beams of raw destructive power lashed out from the lead ships, shearing into and through Consortium vessels, leaving absolute destruction in their wake. The attacking ships had to decelerate as they got in range, but they still were going so fast that the *Dreamer* and *Jenda* literally crashed into the back of the Consortium formation. The *Jenda* rammed a Consortium cruiser, the battleship shuddering as it literally ripped the Consortium ship in half, then its aft half exploded in a massive hellstorm that knocked the *Jenda* off its vector and caused it to sideswipe another Consortium cruiser, tearing the rear nacelle off the Consortium cruiser and tearing deep gouges in the *Jenda's* port wing, so incredible was the force of the collision that it actually breached compressed Neutronium armor. The battleship was still operational, however, stabilizing and unleashing all of its port side particle beams against the ship it struck, carving it into pieces in a matter of seconds. The *Dreamer* and other ships had to take evasive action to avoid similar collisions, and the Confederate fleet literally careened right through the Consortium fleet, slowing to match their enemy's velocity *in front* of them.

But they were in range now, and they vastly outnumbered the Consortium vessels. Particle beam, pulse, rail, and stream weapons unleashed against the surviving ships in a blinding curtain, even as the fighters danced through the fire to maintain their continuous blitz of pulse fire against the enemy ships. The Consortium was outnumbered over five to

one, and those numbers made the difference. The Consortium ships fired back even as they tried to maneuver around Confederate ships to get into the atmosphere, but they were systematically sheared apart, had holes ripped into them, or had their power systems blown out and their crews literally fried like a TV dinner in a microwave oven by Kimdori stream weaponry. Within two minutes, the entire Consortium fleet was destroyed or permanently disabled, and they moved quickly with towing beams to arrest the debris' velocity, get it into orbit rather than have it fall into the atmosphere. *Commence ground invasion while we deal with the debris*, Marayi ordered. "Have the *Treni* get a towing beam on that Kimdori ship!" she barked, pointing at a damaged Kimdori ship in a death spiral towards the atmosphere.

As one, 63 jumpers gracefully started their descent into the atmosphere as 117 corvettes and low orbital bombardment vessels followed them. In front of all of them, Army and Marine Wolf fighters and 170 Gladiators equipped with flight pods descended, the advance force that would secure the landing areas. Marayi could only hope that they didn't have the same kinds of problems they did, because now it was absolutely clear that the Consortium was not only suicidal, but genocidal. They would destroy Shio Prime if they were allowed to do so.

Marine General Trela Karinne sat at her desk in the tactical section of the Marine Corvette *Honor*, her sister Colonel Miori Karinne's ship, a full tactical readout of all resources and detected Consortium defenses on her holographic monitor. She was the overall commander of this ground attack, so she had to be able to see everything that was going on. The *Honor* was the lead corvette descending just behind the jumpers, and everything on her board was showing ready even as sensor officers detected and marked every Consortium mantis mecha and automated ground battery. "Alright, let's get this going," she barked in her strong voice. "Get the sub-orbitals up and running!"

The low orbit ships, which would actually be 60,000 *shakra* over the city instead of in low orbit, pulled up and into position, and they went to work. Streaks of plasma bolts lanced past the descending ships as the high-altitude strikers began firing on known weapon batteries and identified

mantis craft. The high ships had far more range than the ground batteries, and the hot plasma bolts, the only plasma weapon capable of planetary bombardment from high altitude or orbit, rained down on those positions before they could start firing on the descending ground units. Under that sustained fire, the ground forces would have a much easier time reaching their landing positions. The Wolf fighters then dove down on the city of Shial, hitting any battery the strikers missed and also going after the swarms of mantis mecha on the planet. There was some fire coming up, which the Wolves managed to evade fairly easily, as did the descending Gladiators. Trela had to shiver a bit when she saw those six black Gladiators at the vanguard. The KBB. Trelle's silky hair, did she almost feel sorry for the bugs that had to face those six women once they hit the ground. The lead Gladiator had a railgun in its hand, and it fired back at the ground, using the red streaks to track back to the weapon batteries, and whoever was in that Gladiator, her aim was *fucking deadly*. She was firing from midair from a ground unit with no bracing and having to deal with all that motion and shimmying, and yet her rail slug almost went right down the fucking barrel of the Torsion gun that had fired in her general direction.

That *had* to be Captain Kyva Karinne. Trela zoomed in, and was sure of it, the Gladiator's telemetry gave her away. The other Gladiators followed her lead, and soon there were dozens of corkscrew trails tracing down into the city as the descending Gladiators opened up on any target they could identify.

Trela watched as Kyva was the first to land, in a grassy park only 479 shakra from the perimeter of the planet killer. The instant her feet hit the ground, she jettisoned her flight pod, and two spinners borrowed from the Wolf fighters launched off her shoulders and zipped up into the air. From the legs of her mecha, two tiny quadrupedal drones deployed, like two little robotic guard giruzi, another idea borrowed from the Wolf fighters. They were little helper drones that could fire on enemies using either MPAC or pulse guns or scout dangerous locations from ground level, even as the spinners kept an eye on things from above. The other KBB squad members landed and mirrored their captain, jettisoning their pods and deploying their spinners and drones. Within 20 seconds of landing, the KBB was challenged by a pack of about 20 mantis mecha, but they showed absolutely no fear. The six black Gladiators surged forward to hit them head on,



defending the landing position as more Gladiators landed behind them. Trela was almost mesmerized by the grace of those six Gladiator riggers as they literally danced through the incoming fire, occupying all of their enemy's attention, then they split into two groups of three at the last second and skirted to each side, firing into the pack of mantises in a nasty crossfire of pulse blasts. They then turned right into the disorganized mob, their monomolecular blades extended, and engaged the mantises in blade to scythe combat. All their helper drones were right in that melee with them, shooting up into the underbellies of the mantis mecha even as they skittered around the legs of the combatants, even biting the mantis mecha, clamping jaws on their legs and damaging them. It was like watching one of those Terran pirate swashbuckling movies, the six black Gladiators fighting with the mantis's sword to sword, but the mantises were no match for the Gladiators. They were carved apart with swift assuredness within seconds of engaging a Gladiator, and any time a Gladiator was given enough room, it simply fired pulse blasts from its forearm cannons to blow apart any mantis afraid to engage in melee combat. And in the chaotic melee, the mantises had an almost impossible time trying to fire a shot at a Gladiator without endangering one of its own. In mere moments, all the mantis mecha were destroyed, and the Marines had their landing zone secured. Kyva picked up her railgun from where she dropped it to engage the mantis mecha just as the jumpers started touching down, disembarking Crusader-clad Marines and several companies of Kimdori wearing their own version of Crusader armor, moving swiftly to set up heavy mount defensive MPACs, pulse cannons, and railguns as the Faey spread out and started using their telepathy to find and knock out any Shio anywhere near their landing zone.

Though not quite as spectacularly, that same scene played out at all six designated landing zones. Gladiators landed and eliminated all resistance, securing the position for the infantry to safely disembark the jumpers and start securing the perimeters with fixed weaponry. Those six landing points would also be the evacuation points if they had to abort, so they had to be defended at all costs.

"Stage two, go," Trela called, and the order went out.

At that command, Gladiators and infantry moved towards the planet killer facility from all six landing sites, moving slowly and carefully as Shio

citizens scattered before them, all of them telepathically dominated and sent into basements and other safe locations. The six advance elements joined at planned locations and merged into three strike teams, all of which would assault a different entry into the planet killer. Data coming in from the attacks on Ravarra were already supplying them with basic layouts of the other two planet killers, and if the Consortium were creatures of habit and built their devices similarly, that information would be useful here. Trela watched as the first unit reached its destination, as techs disabled the plasma fence under a storm of defensive fire as infantry and Gladiators returned fire with railguns, and once the fence was down—even though they could fly, they weren't leaving that fence up to hamper an escape route—the KDF and Kimdori infantry stormed a large supply depot. Wolf fighters pounded the defensive positions from the air as Gladiators finished off the mantis mecha defending the main doors, then they literally blew the doors open using MPACs. Armored insectoids were visible beyond the smoking hole, wearing some kind of combo armor and gravity nullifier, firing Torsion weapons at the invaders, but they were withered down to nothing in a virtual solid mass of incoming fire, most of it done from beyond the range of their Torsion weapons. There were also Shio visible in there, but most of them were laying on the floor unconscious, victims of Faey telepathy. The mindstrikers could have forced the Shio to attack the Consortium insects, but they had orders not to put the non-coms at risk. Knocking them out was the only real option they had, putting them on the ground and out of the biggest part of the danger and also preventing the bugs from slaughtering them if they were running around in there.

It only took them three minutes and 17 seconds to gain a foothold inside the facility once the fence was disabled, at a cost of 73 dead or wounded. Faey and Kimdori poured into the breach, some of the Kimdori shedding their armor and changing form, then vanishing into the air ducts and pipes to infiltrate deep into the facility in advance of the armed invasion.

The other two strike teams had also breached the planet killer, so Trela ordered stage three and watched, issuing commands here and there for both the invading infantry and the fighters and support ships still fighting in and above the city. Mantis mecha were everywhere, and the Wolf fighters and Gladiators were being directed to them to destroy them as the sub-orbital support ships bombarded them any time they had a clear shot. Skirmishes

were being fought all over the city, as pockets of mantis mecha were engaged by Gladiators, or strafed by Wolf fighters, and the Shio population vanished into buildings, staying out of the way, as well they should.

Inside the facility, the Kimdori did their jobs. Infiltrators managed to get behind the defensive lines and they wreaked havoc, disabling systems, misdirecting defending insectoids, and they even managed to kill the overall facility commander as 16 Kimdori attacked the control room. The Kimdori scattered the defense of the facility by taking the command center, and it allowed the KDF to drive deep inside and take the main control room only seven minutes after making the initial breach, despite heavy resistance... because that resistance wasn't coordinated and their data about the Ravarra facilities matched the facility here, which gave them blueprints and told them where to go. Without orders, the bugs were fighting with suicidal determination, not leaving their positions, not falling back, and that allowed them to clear a hallway or section and then move in deeper rather than see the defenders fall back to more heavily defended positions and put up even stiffer resistance. The insectoids were very fast in their armor and were dangerous with rifles, but they were simply outclassed by infantry in Crusader armor, who were faster and had even more firepower. The KDF drove deeper and deeper inside, until they eliminated the last pocket of defense between them and the control room. They joined up with the Kimdori infiltrators, reorganized, then moved on to attack the central power core, where over a hundred bugs were waiting in defense, some of them laboring to try to overload the power core and blow up the facility rather than allow the KDF to take it.

The battle in the core was short and brutal. The bugs were fanatical in their defense of the techs trying to blow up the power core, and it forced the KDF to push very hard, losing soldiers left and right as they pushed through the zealous defense and reached the techs trying to destroy the core. The battle in the core took nearly six minutes, and it cost the KDF 117 soldiers to eliminate a defending force almost equal to the number of the dead or injured.

But, despite the losses, it was a fast and efficient operation. The casualties were below the estimated number, though those numbers might go up since the KDF still had to wipe out the last of the defenders and secure the planet. Still, they had the upper hand. The bugs had no ships, no

communication, no support, and now they were facing a hostile Shio population as soon as the Shio realized that the Confederacy had retaken Shio Prime. The only thing they had to do was retake the orbital station currently on the far side of the planet, and then they'd be done. But that was not considered part of this operation.

Trela sighed and called it in. Shio Prime's defending fleet was destroyed, and the planet killer was effectively secured. The objectives of the mission were fulfilled, now came the mopping up.

For all intents and purposes, Shio Prime was under Confederate control.

# Chapter 7

*Kaista, 19 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 4 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Kaista, 19 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

The Shio had been completely liberated.

Jason read over the report Myri sent him as Rann and Shya ran laughing around the yard, playing that immortal game of tag, with Shya being it. Shya was quite the athletic little girl, and Rann was hard pressed to stay away from her. Amber had been playing with them, but she decided that chasing the children wasn't that much fun when one of them accidentally kicked her. It didn't hurt her, but she was now sitting on Jason's lap, sulking a little as she milked her feigned injury for everything it was worth, getting her pity attention while she stared at the kids with narrowed eyes, plotting her revenge.

The tactical use of the interdictors had completely thrown off the Consortium, and in the eight days since they began the counteroffensive, the four Shio systems were now liberated. First they had hit Reglen, driving the Consortium out and taking over the planet killer, then they had consolidated their hold there as the Skaa and Imperium hit Bregali, driving what little Consortium defense they had there and opting to destroy the planet killer from orbit rather than trying to capture it. They'd captured three of them, they didn't need a fourth, so they had the Kimdori infiltrators go in first and clear out the Shio, then they bombarded it from orbit using low orbit tactical ships. They had marched right back across Shio territory and kicked the Consortium right back out, and now the majority of the Confederate forces were concentrating at Bregali, the closest system to

Alliance space, preparing to cross into Alliance territory and continue the offensive. The planning of that was out of his hands, as was just about everything else right now, all command decisions now coming from the war room on Terra. All Jason could do was read reports, sit in on meetings, and stew over his grounding.

And it *was* a grounding. Aya was absolutely militant about keeping Jason under control, mainly due to his history of needing to get his hands into everything. Jason was the kind that would ride shotgun on the bridge of a battleship when it went into battle, hell, he would charge into battle right along with the infantry, which was very much unlike just about any other house ruler. Aya kept a very close and personal eye on him, her eyes just *daring* him to get any ideas every time he so much as looked past the fence. She had two guards with him at all times when he wasn't in his bedroom, usually herself and Dera, but all his normal guards rotated through his babysitting. Such as right now, since Shen and Suri were standing over by the hot tub deck, sending casually between themselves but still keeping an eye on him. Jason had found that trying to leave his house to go anywhere but the White House, 3D, or Kosigi was almost not worth it, because Aya demanded exorbitant security precautions that slowed everything down... and Jason suspected she was doing it on purpose to keep him from wandering. It was a hell of a lot easier for her to defend him if he stayed home or restricted himself to military or government installations. She couldn't tell him he couldn't go somewhere on Karis, but she could make it such a pain in the ass that it wasn't worth the effort.

It was almost annoying. He *was* the Grand Duke, after all. He shouldn't be held hostage by his own captain of the guard...yet that was exactly what was going on, and he just didn't have the balls to challenge Aya over it. She was just doing her job, and he knew that if he crossed her, she would literally lock him up and keep him imprisoned until the danger had passed. And not a single soul on Karis would dare try and stop her.

The report was pretty much a rewrite of the one he'd read about Reglen. The Consortium only had a token force of defenders at the system, which the Confederate forces had engaged and destroyed before they could crash into the planet. Jason watched some battle footage of that included in the report, showing the 21 Consortium ships being blown apart by Skaa and Imperium ships, and then the low orbit strikers settled into position over the

capitol city of Reglen and pounded the planet killer from orbit once the Kimdori gave them the go-ahead as Faey and Skaa infantry landed on the planet and engaged the few Consortium that were planetside. It was basically a rout, as the Consortium put up almost no resistance, and were quickly and easily overwhelmed. Once the advantage they had of being able to jump in real time to reinforce their conquered systems was taken away, they were sitting ducks.

Jason leaned back, stroking Amber's flank as he pondered their tactics. They'd gone through all the trouble of taking over the Alliance and the Shio, and now they were basically just giving the systems back without a fight. This concerned Jason, but for the life of him, he couldn't see the logic of it. They had to have some kind of reason to throw away ships they really couldn't afford to lose. But, to be fair to them, there wasn't much they could do about it. If they stacked heavy fleets at a system, those ships might be trapped inside an interdiction field if the Confederacy caught them with their pants down, and that was a scenario which they absolutely could not allow to happen. They couldn't defend the systems, but they also weren't about to just abandon them either. So, they were putting token defenses there to slow down an attack in hopes that they could either complete the planet killer, or a few of their battleships could crash into the planet, which would produce roughly the same result...just not immediately. Yes, the crashing of a dozen or so half-mile long ships into the planet would kill millions, but it would take a few years for the dust to choke off all life and give the survivors of the impact the chance to be rescued before they starved to death.

So, unable to defend what they'd taken and unwilling to just leave because anything they left behind would fall into the hands of their archenemies from Andromeda, the Consortium was in a bit of a jam. Good. Though, it should have dawned on them by now that if the Confederation could deal with the Consortium, then they'd have similar luck against the Syndicate. The Confederate rulers were not afraid of either of them, and their confidence grew more and more by the day as they pushed the Consortium out of Shio territory and prepared to jump across the empty space to the nearest Alliance system to Bregali, which was Grevalt. Battle plans were being assembled at that very moment, as Kimdori infiltrators had penetrated Consortium defenses at all three populated planets and were

gathering ground-level intelligence as Kimdori spy probes assessed the space-based defenses the Consortium had staged at the three inhabited planets. Grevalt II was a sun-blasted wasteland just barely within human tolerance, but the Bari-Bari were much hardier than humans, so they could tolerate the 165-degree days and -50 degree nights. Grevalt III was a tropical planet much like Terra but hotter, a farming planet and the primary planet of the system, which was also the homeworld of the Bari-Bari. Grevalt IV was temperate, much colder than Grevalt III, but capable of producing food along its equatorial regions. The Bari-Bari didn't like the cold, which was odd to Jason since they were covered in fur, so the colder regions of the planet were populated by other races of the Alliance.

Odds were, the primary focus of the attack would be Grevalt III, giving it priority. The attack would be carried out by Skaa, Alliance, and Imperium ships, as it was only a two day jump from Bregali to Grevalt, and that gave them time to set up an interdicator. With a large block of Karinne ships out of rotation for engine refits, the war room decided to just give the Karinnes the time they needed. The ships they had capable of jumping through interditors were busy at the moment, ferrying supplies and many of the refugees that had fled to Terra into Shio systems as 3M rushed to build Stargates to place at the systems. They only had two extra pairs of gates, and those had been placed at Shio Prime and Bregali, leaving Ravarra and Reglen dependent on Karinne and Kimdori ships for their links to the outside.

Jason didn't mind. If his girls were playing cargo pilots, then that meant they weren't having their asses shot at by Consortium warships. As far as he was concerned, the KMS could spend the entire war ferrying supplies around.

After Grevalt was taken, there were different plans as to how to go about retaking the Alliance. One plan involved hitting the Alliance's capitol system, Faroll, one involved attacking the primary industrial system, Ruad, and the most likely plan to be used was to hang back and identify which systems had planet killers closest to completion, then striking them before they could be brought online.

That did make him check up on the logistics. Jrz'kii's freighter schedule had been expanded to deal with the Shio systems, and he noted a report



from her that showed she was also preparing to add recaptured Alliance systems into the schedule. That big Kizzik was always prepared.

A squeal of laughter brought him back to reality, and he saw that Rann had fallen down. Shya had taken the opportunity to jump on him, and what had started as tag turned into a wrestling match. Jason pondered what it would be like to grow up knowing who he was going to marry, how that might affect his relationship with the girl if they also happened to be childhood friends. Rann and Shya were best friends, but both of them knew that they'd spend their entire lives together. In one way, Jason reasoned, it might be a relief. No having to surf the dating scene, no broken hearts, no bad relationships. But, on the other hand, dating and romance had its places, and could be quite fun. He wondered if there would ever be true romance in Rann's life, given he was marrying a Faey, and he would know his bride pretty damn well before they took their vows.

That wasn't really a fair observation. Jyslin was *extremely* romantic, as were many Faey...but it was a different kind of romance. Faey women saw romance as an aspect of married life, not the dating scene. Yes, Faey did engage in romance while they dated, but not to the same degree as humans did. And in typical Faey role reversal, it was the women who were shouldered with the burden of being the romantic aggressor, trying to woo and win a man who would do everything in his power to play hard to get, testing the woman's resolve and maybe trying to milk it for everything it was worth. After a woman caught a man, then the romance of marriage took over, a slower but much more intimate form of it created by the telepathic pair bond. Faey couples were extremely attentive of each other, highly engaged, at least true commoner marriages. Most nobles married only for political gain, and some of those marriages never had a telepathic pair bond form, as the two didn't like each other. But Rann and Shya would buck that trend. They were best friends now, and he was certain that they'd pair bond well before the marriage. Shya all but had a piece of herself stuck in Rann's mind as it was. He was also fairly certain that Rann would lose his virginity to Shya at the first available opportunity...and that idea didn't bother Jason all that much. He was a male, after all, and a father liked to know that his son was popular with the girls. He'd feel *much* different when Bethany and Siyae got around that age, but that was because he was human. Jyslin would egg the twins on as much as Jason would Rann, because in Faey society, the

females were the aggressors. If both girls hadn't conquered themselves a boy or two by the age of 14, Jyslin would be very disappointed.

Jyslin's pregnancy had reached that stage. Last night, she hadn't been interested at all in the idea of a little bed bouncing, and he realized she'd passed into that stage of her pregnancy where her sex drive basically flatlined. It had happened with Rann's pregnancy, and it was something of a common phenomenon among Faey women. Symone had also entered the "I'm not in the mood" phase, forcing Tim to go prowling for a playmate last night. But then again, Tim was fairly well known for his prowling prowess before Symone lost interest, and it didn't take him long to find a girl who was more than willing to relieve some of his tension. Jason had an even easier time of it. All it would take for him was one call to Yana or Aura, and his physical needs were well satisfied...at least for a while.

Yesterday, he got the news. Yana was pregnant, and he was the father. He was going to have another child, a boy this time, and Yana had already decided to name him Walter, after Jason's grandfather.

Yana was the first to pull off what all the strip girls were trying to do, get pregnant. There had been quite a bit of traffic through the fence gate since Songa had solved the sterility problem, men coming in to go on dates with the girls, and Yana had struck first blood as it were, but only by two hours. Two hours after that, Kumi boomed across the strip that she was *finally* pregnant. Kumi had put off having a child because her work was so demanding, but Temika and Rahne had really helped take the edge off; Rahne was interning in Kumi's office, and her education was focused on business, so the best thing she could do was jump in with both feet and get her hands dirty in the real world.

And of course, the observations about Jason's virility had to float around. But he couldn't deny them, really. He *did* have some kind of knack for getting Faey pregnant. He'd had his required four children by different mothers with little problems getting them pregnant, he'd gotten Dahnai pregnant, and now he'd gotten Yana pregnant before any of the other strip girls had managed. All he needed to do now was get Symone and Aura pregnant, and he'd have a complete set of kids by every woman with which he had consistent sex. And he wouldn't mind a bit. The more kids he had,

the happier he'd be, for he loved his children. He had plenty of room in his heart to love a few dozen more.

And now that Jyslin and Symone were in that phase, he'd be calling Aura quite a bit. They'd be like that for a couple of months, then their sex drive would come back. Until then, he either had to go looking for his fun elsewhere or settle for a couple of months of oral sex. He'd been conditioned enough by the girls to feel comfortable seeking his physical satisfaction with another woman, since he was doing it with Jyslin's blessing.

He looked up Aura's schedule, because he fully intended to call on her tonight. She was in flight classes, getting her classroom instruction. Jason wanted to train her himself in her practical piloting skills, but Nazi Aya absolutely forbade him from even setting foot in a dropship sitting on the landing pad. He wasn't allowed to board anything smaller than a corvette, and it was pretty much well impossible to train Aura how to fly using a corvette, they were too complicated for a novice pilot. They'd started just keeping a corvette on hand just in case he needed to go somewhere. Currently it was the *Lion*, sitting in the ocean off the dock where they'd had the *Scimitar*; corvettes were capable of water landings, as were any ground landing ship. Not every planet they might assault may have land, so their ground attack ships were capable of water landings in case they invaded an ocean planet.

The wrestling match ended as they inevitably did, with Shya pinning Rann to the ground. Shya and Rann were about the same size and weight, but Shya lived on Draconis, which had a gravity well .13112 heavier than Karis. That meant that she was stronger than Rann by a little bit, and that was enough for her to overwhelm him. Seeing Rann get bulldogged like that made Jason realize that it might be time to start teaching Rann some self-defense, just in case.

*Shen*, he called.

*Yes, your Grace?*

*Have Aya start training Rann in basic hand to hand self-defense along with his other classes, he told her. I think he needs to learn how to protect himself. From Shya if anyone else.*

Shen and Suri grinned at him when he glanced over. *I'll put an hour block in every day, since you don't have time to do it*, Aya answered herself. From the sense of her sending, she was in the house. *I think it might be useful to fit him with an inducer.*

An inducer was a little gadget that increased or decreased the pull of gravity in a highly localized area. They were used by Menoda when they were forced to visit Draconis, reducing the gravity so it wasn't lethal, but they were also used by athletes and some military training regimens to build strength, since it gave more gravity to push against. Inducer training was extremely popular among batchi players, and it had started to be phased into football and soccer training back on Terra, in effect granting a 24 hour a day workout. The trick of them was minute increases in gravity at regular intervals, the amount depending on the race, allowing the body to strengthen to the new gravity, and then increasing it just a little bit. Humans had a step-up ratio of .07 per increase, where Faey used .05, but that was because they were already a heavy gravity species. An inducer would be very useful to Rann both as a means to build strength and also to get him used to different gravity fields, something a house ruler had to be able to deal with as he made state visits.

It was a system also extensively used by the KMS. All KMS ships used Faey Standard Gravity, which was the gravity of Draconis, and as such was just slightly heavier than Karis. Jason was actually used to it, and it wasn't so much more that someone really noticed it, since it meant that a weight that was 10 *konn* on Karis was 11.3112 *konn* on Draconis. But it did add up. Jason weighed 137 *konn* in Karis gravity, or about 192 pounds, so that went up to approximately 143 *konn* on Draconis or on a KMS ship, or about 204 pounds. However, Jason spent so much time on ships with artificial gravity, he was actually adjusted to Faey Standard Gravity rather than Karis gravity.

*Sounds like a plan*, Jason agreed. *He can use my old one, I don't really use it anymore.*

*All that time training Dahnai in Aikido in Draconis' gravity field paid off for you*, Suri told him.

*It was the reward for her trying to turn me into a mutant smurf*, he retorted, which made Shen wheeze in silent laughter. *Besides, I spend so much time in artificial gravity, I'm used to it.*

He tuned them out to access the biogenic network and tracked down Aura's interface. He cheated a bit by hacking it to access its camera to see where she was, and found she wasn't in class, she was on break. He queried her interface, the same as making a phone call, and she picked up. *[This is Aura.]* her voice communed to him through his interface.

*[Aura,] he called.*

*[Jason! How are you?]*

*[Fine, hon. You busy tonight?]*

*[I think I am now,] she replied cheekily. [Looking for a date?]*

*[You know it. Come by for dinner, and then stay for breakfast.]*

*[Ooooh, a fun date,] she trilled. [I'll pack an overnight when I get home.]*

*[It would be a good idea.]*

Only in Faey society would he arrange a tryst with his mistress and bring her into his house to have dinner with his wife before he took her off to a bedroom and had sex with her. He said his goodbyes to her as he watched Rann struggle under a smug Shya, then Jason laughed in surprise when he finally started thinking and used his telekinetic power, even being smart enough to access the tactical gestalt in the basement. It vastly amplified his power, allowing him to push at Shya with it. Rann had significant ability on his own, had been working with both Jason and Myleena to bring it out, and now that amplified power was turned against Shya. She barked in alarm when he shoved her off, just hard enough to dislodge her and put her on her butt, then he shamelessly attacked while she was confused about what happened, rolling over and lunging at her, tackling her to the grass. *Cheater!* she accused.

*Daddy says the only rule is to win,* Rann replied teasingly as she tried to roll them over.

*Only when you fight, and you two aren't fighting,* Jason injected dryly. *Mind, son, if you make her mad, she'll punch you in the nose.*

*Darn right I will!* Shya threatened as she kicked her legs. *I'm not gonna lose wrestling to a boy!* she declared adamantly, then managed to kick Rann

off. She pounced on him before he could get up, and they were rolling around in the grass, trading the kinds of insults that seven-year-olds found witty and sharp. Jason had to chuckle at a few of them, and marvel at how fluently and effortlessly they were sending. Shya never spoke aloud to Rann anymore, preferred sending, and it was just another indicator to him that Shya had her hooks dug deeply into his son. She wanted the intimacy, the purity of sending, and refused to communicate with her betrothed any other way.

Amber's two tails twitched as she watched the savage battle with intense eyes, her little clawed paws kneading his leg in anticipation of the ambush, waiting for the perfect moment to get involved. When Shya again pinned Rann down by his shoulders, she leaped off his lap and charged. Jason had to suppress a laugh as Amber bolted at them, then Shya screamed in surprise when Amber jumped onto her back, digging those twenty sharp little claws into Shya's back and climbing up to her shoulder. She bit Shya's pointed ear just hard enough to make her flinch, and Rann took advantage of it to push her to the side. Amber jumped clear as Shya was rolled over and then pinned down, her sending indignant. *That's double cheating!* she complained.

*Amber loves me*, Rann taunted in reply. But then he cried out when Amber jumped on *his* back, which made Rann flop down on top of Shya to keep her from climbing up his back and giving him all kinds of bleeding scratches. Amber jumped up and down on top of them, yipping triumphantly as she declared victory over both of them, which made Jason laugh.

*I'd say both of you just lost to the biggest cheater on Karis*, Jason sent lightly. *Nobody cheats like a vulpar.*

Amber jumped down, flicked both her tails insultingly in Rann and Shya's faces, then strutted back to Jason like she'd just won the crown. *Oh no you don't!* Shya barked, pushing Rann off her. "C'mere you little cheater! I'm gonna get you!" she shouted, getting to her feet. Amber bolted for the house as Shya gave chase, yipping excitedly, as both Jason and Rann laughed. Amber rushed into the open door with Shya hot on her tails, and they disappeared into the house.

*Amber is so silly*, Rann noted to Jason as he sat back up.

*She likes to play, just like you and Shya, but she cheats quite a lot, Jason chuckled audibly. I hope you two had fun, because Shya has to go home on Kaira.*

*I know. I wish she could stay here all the time, Rann fretted. I love having her around.*

*She loves it too, but she has her own lessons the same as you, and she's been missing them while she's here, Jason informed him. Tomorrow we'll do something special for her last day here, alright?*

*Can we take her to the boardwalk?*

*Sure, we can do that, Jason nodded. We'll have to go shopping, too, so Shya can take a present back home for Dahnai and Kellin.*

*Yeah, they'd love that, Rann agreed.*

*Aya gave him a dark sending. You know I don't want you in unsecure locations.*

*Aya, we're on Karis, he replied bluntly. We'll be just fine, as long as you do your normal thing.*

*I'll start arranging the outing, she sent after a moment. Have them send over her Highness' new armor.*

Shya was going home with more than just a present for her parents. They'd made her a new interface and a suit of Crusader II armor, with all the safety upgrades, and it was supposed to be done already. They were going to present it to her before she went home, but since they were going out and Aya wouldn't allow *any* of the Ducal family out of the strip without armor, Shya would be armored for her excursion. Besides, since Shya was as good as his own daughter, he was damn well going to make sure she was outfitted with the *best*, just like Dahnai. They had a set of armor for every member of the Imperial family, from Kellin to Sirri, and they'd ship it back home with Shya. Jason technically was violating his own policy of allowing cutting edge tech off Karis, but this was Dahnai. She deserved the best protection available, and that meant Mark II Crusader armor.

That, and he put enough traps in the armor to make sure she didn't tamper with it.

Rann went to go see what happened as Jason read the next report and blinked in surprise. That crazy experiment the Academy was conducting to hardwire a human brain *fucking worked*. The results scrolled through his mind's eye and he was honestly amazed. The interlink computer between the human brain and the outside needed some tweaking, but the experiment had been a complete success. Both the test subjects had been able to successfully interface with an external computer using nothing but their brains, and with very minor side effects that they could iron out with a little more work.

If it worked, then that meant it was time to hijack the program, because it had immediate military applications. If he could hardwire his human pilots, they'd have the same capabilities as a Generation. Jason ordered the Academy mainframe to copy all data concerning the program to Cybi, sent a message to Ayuma to have her have those two lead scientists and their two test subjects moved to Karis, then asked Cybi to send it on to the 3D mainframe. He then called Songa and Olan Karinne, one of Myleena's Black Ops engineers that had defected to them, who got his degree from Dracora Academy in cybernetics, working with the machines the Faey used to replace body parts. It wasn't his specialty anymore, but that degree meant that he was the most qualified man in 3D to work on the program. *[I have a new project for you two,]* he told them, looking at both of them in his mind's eye as they were conferenced. He explained the experimental program, then smiled, which they could see thanks to the floating camera in front of him. *[You two are going to work with the two scientists that started the experiment to help them perfect it, as fast as possible.]*

*[Easily done,]* Olan nodded, his thick mane of light blue hair bobbing. *[I'm fairly impressed that they actually got it to work. I need to see their data.]*

*[It should already be on the 3D mainframe, and you should have access,]* Jason told him. *[I want you to start designing an interface to work with this, you know, just plugs right in.]*

*[Actually, the interface could double as the interlink computer, removing the need for a computer to be implanted in the host,]* Olan mused. *[Doctor Songa, is it feasible to place the interface jack behind the ear?]*



*[Actually, that would be a good place, anchoring it to the occipital ridge of the skull. There's some open area behind the ear canals where the wiring could be concentrated before it's spread out into the brain, and the wiring can be fused to the interior skull for the connections on the other side. I need to see their data as well, Jayce love,]* she told him.

*[I'll get you access, but for now, go to 3D. They'll let you in.]*

*[I'm on my way now. Truth be told, I won't mind a little diversion. Paperwork is boring,]* she complained, sticking her tongue out just a tiny bit.

Jason laughed. *[Welcome to command, love,]* he told her.

Jason filed through a few more reports, then sighed and went inside for his scheduled meeting with the Confederate Council, the eight rulers of the allied powers. Things were still a bit tense, mainly between Dahnai and Assaba, but things had calmed down considerably as the Confederate forces proved that they could work together and work together well. Grayhawk wasn't present at the meeting, sending his assistant to listen in on the meeting in his stead, since he had a lot of work to do helping his parliament get things back in order now that the Shio systems were back in Confederate control. Dahnai still had supremacy issues, and that really chafed Assaba's scales. He listened in without comment as Dahnai gave a status report, then they debated the best ways to invade the Alliance... which was a pointless thing, since it was the war room that was going to make that decision. The only good thing Jason could see out of it was that it kept the rulers out of the hair of their commanders. Myri hated it when Jason nosed around her business, and he had no doubt the top-tier commanders of the others had similar irritation when their rulers started sticking their nose in business with which they had no business involving themselves. As far as Lorna was concerned, Dahnai's only function as the Empress was to sign the orders her military staff issued. Grran was the only one at that table that had enough practical military experience not to be a pain in his generals' asses.

But there was some important business that happened, as Zaa took over the meeting. "I have infiltrators on the way to the occupied territory taken over by the Consortium on the far side of the galaxy," she declared. "They know we have infiltrated them and have become very secretive about

certain projects. With the CMS technology provided by the Karinnes, we can now get infiltrators deep inside their territory.”

“We could have provided stealth field technology, Denmother,” Sk’Vrae told her.

She shook her head. “Stealth fields cannot function in hyperspace, where CMS can,” she answered. “CMS is effective against hyperspace-based sensors as well. It is perfect for us. I should start receiving reports from my infiltrators within four days. Then we will know what secrets the Consortium seeks to hide from us.”

“Never try to hide something from a Kimdori,” Dahnai chuckled.

“It provokes our instincts,” Zaa said urbanely. “As to other matters, I have children on every Alliance planet, moon, and station, and all are now actively assessing the progress of planet killers, so that we may know where we must attack first. They are also making contact with the resistance cells that have appeared, to secure aid and coordinate any attacks with them.”

“Our peoples will resist the occupation of Alliance territory and fight bravely,” Ba’mra’ei declared.

“They’ve proved it during the Shio operations,” Dahnai nodded towards the ugly simioid.

“That is the extent of my information at this time.”

“Alright, we’ll move on to Stargate production,” Dahnai said. Jason drifted out as he pondered much more important matters, which was Aura’s visit. Rann was very fond of Aura, and so was Jyslin for that matter, and Rann fully understood just why she came over. They didn’t hide such things from Rann, for they were mainstream aspects of Faey culture, and he’d see similar situations on just about any vidy program. Nearly every married couple had such boyfriends and girlfriends, even such deeply involved marriages like Maya and Vell. Vell had a mistress or two and Maya had a couple of beaus and were known to indulge in a little extra-marital activity from time to time. Aura was Jason’s girlfriend in Rann’s eyes, and he knew that his father and Aura had private time. He needed to make sure the pool house was clean, for that was where they went when Aura came over for a conjugal visit, their private little place. He also needed to make sure Ayama had steaks, because that was Aura’s favorite Terran food, and he always

indulged her when she came over. He was also going to have to start prowling the strip for those sudden urges, just like Tim did, so he considered a few impromptu seductions...probably Lyn and/or Bryn first. Having twins in bed with him was really fun when it was Meya and Myra, and he was starting to wonder if Lyn and Bryn were the same way once a man got them out of their clothes.

“Wake up, Jason,” Dahnai called, which caused Cybi to manifest her illusion and nudge him. He blinked and looked at the eight holographic faces arrayed in a semicircle before him.

“Huh?” he asked.

“I said, how is the interdictor production going?”

“On schedule,” he answered, ignoring Cybi’s light, teasing smile, yet more proof that Cybi was alive. She had a definite sense of humor.

*“We will have six interdictors ready for deployment in two days,”* Cybi elaborated. *“Nineteen more are in the final stages of production and will be ready in a takir.”*

“I think that’s enough. We’ll be two short, but I don’t think we’ll be able to retake all of Alliance territory within a takir.”

*“No, it’s going to take much longer. Surprise is no longer on our side,”* Grran nodded, speaking through his vocoder as his fourteen highly dexterous fingers danced before him, typing out his words. *“So long as interdictor production keeps up with the advancement of our naval forces, we will be alright.”*

*[Jason, my friend, keep your ardor under control,]* Cybi teased.

*[Ya ya ya, bite me,]* he replied blandly.

*[It’s just good that you’re sitting behind your desk, else Dahnai might get the wrong idea.]*

*[Keep pushing that button, Cybi, it’s eventually going to go off.]*

*[Oh my. Should I bring you a towel?]*

He glared at her, which oddly enough, caused Dahnai to laugh. “What is she saying, Jason?”

“Nothing I’m repeating over an open comm,” he replied, which made Cybi pat Jason fondly on the shoulder.

“I often lament that I am eternally only on one side of a conversation where it concerns the Grand Duke and Lady Cybi,” Magran intoned dryly.

“You want her? Twenty credits and she’s yours,” Jason offered.

“*Your Grace!*” Cybi protested. “*I am worth at least fifty credits!*”

Dahnai laughed. “Be glad you didn’t offer that to me. I’d buy her in a heartbeat.”

“*You may buy me but getting me to obey you will cost you far more than you possess, your Majesty,*” Cybi then declared, somewhat airily.

“I do think this is a good time to stop. I find myself tiring, and not all of us are concentrating,” Sk’Vrae piled on.

“*I second that motion,*” Grran called. “*There are reports awaiting my attention.*”

“You aren’t the only one who has work waiting,” Vizzie nodded. “I must brief her Imperial Majesty on the day’s information.”

“Is she ill?” Magran asked.

“She is fulfilling some of the other duties of her crown at the moment,” Vizzie replied, with visible relief.

Cybi remained after the conference ended, and the two of them went over some of the reports, mainly dealing with production of Legion weaponry and her input on a few Legion projects under development. *[Myri hasn’t told you yet, but the Prophet and its task force are nearly finished with their shakedown and will be entering active service by Chiira.]*

*[Good, we can use them. How’s the refit on the Aegis?]*

*[The engine modifications are complete. The installation of the GRAF cannon is projected to be complete in seven days.]*

*[Any problems?]*

*[None yet. So far, installation is on schedule.]*

*[Then, I guess we’re done here?]*

*[Yes, we are done here. Go back to your lascivious fantasies,]* she teased.

*[I'm going to do just that, thank you very much,]* he replied shamelessly.

Aura arrived promptly at 1930, just in time to smell the steaks grilling out on the deck, not even bothering to come into the house. She padded up to see Jason and Jyslin playing chess on the outside table as Rann and Shya played with Amber, rolling a ball back and forth between them while trying to keep Amber from intercepting it. Surin was flipping the steaks on the grill as Ayama brought out salad, corn on the cob, and *raya* chutes sautéed in butter, fleshy pulp pulled from what looked like bamboo shoots, but tasted like nutty potato. “Good evening, everyone,” she called, dropping her overnight bag on the deck. “I see I’m just in time!”

“A touch early, Lady Aura,” Surin answered her.

“Speaking now, are we?” Jyslin asked.

Aura laughed. “I have to practice modern Faey somehow,” she replied. “That smells wonderful!”

“Thank you,” Surin and Ayama said in unison as Aura sat down beside Jyslin at the table.

“How was flight class?”

“Always interesting,” she replied. “I got my first chance to fly in space today, they introduced us to vector based flight.”

“That’s way different from atmosphere,” Jason chuckled.

“I know. Vector based flight is like a whole different kind of flying, but I’ll get the hang of it.”

*It took me forever to learn it*, Symone sent idly as Amber abandoned the game to jump up onto the table and yip demandingly at Aura.

“I just hope to be working soon,” she said, scratching Amber behind the ear, getting a purr out of her before she rejoined the game. “So long as I pass my flight exam, I graduate in three takirs and move on to apprenticeship, flying as a copilot in passenger dropships.” That sounded

about right. It wasn't really that hard to get a Class 3, about a month of instruction for someone with no experience at all, because skimmers were actually very, very easy to fly. It was about as hard to fly a skimmer as it was to drive a car, and Jyslin had learned how to fly his skimmer back on Terra in just a couple of weeks. Aura was a little different, though, because she was still learning how to fit in among the Karinnes and had absolutely no experience driving or flying. She was highly intelligent and learned very fast, however, so she wouldn't be losing any time in class. The Exiles had always had the *knowledge* of Karinne technology, but just lacked the ability to produce it. That did make quite a difference, allowing the Exiles to assimilate into Karinne technology and society faster than Jason expected. Just as Aura learned how to speak modern Faey very quickly, she had managed to work herself into her new home's technology, and even its culture, very quickly.

Aura would earn her Class 3 in about a month. But, since Aura was going to be a commercial pilot, she'd go through a few months of on the job training on the small passenger dropships, the 12 seaters that were little more than glorified skimmers, before being allowed to pilot one. From there, she'd work her way up through the fleet until she was piloting military ships as a pusher pilot, learning how to fly progressively larger and more complicated ships, step by step, each new assignment building on the skills she learned from her prior one.

"How are the other classes going?" Jyslin asked.

"I'm done with assimilation classes, and I'm almost finished with the language training."

"I noticed, you speak Faey very well now," Jason praised.

"I'm almost just another Karinne now," she laughed. "I've even gotten addicted to watching the vidy, just like you guys."

"Hey, I don't spend all my time in front of the vidy!" Symone protested.

"You just spend it in a Gladiator," Tim teased.

"Watch stuff blow up or blow it up myself, whichever shall I choose?" Symone retorted with a grin.

“Enough talk of job training. Let’s talk about that steak!”

“For someone as thin as you, I don’t see how you eat so much,” Ayama accused.

“Practice,” Jason teased.

“I used to work very hard, and that gives a girl an appetite,” Aura said primly. “When I start getting fat, then I’ll worry about how much I eat.”

*Jason makes sure to work it off her,* Symone sent with a naughty tilt.

*Exercise is exercise, whether I’m on my feet or on my back,* Aura replied shamelessly, which made Jyslin laugh.

*I just hope when I’m older, I have girlfriends as nice as you,* Aura, Rann told her.

She smiled at him. *I’m sure you will, pippy, you’re a very handsome young man, you know.*

*He’s mine, back off,* Shya warned, which made all the adults explode into laughter.

*She’s definitely marked the boundaries of her territory,* Aura winked at Jason.

*She’ll be in for a rude awakening when she finally realizes she won’t be the one in charge.*

Surin and Ayama served up dinner, and they bent to the task of enjoying grilled steak and all the trimmings, both Terran and Faey, that went with it. Jason enjoyed the evening for just what it was, a nice dinner with family and friends, a dinner that had nothing to do with the war being waged out there in space, a war where his own girls had already shed blood and lost lives, and he’d shed his own number of tears of their loss. But the dinner was a nice escape, a chance to rest, relax, and not think about cold reality.

The escapism continued after dinner, as Jason played piano for everyone, including Cybi, then they talked long enough to bore the children into going upstairs, Jason just catching up on the daily lives of Aura, Tim, and Symone. He found out that they’d decided on a name for their baby girl, Duchess Lyra Melissa McGee Ayalle Karinne, which was almost as bad as poor Rann’s full name, Duke Heir Apparent Rann Brian Fox

Shaddale Karinne. Tim and Symone headed home around 2200, because Tim had work in the morning and Symone was going to be working tomorrow as well, working as a Gladiator rigger by moving freshly produced Gladiators out of the factory beside the Shimmer Dome and loading them on transports to their destinations. She would be one of about twenty riggers that would give the Gladiators just off the line a cursory shakedown run, and then load them up on cargo transports after they were sure they were working just fine. It was fairly safe work, just the risk of some kind of bad manufacture causing a breakdown. The heavily armored box holding the pilot made it a safe place, even if some kind of wild malfunction caused something on the unit to explode. The main thing it did was give Symone a feeling that she wasn't a fifth wheel, that she was contributing. He'd never in a million years allow her into combat, but he'd let her play with Gladiators all she wanted as long as she never got into a fight. She was his *amu dozei*, and that afforded her certain perks and protections not allowed to most anyone else...but it also came with some restrictions and responsibilities. One of those was that she would never see combat if he had his way. And since he was the Grand Duke, it was fairly certain he was going to get his way.

After Tim and Symone left, Aura joined them in the baths as they got Rann and Shya ready for bed. Jason was not shy about bathing with others. He'd shared his bathroom with just about everyone on the strip at one time or another over the years, because bathing was seen as a social custom among the Faey. However, in this one instance, he thought that was just a tiny bit weird that Jyslin would invite his mistress to the baths, but neither Jyslin nor Aura had any problem with it. Rann and Shya didn't care either. He got over that feeling relatively quickly as Aura washed Shya's hair, listening to her send away in her bubbly manner, looking completely comfortable being brought into an intimate setting with his family. And he couldn't deny that he loved looking at her. She was so much like Dahnai, tall and sleekly muscled, like a panther, yet with all those curves a man loved to see on a woman, and like all Faey women, she was enticingly comfortable with herself, willing to show them the beauty of her body; among the Faey, the naked body was living art, a thing to be displayed, viewed, and admired, not hidden and rebuked as it was in human society.



After everyone was washed up, they sat in the soaking tub a while as Rann entertained them with his telekinesis, making water shapes, which wasn't an easy thing to do. Water was harder to affect because one had to approach it from a different angle. Instead of affecting the object, a telekinetic instead had to affect an *area*, the volume in which the water was contained. Telekinetic power could affect space at a direct level, and manipulating water was one of the aspects of that manipulation, working with the space that contained the water rather than the water itself. That Rann could make water shapes proved that he was going to be a very strong TK. It also said that Myleena had been teaching him tricks that Jason felt he wasn't quite ready to start trying yet. Jason, Myleena, and Ayuma took turns training Rann and Danelle in their power, and both of them had come along very quickly. Despite how busy they both were, they found the time to make sure that their kids got at least a good three of four hours of training a day. Ayuma found that giving TK lessons filled up the free time she had now that she was on Karis and would be there until it was safe for her to return to the Academy.

"My, that's a good one!" Aura praised as Rann slowly raised a twisting double spiral of water out of the tub, the two tendrils of water twirling around one another until they were nearly a foot tall, the two tendrils bobbing and weaving and shivering as Rann concentrated every fiber of his being on keeping control over the water. Jason had to marvel at how fast his son was learning how to control his powers. Just a couple of weeks ago, he could barely move something in his hand, and now he was making water shapes. But his novice status became apparent as he lost control of it, and the water splashed back into the tub.

*I made it too big,* he fretted.

*You're learning so fast, my clever son,* Jyslin smiled at him.

*Well, Daddy, Miss Ayuma, and Aunt Myleena make me practice all the time,* he answered. *Danny's getting really good too.*

*Just don't get showy like Kyri, and you'll be fine,* Jason chuckled audibly. *Woops, and that's it, young man, no more,* he warned as a tiny bead of blood appeared on his upper lip. Nosebleeds were a common side effect of learning telekinesis, when one pushed a little too hard.

“Here, love, let me get that for you,” Aura told him, taking up a rag and tilting Rann’s head up, dabbing the blood from his lip. “Alright, now pinch off your nose until it stops.”

*I’ve done this enough times, Miss Aura,* he grinned at her. *It’s when Daddy and Aunt Myleena says I need to stop.*

“I should say so!” Aura smiled down at him, patting him on the shoulder.

“Miss Ayuma says keep going until I get dizzy, though,” he added aloud, his voice a little nasal since his nose was pinched closed. “She says that’s how she learned.”

“Well, Ayuma isn’t your father or your aunt, so listen to them first,” Aura told him, quite seriously.

“Miss Ayuma says it’s not dangerous until your ears bleed.”

“If she pushes you that far, I’ll kick her butt,” Jyslin said with a grunt. Jason nodded in agreement. Bleeding from the ear canals was never a good thing, either in telepathy or telekinesis.

The good part about those kinds of nosebleeds was that they didn’t last very long. After just a couple of minutes, the bleeding stopped and Rann endured Shya cleaning up his nose and face, clucking at him like she was his mother, then she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. *There, all better,* she proclaimed, which made Jyslin smile lightly.

*You two hop out and dry off, it’s almost your bedtime,* Jyslin called. *And remember, you’re gonna be really busy tomorrow, so get to sleep.*

They did so, Rann drying his hair as Shya scrubbed the water off her shoulders and torso, then she looked down at Rann’s body. *When will you grow hair over your thing, like Daddy and Uncle Jason?* she asked boldly.

*Not for a while yet,* Jyslin answered her in an unruffled manner. *About the same time you grow your own hair.*

*Oh. I guess that makes sense,* she shrugged.

The two of them finished up drying off, then leaned over the tub to kiss the adults goodnight. Once they padded out, Jyslin leaned back against the

lip of the tub and sighed. *Shya's not going to be too happy about going home, she remarked. She's getting into that phase. So is Rann.*

*What phase?* Jason asked.

*This morning when I went to wake them up, Rann had his hand between her legs and he was feeling her up like nobody's business, she answered. And she was just spreading her legs wider for him.*

*All children go through such phases, it's not a big deal, Aura shrugged. Besides, they're betrothed. By custom and law, Shya can do anything she pleases with Rann, and Rann with her. If she wants him to touch her, and he wants to touch her, then she has that right.*

*That hasn't changed, and like I said, Shya's gonna be a little annoyed to leave, she chuckled. But I was a little surprised to see it. It's the first time I've seen them touch each other that way.*

*It has to happen eventually, Aura told her. They know they're betrothed, and they're old enough to understand what it means. They'll be doing a lot more than touching in a few more years, and they both know it.*

Jason was of two minds about that. They were right that by Faey custom and law, what Rann and Shya did was Rann and Shya's business, and not even they could really stop them. They were betrothed, and that gave Shya way more rights to Rann than she'd have otherwise. But, the human upbringing in him objected to the idea that the two of them had started getting *that* kind of curious. However, stopping them from anything improper would be virtually impossible any time they were together, because Shya and Rann were utterly inseparable when they were visiting. They even slept in the same bed and splitting them up now would not be easy.

*I can sense the moral outrage from here,* Jyslin teased a little at him.

He chuckled. *A little, but I already put my chips in this pot, so I may as well just see who wins the hand, he replied. In Terran society, that kind of thing is a serious taboo. But, then again, in human society, you can't turn on basic cable and see graphic pornography either.*

*Terrans are extremely uptight about sex,* Jyslin told Aura with a slight smile. *They see it as some kind of moral wrong unless you're married and*

*have turned anything even remotely sexual into a cultural deviance. They even outlaw nudity in public.*

*Good Trelle, that society must be a nightmare to live in, Aura noted. No wonder Jason is so well adapted to a proper lifestyle.*

*Ya ya ya, that's your fault for being so fucking sexy, Aura, he retorted, which made Aura preen a bit and Jyslin laugh. I never in my life dreamed I'd have three wives and a mistress who know about each other without trying to castrate me.*

*You have one wife, buster, Jyslin retorted with a playful smile.*

*I'm equating it to a Terran condition, he chided. Symone and Dahnai would be wives in human society, because they're relationships based on love. Aura would be a mistress, because it's all about sex.*

*I don't mind being a mistress, she grinned.*

*You'll be getting a workout, Jyslin told her. I've completely lost my sex drive.*

*Ah, you're at that stage, she nodded knowingly. I had a similar period when I was pregnant. Just the thought of sex made my skin crawl. My husband had to seek satisfaction with our next-door neighbor, with whom we both had a casual relationship.*

*Well, they're getting better about it, but there's still quite a bit of moral crusading on Terra over what Terrans see as Faey permissiveness, Jason chuckled. Especially around Los Angeles, because of the high concentration of Faey residents working in show biz. Most vidlinks on Terra have parental controls that basically block all off-planet networks except INN.*

*No offense, Jason, but your people are seriously messed up, Aura told him.*

*They say the same thing about Faey. It's just a rather significant culture clash, nothing more. Personally, I always thought it was a bit silly that parents rage against sex in society, yet let their kids play video games where they tear people's heads off. Seeing cleavage is a reason to go up in arms, but letting your kid play a game where you shoot an old lady between the eyes is just fine. Given the choice between my child messing around with a*

*neighborhood girl or hacking her up with a machete, I'll take the messing around.*

*There's that male pride I like to see, Jyslin grinned. Admit it, when Rann comes to you and tells you he lost his cherry, you'll congratulate him.*

*Sure will. But when Siyae or Bethany says the same thing, I'll grab my railgun and make sure the boy never has another chance.*

Both women laughed. *Such a sexist!* Aura accused.

*I'm still Terran in some ways,* he declared shamelessly.

*But you're Faey enough where it matters,* Aura winked.

*Hmm, let's see. I'm sitting naked in my tub with my naked wife and my naked mistress talking about my children's future sexual adventures. I guess I am,* he admitted.

*Well, I won't complain.*

*I tried to complain at first, but Jys and Symone beat it out of me.*

*Literally,* Jyslin giggled aloud. *And you had your own hand in that, Aura.*

*Yes, I remember you telling me about it,* she nodded. *I was happy to be of help subverting you to the evil Faey lifestyle,* she teased.

*Speaking of that evil Faey lifestyle, why don't you and me go down to the pool house and do something that would make my mother disown me?* he offered.

*I thought you'd never ask,* she purred in reply.

Aura was always therapeutic.

He woke at sunrise, 0646, and looked out the windows towards the fence, since the pool house was between the fence and the house. Two guards walked by, in their black armor, the morning patrol of the fence to ensure it was whole and operational. He picked up his interface and put it on, and immediately saw that he had three urgent messages, all from Myri. He decided she could wait a bit longer, leaning down and pulling the covers away to admire Aura's toned, sexy body, covered in that darker hue of blue

skin that showed she'd spent many long hours out in the sun, so long that her darker coloring had burned into her skin permanently. She was on her back, one hand draped over her tight stomach and the other dug up under the pillow behind her head, her gorgeous gold hair fanned out on the pillow around her reposed face. He made sure to pull the covers down enough to see all the way down to her knees, his eyes lingering on her generous breasts and that sexy triangle of shimmering gold pubic hair. They'd made love for hours last night, multiple sessions, multiple positions, multiple orgasms, Aura proving that she was the sexy beast that she was, sexy enough to have him call her and come over to fill in for Jyslin while she was in her disinterested phase and he was bandy.

And there was no love. A great deal of friendship, yes. Intimacy, yes. Love in a platonic sense, yes. But not romantic love. Aura really was just a really good friend who happened to have the hots for him, he had the hots for her, so they satisfied each other's desire in an entirely Faey manner. She was the glaring proof Jyslin had tried to show him for *years* that it was alright to enjoy other women, that he wouldn't fall in love with every woman he brought to bed.

She opened her golden eyes and gave him a lazy smile, not moving. *Enjoying the view?* she asked lightly.

*I'll enjoy it more if you give me more to see,* he replied, feeling his ardor rise staring at her. *Actually, forget looking, I'd rather do something else,* he declared, crawling on top of her.

Aura laughed and wrapped her arms around him. *You are always so wanton in the morning. I love it,* she told him in a seductive tilt of her thought, telling him she was just fine with a little morning entertainment.

Just about the time he'd gotten Aura's legs apart and was happily committing what his Christian morals would call adultery, his interface beeped again. He growled in frustration and stopped. *Dammit, they just can't leave me alone,* he complained.

*It's your fault for putting your interface back on,* she chided, her sending tinged with lust.

*Give me a minute, it's marked urgent.* Aura didn't seem too happy about that, putting her hands on his shoulders and rubbing her thighs against him

in a manner that tried to scatter his attention as he accepted the query. Myri appeared in his mind's eye, but since there was no floating camera in the pool house, she couldn't see him in return. *[What is it, Myri? I'm busy!]*

*[I know, I saw you drag Aura into the pool house last night,]* she replied with a leer. *[There was an accident up in Kosigi last night. A primary exchanger exploded on the Aravalo while they were testing the engine upgrades.]*

*[Shit, is everyone alright?]*

*[Fourteen minor injuries, one serious injury, but no fatalities,]* she replied, which made Jason sigh in relief. *[But the damage to the Aravalo is pretty extensive. It was the core exchanger, Jayce.]* That was definitely bad, since that was the main exchanger attached to the singularity plant. *[They're estimating two takirs to get it back in service.]*

*[I want to know why it happened.]*

*[I've already got QC going over it,]* she nodded. *[Tests on the plant show that it wasn't damaged by the feedback, so we really dodged a giruzi on that one. But they'll have to replace a hell of a lot of conduit and the two tertiary exchangers on top of the structural repairs.]*

*[That's not a surprise.]* It wasn't, because the two tertiary exchangers, directly attached to the core exchanger, were there to isolate the core from the ship and the ship from the core, acting like last-ditch circuit breakers in a catastrophic failure situation, just like a core exchanger explosion. It had no doubt melted both exchangers as they isolated the rest of the power grid from the wild feedback through the conduit from the explosion, but that was what they were there for. It was far easier to replace two exchangers than half the equipment on the ship.

*[Usually I wouldn't bother you with something not cataclysmic when I know you're digging for treasure between some lucky girl's legs, but you're the one that told us to report anything serious to you.]*

*[Yah, so I did, and you did the right thing. Thanks hon. Send updates by the hour.]*

*[Will do.]*

So? Aura prompted.

*An accident on a cruiser. A few people hurt, no one killed, but it knocked the Aravalo out of service for a while.*

*Ships can be fixed, but lives can't be replaced,* she sent sagely.

*Amen,* he agreed. He chuckled when she took hold of his interface, and he had it shut down before she pulled it off of his face. She gave him a smoldering look as she tossed it to the floor.

*Now, where were we?* she asked with a hungry smile.

*Right about here, I believe,* he answered, returning to what he was doing.

At least Miaari had the sense to let them finish before she barged into the pool house, but only just. She got quite an earful as she boldly came in through the bedroom door, and probably got quite an eyeful as well, since the foot of the bed faced the door and Jason had Aura in a position that probably left little to a spectator's imagination if viewed from that angle. Miaari came in just as Jason climaxed, accompanied by Aura's howls of pleasure, then he collapsed on top of her.

"So typical," Miaari sighed.

"Miaari!" Jason barked, looking back at her. "Do you *mind*?"

"Not at all, and since you didn't lock the door, I guess you don't either," she observed, which made Aura laugh. "It's not like I haven't seen you mate with a female before," she said dismissively.

"It's the principle of the matter! I wouldn't barge in on you if you had a man in your bed."

"I wouldn't care," she shrugged. "I'll send you an invitation when Kraal arrives, so you might observe Kimdori mating rituals. It would be educational."

To his intense pique, he blushed, which made Aura laugh even louder.

Jason wasn't about to feed Miaari's obvious amusement. He pulled up the covers with his talent far enough to get off of Aura without giving Miaari anything to see, then he sat on the edge of the bed as Aura kicked the covers back off and rolled over on her side, looking quite satisfied and



amused. “Now what’s so bloody fucking important that you’d interrupt my private time?” he demanded.

“Denmother wants to talk to you, and she felt it important enough to tell me to chase you down,” she answered. “Her exact words were, ‘I don’t care if you have to drag him off of Jyslin.’ I was prepared for the dragging but wasn’t prepared to drag you off of Aura. Hello, Aura,” she said politely.

“Miaari,” she returned with a nod and an impish grin. “I hope we didn’t offend you with our, ah, mating ritual?”

“Shut up, you traitor,” he growled at Aura, which made her giggle like a little girl.

“Jason always proves he is quite...enthusiastic about mating,” she replied, which earned her a smack on the arm. “Now, Jason, Denmother needs to speak with you, and it is quite urgent.”

“Guess work isn’t passing me by today,” he grunted, standing up and pulling his interface up off the floor with his power. He put it back on and turned it on, pausing only a second as it reasserted itself in his mind. He was so used to it now, it didn’t even make him dizzy anymore. “I’ll see you later, hon,” he told Aura.

“I need to get ready for classes anyway. Might I use your bathroom?”

“It’s all yours.”

Given that he and Aura had come down to the pool house already naked, he had nothing to wear back into the house...not that it mattered. It was a common sight to see Jason wandering around his yard naked. For that matter, he wasn’t the only one. Tim was also naked, padding back towards his house after leaving Myleena’s house, and he didn’t doubt that he and Myleena had been having a little fun. Myleena and Jason had no mutual attraction, but that was him and Myleena. Tim was another matter entirely. Ayama wordlessly handed him a mug of coffee when he went through the kitchen, following Miaari’s swaying tail, and she led him up to his study and put the room in secure mode. A hologram of Zaa appeared as soon as Miaari touched her memory band. “Bring on the bad news, Zaa,” Jason sighed, flopping into his chair.

“There is bad news, but also a little good,” she told him evenly. “I’ve received some reports from my children at Trieste. The Consortium is concentrating all defenses at Trieste and mean to hold it at all costs. The data we have analyzed suggest that they are willing to leave the other Alliance systems even less defended than the Shio systems to ensure they hold the Trieste system. All of the weapons platforms we expected to face in the Shio systems are all at Trieste, as well as a very large segment of their fleet.”

“What’s so important about Trieste?” he asked, bringing up a holo of the system. It had four planets and a massive asteroid belt, three gas giants and only one terrestrial planet, which was a blasted wasteland similar to Mercury. The Alliance had colonized one of the moons of the gas giant closest to the star, which had a temperate climate capable of supporting life but was actually a barren planet due to high radiation. It also had an air pressure one half Faey standard, which was hazardous to Faey and humans without prior preparation, but the radiation meant that a Faey or human would have to wear an E-suit to survive. It was bathed in low-energy radiation from the gas giant, so it was a Jakkan holding, though not quite as radioactive as a Jakkan might like. Curiously enough, the radiation levels were well within Generational tolerance. Jason could visit the planet without an E-suit so long as he decompressed to their air pressure beforehand. The Jakkans mined gold and zinc on the moon. “There’s nothing special about the system.”

“I know, but the Consortium has decided that the system is too important to lose. The why of it, well, I am sure that data will become available soon. The main reason I needed to speak with you urgently is because of the first report I have received from my children infiltrating the Consortium holdings on the other side of the galaxy.” She touched her memory band, and a hologram appeared, showing some kind of massive construction effort. “They are building something, and something *huge* at PR-237,” she told him, pointing at the armada of dropships and construction nodes hovering around a skeletal superstructure, as both insectoids and bipedal beings in E-suits crawled all over the many different individual sections sitting in orbit. “Thus far my children have no idea what this is, as they have only just arrived. They literally took these holos as they passed

by. I have analysts trying to piece together what these sections might create when joined together.”

“So, you think this is their answer to the interdictors?” Jason asked.

“Given the sheer size of this effort, and the fact they are *not* building ships, I suspect it might be,” she agreed. “This must be some kind of device they feel will aid them in their war effort. And given their sole command is to capture Karis as quickly as possible no matter the cost, then this must somehow be related to their plans to attack your planet.”

“What can we do about it?”

“There? Very little. It is much too far to jump a sizable attack force, not with *this* there,” she said, changing the angle. He realized that just about their *entire* fleet that was not at Trieste was parked around that planet, well over sixteen thousand ships of both Consortium and another design, strange bulbous ships that looked like slightly flattened turnips. Those had to be the ships of the native citizens they’d conquered.

“Well then, I think it’s time to start using up the Legion stockpiles again,” Jason grunted. “We’ll see how fast they build that thing while under constant attack.”

“Just what I was to suggest,” Zaa smiled. “I will also order sabotage attacks against whatever this is. I don’t think either of us want to see them complete it.”

“I do want to know what it is,” Jason said, staring at the pieces. “So we have an idea of what they’re up to.”

“That is a given,” Zaa nodded. “Now, as to the good news. I am coming to visit,” she smiled.

“Wonderful! When?”

“Tomorrow. I am bringing Kraal to Karis. He has won the right to sire Miaari’s cubs, and if I am to see my only Handgroom and Handmaiden mate, I fully intend to bring them together personally so they may consummate the agreement. Such a mating is exceedingly rare, and all of Kimdori has high expectations from their offspring.”

“I can only do my best to teach them properly, Denmother,” Miaari said demurely.

“You are far too busy with this war to properly watch after your cubs, and I *know* what kind of a handful Jason can be,” she snorted, which made Miaari grin toothily at him. “I will foster them until you are ready to fulfill your parental duties.”

Miaari almost swallowed her tongue. “I...I am honored beyond all words, Denmother!” she gasped, almost genuflecting right there in his study.

“I would be a poor Denmother to not foster the cubs of my Handmaiden when she has need of it,” she declared, a bit pompously. “Denfather is so eager of the idea to have cubs about the den that he is urging me to breed.”

Miaari laughed. “Why not? It has been centuries since you graced us with cubs, Denmother!”

“We will see,” she said brusquely. “So, I will arrive at sunrise tomorrow Karsa time,” she told them. “And I will bring Denfather, and Miaari’s parents so they may celebrate the event.”

“I’ll make sure we’re ready to receive you, Denmother,” Jason assured her. “I’ve never so much as seen the Denfather.”

“Denfather is my consort, and serves no other purpose in Kimdori society,” she said simply. “Denfather is my permanent mate, as is my right as a clan ruler to have a mate and breed at will. When I won the title of Denmother, the male clan leaders competed to earn the right to stand by my side, and Denfather won that competition. My clan selected a new clan leader who oversees my clan, his clan selected a new clan leader, and now we both have different duties. Just as Denfather serves only to be my breeding partner, Miaari’s mother holds a similar position within her clan as consort to the clan leader, a position she had to *win*. Her sole purpose is to produce offspring by Miaari’s father whenever he so wishes, and she had to prove her worth by defeating all challengers, proving she was the best female in the clan.”

“Ah, I understand. Alpha male and alpha female.”

“Just so,” Denmother said with a toothy smile. “Consorts are forbidden by law and custom from involvement in politics or clan activities. They exist solely to breed.”

“A cushy life.”

“It can be boring for them, believe me,” Zaa told him. “Denfather spends most of his time pursuing education. He takes many remote classes from the Academy,” she said with a slight smile. “His educational pursuits, however, make him an invaluable advisor. He is restricted to homeworld in all but the most exceptional circumstances, such as this event. He is most looking forward to coming to Karis.”

“Well, we’ll do our best to make his vacation a good one,” Jason assured her.

“Very well. I’ll let you go shower now, Jason, it looks as if you need it.”

Miaari burst out laughing. Jason swatted her on the butt, to which she replied by smacking him in the back of the head with her tail. Her shaggy tail had a lot of fur on it, but there was enough meat and bone there to make it not entirely pleasant. Zaa just smiled as her hologram faded.

“Bitch, I just might stand there and watch as you get your turn,” he threatened.

“You will be very disappointed,” she grinned at him. “Kimdori are much too refined for all that moaning and rolling around. If you do attend, you will be among company, for the parents of both of us attend the event. Kraal’s parents have passed on, so Denmother and Denfather will stand in their stead, as is their right and privilege given Kraal is a Handgroom. And it will be over much too quickly for your taste.”

“Well, that sounds anticlimactic,” Jason noted as he stood up.

“It’s ritualized, Jason,” she told him. “I will kneel down, and he will mount me, and it will be over as soon as he is fully mounted. We do not mate for pleasure as your species does, though we *do* have some forms of physical and sexual pleasure when we are in the mood for it,” she said with a slight smile. “He will give me his seed, and I will produce anywhere from one to four cubs some three weeks later.”

“Three *weeks*?” he gasped.

She nodded. "They will be tiny and helpless and will require much care. That is why I am honored that Denmother would nurse *my* cubs to her own breast. Such an honor for my cubs," she said dreamily.

"Why so fast?"

"Because before we evolved as we are now, we were required to hunt for our food," she said simply. "Kimdori females needed to be able to hunt, and since in our primal state only the alpha female bred, it meant that one of the best hunters in the pack would be burdened. So, we had very short gestation cycles. It is easier on the females to give birth to tiny, helpless cubs and have the pack guard them than to be burdened with a belly heavy with cubs and be too slow to catch prey."

"Well, I guess that makes sense," he reasoned. "So, what *do* you do for pleasure?" he asked.

She grinned. "Are you propositioning me, Jason?"

"You're not my species, Miaari."

"But you *are* a Generation. You'd be capable of it," she replied ominously.

"Miaari. Bad dog," he said in a stern voice, which made her laugh. "So, you use sharing as a form of pleasure."

"One kind," she nodded as she followed him to the bathroom. "We can mate purely for physical pleasure as well, which is much longer, but still much more dignified than your wild gyrating and sweaty forms of copulation."

"If you're not sweating, you're not trying," Jason said, which made her give a growl of a chuckle.

"Why would a male have to thrash about behind me like a wounded bear when he can simply use his Kimdori gifts to do all the work?" she asked lightly.

Jason had to laugh. "That just seems wrong," he complained, getting her drift. Kimdori *were* shapeshifters, after all.

"Not when you're the one mounted, it's not," she replied ribaldly. She sat on a stool and watched as he turned on the shower feature in the bathing

pool, which used airskin technology to keep the water off the floor, so it had no curtain. The shower got almost no use, but in this case, it was very handy given he didn't have all day to get clean.

"Well, make yourself useful and go tell 3D to get ready for a conference," he told her. "We have to have a little talk about that construction at PR-237, and what we're going to do about it. And ask Chirk to get the cabinet together so we can prepare for Denmother's arrival."

"Hush, I am watching you shower," she told him. "Am I not acting like your harem females? Or would you rather I take Aura's form so you might ogle me?"

"Out, you hussy bitch!" he barked, pointing at the door, which made her laugh and heed him.

Since he was grounded and now the war was out of his hands, he felt like he had something to do with this information. He left Rann and Shya with Dera and Aya, and Shen, Suri, and Ryn accompanied him to 3D, where the team was already assembled and waiting for him. He showed them the holos that Zaa had given him. "Whatever this is they're building, we don't want them to finish," he declared. "So, what can we do about it?"

"At the moment, not a whole hell of a lot," Tom growled. "I'm getting *some* factory time, but we're really low on toys right now. Half of what they're making for us keeps getting commandeered by the military."

"Well, I'll tell Myri to give it all back," Jason grunted, making a note of it in his gestalt. "They have enough weapons without taking ours, especially now when we need them. Do we have disposables to get them out there?"

"Plenty," Myleena answered, studying the hologram. "Hmm," she mused. "Look at these pieces, Bo. What does it look like to you?"

"They're all curved," he answered. "Circular?"

"Or spherical," she nodded in agreement. "These pieces all have the same arc. And these pieces have a different arc," she called, pointing at various pieces in the hologram. "Fuck, if those form a circular piece, it would have to be five hundred *kathra* in diameter. And there's not enough pieces there to make something that big."

“Maybe they’re arced sections of something else,” Jenny offered. “If there’s two different sizes there, I’d guess that they’re pieces of some kind of ship.”

“But where’s the rest of it?” Leamon asked.

“Being built somewhere else, maybe?” Bo offered. “How many systems are over there?”

“A bunch,” Gerann answered. “I think we need more information from the Kimdori before we can really figure out what they’re doing.”

“Be that as it may, we don’t want them finishing whatever it is, so let’s load up a few freighters with toys and send them over,” Jason told them. “You get that gravity beam going, Jenny?”

“Well, we can field test it,” she laughed. “It sorta works, but it tends to blow up if it overloads.”

“Well, nothing like actual field conditions,” Jason shrugged.

Myleena wasn’t saying anything, her eyes were still studying the pieces. She shifted the image into a spectrographic setting, a sensor overlay mode that analyzed material standard on all Kimdori surveillance holograms, then frowned. “Fuck, look at this,” she said, pointing. “These smaller arced sections have phased Eretrium cores. That means they’re going to have some kind of hyperspace application.”

“That’s an absolute fuckton of Eretrium,” Jason grunted, studying the readouts. Eretrium was a synthesized metal that was standard in hyperspace jump engines, though Karinne engines used Terynium, which was much better suited for engine cores. “Where the hell did they get that much?”

“It couldn’t have been cheap,” Myleena noted. “And look at this. The smaller sections have plasma tech in them, but the larger sections are just metal. No datalines, no computers, no equipment. They’re just metal. That is bizarre.”

“Maybe they’re the armored hull sections,” Olan offered.

“Then why aren’t they made out of armor-quality metal?” she countered. “These are made of shocked titanium and iron, covering the iron only on the outer arc side.”



“Some kind of magnetic application?” Jason proffered.

“Possible, but it’s too fucking big to be practical if it’s meant to be magnetic,” she replied. “Jason, this might just be a decoy. What they’re building, I can’t for the life of me figure out what it’s supposed to be.”

“Decoy or not, we’re hitting it,” Jason stated bluntly. “So, I’ll get our stuff back from Myri. After I do, Leamon, build up an attack package and get it loaded up. Coordinate with the Kimdori before you send it off, just in case their infiltrators don’t want us to attack. Get their permission first.”

“Will do,” he nodded.

“I’ll let you guys iron out the details, I have to go talk to the cabinet. Denmother is coming, so I want to get ready for her visit.”

“We’ll survive without you,” Jenny grinned.

“I hope not, this is the only fun *they* let me have anymore,” he said, jerking a thumb over his armored shoulder at his three guards.

“It must be sad that you’re grounded like a little boy,” Myleena bored.

“Keep talking, bitch, and you’ll be spending a few days in the brig,” he retorted, which made her laugh and make a rude gesture.

The *Lion* delivered him to the White House, where his cabinet wasn’t just waiting for him, they had a schedule drawn up and arrangements already made to receive Zaa and her entourage. It really wasn’t that much work to receive Zaa since she didn’t want pomp and circumstance, but she *was* a ruler, so she did deserve all the luxury they could provide. The preparations they usually made when she visited was securing her penthouse suites at the Karsa Gardens, the most luxurious hotel on Karis, and generating security plans to allow her to move about the city quickly and safely. Nobody on Karis was a threat to Denmother, but Zaa deserved absolute protection, even in a safe environment like Karis. It was doubly important because the Denfather would also be there, and his protected status meant they had to be doubly sure he would be safe and well, and also entertained. Tours would need to be arranged so he could visit the historical sites around Karsa, and a trip to Kosigi to tour the shipyards and Kosiningi to visit Cybi in person were also required. Zaa had sent word of the size of her entourage before Jason got there, and they were using that information

to get everything ready. Yeri Karinne, his Secretary of State, was the one primarily responsible for arranging such things, for she was the primary diplomat when Jason himself wasn't involved. Yeri dealt with most of the lower level diplomatic bullshit, leaving him free to only worry about the top tier crises. Arranging things so the Denmother had a safe and satisfying visit to Karis was her domain, since this was going to be an *official* visit rather than an informal one.

"Denmother is bringing four dignitaries outside of herself and Denfather," Yeri told him after he got there. "Two members of Miaari's clan and two other Kimdori from Kraal's clan. Kiaari is also coming for the ceremony, and she should be here in a few hours."

"Great! Can you get hold of her and ask her to come to my house for dinner?"

"She's still on Terra, so that should be easy," she nodded. "I've already got everything set up, it just needs your approval."

Jason read through her proposed schedule and found nothing wrong with it. "Looks good, let's go with it," he affirmed.

Kumi bustled in, looking a bit sheepish. "Sorry I'm late, I was fighting with those fucking Moridon," she said, quickly taking her chair. She *was* the Secretary of Economic Affairs, though she almost never actually sat in on cabinet meetings. Myri was also technically on the cabinet as the Secretary of Defense, but she too almost never attended official meetings. Navii usually sat in for her, though nobody from defense was present today.

"Congratulations on your blessing, Kumi!" Trenirk called.

"Thanks Tren!" she smiled radiantly.

"*You are carrying eggs?*" Jrz'kii asked.

"Yuppers, I'm pregnant," she answered with a big smile. "Just found out yesterday. It's about time!"

"Who's the lucky father?" Yeri inquired

"Taen Karinne," she replied. "Generation. One of my four, you know," she grinned.

"He's quite handsome," Yeri said in approval.

Jason was distracted when Cybi suddenly took control of his gestalt, linking him to Saelle without warning. *[Jason!]* she called urgently.

*[Saelle? What's wrong?]*

*[An Imperial Guard just tried to kill Dahnai!]*

*[WHAT?]*

*[Just opened her gunports and took a shot at us right out of nowhere!]* she communed distractedly. *[I'm hustling Dahnai to her apartment right now!]*

*[Is everyone alright?]*

*[We're fine, and I didn't kill the guard, I just knocked her out. I want to know what happened, why she broke years of conditioning and tried to kill Dahnai.]* There was a brief pause. *[Dahnai says to keep Shya there, and that Kellin and the kids are coming. She wants them out of the palace until we get to the bottom of this.]*

*[Not a problem. If Dahnai's in any kind of danger, you truss her ass up and bring her here as well. I'll send a task force to pick up Kellin and the kids right now.]*

*[Dahnai says thanks. Now let me go, I'll call back as soon as I get Dahnai to a secure location and find out what the fuck is going on.]*

*[Keep her safe, cousin.]*

*[That's why I'm here,]* she answered calmly. The connection ended, and left Jason both furious and astounded. An *Imperial Guard* tried to kill Dahnai? That was almost unbelievable! They undertook years of conditioning and training to make them impossible to telepathically dominate, and their devotion and loyalty to the throne were unswerving due to extensive psychological tests and screening before they were awarded the position. Jason would believe that rocks could dance before he'd believe that an Imperial Guard would try to assassinate Dahnai.

Just what the *fuck* was going on over there?

*[Myri,]* he called.

*[Yeah?]*

*[Send everything on standby to Draconis right now and pick up Kellin and Dahnai's children, as fast as possible.]*

*[Sure, they'll be on the way in twenty minutes.]*

*[Right fucking now,] he communed vociferously.*

*[Uh oh, what happened?]*

*[Dahnai just survived an assassination attempt in her own palace,] he answered intensely. [So get that task force there fucking now so we can get Kellin and the kids out of any possible danger.]*

*[Holy shit! Right now!]* she agreed emphatically. She broke connection, and Jason accessed the cameras in orbit around Kosigi to see that his orders were followed. A task force of 38 ships barreled out of the capital doors, led by the *Trelle's Gift*, and immediately turned towards the Draconis Stargate at flank speed.

The others were giving him a curious look. "What's up, babes?" Kumi asked.

"Meeting's over," he said curtly. "Someone just tried to kill Dahnai."

That created bedlam in the cabinet room. He calmed them down and told them what Saelle told him, then stood up. "Yeri, finalize things for Denmother's visit. Oh, and call over and have them prepare Dahnai's guest house for Kellin and the kids. I'm going over to the command center to find out what the fuck is going on. I'll have them send all of you reports as events update."

*"That is considerate,"* Grik'zzk nodded. *"We are all quite concerned and would appreciate to be kept up to date."*

His three guards kept their utter astonishment secret, at least until he left the cabinet room. *How? How?* Ryn sent, stunned. *I, I, I just can't believe one of us would attempt such a thing!*

*I know, it's right up there with flying pigs,* Jason agreed shortly. *All I know is that something major had to happen for something I thought was impossible to become possible. Saelle didn't kill the guard, so at least they can figure out what happened from her.*

*Thank Trelle! Shen sent with a sigh of relief. That way we can get the truth right from the source!*

*I can't believe that one of us would fall subject to telepathic domination, but the idea that she tried to kill the Empress willingly is equally unbelievable, Suri grunted mentally.*

*Like I said, something seriously fucking major had to happen. I trust the Imperial Guard with my life. I'm just as shocked as you are that one of you would do something like that. I just hope Dahnai has a mindbender capable of subduing an Imperial Guard, Jason sent grimly.*

All three nodded. It would take someone like Yana to pull that off. The conditioning of the Guards was all but undefeatable...but someone *had* to have defeated it. Jason just flat out did not believe that an Imperial Guard would *willingly* try to kill Dahnai. There had to be some kind of domination or outside influence at work here.

*Saelle might be required. I can't think of anyone else with the power to do it, Shen answered.*

*She's one of the strongest telepaths alive, Jason sent simply, for it was just plain truth. She should be able to do it.*

The command center was in a blitz of activity when he got there, because they all knew now what had happened. The task force was already at Draconis, about to enter orbit, by the time Jason got to Myri's desk. "Any word from Saelle?" she asked as he got there.

"Not yet, she said she'd call back when she had news," he answered, "and I'm damn fucking well not gonna distract her right now."

"Fucking truth," Myri agreed with a growl.

Jason watched and listened as the task force entered orbit, and a large flotilla of fighters and six corvettes escorted a heavily armored dropship that rose up from the palace, no doubt holding Kellin and the kids. Wolf fighters met it halfway up and joined the procession, forming a ring of bristling potential violence around the dropship, over a hundred pilots on a razor's edge and ready to shoot at anything they even *thought* might be a threat. While they did that, Jason sent a blanket warning to all the other rulers about the attack, and that they'd better tighten their own security just

in case Dahnai's attacker was just one of many rather than a lone wolf. Jason found himself holding his breath as the dropship neared the KMS battleship, and then he sighed explosively when it was docked. There were a few cheers in the command center; he wasn't the only one glad to see the Imperial family safely on board the *Trelle's Gift*. Imperial Naval vessels joined the KMS task force as it turned and headed for the Karis Stargate, until there were over 100 starships protecting the battleship, deeply entrenched at the center of a defensive formation, making it virtually impossible for any threat to fire on the battleship without hitting one of the defending ships in the formation instead. The gate was brought back up from hot standby as the task force neared, then they started traversing the gate in pairs and quartets, half of them going first, then the *Trelle's Gift*, then the other half. The gate partially delinked as soon as the last ship went through, returning to hot standby, closing the door and preventing anyone or anything from following.

Saelle finally got back to him. *[Jason,]* she called.

*[Thank God! What's going on?]*

*[I have Dahnai in the bunker right now, with about fifty Guards who are almost too busy glaring at each other rather than paying attention to defending the door. It's almost as if they think that at any moment another of them is going to eat the barkpod.]*

*[What about the attacker?]*

*[They're taking her to a holding cell. They've already asked me to deal with her.]*

*[You're the strongest telepath on Draconis, cousin. You can handle it.]*

*[I'll send you some vidy of the attack. They caught the whole thing on Courtwatch, so the attack is general knowledge. Now let me calm these twitchy bitches down enough so I can leave without them starting a war between themselves right here in the bunker.]*

*[Get it done, cousin. And you might think about making preparations to come back to Karis. If we can't guarantee her safety in the palace, we'll bring her here, where nobody can lay a finger on her.]*

*[I'll talk to Lorna about it. Let me go dig up some answers, Jayce. I'll report in as soon as I know something.]*

*[Get Jinaami there too,] he told her. [If you can't get answers, she can.]*

*[True. It won't be easy to explain to the guards why I need Jinaami, but we'll think of something.]*

*[I have every confidence in you, Saelle. Just tell Dahnai to order them to let Jinaami in. She'll be able to do it without attracting attention if you can't break the guard.]*

*[Okay. I'll call back in a bit.]*

*[Good luck and thank you.]*

*[She's my friend too Jayce,] she replied simply, then she broke the communion.*

Saelle was right about the attack getting caught on *Courtwatch*. Jason, Myri, Navii, Sioa, and Juma watched along with his guards as they accessed the data Saelle uploaded to them, viddy of the attack. It was as abrupt as Jason would have expected. One second everything was completely normal, then one of Dahnai's guards standing near the door to her private hallway extended the MPACs on her forearms with no warning and fired at Dahnai. Saelle reacted with blazing speed, thrusting an open palm in the guard's direction, using her telekinesis to protect Dahnai. The MPAC bundles suddenly veered upward and hit the ceiling, blowing huge chunks of polished marble-like stone and crystal decorations out of the ceiling to rain down over the dais, but all the debris was also caught up in Saelle's power, shunted harmlessly to the side. Jason was impressed. Saelle had manipulated not the MPAC bundles, but the *space* in front of her, twisting it to make the shots change direction. He knew that because to make those 11 MPAC blasts all change direction through direct manipulation, she would have had to alter the course of each one individually. Affecting the space through which they traveled was the only way to do it. She then retaliated against the guard, snapping her hand up, which caused the guard to fly into the air, sending a few more MPAC shots wildly into the air, hitting the walls and ceiling in an arc from the dais over to the far wall. Her armor literally flew apart, stripping her naked in the blink of an eye as Saelle used her power to tear it apart along its seams, undressing her and rendering her

unarmed in about a second and a half. She then slammed the woman against the wall over the hallway door, stunning her, and then dropped her to the ground as the other guards tackled her, holding her down as chaos took hold of the throne room. Saelle immediately grabbed Dahnai by the arm and hustled her right out there using the emergency door behind the throne even as the panic shield winked into visibility around the dais, the shield that was *supposed* to prevent the attack, was supposed to activate immediately upon the detection of an activated weapon within the room...though odds were it was programmed to ignore the weapons in the armor of the guards. Odds were that shield was manually activated. Saelle's primary duty was to Dahnai, letting the guards deal with the attacker and fulfilling her primary objective of getting Dahnai to safety, which was the best thing to do. After an attack like that, getting Dahnai out of the public throne room and into a secured bunker was the highest priority. *Demir's sword, Saelle reacted so fast*, Shen noted. *She was looking in that general direction just as the attack happened, but still, she reacted so fucking fast to intercept those shots like that.*

"She was an Imperial Marine, Shen, she has military training," Jason told her. "That's why I chose her for the job."

*You saved Dahnai's life with that decision, Jayce*, Navii sent grimly. *If not for Saelle, Dahnai would have been killed. There's absolutely no doubt about it.*

*Yeah*, Myri agreed with a nod.

*I'm not going to complain*, Jason told them seriously. *She's my amu dorai way more than she's the Empress, fucking right I'm gonna protect her.*

Jason fielded calls from the other Confederate rulers as he waited for news from Saelle, basically just telling them that Dahnai was safe and he was waiting for more information, though he didn't get a call from Zaa yet. No doubt she was furious and was reading some Kimdori the riot act, and she'd get in touch with him when she was ready. He also kept track of the task force, watching on a holo as they reached Karis orbit, then a corvette docked with the *Trelle's Gift* to bring Kellin and the kids to the planet. Imperial Raptors and KMS Wolves escorted it down as the warships hung in low orbit, then they pulled back towards Kosigi once the corvette had made a water landing and tied up to the pier at the strip. He saw a very



worried Kellin quickly leave the corvette along with 16 Imperial Guards, with Sirri and Maer holding each of his hands. They immediately escorted him towards the guest house, and he saw that Jyslin met them halfway, giving all of them crushing hugs, then she picked up Sirri and went with them to Dahnai's vacation house. Four Gladiators had been brought onto the strip, two standing at each side of the vacation house. Three were KBB, the fourth was an Army Gladiator. Kyva was commanding the four mecha, and to Jason's surprise, Symone was in the Army Gladiator, a rail cannon in her mecha's hands as she scanned the sea for any possible threat. He hadn't had time to tell Jyslin what was going on, but someone else had, thank God. Kellin deserved to have her meet him and stay with him, because he had no doubt that Kellin was very worried and afraid for Dahnai's life at that moment, no matter how safe she seemed to be. A husband would worry for his wife in that kind of a situation until she was in his arms.

After about 40 minutes, Saelle finally called him back, this time using a comm. Jinaami was with her, and she didn't look happy. "We have news," the Kimdori told him.

"What happened?"

"It seems that our foes are fond of using old tricks," Saelle told him. "The guard was infected by a virus similar to the one they used on Rahne."

Jinaami nodded. "If not for Rahne, I might have missed it," she declared. "The virus had already activated and destroyed itself, which allowed the guard to get past the biosensors that seek out such things, but the effect it had on her brain exactly mimicked the simulations we ran concerning Rahne. The virus wrote a subliminal suggestion into the guard's brain. She had no idea what she was doing, which was why the listeners and mindbenders around Dahnai had no warning of what she intended to do. It was beyond her control."

"How the fuck did they manage to infect an *Imperial Guard*?" Jason demanded. "That virus had to be custom engineered just for her!"

"That is a question I intend to answer *immediately*," Jinaami said with a scowl. "This is *my* territory, and this attack is *my* shame! I will know how it was done so that I might at least bring answers to Denmother before I repent for this grievous error!"

“Don’t start thinking of suicide, young lady,” Jason snapped. “If you kill yourself, I’ll never forgive you!”

“I *should*,” she said vehemently. “I have failed in my duty!”

“Let Denmother be the judge of that,” Jason told her. “Personally, I don’t see how you could have stopped this. Some things can even get past a Kimdori.”

“I should have considered this possibility!” she raged at herself. “I should have prepared for this!”

“Jinaami!” Jason barked. “I need answers, and you’re the only one that can get them!”

She blew out her breath, then nodded. “Yes, I must save the self-recrimination until I have answers for you and Denmother,” she said. “I will order an immediate bio-screen on everyone in the palace and see if anyone else is infected, to start out. I will get to the bottom of this, Jason.”

“Bring it to Karis *personally* when you have the answers,” he told her.

She nodded, then left the room.

“Don’t let her go and do something crazy, cousin,” Jason told Saelle. “She’s my friend.”

“I’ll cheer her up for you,” she said with a gentle smile.

“I’ll send this on to Denmother,” Jason told her. “You keep Dahnai safe.”

“As safe as if she were sleeping in your bedroom,” she declared with a reassuring smile, then the hologram winked out.

“Fucking clever,” Myri growled. “Using a *guard*.”

“I want to know how they pulled off that miracle,” Jason grunted. “Cybi, can you get Denmother on the comm? She’ll answer if *you* call.”

“*Certainly. One moment.*”

Jason was right that Zaa was furious. She had that same terrifying look of outraged fury he remembered from the missile attack. “You bring news?” she asked directly.

He repeated what Jinaami told him. “The guard had no idea what she was doing, and since the virus had destroyed itself, she got past the biosensors,” he explained. “Right now, Jinaami is tearing the palace apart looking for anyone else that might have been infected and trying to find out how the guard was infected in the first place.”

“As she should!” she snapped.

“Don’t put this one on Jinaami, Denmother,” he said, a bit placatingly. “I don’t see how she could have stopped it. She can’t keep track of every single person in the entire city, you know.”

Zaa looked as if she wanted to debate that point, then she growled and nodded. “You are right,” she acceded. “She *does* have fault here, but not fault so severe that she has shamed herself. She should have had stronger protections around Dahnai, but I cannot fault her for how the attack was carried out. I will be quite wroth with her, but I will forbid her to repent for her shame.”

“Thank you,” Jason said simply. “If you do fire her, send her to Karis. She’s a friend of mine, Denmother. I’ll take her. I believe in her.”

“Your loyalty is a trait we Kimdori greatly admire, Jason,” she told him simply. “Now if you will excuse me, I have more children to chastise for this.” And then her image winked out without another word.

“Fuck, she’s a scary bitch when she’s mad,” Juma breathed, then she realized she said it aloud and blushed.

“That’s the truth,” Jason agreed. “I almost peed myself when I saw the look on her face after the missile attack. She could put the fear of God into anyone with just that cold stare.”

He retreated to Myri’s office so he could call Kellin privately. He appeared on the holo immediately, then gave an explosive sigh. “Thank Aris and her sweet mercy! What’s going on, Jayce? You have news?”

Jason explained everything they had so far. “Jinaami is leading the investigation, and you know how you can’t hide anything from a Kimdori, especially when she’s on the warpath,” Jason told him. “Dahnai is safe, and now we’re just waiting for the all-clear before they let her out of the bunker.”

“That’s a relief! But how did they manage to infect a guard? They never leave the palace!”

“That’s one of the things that Jinaami’s gonna find out,” he answered. “Have you talked to Dahnai?”

He nodded. “Just a couple of minutes ago, she was making sure we made it safely.”

“Well, go ahead and settle in, you’ll be here overnight if nothing else,” Jason told him. “I’ll have Ayama come over and make you something to eat.”

“I do love her cooking,” he smiled nervously. “But right now, I could do with a stiff drink.”

“We have plenty, just ask for something,” Jason assured him. “Surin keeps a liquor cabinet that would make any bartender jealous.”

“I just don’t have the nerves for politics,” he admitted.

“That’s one reason why Dahnai loves you, so don’t change,” Jason told him with a chuckle.

Jason calmed down as the crisis point passed. Jinaami gave clearance for Dahnai to leave her bunker after about an hour, as Jason was spreading word among the rulers of current information, and he spent a good fifteen minutes talking to Dahnai, who looked a little shaken, but also plenty pissed off. “Babes, I’m gonna kiss you *sooo* many times for sending Saelle,” she told him fervently. “She saved my life!”

“You’ll have to stand in line,” Jason told her. “Right about now, I’d kiss her ass if she asked.”

Dahnai laughed. “So would I,” she admitted. “They’re not letting me out of my apartment any time soon, so do me a favor and keep Kellin and the kids for a while. I don’t want them in any kind of danger. I want to be absolutely sure beyond any doubt that the palace is safe before I let them come back.”

“We’ll be happy to have them,” Jason assured her.

After two more hours, they had at least one answer. Saelle sent him some data that showed that the virus had been *airborne*. The guard had

contracted it while out on the grounds, and it had infected her, written its subliminal message into her brain, and then destroyed itself before she went back inside. It was also disguised to appear to be a harmless virus common to Draconis' atmosphere, which fooled the biosensors stationed on the grounds from detecting it as dangerous. The palace did have something of a passive defense against airborne threats in that the palace and its inhabited buildings were all positively pressurized; the slightly higher pressure inside the palace blew air *out* of any open door or window, preventing airborne viruses or contaminants from entering the palace. Jinaami ordered a swift rectification of that little oversight by having an airskin shield installed around the perimeter fence. In the interim, the palace's perimeter shield was raised, which was a hard shield, so it would stop the exchange of air molecules across its area of effect. The palace would run on air purifiers until an airskin shield was installed just behind the defense shield, which would stop anything but pure air molecules from crossing its boundary, and that would be left on at all times to prevent another attempt of that kind. Once the question of *how* it was done was answered, Jinaami rolled up her sleeves and tried to track down just *who* had released that virus. That would be like finding a single needle in a field of haystacks, but Jinaami was clever and resourceful. If there was any way to find out, she'd figure it out. Since it had to be custom engineered to infect that *specific* woman, they at least had a lead. Jinaami would use that one tenuous lead to track down the perpetrator. She was *that good*, and he was serious when he told Zaa he'd take her if Zaa wanted her out as the Draconis Gamekeeper.

So, after a pretty eventful day, Jason finally made the last call he intended to make, to Sk'Vrae, then he decided to go home. Jyslin and Symone were home, entertaining a somewhat discombobulated Kellin and a worried Maer and Sirri, who were absolutely surrounded by the strip kids. All of his children were there, as well as Danelle and Bryn's twin girls, Riza and Miza, so it was quite the little party. Maer and Sirri were old enough to understand how serious things were, where Shya was only worried as long as someone didn't tell her that everything was alright. Once Dahnai called and assured them all she was just fine, she was fine with it. She was much more trusting of the assurances of the adults, an aspect of youth.

"Hey gang," Jason called aloud as he came in.

*It's about time*, Jyslin called. *You home for good?*

*Until someone calls me and drags me out, yes,* he answered. *Hey mirror girls. Where's your mom?* Jason asked the twins.

*She's at work,* Miza answered. Except for Christy and Jack, Mike and Temika's children, and Jari, Luke and Songa's child, every child of the strip had expressed. Miza's sending wasn't as fast or pure as Rann's would be, but that was because they hadn't expressed long ago. They needed more practice.

*Aunt Maya let us come over,* Riza added.

*You're always welcome here, silly girl,* Jason chided lightly, which made Riza giggle. *Please tell me that Ayama's cooking.*

*I wasn't expecting quite this many, so I ordered out. It should be here in fifteen minutes,* Ayama called from the kitchen.

*I can't wait that long,* Jason grunted. Before he could pad into the kitchen, Surin met him at the doorway with a small bowl of stewed *imi* beans, a Faey legume that tasted like a rich pinto bean and was eaten cold, which Jason rather favored. *Thanks, I haven't eaten since breakfast.*

*We're not surprised. Crazy day.*

*Amen.*

Ayama's "ordering out" turned out to be a huge buffet-style cater by several of their favorite restaurants, all laid out on the deck and enjoyed by the entire strip as a public picnic, Faey, Makati, Menodan, and Terran dishes put out on folding tables ringing the hot tub. All the girls not at work rallied around Kellin and the kids, reassuring them and surrounding them with positive attention, but it was also a chance for them to hear what happened straight from Jason, which meant it would be free of exaggerated rumors. Tim and Zora arrived in the middle of it, both of them looking fairly exhausted, and both of them almost tackling the tables in their haste to get something to eat. Tim sat down on the steps near Jason and Kellin with a plate of Makati *hurрак*, which was a very rough grain bread stuffed with native Makan cheeses and *uaru* roots. It was very strong, and one of Tim's favorite foods. *I'm wore out,* he complained. *Today was a fuckin' hurricane.*

*Imagine what it was like in my office,* Jason told him, which made Tim grunt in understanding.

*I'm surprised you still have your hair. Any new news? I've been getting it straight from Miaari.*

*Not unless she got something in the last hour that I didn't,* he answered, to which Tim shook his head.

*Are they still coming tomorrow?*

*Yeah, they're supposed to arrive at 0830.*

*I'll be at work,* he grunted. *With Miaari going to get knocked up, I'm in charge.*

Jason chuckled. *She invited me to observe.*

*Go for it, from what I hear, it'll take it about five minutes. And that includes Denmother's blessing. Kimdori just don't know how to have fun.*

*Their idea of fun is different from ours,* Jason shrugged.

Miaari joined them, smiling despite the situation. "My friends," she greeted, sitting down beside Jason on the step. "So, Jason, are you coming to my ceremony?"

"May as well," he answered. "I'm just curious about one thing."

"What?"

"Well, I thought there would be some epic struggle among the males for your attention. How did Kraal win so fast?"

She laughed. "He gave me a secret," she said with a mysterious smile.

"And naturally, we're not allowed to know what it is."

"Naturally," she agreed, patting him on the knee in consolation. "But after his offer, I could not deny he was the most worthy. He has earned the right to sire my cubs."

"Enjoy all three seconds of it, boss," Tim teased.

Miaari gave him a wolfish smile. "Oh, I will," she answered smoothly. "And you will be at work at 0730 sharp," she ordered. "Everything is on your panel, and I expect everything to get done."

"Bullshit, this is my chance to play hooky," he retorted.

“Any new information, my friend? I know you are most deeply within the circle,” Miaari said.

He shook his head. “Nothing since two hours ago. Jinaami is rampaging through Dracora right now, hunting down whoever released that virus.”

“I pity her, in a way,” Miaari noted. “This was very cunning. It was not entirely her fault, but that doesn’t change the fact that it *did* happen on her field. She will face chastisement for that.”

“If Zaa fires her, she’s sending her here,” Jason told her. “I believe in Jinaami, and she’s more than welcome to come work for me. I don’t blame her for what happened. As far as I’m concerned, there’s no way she could have either known about it or stopped it.”

She gave him a kind smile, patting him on the knee again. “Ever steadfast when standing by your friends,” she told him.

“You know it,” he said simply.

“I don’t blame her either,” Kellin declared. “Not after I heard how it was done. It means that it only took one person, and they could have gotten the virus somewhere else, somewhere Jinaami couldn’t see it.”

Miaari nodded. “Thus I pity her for her situation. It is not her fault, yet the blame will fall squarely upon her because it *did* happen in her realm of control.”

“Miaari!” Kyri called, jumping on her back. “When are you coming to visit?”

“Soon, cubling, soon!” she laughed, patting the arm wrapped around her neck. “I’m just very busy at work right now. But guess what?”

“What?”

“My parents, Denmother, and Denfather are coming!” she declared happily.

“I know! Daddy said we get to meet them tomorrow.”

“You will. They are looking forward to meeting all of you,” she affirmed.

“Daddy said you’re gonna have babies.”



“Yes, that’s why they’re coming. They’re bringing the Kimdori that will be the father,” she replied. “But my children won’t stay on Karis. When they are birthed, Denmother is going to take them back to Kimdori Prime and watch them for me until I have the time to be a proper parent. Isn’t that just so generous of her?”

“Yeah, she’s really nice,” Kyri agreed. “I like Denmother a lot.”

“As you should, cubling, for she is a wonderful person. I admire her more than any other. She is the role model all Kimdori strive to copy. I want to be just as smart and clever as she is.”

“I wanna be just like Daddy and Mommy both when I grow up,” Kyri declared.

“Both are quite wonderful people, cubling, and you would do no better than to be just like either of them.”

“I know,” Kyri said gravely. “Ohh, we’re gonna go play a game, Miaari. See you later?”

“Of course. Go have fun, cubling!” she said. Kyri kissed her on her furry cheek from behind, then let go and ran off after Rann and Zachary as they headed towards the beach carrying batchi sticks. “Such a dear child,” Miaari chuckled. “And so powerful. I can sense it in her every time she touches me.”

“That little girl is going to grow up to be the most powerful telepath alive,” Tim said seriously. “It’s just damn good she had Jayce and Yana to teach her how to use it responsibly. And now she’s pregnant with Walter. I don’t doubt he’ll be the most powerful male telepath in the history of the Imperium.”

“As Uncle Ben would say, with great power comes great responsibility,” Jason intoned seriously, which made Tim laugh.

“Who?”

“Archaic Terran comic book reference,” Jason told her. She touched his wrist and felt his consciousness expand slightly into hers, as she picked up just what he meant. She gave him a slight smile when she found it.

“Dude, you so need to invent web shooters,” Tim grinned at him.

“Pfft, why go so small when I can build things that blow up.”

“Occasionally even when that’s what they were intended to do all along,” Miaari noted slyly, which earned her a swat.

Kellin and the kids were in a much better mood by the time things broke up. Being surrounded by friends was a calming thing, and another reassuring call from Dahnai near the end relaxed Kellin even more, as she told him he’d be coming home in a few days at the latest, just as soon as the airskin shield was up and running. He even went back to the guest house with company. Symone and Jyslin weren’t going to be in the mood any time soon, but Min was curious enough about him to give him a try, and Kellin thought she was rather sexy...and after a day like that, a little romp in bed could do wonders to take one’s mind off things. Maer and Sirri stayed over with Jason and his family that night, which Jason didn’t mind at all.

Kellin wasn’t the only one. After getting all the kids to bed and putting Jyslin to bed as well, he caught up on a few reports and missives that piled up while he was relaxing in his study, and he heard faint moans from under his window. He accessed the cameras to take a look, and saw Tim and Sheleese in the hot tub with absolutely no doubt what they were doing, not with her bent over like that and him behind her, acting much like the wounded bear Miaari accused them of resembling.

*You mess up that jacuzzi, you clean it,* Jason warned.

*Yah yah, shut up and let me concentrate here,* Tim replied, a bit urgently.

*I’m serious, remember what happened the last time you had sex in that tub? You’re lucky Jyslin didn’t brain you. It took her an hour to get it all out of her hair.*

*I know, I know, I’ll make sure to come in the girl this time,* he sent, his thought saturated with sexual pleasure.

Jason distanced himself from that, else it got to him and made him start looking for a playmate.

He read the final damage report on the *Aravalo* and the estimated time to repair...it could have been worse. Two Class Two and one Class One exchanger in the crapper, about four hundred *shakra* of primary gauge

conduit blown out, and some structural repair to Deck 16 and 17, sections 21, 22, and 23. Nobody critically injured, though one of the engineers was going to need a new left arm from the elbow down. Everyone was in Crusader armor, so that stopped any fatalities, but he was the closest to the explosion, and it had enough power to rip through his armor at the elbow joint. The primary plant was undamaged, and the two tertiary exchangers did their jobs and ate the meltdown rather than let the power spike destroy just about everything connected to the power grid. Estimated repair time, 15 days, mainly because the Class One primary core exchanger had to be brought into the ship in pieces and then assembled, it was too big to fit any other way...and that was even with spatial tunnel modules letting them port the oversized sections along the deck passageways.

The door opened, and Maer looked in. "Aren't you sleepy, Uncle Jason?" he asked.

He chuckled. *Nah, I have too much work to do to be sleepy*, he sent, motioning at his panel. *What's wrong?*

*Nothing, just going to the bathroom and I saw the light on*. He did come in, however, and sat at the chair facing his desk. *Can I ask you something?*

*Sure, go ahead.*

*I've been reading some on the Third Civil War, and I don't understand. If the Karinnes had all this, how did they get destroyed?*

*That's because all of this was just theories and plans*, he answered, motioning around. *They hadn't built any of it.*

*But that's what I don't understand. Why did they invent all these weapons, the ships, the Wolf fighters, everything, and not build them? And why did they build Kosigi? I mean, it's a huge shipyard, it had to take them like a hundred years to build it, it was here when the Karinnes were destroyed and nobody knew, and they just built it and didn't do anything with it. It just doesn't make any sense.*

Jason realized that Maer was a lot smarter than he thought. *That's because they were about to do something with it*, he answered honestly. *The Third Civil War came along right as the Karinnes were starting to militarize. They'd designed the destroyers and cruisers, they'd started designing larger ships, they invented the particle beam and Pulse weapons,*

*and they invented the Wolf fighters. When we first got here, there were three prototype ships up in Kosigi, the first ones they'd built. The Defiant, the Resolute, and the Sora's Pride. All three had sat for so long they weren't operational when we got here, but they were there. The Karinnes were maybe thirty years from building their own house fleet.*

*Why? They were neutral, nobody bothered them. Well, at least up until the war. The history books say both sides attacked the Karinnes because neither side could risk them siding with the other.*

*That's exactly right, he nodded. And both sides attacked them because they knew the Karinnes were far more advanced than they pretended to be. That, and that Karinne telepaths were so strong that neither side wanted to face them as an enemy. Had the Karinnes sided with one side or the other, Maer, at that time in the Imperium's history, those three ships that they'd built could have steamrolled the entire enemy fleet. They didn't have MPACs or plasma torpedoes back then. They used hot plasma bolts and ion weaponry, neither of which would so much as scratch the paint of a Karinne warship. And as you know, armor and shields mean squat to particle beam and pulse weapons, so the Loyalist and Seditionist ships would have been defenseless against the Karinne ships. The Defiant could have eradicated an entire house fleet by itself. Hell, it could have fought half the entire Imperial Navy by itself and would have had an even shot at winning.*

*But...why build them?*

*Think about it.*

*Maer was silent a long moment, then his eyes widened slightly. They were going to take over the Imperium! he realized with an audible gasp.*

*I'm not entirely sure, but it certainly seems that way, doesn't it? Jason agreed. In a way, the Third Civil War prevented an even greater calamity, and that would have been when the Karinnes decided they were better than everyone else, that they were superior, and everyone else should be under their rule. They seemed to be just about to abandon a millennium of neutrality, and in a way, sacrifice the very soul of the house for shallow vanity. This may sound strange, but the destruction of the original Karinnes might have been a good thing, at least in my opinion. They had almost lost*

*their way. If the Third Civil War would have come maybe even ten years later, things may have been very different. At the end, Koiri Karinne, the Grand Duchess at that time, did not permit the ships up in Kosigi to fight back. She had the mainframe computer up there close the doors and power down. She honored the neutrality of the Karinnes, and she was destroyed for it. But, maybe ten years later, she may have made an entirely different decision, as Karinnes with dreams of empire whispered in her ear and persuaded her to change her mind.*

*That's really surprising.*

*It shouldn't be. On Terra, about eighty years ago, we had a terrible war. World War Two. I remember reading about it.*

*He nodded. Do you know why it started?*

*Hitler wanted to conquer the world.*

*And what did he do during the war?*

*He slaughtered the Jews and a whole bunch of other people that he hated.*

*He believed in the superiority of the Aryan race, and that it gave him the right to kill anyone who was inferior. When I first came here, I realized that in a way, the Karinnes were this close to falling into that same dark hole, he sent seriously, holding his thumb and finger a hair apart. If it was a choice between them turning into the next incarnation of the Nazis or being wiped out, I think the Merranes did the universe a favor and destroyed them. Half of what I do here, Maer, is make sure we never forget that even though we have better technology and stronger telepaths, that does not make us better than anyone else. We will not let pride become arrogance, and have that arrogance seduce us into evil. I'll use the technology my ancestors left me to protect my house and defend the Imperium against enemies like the Consortium, I will use it to help everyone as best we can, like through the Academy, but I will never allow it to be used to conquer and rule. The House of Karinne will never impose its will on another, either directly or through the use of the technology we possess. We will never forget that our house was destroyed, but we also won't ever forget the sacred vows and traditions of the house, like the way the house seemed to be forgetting right before it was destroyed. The moment we forget, we might*

*become such monsters that the entire galaxy will curse the name of Karinne for ten thousand years.*

*Wow, that's pretty serious.*

*There's a lot of responsibility that came with the ring of this house, Maer. In some ways, even more responsibilities than your mother has as the Empress. I have to protect my house against its enemies, but I also have to protect my house against itself.*

*I...I understand.*

*I thought you might. You're a very clever young man, Maer. Your mother will be proud of you. You're going to be a man of great importance once you grow up.*

*Maer beamed at him. Thanks, Uncle Jason.*

*It was nothing.*

*Yes it was. You didn't have to tell me that much. Thank you for treating me like a man.*

*If you're old enough to ask honestly, you deserve an honest answer, Jason sent with dignity. Now, I have more paperwork to do, and I think you need to get back to bed. Tomorrow you're meeting the Denmother, so you'd better not yawn in her face.*

*Maer laughed. Alright. Least as soon as I go pee.*

*Yes, getting that done before you go to bed would be a good idea, Jason sent dryly, which made him laugh.*

Despite being on a warpath the day before, when Zaa stepped off her transport, she looked quite happy.

Jason, his entire family, Kellin and his family, and just about everyone of importance greeted the Denmother at the landing pad of the Karsa Gardens Hotel, as a high school band played the Kimdori National Anthem in the background. She smiled fondly and put her hand on Jason's neck, and he mirrored the motion, allowing her to do as she willed. "How was your flight, Denmother?" he asked.

“It was uneventful, which is always a good thing. Jason, might I present the Denfather, Grun,” she said, motioning at a towering Kimdori that stepped off the transport behind her. He was nearly seven feet tall, and he was the first Kimdori Jason had ever seen that wore pristine white fur over his entire body. He had no band of station on his front, but he did have two small dashes of black fur over each eye, almost like little eyebrows.

“Denfather, it’s an honor to finally meet you,” Jason said, bowing to him, then allowing him to touch Jason’s neck as Zaa stepped aside.

“The pleasure is mine, your Grace. I am very much looking forward to touring Karis.”

“We have a full itinerary prepared for you, so you might visit all the important sites. And of course, you will be allowed to meet Cybi in person,” he assured him.

“Excellent, excellent!” he said brightly.

Jason hugged Kiaari as she stepped off the transport behind the Denfather. “Hey fuzzybutt, how you doing?” Jason asked with a laugh.

“Fine now that I can bite you for all those mean things you’ve said about me from the safety of Karis,” she winked in reply.

“I promise to bleed all over you,” he retorted, which made her laugh.

Despite a curiosity about the mysterious Denfather, Jason was introduced to Miaari’s parents, an almost giddily prideful Faar and Raali Threxst. They were so beside themselves with pride for Miaari that they could barely speak in coherent sentences. After they moved on to greet Jyslin, Jason found himself standing in front of the tallest, burliest Kimdori Jason had ever seen. He was nearly eight feet tall, and his fur was almost sinfully black, so dark it swallowed the light, everywhere but the white band of station that ran up the center of his torso, from crotch to under his chin, the white bar of a Handservant. From what Jason knew, Kraal was the only other living Handservant among the Kimdori, which proved how rare that most exalted of stations really was. His hand was huge, but it was gentle when it touched Jason’s neck. “Jason Karinne, it is an honor to be permitted to come to Karis,” he said in a rich baritone.

“Anything that makes Miaari happy,” Jason smiled. “Congratulations on winning the right to sire Miaari’s cubs.”

“She is very hard to please,” he said with a rueful smile.

“She’s a typical female, Kraal,” Jason grinned.

“Truly,” he agreed.

“I *am* standing right here,” Miaari protested from the other side of Jyslin, which made Jason laugh.

“She nags like a typical female as well,” Jason told the huge Kimdori.

“How is that any different from normal?” Kraal asked.

Jason met the clan leader and mate of Kraal’s clan, the Shevks. The clan leader, Haari, was female, a thin, gangly-limbed female with brown fur but a gray face, but who was very polite and gentle with her touch. Her mate Dirxk was short and stocky and had a jovial manner about him that put Jason at ease quickly.

The Kimdori visitors greeted those who had come to see them, but then the business of the matter took precedence. Jason, Jyslin, Rann, and Kellin had been invited to attend the mating, and it would have been rude to decline, so they entered the hotel with the Kimdori, all of them wearing formal robes while the Kimdori were all unclothed. There were no special preparations for this ritual, and custom dictated it take place immediately upon the meeting of the male and female involved. So, they went up to Zaa’s penthouse, and as soon as they entered the living room, Zaa, clapped her hands briskly. “All are in attendance,” she declared, speaking in slow, formal Kimdori. “Let she who wishes to propagate step forth and be recognized.”

Miaari stepped up to Zaa and then leaned forward and licked her just once under the chin. “I am Miaari Thresxt, Revered Denmother, and it is I who have petitioned my clan leader for the right to breed.”

“Who has won the right to breed with Miaari Threxst?” Zaa asked as Miaari stepped past Zaa and stood behind her.

“I am Kraal Shevk, Revered Denmother, and it is I who have won the right to mate,” Kraal stated, taking one step forward and putting his fist to



his chest.

“Then step forward,” Zaa called. He did so, licking Zaa under the chin as Miaari had done, then he took his place beside Miaari behind Zaa.

“Does the Clan Leader permit the breeding to commence?” she asked.

“I do so permit,” Faar declared formally. “Kraal Shevk has proven his worth to join his line to my clan.”

“Does the Clan Leader of the male grant leave for him to mate outside the clan?”

“I do so permit,” Haari declared. “Miaari Thresxt has proven her worth to receive the seed of my clan.”

“And which clan will claim the progeny of this mating?”

“My clan has that honor, Revered Denmother,” Faar stated. “By ancient right and custom, I claim the progeny of Miaari because she is the mother and is of equal rank to the sire.”

“Then all is in order,” Zaa declared. “I declare this mating valid. You may commence.”

Miaari told him that he’d be disappointed in how short it was going to be...and she wasn’t lying about the short part. Miaari faced Kraal and put her hand on his neck, he mirrored the gesture, and then she did exactly as she described. She knelt down and stuck her tail in the air. Kraal stepped around her and knelt down behind her, he took hold of her hips, looked down, moved his hips forward deliberately as he mounted her, until he bumped against Miaari’s fur-clad backside. He held still for maybe five seconds, making no sound, just looking down at Miaari’s butt as Miaari remained stone still. He then backed off and stood back up. “I have given her my seed, Revered Denmother,” he declared formally.

“I have accepted his seed, Revered Denmother,” Miaari mirrored, putting her tail down and then standing back up.

“Then I declare this mating successful. Congratulations to both of you.”

And that was that. In all of about ten seconds, Miaari had what had to be the fastest and most boring-looking sex Jason had ever seen. The clan

leaders congratulated the couple with kind words and pats on the shoulder as Zaa and Grun stepped back.

*That's it?* Rann asked.

*Yes, that's it, son, Jason told him. From what Miaari told me, usually the Denmother doesn't involve herself in the ceremony. But because both the parents are Handservants, she felt the need to preside over it herself. Usually it's the clan leader of the female that conducts the ceremony.*

*That wasn't anywhere near as long or as noisy as you do it, Mommy,* Rann noted.

*Not every species can have as much fun as ours do, son,* Jyslin grinned at him.

Since the ceremony was over, it meant that now they had plenty of time to show the Kimdori around Karis. They boarded a corvette, and then took them on a long tour, from Karsa proper out to the ruins of Karsa along the northeast edge of the city, out to the desert to the ruins of Braeara, then they dropped in and visited the Parri on the northern coast. They then flew to Kosiningi, and Jason took them into the bunker to show them the CBIM and to meet Cybi. She greeted them in the core room, and she gave them a tour of the facility as Grun asked her about ten thousand questions. They had lunch there on Kosiningi in Jason's rebuilt guest house, prepared by cooks who had come early, and then they went over to Virga to tour the Kizzik hive that was thriving there. After they finished there, they went up to Kosigi and spent nearly five hours giving Zaa and Grun an exhaustive tour of the entire shipyard, from the capital doors all the way down to the rocky core at the center. Dellin had greeted them when they arrived and conducted the tour himself, which meant that it was utterly thorough; *nobody* knew as much about Kosigi as Dellin did. They then returned to Karsa, and Jason showed them the Shimmer Dome and 3D, one of the few non-Legion who had ever been allowed to set foot in that most secret and secure of facilities on the planet. Tom showed them around after Jason got a call from Myri, and he excused himself to see what she wanted. He went to his office and got a holo of her. "What's up, hon?" he asked.

She gave him a haunted look. "Jason," she said with a trembling voice. "Pathrana two was just destroyed."

“Destroyed? What do you mean?”

“They finished the planet killer, and they *used it*,” she said in an intense voice, her eyes a bit wild. “The *entire planet* is on fire, Jayce. It’s on fire!”

As fast as thought permitted, he got an image of the Pathrana system from the Kimdori spy probes, then had it zoom in two Pathrana II, which was a desert planet within human environmental tolerance.

And Myri wasn’t lying. The *entire planet* was burning. The very atmosphere itself had been ignited, and it was blazing like the sun behind it, an angry sea of red and yellow flames that covered every inch of the surface. The entire atmosphere of the planet had been set on fire, from the troposphere all the way down to the planet’s surface, and the sensors showed him that it was 2,270 degrees Fahrenheit on the average on the planet’s surface at that moment, hot enough to melt rock. When the fires finally died, there would be nothing left but molten slag and collapsed skeletal remains of cities where heated metal toppled because the intense firestorms and wind would push over metal frames no longer resting on solid foundations.

Pathrana II had a population of 4,149,500,000 Alliance citizens.

*Four billion*...and unless they were in shielded bunkers, then they were dead, consumed by the fiery wrath of the Consortium.

Pathrana II was now dead, consumed in a sea of raw hell.

“Oh my *god*,” Jason whispered, his mind reeling, the room spinning. He staggered, wilted, and then fainted dead away.

# Chapter 8

*Koira, 22 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Wednesday, 7 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Koira, 22 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

Pathrana II hadn't been a complete genocide...such were small favors.

There were 4,920 survivors on the planet once the fires died after four hours, as the induced planet-wide chemical reaction ran its course and caused the water vapor, nitrogen and oxygen present in the atmosphere to recombine back into natural molecules. The survivors had been in a deep core mine, and as such had been shielded from heat. It was a miracle they survived, but survive they did, and they were already being hailed as heroes.

At least this time, there wasn't three days of shock. After what happened to Raxxad, Jason was at least able to cope this time after he woke up. This was the second instance of wholesale murder the Consortium had committed, and while he didn't react as extremely as he had with Raxxad, there was still a nearly crushing guilt that came with knowing that, in his own way, he was directly responsible for the deaths of *four billion* souls. After Raxxad, he was able to at least digest this and focus back on the business of stopping this madness from continuing, but he knew that he was going to have nightmares for a *long* time...probably for the rest of his life.

There was Jason's reaction, and then there was Zaa's reaction. She was grimly furious that her infiltrators on Pathrana hadn't stopped the atrocity, hadn't gotten into the planet killer in time, but the fact that the Kimdori had been killed along with the rest of the population at least told Jason that they would have done so if there had been any way for them to accomplish the

mission. Kimdori were almost impossible to kill, but a hellish inferno seemed to be one of the few ways to do it.

The disaster had put a dark pall over what was supposed to be Miaari's special day. She abandoned the tour and the celebrations and went right back to work after word of it leaked out, as much as Jason did after we woke up on the floor of the office moments later, before Myri could get a medical team there.

Myleena disturbed him a little bit by studying the way the planet killer had ignited the atmosphere. It was a catalyst effect, causing the nitrogen, oxygen, water vapor, and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to chemically combine in a way that unleashed intense heat, literally setting fire to the atmosphere itself. The process spread from the planet killer like a wildfire through dry brush as the effect consumed all the gasses in the atmosphere, but it was a catalyst effect in that at the end of it, the oxygen, nitrogen, water, and carbon dioxide recombined back to their original states. The effect was dramatic and almost evil in how it left the planet a scarred, ash-choked wasteland, but did nothing to destroy the planet's ability to support life...at least after the atmosphere cooled down. After the fires finally faded, the planet's ambient air temperature more or less held steady at 587 degrees Fahrenheit, hot enough to spontaneously ignite paper and wood. That cooling process would take about two years, according to Myleena's projections, during which time the temperature would slowly cool, until it got cool enough for all the water suspended in the atmosphere to start returning to the planet in the form of rain. It would rain for months, and the continuous cycle of water falling on the heated surface, evaporating back into the atmosphere and falling back to earth would cool the planet. In two years, the Alliance could return to Pathrana if they so desired.

But everything that had been there had been eradicated by the hellstorm. There were some ruins left, twisted metal frames of buildings that hadn't melted, shattered plascrete that hadn't melted but had cracked and broken from the intense heat. But that was all there was. All the life, all the people, the entire society of Pathrana II, it was all gone. It was all ash suspended in the atmosphere, which would be settled back to the ground once the rain began, which would ironically serve to enrich the baked ground with the remains of the life that had once thrived there. With a little basic terraforming, mainly breaking up the hundreds of square miles of volcanic-

appearing glass that had been the desert belts at the equatorial regions, the planet could be reclaimed, life growing out of soil seeded by the ashes of four billion sentient beings.

That was a disturbing thought, that someday he might eat food nurtured by such ghastly genocide.

What it did do was completely enrage the entire Confederation. Overnight, the volunteers for military service skyrocketed in every Confederate nation, and in the mother of all shocks, the Moridon released a statement that they would do no business with the Consortium, and would offer virtually zero interest loans to Confederation governments to fund their war efforts if they were so required. The Moridon never took sides, but that...*holy shit*, that was as good as saying that the Moridon considered the Consortium to be their enemy. And the Moridon didn't fight with guns and ships, they fought with *money*. The formidable banking and economic institutions of Moridon were going to bankroll the Confederation against the Consortium.

The entire sector must think that the world was ending. First the Karinnes, then the Kimdori, and now the *Moridon* were taking sides, three of the most universally neutral factions in galactic history.

In a way, Jason saw that the Consortium had just made a *huge* mistake. By so baldly displaying their absolute ruthlessness, they had galvanized the entire sector against them, and now the Consortium was going to fight like rabid wolverines to keep that from happening again. It was one thing to *prepare* to do something that horrid, but when you actually *did* it, you left no doubt in anyone's mind and silenced all naysayers. Even the most rabid anti-war activist could no longer deny that the Consortium intended to commit galactic genocide.

Jason and Zaa sat in his office and discussed the matter for long hours after he got over his indisposition, with Miaari, Kraal, Kiaari, and Tim in attendance. Mainly, they discussed how they were going to stop it from happening again. Ultimately, they called in Myleena and got the status of her idea to use nanomachines to invade the planet killers and disable them from the inside.

“I’ve got a working prototype,” she told them, sitting down wearily in the chair in front of Jason’s desk. “I haven’t quite got them fully operational yet. They work, but I’m having a bit of a problem getting them programmed to do the job fast and efficiently.”

“How soon can you have them in production?”

“If I focus on it, maybe two days,” she answered.

“Then do so. As soon as they are ready, we’ll seed them into every atmosphere in the Alliance, and let them stall and delay the completion of those evil machines as much as possible.”

“I can do that, Denmother,” Myleena said soberly. She then nodded to them all and hurried out to get on the job.

“God,” Jason grunted, rubbing his eyes. “I wish this headache would go away.”

“Perhaps you should go to the infirmary, Jason,” Zaa said gently.

“No, I’m alright. There’s nothing they can do about this, it’s stress.”

“At this moment, we all have reason to be stressed,” Kiaari grunted.

“Will this alter the attack plans of the military?” Kraal asked.

“They already pushed up the timeline,” Jason answered him. “They’ll be jumping out of Bregali in about six hours to attack Grevalt. Ba’mra’ei wants us to attack Faroll with KMS and Kimdori ships at the same time, the way we pincerd them at Ravarra and Reglen.”

“She has a point. If they destroy Faroll, it would permanently cripple the Alliance,” Zaa nodded. “Faroll has been their capitol system for over two thousand years.”

“I’ll talk to Myri and have her forward it to the war room,” Jason promised. “But that’s gonna be one hell of a nasty fight, and we won’t be able to get an interdictor there beforehand, it’s literally in the heart of Alliance territory and it’s too risky to try to send in an interdictor beforehand, not with the Consortium using the Alliance sensor network.”

“I would have to agree,” Zaa nodded. “Even our sensor jammers would be hard pressed given how close we will be to the heart of the Alliance

sensor net.”

“If they see it coming, they’ll destroy Faroll before we can hit it, so this has to be completely by surprise and with absolutely no risk of tipping our hand beforehand. If we attack Faroll, we’ll have to hold it against waves of Consortium reinforcements until the interdictor we take with us gets enough of a field up to make jumping attackers into the system impractical, and that’ll get very nasty very fast.”

“This entire business has just become nasty,” Tim grunted. “Call me a dreamer, but I honestly didn’t think they’d actually *do* it. I thought it was a bluff.”

“I don’t think a lot of people did, but they know better now,” Jason told his friend. “So, that’s the danger of attacking Faroll.”

“It is risky, but it must be done,” Zaa said simply. “We jump an attack force to Faroll and have it take an interdictor with it. They turn it on as soon as they get there, and simply hold out until it expands logarithmically.”

“We’ll need some major backup from the Kimdori,” Jason told her. “Even with every refitted ship I have jumping to Faroll and using every automated weapon we have available, they won’t be able to repel the Consortium if they jump that fleet they have at Trieste to counterattack.”

“You will have it,” she answered. “Recapturing Faroll is critical to the retaking of Alliance territory. As you stated, cousin, Faroll is the heart of their territory. Our other allies will be able to jump to any system in the Alliance in two days if they do so from Faroll. For that reason alone, taking Faroll is a strategic necessity.”

They discussed it for an hour more, then Jason went to go see Myri with it. “It’s gonna get ugly, hon,” Jason told her as his generals stood at the main tactical table in the command center. “It means jumping in and facing the possibility of counterattack even as we secure the system. And you know how many ships they have sitting at Trieste.”

“That’s the risks of war, Jason,” she said sagely, patting him on the shoulder. “I’ll send this on to the war room, but no matter what they decide, I’ll get things moving.”

“I’ll design a battle plan,” Juma declared.



“I’ll prepare an invasion plan of the surface,” Sioa added.

After that, they took Jason home. Jyslin more or less dragged him to the couch and just sat with him, sitting on his lap and cuddled up against him, using the contact to push herself into his mind and make absolutely sure he was alright. He’d suffered from depression after the attack on Raxxad, blaming himself for the tragedy, but she was somewhat relieved that while Jason felt guilt for what happened at Pathrana, he didn’t blame himself directly. Yes, there was guilt. Yes, there was a feeling of responsibility. His fainting spell was just something of being overwhelmed by the moment. But there wasn’t that feeling that it was directly his fault. And this time, instead of black melancholy, there was a growing, seething anger. Jason was more outraged than guilty, and while the enormity of it had momentarily overwhelmed him, the reaction after the fact was different this time.

*I hope they don’t leak that I fainted this time,* Jason grunted to Jyslin.

*Don’t worry about such silly things, you stubborn man,* she replied gently. *I’d be more worried if you didn’t faint.*

*People instead of numbers,* he sighed. *Sometimes I envy Zaa and Dahnai.*

*You say it yourself, love. The day you see the numbers instead of the people, you’re not worthy of the title of Grand Duke. I agree. Your compassion is one of your most admirable traits, and if you lost it, you wouldn’t be the man I fell in love with. Every member of this house knows you care about them, Jason. Each and every one. If you lost that, if you turned into just another house ruler, it might undermine the very foundation upon which this house has been built. It can work against you, but in the bigger picture, it is far more your greatest strength than your greatest liability.*

*I love you, Jyslin,* he told her simply, honestly.

*I’m glad you do, because I’m never letting you go,* she answered with a light smile, her eyes dancing. *Usually I’d take you upstairs and make you forget all about it, but right now just the thought of that makes my teeth grind,* she complained with a frown. *It’s terrible that I can’t even rock your world right now.*

*I fully understand, and I appreciate that if you weren't in that phase right now, you'd make me forget my own name,* he replied with a weary smile.

*I wonder what causes it.*

*I'm sure Songa could explain it medically.*

*Please, the explanation would leave me more confused than the question,* she retorted, which made Jason chuckle.

*It's just the Faey female's version of morning sickness. Human women throw up, Faey women become frigid. It'll pass. It did with Rann, after all.*

*Three takirs of hell,* she mused. *And I almost broke your back after I got my mood back.*

*That was a wild night,* he agreed with a laugh. *But, all things considered, a little snuggling is almost as good.*

*Well, let's talk about that a little, then,* she winked, snuggling against him.

*Please, keep right on talking,* Jason sighed, wrapping his arms around her and letting her wonderful presence make him feel better.

Jyslin made him feel somewhat better, but instead of snuggling all the way to sleep with her, he instead sent her on to bed and sat in his study, quietly pondering, maybe brooding a little bit. He had to stop it. He just couldn't let them do it again. They'd killed millions at Raxxad, and now *billions* at Pathrana. He just couldn't let them do it again.

He'd had his girlish reaction of fainting, now he had to man up and do something about it. And for Jason, *doing something about it* meant it was time to play dirty pool.

So. How do you stop genocidal maniacs?

Simple. You *kill them before they kill you*. If Jason didn't want to see another planet turned into a raging inferno, he had to be ready—even *willing*—to commit genocide right back. He'd worry about the moral implications of it for when he and his allies were still alive to lament the things they had to do to survive.

Jason spent the entire 13.16 hours of darkness in communion with Cybi, and the two of them analyzed all their data they had on the Consortium, its species, its tactics, and its planet killers. In the manner of a true engineer, he studied the data, isolated potential things to exploit, studied them, developed a theory, ran some sims, got a working model, and then designed a prototype.

What was delivered to his house by courier just before dawn was a small, rather innocuous looking device that looked like a large metal frisbee, or a small manhole cover. But this was a piece of hardware, a subsonic inducer, and it was one of several hundred thousand he had ordered. These inducers had been specifically designed to attack the insectoids. They'd already designed ones to harass them, incapacitate the subject races and make them incapable of action, but Jason had built on that data and Songa's exhaustive medical investigation of the corpses they had, and he had designed this inducer to try to kill by rupturing their exoskeletal carapaces, like how an opera singer could shatter a glass with nothing but her voice. They'd also blow out quite a few windows themselves and would probably give any non-insectoids in the area of effect hearing damage, but those people could always get their ears fixed after the fact. The inducers had to project their fields at a sound equivalent of 137 Decibels in order to kill the insectoids, but that was so loud that it was going to damage the eardrums of anyone that could hear it, and could conceivably kill people who were too close to it when it activated. If they were that close, it could shatter their bones. They were a combination of both basic designs, which was why they were so large. They could attach to the hull of a ship and use its hull as a speaker to broadcast its subsonic field just like conduit smashers or his original subsonic itcher, which was how it would attack Consortium ships in space, or it could hover in midair and generate a field on its own just as the inducers he'd used against Washington D.C. had, which was how it would attack the Consortium on planets. Because of their limited factory space, making one design that could do both jobs had been mandatory, and this dual design certainly fit the bill.

And that was why they hadn't tried this approach before, because they had wanted to design something that wouldn't hurt the innocent civilians. Well, better to make a few million people deaf than see them burned to ashes.

After they delivered it, he got his armor on and went to 3D, escorted by Hara and Yae, two of the night watch. He then sat down in the empty warehouse and pulled a standard hyperspace missile up onto a worktable and got to work, the guards helping as best they could. He separated the warhead and then emptied out the warhead cavity of the frames meant to hold Satan's Marbles. He started building a dispersing system to unleash the inducers as soon as he had the warhead cleared out.

Jenny came in, yawning, and gave him a surprised look. "You're here early," she noted.

"No doubt I'm pissing off Zaa and quite a few others, but I had to do something," he grunted. "Make yourself useful and build the frame on that schematic," he ordered, pointing at a hologram of a diagram hovering just at the end of the table.

"Yeah, we heard. I haven't seen the pictures of it. I don't really want to."

"I knew you were a smart girl, Jen," he told her grimly, even as he used his gestalt to order 157 hyperspace missiles to be converted over to CMS. "How many marbles do we have stockpiled?"

"Tons," she answered. "The military doesn't like to use them. I guess they're not flashy enough."

"Good, whoever shows up next gets to prep them. We're gonna be using them."

"What's up?"

"Well, if we attack any planet killer, they'll know we're going to attack that planet. So, we're going to attack *all of them*, all at once, using borer missiles carrying Satan's Marbles. The marbles will destroy the units from the inside, and while they will do some collateral damage to the cities, eventually most of them will escape into space before they cause wholesale destruction outside of the planet killer. At the same time, we're also going to launch marble missiles at the ships defending the planets. *These* are going to be launched at the ships in orbit and also at the cities holding the planet killers, to try to stop them from crashing their ships into the planet. The Kimdori stream weapons gave me the idea. If there's nobody alive on the ship to pilot it, it's not gonna be doing any suicide runs. We don't have

the manpower or ships to attack every system in the Alliance at the same time, and now we know that relying on the Kimdori infiltrators to prevent the planet killers from getting finished isn't going to work."

"I'm sure they tried."

"I don't doubt it either, but we can't let this happen again. I have a lot of faith in the Kimdori, but now we know we can't rely *solely* on them."

"Well, that's what the spiders were for."

"The spiders are going in as well, as soon as Myli finishes them," he nodded. "They'll be the passive defense that stops them from rebuilding, them and the Kimdori. The marbles and these inducers are an immediate response to make sure that if they have any other planet killers close to being finished, that they don't get the chance to use them before the spiders can take over. This is a stopgap, and a *visible* one they'll expect to see. That means that the spiders will be able to get in without as much scrutiny."

"Ah. Yeah, that makes sense," Jenny agreed.

The next person in was Leamon, so he was put to work on the marble warheads. The three of them worked in weighty silence as Jason built the deployment frame, looking like a long carousel for storing frisbees, then tested to make sure it would deploy correctly. He and Jenny loaded it with a few dozen replicated dummy slugs, put it in the warhead, and after they put it back on the missile, he ordered up a courier to take the missile over to the test range. If the missile deployed the dummy slugs as predicted, he'd send the specs out and order them built.

Zaa did track him down, using the fact that she'd been cleared to enter 3D yesterday to get back in, with Denfather Grun, Miaari, and Kiaari in tow. "We've been looking for you, Jason," she told him.

"I've been working on something," he said as the missile was put out in the cargo hatch, an airlock-style room with two sets of doors where workers would remove it without entering the main warehouse. "You realize we have to hit every planet killer *now*," he declared.

"It might provoke a response," Zaa warned.

"I took that into account as well," he said with a dark smile. "They won't be able to crash ships into the planet if the crews on the ships are

dead.”

“It has potential,” Kiaari mused.

“Let’s go into your office, cousin,” Zaa told him.

He glanced over at Jenny, then nodded. “Alright.”

Jason’s office at 3D was rather cramped and cluttered, filled with small prototype replicas, hard paper printouts, drawings, and tools and components laying on most horizontal surfaces. There was just barely enough room for the four Kimdori to sit down as Jason flopped down in his chair behind the desk. “So, what bad news is there *now*?” he asked.

She gave a slight chuckle. “I do seem to be the bearer of grim tidings,” she admitted. “I’ve gotten some missives from my infiltrators on the other side of the galaxy. The enemy is undertaking major construction projects at sixteen of the systems they have under their control, and the effort is massive.” She touched her memory band, and as Cybi formed her image behind Jason’s chair, she used the holographic emitters in his office to show him holo after holo of massive construction projects surrounding planets.

“Any word on what they’re for yet?”

“Yes. They have two separate projects going. One is still a mystery, but the other is known to us. These,” she said, pointing at the smaller arced sections. “This is their answer to the interdictor.”

“The ones with Eretrium cores? What’s it supposed to do?”

“It’s a form of faster than light travel,” Zaa asked. “This they got from the race they subjugated, not from Andromeda. They will build this device that will catapult ships using it into what you might call a hyperphased state, which will reduce mass within the effect to a mean zero value, thus allowing an object of mass to exceed the speed of light.”

“The old warp drive theory from Star Trek,” Jason grunted.

“A viable theory, but this is a quantum effect. That means that as soon as they phase the ship into a quantum alternative, it behaves as a singular quantum microstate.”

“Meaning only phase matched energy, pulse weapons, MPACs, and plasma torpedoes will hit it,” Jason growled. “A defense on top of a means

of travel.”

“A rather clever solution to their problem,” Zaa nodded. “The effect decays over time, so if calculated correctly, they decay out of the microstate and return to real space where they intend to be. They’ll still lose a lot of ships during transit from our ambushes along the way, but they’ll get *some* to Karis using this system.”

“How fast can they go using this?”

“They could traverse the two light years of interdicted space surrounding Karis in about ten hours,” she replied. “But they would have to bring the device to the edge of interdicted space to use it, which would be insane to even attempt. I believe that their fortification of Trieste means that they intend to build it *there*. From Trieste, it is 87 light years to Karis. That means it would take them approximately 14 days to travel to Karis. The subject race there abandoned use of this technology when they developed hyperspace travel. It is much faster.”

“Can our sensors detect any ships coming at us in this quantum state?”

“My sensor officers are certain that they can. They can also be detected by standard hyperspace sensors.”

“Good, at least we’ll see them coming if they manage to get one built. How far are they from finishing it?”

“I don’t have that information yet. My children are already starting to dig.”

“Alright. So, what about the other device?”

“As I said, we don’t know yet. My children are trying to get that information.”

“Sorry, I was talking to myself, Denmother. I didn’t mean for you to answer,” he motioned towards her. “Strange that they’d do it at Trieste. Aruda is the closest Alliance system to Karis.”

“They must have a reason,” she agreed. “Perhaps they feel Trieste is easier to defend.”

“A subject we should investigate,” Miaari noted.

Zaa nodded. “Knowing *why* they do what they do is often as important as knowing *what*,” she declared.

“Well, at least we know what to look for,” Jason grunted. “That’s something.”

“Just so,” Zaa agreed, glancing at Grun. “So, we will leave you now, cousin. Grun wishes to view more of Karis before we leave.”

“I really should go with you,” he said.

Grun shook his head. “We will be fine, and this is where you need to be right now,” he assured Jason.

“Actually, I’m done with what I was doing here, I have some free time,” he returned.

“Then perhaps you should get some sleep. You have been here all night, haven’t you?” Miaari accused.

He chuckled. “I guess I have. I just had to *do something*,” he sighed.

“And you have. Now go rest, spend some time with your children, and we will see you at dinner. Ayama is making us pizza,” Zaa said with enthusiasm.

“I guess I can do that. There’s nothing left for me to do here but wait for the test results to come back anyway.”

Zaa made sure to see him to his corvette, and Hara and Yae took him back home. He did as Zaa suggested, took off his armor and tried to relax, spending time in the jacuzzi and letting the hot water massage the knots and tension out of his muscles. Rann was with Dahnai’s kids, who were all with Jyslin over at the boardwalk, fulfilling their promise to his son to take them, but he wasn’t alone for long. Temika wandered over and sat at the picnic table. “That looks relaxin’,” she declared.

“I guess I needed it.”

“Ah should jump in, Ah could use some of that mahself.”

“Just be warned, I’m not wearing any trunks,” he told her.

She chuckled, and to his surprise, started undressing. “Why Mika, you’re getting naked,” he teased as she took off her bra. “Usually you’ll



only strip for me when Songa browbeats you into it.”

“Pfft, Ah’ve been here long enough ta’ be able to handle it,” she told him as she unbuckled her belt. “Ah just don’t like paradin’ up and down the beach bare-ass naked, that’s all. And you know Ah’ll punch you in the nose if you get grabby, so Ah ain’t got no problem sharin’ a jacuzzi with ya,” she declared, which made him laugh. He did make a catcall when she unzipped her jeans, showing her white panties, and she flipped him off.

She shed her clothes and climbed in, leaning back facing Jason, with those rather formidable breasts visible just over the bubbling surface of the water. “Why aren’t you at work?” he asked.

“We *are* working,” Kumi called as she came up the stairs from the walkway. Kumi was stark naked, and to Jason’s surprise, Rahne was as well. “We just finished up a proposal for the Moridon, so I decided to take a break and go relax on the beach a bit.”

“I dinna’ have a suit, so Kumi talked me inta’ goin’ bare ta’ the world,” Rahne chuckled.

“This is a Faey planet, Rahne,” Jason told her. “And I know Cybi taught you Faey customs.”

“Well, does this answer yuir question, Jayce?” she asked, motioning at her pale, freckled form.

“She was so easy to subvert,” Kumi laughed as she climbed into the jacuzzi without asking. Rahne too climbed in, and Surin wordlessly came out with *oye* juice for them. “Alright, tell us what’s going on.”

He filled them in on recent events, including his all-night work trying to come up with a way to stop it from happening again. “I’m dead tired, but I’m not sleepy,” he told them. “Now, what proposal were you working on?”

“Just a few business ventures they might be interested in backing,” she answered. “You know, expanding the house’s economic base.”

“My, that’s vague and evasive.”

She grinned at him. “Pirates keep their secrets, babes,” she teased.

“So, how much is she skimming off the top?” he asked Rahne, which made Kumi burst out laughing.

“Just a little, nothing ta’ get her arrested or anythin’,” Rahne smiled in reply.

“You’re not supposed to tell him *that!*” Kumi protested.

“I canna’ lie to my Grand Duke, Kumi,” Rahne protested innocently.

“You’re going into business! If you can’t lie in your own husband’s face and make him believe it, you have no business in business!”

“Ah, business, where the best liar wins,” Jason teased.

*Fuckin’ right*, Kumi sent in complete agreement as she drank some of the juice Surin gave her.

“So, has being pregnant sunk in yet?”

“Nope, I still can’t really believe it,” Kumi chuckled, putting her hand under the frothing water to pat her belly. “I’ve already ordered the nursery furniture.”

“Never hurts to be prepared,” Temika said. “Ah had Latoiya’s set picked out two days after Ah found out Ah was pregnant.”

“I thought I heard you guys,” Vell called as he came up the stairs as well. “Might I join you?”

“Get naked, baby,” Kumi leered at him, which made him chuckle and reach for the belt of his robe. He disrobed and climbed into the tub as well, sitting beside Jason.

*Are you alright, Jayce?*

*Fine*, he replied. *Or at least as fine as you can be given the circumstances. You have the kids today?*

*Maya took them to the boardwalk with Rann and the others*, he answered, leaning back and sighing. *I wasn’t feeling up to chasing them around, so I stayed here today.*

“You not feeling well, sugah?” Temika asked.

*I’m fine, Mika, thank you for asking. I just didn’t get much sleep last night. I was preparing my thesis for my comparative literature class.*

*Ah thought you graduated.*

*I'm taking the extension, he answered. It gives me something to fill some of my free time. A house husband has little to do when there's a maid to do the cleaning.*

*Clearly you're not being creative, Vell, Kumi purred.*

*"Think with the big brain, Kumi. The big brain," Jason chided, which made Temika and Rahne burst out laughing.*

*Clearly you haven't seen her at her office, Rahne sent slyly.*

*I've been there before. I'm sure there's a reason her desk is padded.*

*Kumi gave him a wolfish smile. Prevents bruising, she informed him. I may as well be comfortable when I'm having my secretary bang me on my desk.*

*That's what couches are for, Vell told her.*

*We use that too, she winked. I really need a new secretary. Giren is good at his job, but he's got such a great dick, all I wanna do at work is sit on it.*

*Get some ugly, dried up old prune, that'll keep your mind on your job, Jason told her.*

*She is such a nympho, Temika accused.*

*You bet I am, baby, Kumi replied immediately and without a hint of shame. I'm a proper Faey noble.*

*Sometimes I wonder how they ever get anything done, Rahne teased lightly.*

*That's because the only thing that really competes with a good orgasm is making money, Kumi answered. I get a little thrill in my pussy every time I swindle some clueless moron.*

*Orgasms off business deals, now I know you're completely hopeless, Jason teased.*

*Be glad I chase that high, babes, that's what keeps this house in the black, she retorted. I just hope I don't suffer from the phase. It hits half of us women. I'd go nuts not wanting to fuck.*

*As horny as you are? No chance, Temika accused.*

*Good*, she grinned in reply, sliding over to sit beside Jason. Under the water, she reached down and took hold of him. *See, now, all this talk is getting me frisky. Want me to make you sleepy on top of tired, baby?* she purred.

*Why Kumi, I never knew you cared*, he deflected artfully.

*Let me sit on you and you'll see how much I do care*, she invited with a sultry smile.

*No way would she ever do that in public*, Temika protested privately to Jason.

*This is Kumi here, Mika*, Jason replied lightly, her fingers stimulating him to erection. No straight sane man could last long with Kumi's hand on him before he responded. And in a way, he could appreciate her attempts to distract him, try to make him feel better, in her own rather unique way.

*Kumi girl, I'm honored you're interested, but this might not be the best time and place*, he sent delicately.

*Then let's go somewhere private, since you're such a prude about public sex*, she retorted.

He considered rebuffing her, but the Neanderthal part of his brain took over. *Alright*, he agreed. Rahne grinned when he stood up with an erection, Vell chuckled, and Temika gave him a look like he was surrendering to temptation. Jason took her over to the pool house, and while Vell, Temika, and Rahne continued to chat, Jason got a pretty intense half hour in the bedroom with Kumi. She did indeed make him sleepy as well as tired by the time they were done. And after they were done, Kumi panting on top of him as she recovered herself, he couldn't deny that it had done what Kumi intended. Strangely enough, he felt better after their little tryst, a little sleepy, but also like life would go on. Life *had* to go on, and here on the strip, one of those little facts of life was that when Kumi was militant, no man was going to dare say no to her.

Rahne laughed as they came back out of the pool house, the three of them now sitting at the picnic table, Temika again dressed and Vell back in his robe. *I think she wore you out there, Jason*, Rahne observed, looking right at his genitals.

*He's always a fun lay, Kumi sent shamelessly as she smacked him on the butt as she came out behind him, strutting a little in her victory. You get that big dick of his hard and it makes you feel all kinds of awesome when he sticks it in you.*

*Something Ah'd better not find out, Temika grunted, mainly to herself.*

*Pfft, your monogamy is ridiculous, Kumi told her. Sex has nothing to do with love.*

*Let's not start a cultural war here, Jason headed that off, because that was an argument Temika had had with more than one woman on the strip.*

*We made you see the truth, now we just have to work on Mika, Mike, and Luke, Kumi grinned. At least Tim's been with it since we moved here.*

*Men are easy to seduce, Vell admitted. We have the same impulses that women do, after all, despite what men make women think.*

*Human men even more so, Kumi grinned, brazenly reaching over and grabbing Jason's penis, waggling it at them. There's a whole lot of horny in this sexy man-meat. I bet Mike's just as slutty once you get him hard and willing.*

*You even think about coming after Mike, and I'll rip your ears off, Temika threatened.*

Jason yawned. *Well, I think I need a nap now,* he stated, which made Rahne burst out laughing and Kumi grin victoriously.

He excused himself and went up to the bedroom to nap, silently thankful for Kumi and her little romp. It did make him feel better, and it again grounded him back in the familiar routines and feeling of *home*, where the girls flirted, and from time to time, did a little more than that. And ever since he met Rahne, he didn't mind that one little bit. As long as Jyslin gave him her blessing, he was happy to honor their interest in him.

And as always, Kumi was, well, Kumi.

Zaa and her retinue did come over for dinner, which was almost an informal state dinner, given that Kellin and Dahnai's kids were also attending, with all Jason's kids and their mothers also invited, as well as

Danelle, who was staying overnight as Myleena focused on finishing the spiders. Ayama made homemade pizza for everyone, which took her most of the day given she was feeding about 19 people. But she had promised Zaa pizza, so she honored that promise despite the number of people that were present. Zaa spent most of the time visiting with the kids, charming Maer, Sirri, and Shya as she renewed bonds with Rann and the others, with a child in her lap almost at all times, each of them taking their turn. Jason had woke up in time to help Ayama with the pizzas, and he did indeed feel much better, both physically and emotionally. No matter what chaos or insanity happened outside that door, at least inside his house, he could feel *normal*. And for him, normal was his wife, *amu*, his kids, and his friends up and down the strip.

Jason spent most of the dinner talking with Grun, Faar, and Haari, as their mates harassed Ayama to teach them how to make pizza, and Kiaari and Kraal seemed to strike up a friendship. Both Faar and Raali's clans were highly respected—the fact that Handservants were in both of them was just one reason—so they had positions of great power and influence within Kimdori society. Jason got to know them, and found that he rather liked them, for they were both wise and intelligent, miniature versions of Zaa.

Work did intrude more than once. Myri kept sending him updates on fleet preparation as they organized for the dangerous attack on Faroll, as Navii and Juma prepared attack plans and Sioa got her ground troops ready for the surface attack. They again had no intention of capturing the planet killer, they would destroy it from orbit, but they would need to send ground troops to wipe out any Consortium forces on the planet's surface. He also got word that his subsonic inducer warhead was viable, so he put a factory to work building them as Satan's Marbles missiles were prepared with CMS technology to let them get to their targets before they were detected. He also got word that the brain implant experiment's scientists had arrived on Karis, and had already been put to work with Olan as they worked to militarize the concept, to give his human non-telepathic pilots a means to match Generations in capability.

After eating, he found himself lounging out on the beach with Yana, Zora, Symone, Tim, and Kiaari. Kiaari didn't get to visit often, so he always made sure to put time aside for her when she could manage it. Being

Gamekeeper of Terra was a very demanding job, since she had to deal with all the spies and intrigue that stormed back and forth through the Academy on any given day. It was her job to know *everything* that was going on, which also gave her quite a bit of insight into the operations of the governments which sent all those orders down to their ambassadors and workers at the Academy. Terra was the true nexus of all covert shenanigans going on in the sector, and Kiaari navigated those shifting waters like a salty sailor. Zaa was immensely impressed with how good a job Kiaari had done, and it gave her clan even more prestige because Kiaari was the youngest Gamekeeper ever among the Kimdori, and a Gamekeeper in one of the most important positions at that. That Faar had produced a Handmaiden and the youngest Gamekeeper in Kimdori history were matters of extreme prestige for him, and also for the Thresxt clan.

“Man, I can’t eat another bite,” Tim groaned as he laid back in the sand.

“I’m the one that’s supposed to eat like a starving *brail*, not you,” Symone teased.

“I don’t see how Ayama does it,” Kiaari chuckled. “Everything she makes is fantastic.”

“She is a good cook,” Jason agreed as Aran ambled down from the deck. “Hey kidlet,” he greeted.

“Whatcha doin’, Daddy?” he asked.

“Just enjoying the moonrise,” he said, motioning at the half-risen Kosigi as it came over the horizon.

“Hard to believe that’s the same moon I’ve been inside,” Aran noted.

“Looks a lot different from here, doesn’t it?” Symone agreed.

Aran climbed into Jason’s lap and looked at the moon. “You just keep getting bigger and bigger every time I see you, cub,” Kiaari grinned at him. “I need to visit more so I won’t be so surprised!”

“Yes, you do,” Zora agreed. “I haven’t had the chance to crash you for over a year.”

“I’m gonna get you for that, Zora!” she laughed.

“Pfft, I pilot battleships now, Kee, you sure you wanna play chicken with me now?” she teased.

“I’ll just get my own battleship,” she replied loftily. “I just don’t have much time for play anymore.”

“I know that feeling,” Tim agreed. “There’s always more to do than you can ever fit in a day.”

“I’ll almost be afraid to look at my in-box when I get back,” Kiaari chuckled ruefully. “Now why are you over there, you silly cub? C’mere!”

Aran moved over to Kiaari’s lap, and she laughed and wrapped him up in her arms, hugging him. She slurped her tongue up his face, which made him burst out laughing, and he squealed and struggled in her grasp as she continued to lick his face. “Oh no, you’re all mine, you tasty morsel!” she called. “I’m gonna eat you all up!”

“Nu-uh!” he protested, squirming even more, then he laughed again. He managed to wriggle free of her, and he took off down the beach as Kiaari quite sinuously slithered up onto all fours, and then bounded after him like an enthusiastic dog. Aran barely managed to make it twenty feet before Kiaari pounced on him, and he fell squealing in laughter, covering his head with his arms as she nipped and licked at his head and neck, her tail wagging enthusiastically behind her.

*She’s certainly a lot more playful than most Kimdori,* Yana chuckled.

*In some ways, Kiaari’s still a little kid at heart,* Jason agreed. *I like her that way.*

Aran continued to squeal and laugh as Kiaari kept him squarely under her, licking his face whenever she got the chance, at least until she missed and got a tongue full of sand. “Blech!” she called and spitting a few times, which gave Yana the giggles and made Jason laugh himself. “Sand does not taste good!”

“Then stop eating it, silly!” Aran teased from under her.

“Oh, so my dinner is getting sassy, is he?” she said in a playful voice. “I need to do something about that!”



There's one universal truth about kids, and that is if there's a game going on somewhere, they *will* find it. Kyri took note of what was going on and rushed to Aran's rescue, bolting down from the deck and jumping on Kiaari's back. "Ha! An entrée to go with my appetizer!" Kiaari declared, dislodging his giggling daughter and putting her right down beside her half-brother. The two of them squirmed and shimmied and tried to get away, but she kept both of them between her hands and under her, licking at their faces, heads, and necks mercilessly. She licked them into submission, as they just balled themselves up in surrender and covered as much of their heads as they could with their arms. "Well, now that you're all tenderized and ready, who should I eat first?" she called, looking at each of them as they giggled. She reared up as if to ponder her decision, and they used that opportunity to jump up and run away, laughing. Kiaari bounded after them for a few steps, then intentionally let them outpace her. "Run as fast you can, tasty morsels, because I'll just hunt you down later!" she warned as they rushed up the steps and onto the boardwalk, then ran up towards Dahnai's vacation house, laughing the entire time. She watched them go, then stood up and walked back to them and sat back down beside Jason.

"Well, that's true enough," she said, pinching her tongue between two furry fingers, then spitting again. "Karis' sand doesn't taste very good."

"Then don't eat it," Jason winked. He laughed when she balled up her fist and threatened to backhand him.

*[Jason, Jinaami just got back to the palace with some news. I'll relay it as soon as we get to Dahnai,]* Myri told him.

*[Alright. Thanks hon.]*

"Jinaami got some information," he told Kiaari.

"Not a surprise, she's very good," Kiaari nodded.

"Sounds like work is about to intrude," Symone chuckled.

"Doesn't it always?" Tim told her. "Oh, by the way love, I'm gonna spend the night over at Min's."

"No sweat baby," Symone nodded. "Give Min a good time."

"I'll try," he grinned wolfishly.

“So hopeless,” Kiaari laughed.

“I’m used to having sex, at least once a day,” Tim shrugged. “Now that my wife and *amu* are in their phases, I have to find it somewhere.”

“Men get bitchy if they’re not getting laid,” Zora declared. “Some need more than others to keep them from getting whiny.”

“That’s me alright, the strip’s sex machine,” Tim declared shamelessly. “There’s not a girl inside the fence I haven’t had at least ten times.”

Kiaari looked at Zora and Yana, who just smiled.

“Faey are such sluts. And human men aren’t much better!” she accused.

“Ouch. The truth, it’s hurting me,” Zora said dryly, her hand over her chest, which made Yana laugh.

*Speaking of sleeping over, come over tonight,* Yana sent to him coquettishly.

*Sure, hon. Though I might have to leave early if things start getting busy.*

*No problem.*

Saelle got back in touch with him, relaying the conversation as she heard it, so it was Jinaami’s voice he heard through communion. *[I just tracked down where the virus came from,]* she declared. *[There are only five biotech labs on Draconis capable of engineering that thing, and I was fairly sure it had to be made here, it would never get through the cargo scans if it was shipped. That was a correct assumption. It was made at Meyalle Microbiology, and whoever ordered it made was clever enough to kill the technicians that did the actual work. After it was made, it was delivered to a mercenary who was paid ten thousand credits to leave the virus container near the fence, a container mocked up to look like a datastick carrying case. She had no idea what it was. After she left it, the container opened on its own and released the virus.] [Fuck, Jin, that was fast work,]* Dahnai complemented her. *[So who ordered it made?]*

*[I’m still working on that, but I felt this was important information to pass along. Right now, my agents are combing through Meyalle’s computer and security logs, searching for the instigator. Either she or her direct*

*agents had to be there, because the technicians were killed on site. Their throats were cut.]*

*[Good work. Keep me up to date.]*

*[Alright, that's it, Jinaami's leaving,]* Saelle told him.

*[Thanks for the eavesdrop, cousin.]*

*[Any time, Jayce.]*

"Jinaami tracked the virus back to its lab," Jason told Kiaari. "Whoever ordered it done killed the people who did the actual work, then hid it in a fake datastick case and had someone drop it off near the palace."

"Efficient," Kiaari noted clinically. "But a dead body leaves a trail that often leads in the same direction as the information that person held before death. Find out who killed them, you find what you seek."

"And Jinaami's working from those dead bodies to hunt down whoever killed them," Jason added.

"Then she'll probably have all the answers by tomorrow," Kiaari stated confidently.

"I'm glad you guys have patience for that cloak and dagger bullshit," Zora chuckled. "Give me a nice ship to pilot any day."

"To each her own, Zora," Tim told her. "I happen to like my job."

"And I'm glad you do. It's just not for me."

Yana yawned. "Well, I think I'm gonna go home, I have to be at work at six," she said, giving Jason a direct look. "Don't be too long," she told him, patting him on the knee before she stood up and started towards her house.

"There's more than one slut here," Kiaari grinned, looking at Jason.

"Keep looking if you're hunting for some shame, Kiaari," he said blandly, which made Zora laugh. "I'm in the same boat Tim is. I'm used to getting some every night, and now both my wife and *amu* are in their frigid phases."

"Gotta keep them happy or they're impossible to live with," Zora grinned at Kiaari. "And since you're

basically available, Jayce, *I* get you tomorrow night. I want to relive that night you got me pregnant,” she winked.

“I should just put up a calendar and let you guys put your names down,” he drawled, which made Kiaari laugh.

He did get up, said his goodbyes, and headed towards Yana’s house. *I’m gonna stay over with Yana tonight, love*, he told Jyslin.

*Want me to keep Kyri tonight?*

*Only if she wants to stay*, he answered.

Jason was enough of a regular visitor to Yana’s house that he had his own drawer of clothes in her dresser, and she kept an extra armor stand in the closet for when he arrived while armored up. Yana didn’t love him romantically, but she did love him in her own special way, and that combined with her feeling of trust and comfort with him to make him the man she invited back to her house most often. She’d had her little trysts with Tim, but those were an example of the Faey concept of buddy sex. Tim and Yana were friends, and when Yana was needful, Tim was more than happy to satisfy her itch. But she never invited Tim over to her bedroom to do it, she had sex with him in the guest room. Only Jason was allowed in her bedroom.

In more than that way, Yana was a little closer to him than the other girls, even Aura, and he was a little closer to her than other men. There was a bond of trust between them that was just a little deeper, but not so deep that Yana crossed into *amu* territory. He liked her, she liked him. When he first met her, he was one of the few men willing to allow Yana to use her telepathy during casual sex, letting her go as he’d let Dahnai go before she became his *amu dorai*, but now that wasn’t as much an issue because the other Generation men weren’t quite so intimidated by Yana when they were wearing their gestalts. She had more options now, but the simple fact of the matter was, Yana was the type that didn’t veer away from something when she found that it worked. She was the kind that would use an outdated piece of technology because she was used to it, she was comfortable with it, and she was slow to change. Jason also fit into that concept of her personality.

He and her worked, and she saw no reason to look for anything different until she decided she wanted to find a husband.

Because they were just a bit closer than the norm, but not *too* close, Yana was privy to a couple of things that the other girls weren't, such as his nightmares. He'd woken up twice during the night with those nameless terrors, unable to remember them after he woke up, and his agitated mental state had roused Yana from her sleep. The fact that they were touching gave her a window into his mind that neither of them could really close. She'd known beforehand that he'd been suffering from it since Raxxad, something he'd tell her and Myleena, but wouldn't tell any of the others, since it was a very personal issue. But, just like Jyslin, she quickly soothed him with gentle, reassuring sending of pure *comfort*, using a broad, rich sending that few even among the Generations could manage, and she settled him down almost as fast as Jyslin and Symone could.

He woke up just at dawn to find Yana already awake, in the bathroom. He picked up his interface and put it on, and after seeing that he had no urgent messages, just the standard reports they sent him to keep him up to speed, he laid back down and pondered the work waiting for him. The interdiction team would be jumping out in a few hours for the attack on Grevalt, and there was the attack on Faroll that had to be finalized and put on the board. Jason wasn't looking forward to seeing that, because it was going to be ugly. The Consortium were going to throw the kitchen sink at his girls when they realized they'd jumped in without interdictor support, and they'd have to really face down an angry bull trying to hold out long enough for the interdictor they brought with them put the system too far out of reach for the Consortium to continue reinforcing the system. Even if they had no interest in holding Faroll, so many KMS ships sitting not far from their huge feet would incite a reaction, for the chance to destroy the most dangerous ships to their plans if for no other reason.

He felt a little weary, thanks to his sleep being disrupted by the dreams. At least they didn't seem to have gotten worse since Pathrana. Maybe the difference between six million and four billion wasn't all that much to his conscience, since either number was just too staggering to really comprehend. To his surprise, he'd managed this shock much better than he had the Raxxad massacre, and in a way, that concerned him a little bit. Was he getting too callous? Or was he just trying to protect himself from his

own conscience? Either way, he was just happy that he wasn't seeing Pathrana burning every time he closed his eyes.

Yana padded back into the bedroom, gloriously naked, smiling when she saw he was awake. *Morning, love*, she called, sliding back into bed and cuddling up atop him, kissing him lightly. *Did I wake you?*

*Nah. So, are you gonna buy new furniture or just reuse Kyri's old nursery set?*

She grinned at him. *He deserves his own set*, she replied, her sending gloriously content. *I'm so happy I'm pregnant again. Carrying Kyri and giving you a daughter was the greatest experience of my life. I'm so much looking forward to giving you a son.*

*I already have three, you know*, he smiled.

*Well, we need to keep their numbers even so they always have even teams when they play*, she replied with a wink, which made him chuckle and squeeze her a little bit. *Besides, my son will be much better than your other sons*, she added loftily. *Look at how much better Kyri is than Sora.*

*Such a competitive bitch*, he accused with a laugh.

*I'm a Faey, love. If I'm not competing, I'm dead.*

*Someday you girls are going to realize that I love all my children equally.*

*Of course we know that. This is about us, not you*, she told him. *How much better our kids are than the other kids is how we keep score. And naturally, I'm winning*, she sent shamelessly.

Jason laughed helplessly. *Mean, mean, mean.*

*So I'm mean*, she grinned.

*And you're a cheater*, he accused. *You were supposed to have a child by a different Generation.*

*Next time*, she sent with a shrug. *Given a choice between fathering a child with another Generation and you, I'll take you every time. We take our vow seriously, you know.*

*What vow?*

*That you have at least one child for each of us, and you have fifteen children by 4410, she winked. And you certainly live up to your side of the bargain. Faey men aren't half as virile as you are. You can get a girl pregnant after just one try, she told him, poking him lightly on the side.*

*Well now, this vow thing is new to me, he pressed. And just when did you guys enter this pact?*

*Oh, I'm not gonna tell, she grinned mischievously.*

*Guess I'll have to drag it out of you, he threatened, grabbing two healthy handfuls of Yana's sexy posterior.*

*Well, you can try. And I'll enjoy it, she murmured mentally as she gave him a serious kiss. Mmm, try a little harder, she ordered as he squeezed her butt.*

*Give you what you want? That's not how you drag something out of a girl, Jason countered, letting go of her rear.*

*Either put them back where they were or you lose a lip, she warned, which made him burst out laughing against her lips. He snickered when she took his bottom lip threateningly between her teeth, applying just enough pressure for him to feel it*

*Yes ma'am, he sent cheekily as he again got a grip on her shapely posterior. Mean, mean, mean.*

*You like it when I'm mean, she replied slyly as she kissed him again.*

Yana didn't let him out of her house without some morning glory, and instead of getting dressed and heading home to armor up and head in, he instead just padded home naked, as there was little reason for him to dress just to walk two houses over and jump in the shower, then get in his armor. When he got to the deck, he had to laugh when he saw a professionally made schedule tacked up by his deck door, with the heading [Jason's nights, C25 each!] printed across the top and at the bottom it read [One night per customer, so no hogging!]. And Zora had already written her name in the block for today.

"Alright, who put up that calendar?" he demanded to Ayama when he came in, still chuckling.

“Symone did,” she replied with a slight smile. “I take it it’s some kind of inside joke?”

“Yeah. And if she thinks she’s getting a single credit, she’s got another thing coming!”

Ayama tittered in laughter as she handed him a cup of coffee. Out of curiosity, he looked out the deck door, and laughed brightly when he saw a similar calendar hung up by Tim and Symone’s deck door with Tim’s name on it. He squinted a bit when he saw that one block had already been filled in and made out Ilia’s name done in a rough scrawl.

Myleena appeared on the deck just as he turned, and he made room for her to come in. She was wearing a pair of panties with no bra, which was a bit unusual for her. She was usually either fully dressed or completely naked, not merely topless and in panties, as if she didn’t have the energy or motivation to finish dressing after she got her panties on. That was just one indication that she was very tired. “Morning, evening, whatever it is,” she grunted wearily.

“Have you slept at all?” he asked.

“I just got a couple of hours,” she replied, following him into the kitchen. “I’m almost done with the spiders. I’d have them done already, but I just had to sleep. Thanks Ayama,” she nodded when she handed Myleena a cup of coffee, then she took a long drink and then shivered in a way that made her unbound breasts jiggle.

“No worries, Myli, you have to sleep sometime, you know.”

“Here’s an important safety tip. Don’t wear armor with experimental gel backing that hasn’t been broken in for thirty straight hours, it makes your nipples sore.”

“Well, that explains why you’re showing them to me,” he noted, looking at her chest. Now that she mentioned it, her nipples *did* look a bit red and irritated.

She chuckled. “Look all you want. Touch them and you die,” she warned.

“Touch you? Eww,” he teased.



“Yeah, yeah,” she winked. “You’re not as *eww* as you used to be, Jayce. I’ll be totally honest here. I’m thinking about it. Not us having buddy sex, but us having a baby.”

“That’d be creepy,” he said honestly. “I’d feel like I was sleeping with my sister.”

“True enough. But, the simple fact of the matter is, you’re my best friend, Jason. I’d be a real piss poor best friend if I didn’t at least offer to give you the opportunity to be one of the fathers, even if we’re not really into each other. Have children by virtual strangers, but not my own best friend? It’s almost a scandal.”

“It’d still be creepy.”

“Well, yeah, but we can both just close our eyes and pretend it’s someone else. As good as you seem to be at knocking up Faey girls, it wouldn’t take long for you to get me preggers.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about something else,” he said as she followed him out of the kitchen. *[Where are you with the spiders?]*

*[Just have to debug the last software version, should take about two hours,]* she answered. *[I finally got them behaving the way I want them to. It was trickier than I expected.]*

*[Well, if anyone could figure it out, you could, Myli,]* he complemented her. *[Did you look over the killing inducers I made?]*

*[Yeah, I checked them out while taking a break. They look solid. I think they’ll work. They won’t make anyone in range of them very happy, but they’ll work.]*

*[Good. Always pays to have a second opinion.]*

Myleena followed him all the way up to the bathroom, then sat on the stool as he got into the shower, scratching her breast delicately. *[Fuck, this is annoying. I might stop by the clinic and have them do something about it.]*

*[That’s what it’s there for, though they might not be used to treating raw nipples.]*

*[That's what I get for testing out a new gel backing formula. It set, and then my nipples got hard and it didn't give to allow for it, which rubbed my nips raw. That's a flaw in the formula, so it's back to the drawing board.]*

*[And just why did you get hard nipples?]*

*[Thinking with the little brain,]* she admitted, poking herself just under the waistband of her panties, which made him laugh. *[Damn, I stink. I may as well join you,]* Myleena noted after sniffing at her upper arm. She stood up and pulled her panties off, then stepped in with him. *[Hand me the shampoo, will ya?]* He passed it over to her, and she wet her hair down. *[When are they deploying the interdiction team?]*

*[Four hours,]* he answered. *[I'm more worried about Faroll.]* He conveyed the entire plan to her via communion in about half a second, which made her frown.

*[Fuck, that's gonna be ugly,]* she communed with an audible grunt. *[But it's both the right thing to do and the only way to do it. With sensors behind where we'd put an interdictor, it means they'd see the hole, no matter how many SCM ships Zaa sends with the team. Alliance sensors are too good to fool from that close. Just jumping in and holding the system until the interdictor builds up is the only way.]*

*[I know. I don't like it, but it has to be done.]*

*[That just about sums up the entirety of war, Jayce.]* She lathered up her hair and used her telekinesis to put the bottle back on the shelf. *[Is Zaa still here?]*

*[They're leaving today,]* he answered. *[I'm supposed to meet them to see them off at 0930.]*

*[I'll have to see if I can make it. I might not, depends on how busy I get.]*

*[If you show up on that landing pad without finishing the spiders, Zaa will box your ears.]*

*[That's the truth,]* she chuckled audibly.

Jyslin opened the door, already armored up, and looked in, then chuckled and stepped inside. *I thought I heard the shower going,* she called.

*Morning love, morning Myleena.*

*Morning love, Jason replied.*

*Morning Jys, she nodded in reply. Hope you don't mind me borrowing the shower, but I needed one.*

*No problem. You finish the spiders?*

*Almost. Just a debug and they're ready, but I just had to take a nap and get out of that fucking armor for a while.*

*I just got Rann off to school, I was about to head in to work.*

*Well, don't wait for me, I'll be along as soon as I get cleaned up and get something to eat.*

*Alright, I'll tell anyone who asks that you'll be in when you're ready. What am I doing today?*

*It's on your work panel, she answered.*

*But don't get involved, remember, Zaa leaves at 0930, Jason warned. You have to be there.*

*Alright. See you then, love. See you at work, Myli.*

*Be there when I can.*

*Jyslin blew Jason a kiss and left. [She's done with the gravity beam?]*

*[Jenny can handle it from there. I've put her on something new.]*

*[What?]*

*[Cybi put down some specs for the long range modulated string jammer to cut the Consortium off from communicating with Andromeda. I put her on it, along with Luke and Gerann.]*

*[Good choices,] Jason nodded in approval. [So it's up to prototype stage?]*

*[Yah. From the look of it, we'll have to deploy it close to Exile, put it between the Consortium and Andromeda.]*

*[Makes sense to me,] Jason shrugged. [I'll have to look over what Cybi came up with.]*

*[Typical for her, it's bloody fucking perfect and brilliant,]* she laughed.

*[She is a computer, you know.]*

*[It's easy to forget that.]*

*[Yeah, it is,]* he agreed. *[If you're gonna share the shower, you're sharing the work. Wash my back for me?]*

*[Long as you wash mine first.]*

*[Just don't turn around. I don't want to die today.]*

She laughed. *[That's not going to be a problem. I'm not into pain.]*

It was probably Symone's sense of knowing just when to come in that she opened the door as Jason had his hands high on Myleena's back as she leaned over slightly for him to give him room, scrubbing her back with soapy hands. "Oh baby," she called rudely. "Bend over more, Myli, he might give you a handjob!"

Myleena laughed as Jason gave her a cool look. "Yeah, like I haven't shared a shower with Myli before," he told her accusingly.

"Hush, woman, you're making my washboy lose his place," Myleena retorted.

"He just has to put his hands where you're not soapy, Myli," Symone winked.

"Did you have a reason to come in here, or are you just being annoying?" Jason asked directly.

"Just being annoying," she said with a naughty smile that made Myleena laugh again. Jason threw the soap at her, which made her retreat back out and close the door.

*[She loves being a bitch,]* Jason chuckled as he got back to work.

*[It's part of her charm,]* Myleena agreed, fetching the soap back with her power. Jason was comfortable enough with Myleena to put his hands in places that would get him slapped if it was Temika. He washed all the way down to the backs of her thighs, even dared to push his hand into the cleft of her buttocks, lathering all the way down to her labia, then tapped her on the hip to have her rinse off. She thought nothing of it, and neither did he.

In Faey society, friends as close as they were would be having buddy sex, but since they weren't interested in each other that way, it didn't mean that they weren't intimately comfortable with each other in other ways. They wouldn't be afraid to lay hands on the places usually kept inside underwear and wouldn't assign any importance to it when they did. He didn't bat an eye when she washed his back and did the same thing, then she patted him gently on the backside to have him rinse off. After he finished, he turned off the water and the airskin, since they couldn't really go through it while dripping wet, it wasn't entirely pleasant. *Alright, now the painful part*, she sent as she stepped out and picked up a towel, patting it gingerly to her chest.

*You'll live*, he promised as he stepped out himself and picked up another towel from the rack. *You got the gel out of your armor already?*

*Hell yes, already got my old gel back in it*, she nodded, finishing the painful part and scrubbing her belly and waist. *Getting it aligned is a bitch, but I got it back in.*

*Well, if you don't want another run of pain, you'd better take the starch out of those nipples.*

She laughed, glancing down at her erect nipples. *I'm not thinking with the little brain*, she assured him with a wink. *Guess it's just the air, or maybe the pat down.*

*Maybe you are into pain.*

She snapped him with her towel. *Was that good for you, baby?* She asked mockingly.

*Oh baby, you know what I like*, he retorted playfully, which made her laugh despite herself.

Jason handed her her panties once she finished drying off, and she snuggled back into them as he finished drying off. *I'll be over as soon as I see Zaa off*, he told her.

*Alright. I'll have the specs for the comm jammer sent to your panel so you can look it over.*

*Sounds good. See you later, Myli.*

*Later Jayce, she answered, padding out of the door.*

Symone did swing by his room as he went in, coming in behind him and wrapping him up from behind. *Hey lover, she sent lightly.*

*Well, we're perky, he noted.*

*Maybe a little, she laughed. Oh, Jason, lover, baby, amu dozei, future father of my next child, she sent huskily, can I ask a favor?*

No, he replied immediately, which made her burst out in helpless laughter.

*Let me ask first!*

*When you try to butter me up that much, then the answer is an automatic no, he replied dryly.*

*Bullshit! Lemme ask first!*

*Alright, ask.*

*Can I go on a drill exercise with the army?*

*As long as it doesn't involve leaving the planet, yes.*

*Oh, come on!*

*You think I'm the only one that'll tell you no, silly woman? he asked pointedly. If you think Aya will let you do something like that, you're just plain fucking crazy. Like it or not, you're part of the Ducal family, and she won't let you leave Karis.*

*Damn right she wouldn't, Dera confirmed privately to him.*

*Well, shit! Symone complained, then she started sliding her hand up and down his chest sensually. How about I give you some good head, just the way you like it, baby, and maybe you can talk her into letting me go, she purred to him, layering her sending with all kinds of sexual innuendo, but unable to get much oomph into it because she wasn't really in that kind of a mood.*

*Wow, offering me something I can get any time I want, however can I say no, he sent blandly, which made her laugh despite herself.*

*Well, you're not getting it now. And if you don't let me go, you may never get it again,* she threatened.

*You are such a bad liar,* he retorted playfully.

*Oh come on! I wanna go!*

*Out of my hands, hon,* he sent honestly. *If Aya can hold me hostage, then you don't stand a chance. I'm way harder to control than you are.*

*Well shit,* she fumed.

*Welcome to adulthood, baby,* he teased.

*Jason dear, fuck you,* she replied sweetly, which made him laugh.

*As soon as you're over your phase, I'm holding you to that promise.*

*I'll be here with my legs spread and wearing nothing but a smile, baby,* she sent crudely.

He got out to see Zaa off more or less right on time, but where just about everyone was there for her arrival, only Jason and his immediate family were there for her departure. Given the attack on Pathrana, Zaa herself scoffed at an official departure. Everyone now had much more important things to do than see her get in a transport. Zaa was very earthy as a ruler, and that was one reason why Jason liked her so much. She knew what was important and didn't feed her ego like the other rulers did. Jason, Jyslin, and Rann met them at the landing pad and said their farewells to the Kimdori as his five guards hovered in the background, Jason greeted Faar and Raali first, then Haari and her mate, then greeted Grun as Miaari and Kraal shared a private moment off to the side, their hands on each other's necks. "I hope you had a good visit, Denfather," he said as Haari picked up Rann and licked him lightly on the cheek, making him giggle.

"It was quite enjoyable, at least given the weighty circumstances," he replied with a gentle smile. "I do hope you'll invite me back soon?"

"Any time Denmother lets you out of the Hearth, you're welcome on Karis," he answered, giving Zaa a slight smile.

"You really should visit Kimdori Prime, Jason. From what I understand, you can tolerate our radiation."

“For a short time,” Zaa corrected. “But, after all this fighting has ended, I think a visit to the Hearth would be proper,” she stated.

“I’d be honored to come visit your home, Denmother,” he said honestly.

“Send me reports about your coming blessing, Jyslin,” Zaa told her as she embraced his wife. “I am so looking forward to seeing your daughters born.”

“I will, Denmother,” she replied. “Now, you don’t be a stranger, Denfather,” she told Grun, embracing him. “It was so nice to meet you!”

“As it was for me, Jyslin. You are a fascinating young female, and I see why Jason is so attached to you.”

“Now, you be a good boy, Rann,” Zaa told him gently, taking him from Faar and hugging him. “I very much enjoyed our visit.”

“I did too, Denmother!” he said happily as he hugged her around her neck. “Come again real soon!”

“I’ll try my hardest, cubling,” she promised. “But it may not be for a while. As you know, things are very, very busy right now.”

“I know.”

Grun took him from Zaa and bounced him a little. “It was an honor to finally meet you, young Rann,” he said with a toothy smile. “Such a fine young man! You will make your parents proud.”

“Aww, thanks, Denfather,” he said modestly.

“You going back with them, fuzzybutt?” Jason asked as he put his arm around Kiaari.

“Just back up to the ship. I’ll head back to Terra on my own,” she answered, licking his cheek. “I’m not going alone either,” she grinned.

“Denmother has tasked me to spend a few days on Terra so I might study Kiaari’s organization,” Kraal announced. “She has some unique concepts that work, so there is something to learn there.”

“Good for you, Kee,” Jyslin chuckled. “You show the old curmudgeons how it’s done.”

Kraal gave Jyslin a cool yet playful look, which made Jason laugh.



“Don’t give her any idea that she’s so important, she’s already insufferable,” Miaari laughed as well. “Such pomposity from such a young Kimdori!”

“It’s my revenge for all those times you told me what to do, sister Miaari,” Kiaari stated. “See, my way *works!*”

“I never said you were doing *everything* wrong,” Miaari murmured in a voice that made Jason burst out laughing.

They watched the transport take off and ascend into the blue sky, then Jason sighed and patted Rann on the shoulder. “Alright, kidlet, back to school with you,” he told him.

*They’re gone, Daddy, we can send again,* Rann replied seriously.

He chuckled. *So they are, but then we’d be very rude to Miaari.* “But still, you’ve played hooky enough the last few days. Aya, take him back please.”

*Certainly. Ryn, Suri, if you’d escort him back to class?*

*Yes, Captain. Come, Ranny, let’s get you back in school,* Ryn called, holding her hand out to him.

*Dera, Shen, our problem child is your burden today,* she added, glancing at Jason.

*Just for that, I’m gonna make things extra annoying for you, Aya,* he threatened. “Coming to 3D, Miaari?” he asked.

She nodded. “I heard that you designed a new subsonic inducer that kills.”

He nodded. “Kills the insectoids, but also gives everyone else hearing damage. But the time to look for humane solutions is long gone. They’ll hate what I do, but as long as they’re *alive* to hate me, that’s just fine with me.”

“A justifiable outlook,” she agreed. “So, let us go look at your newest gadget, my friend.”

Jason was busy at 3D all day, but Myri kept him up to date on the military maneuvers. The interdiction team that would set up for the attack on Grevalt deployed right on schedule, an interdicator, two destroyers, and ten Kimdori SCM ships to hide the effect from Alliance and Consortium sensors using the deadspace sensor jamming behind the interdicator as a blanket to conceal the interdiction effect.

The plans to attack Faroll had been finalized, sent up to the war room, and approved. Juma started mustering the fleet, and Jason had to admit that it was quite grand to see his KMS forming up into squadrons outside of Kosigi...and right in the middle of them was the *Prophet*, preparing for its first combat mission. It no longer commanded its small task force of other shakedown ships, those were disbursed through the fleet so no squadron commander had more than one new ship under her command. Jason was proud of their bravery, for they were going to be jumping into the jaws of Cerberus, forced to fight against large numbers of highly aggressive enemies, but they wouldn't be going alone. Simply put, they were going to strip Karis to its underwear as far as defenses were concerned and rely on the interdicator, shifting those resources to the Faroll attack. Much to his own chagrin, he had also decided to change plans and deploy most of their Legion stockpiles to Faroll rather than attack the construction efforts on the other side of the galaxy, as well as pulling 1750 tactical pulse weapon platforms and 550 of the big planetary defense weapon platforms from the planet to assign to the fleet for additional protection. They were going to need those weapons as backup, and even Myri had to admit that after she tried to overrule Jason's decision. The planetary defense platforms weren't drones used by the KMS, the smaller pulse weapon platforms they could mass produce, or the Torsion platforms they sold to the Shio and other nations, or the slapdash platforms used by the Consortium or the Skaa, these were the top-line ones, big, tough, highly mobile, very powerful platforms with powerful Teryon shields and compressed Neutronium carapace armor for defense and bristling with both particle beam and pulse weaponry, while a variant was armed with pulse weapons and plasma torpedoes. A single platform was capable of taking out a Consortium ship, but because they were armed with particle beams and plasma torpedoes and were never intended to be used in an attack situation, that meant they had to take great care that the Consortium didn't capture one to reverse engineer the particle beam or plasma torpedo, both weapons high on their list of

things to take back to Andromeda. Platforms would be carefully monitored and would be destroyed by the Karinnes themselves if there was a chance that the enemy would get their hands on one. The intent was to attack and get the platforms in orbit around Faroll, there they would automatically assume orbit and take up a defensive formation to protect the planet, as they were programmed to do. The KMS would just back up behind the platforms and let them be both shields and swords and hold back the Consortium as the interdictor powered up. The platforms were usually directed from the command center, but for this attack, they'd be controlled from the task force flagship, the *Trelle's Gift*. Jaiya had rank over the other battleship captains, so she would have the flag in any attack until the *Aegis* was back in service.

The stripping of Karis wasn't restricted to the platforms. Just about every army and Marine Wolf fighter had been pulled from their usual duties and sent up to the fleet, where reserve and civilian pilots, basically the Civilian Air Patrol, would be flying old Raptors if there was any attack on Karis that managed to breach the planetary shield. Just about any civilian with a Class 3 had been trained to fly a Raptor in the last few months, and while they were nowhere near fighter pilots, those were still butts in cockpit seats that could help out in the event of a disaster. Every Gladiator rigger that had zero G flight pod combat training was also pulled for the attack, which included Kyva and the KBB. The Gladiators would be acting like fighters out there, but their primary job was going to be defense, not offense. They expected the Consortium to deploy their own slapdash drones, and the Gladiators would be tasked with defending the ships and weapon platforms from drone attacks, though the KBB would probably be in an attack posture. Kyva and her girls were far too good and were much better trained for space combat to keep them in reserve.

They didn't need the heavy defenses they had at Karis at the moment, and they *would* need them at Faroll, so they were going. Karis would rely on its interdictor, its shield, the GRAF cannon on Kosigi, 400 tactical pulse and 172 planetary defense weapon platforms that Myri absolutely refused to pull from the planet, and the skeleton force left behind in case the Consortium somehow found a way to hit them.

Miaari looked over Jason's inducer idea and was suitably impressed by it. His *original* subsonic inducer had been adapted to use to kill insect larva, so it wasn't a stretch that Jason could redesign it to go after much larger

adult insects. They and the Satan's Marbles had also been included into the attack plan on Faroll, since a CMS converted corvette was going to jump ahead of the fleet and launch a salvo of the CMS stealth missiles just in front of the fleet, which would attack Consortium ships in defense and also drop the inducers down to the planet to try to kill any insectoids on the surface, concentrating mainly on the planet killer and the city in which it was being built.

Jason was even more impressed by Cybi's solution to the jammer. The string jammer she created was *brilliant*, for it would totally destroy any attempt to communicate using the modulated string communications the Consortium used over a *massive* area. What it did was break down the modulated strings by destabilizing them, in effect disrupting the carrier of the information rather than the information itself, and it did absolutely nothing to interfere with hyperspace sensors, Teryon communications, or ships moving in hyperspace. It attacked one thing and one thing only, and because of that, it was absolutely brilliant and just perfect. Its only drawback was that it was fairly large, and they wouldn't be able to crank out a boatload of them in a short time. They'd be able to build about one every nine days by the time they had the construction mainstreamed, but once they got the second one built, it would be immediately deployed. By placing one at Exile, it would choke off all communications between the Consortium here and Andromeda, due to the angular direction of all communications. Exile was in the perfect place to act like a chokepoint, for all string communications would pass through that edge of the galaxy on their way to or from Andromeda. The only way they'd be able to receive comm from Andromeda would be to jump *two hours* out of the galaxy and put a picket ship out there to receive the transmission, then jump it back. They would force the Consortium to have to rely on a messenger ship to move information back and forth from the Milky Way to Andromeda.

However, the *first* of those jammers was going to be placed at Faroll. From that central location, it would completely disrupt all string communications the enemy used in all of their occupied territory. That, at the moment, was far more important than cutting them off from Andromeda.

And if they got those string jammers built and placed those jammers at strategic locations throughout the galaxy, put behind interdictors, well...

they could *completely kill the Consortium's long-range communications*. Jason liked that idea so much he put it down on his schedule in the near future to look at the solar systems on the other side of the galaxy, with the intent of planning where to place them to provide maximum coverage and cause maximum disruption.

Jason ordered the jammer built immediately, ordering the immediate freeing up of a dock up in Kosigi. It was so large that it had to be done up there. It would take them about 16 days to build that first one, and then, once they had parts being produced and a good building method, they'd be able to build one about every nine days.

Jason had to move on to his other, more boring duties after lunch, going to the White House and sifting through all the paperwork Chirk had for him, then attending the daily conference with the rulers. Zaa was in attendance, back at home on Kimdori Prime, and it was all about the attack on Dahnai and the incoming attack on Grevalt. Dahnai gave the rulers the information she felt willing to reveal, but not *too* much, so that they might glean just how her Imperial Guards operated behind the scenes. The important part, though, was that she was safe.

He did have a private conference with her afterwards, where she told him what she wouldn't tell the others. "Jinaami is still hunting down who ordered that virus made, so nothing new in that department," she told him as he leaned back in his reinforced chair, the one designed for him to use while armored. His comfortable leather padded chair was in the corner, waiting its turn patiently. "Anyway, if you don't mind, send my family back home tomorrow morning your time."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to do it," he warned her. "Just about our entire fleet is tied up with the attack on Faroll. Aya may not allow them to move if she doesn't feel there's enough ships here to protect them in transit."

She frowned. "Well, step on her toes."

"*You* do it, then send me the vidy of her doing that soundless laugh in your face."

She laughed. "I'm not *that* brave," she winked. "So, get them home when you can, love."

“I can do that. Hold on a second, let me get in touch with Aya and see about it.” Aya was a strong enough telepath for him to contact at his house from his office, but it did require him to completely focus on it. *Aya*, he called.

*What is it, your Grace?* she responded, her sending weak from the distance but still understandable.

*Dahnai wants us to send her family home. Is it possible?*

*Absolutely not!* she retorted immediately. *Not unless you can get the ships from Juma and let them do it. But I don't know if she'll allow them to break drills to chauffeur Prince Kellin and the children home.*

*Alright, I'll ask.* He shifted his concentration, mainly toning it way down since Juma was just one building over. *Juma, Dahnai wants Kellin and the kids to come home, but Aya won't allow it unless she can get ships. So, it's up to you.*

*No*, she replied bluntly. *They have more important things to do right now. If Dahnai wants them, she has to send her own ships to get them.*

“Okay, that’s that,” he chuckled. “Unless you can send enough ships to get them to appease Aya, they stay.”

“I don’t have that many here,” she fretted.

“Then I guess they’re stuck here for a while,” Jason shrugged. “At least you know they’ll be safe.”

“Well, I don’t like it, but I can live with it,” she grunted. “Alright then, love, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Have a good night, love,” he replied.

When he got home, he saw that no Faey could resist piling on when it came to a good joke. The little schedules that Symone had put up on his and her doors had been filled in, rather quickly. He had to laugh when he saw it, saw every block filled all the way through the end of the month, and with a full takir filled in Demaa, which would be *way* past when Jyslin came out of her phase. And in typical Marine one-upmanship, they’d taken to scratching out bets on the margin, bets on just how many girls Jason got pregnant during his period of free roaming. That was a bit crude and uncalled for, but

Faey were Faey, and they were willing to take a joke as far as they could manage.

Zora had been quick enough to get her name down first, and he saw that Sheleese had managed to get her name down for tomorrow. After that it was Lyn *and* Bryn, but that was no shock, since they did absolutely everything together anyway. They even lived in the same house. The next name startled him quite a bit. “Ayama!” he called in surprise.

She opened the door and peeked out. “Yes, Jason?”

He pointed accusingly at the calendar.

“Hey, at twenty-five credits, how could I resist such a bargain?” she winked.

“Get back in the house and cook my dinner, you traitor!” he barked, pointing at her, which made her laugh in delight and close the deck door.

That damn woman and her quirky sense of humor. He had no idea if she was joking or if she was serious, and in typical Ayama fashion, she left things murky enough for him dare not to ask. He’d either make her laugh or mortally offend her.

She wasn’t the only one that decided to be cute. Aya put her name down for 35 Miraa, but just under it she had a list of chores she intended to make him do rather than spend the night with him, and 1 Dumaa just said [Lottery]...he had no idea what that meant. Every girl in the squad had put her name down, Kumi had put her name down, Songa had put her name down, Meya and Myra had put their names down on different days, and some joker had written Temika’s name, though it wasn’t Temika’s handwriting. Even Myleena got in on the game, putting her name down for 27 Miraa, with the blurb [this is one hell of a way to get you to come to work], a dig on all the times he had to go to the White House.

A glance over to the other side of the deck showed that Tim’s calendar was also completely filled, and much to Jason’s amusement, most of the slots on his calendar were taken up by the guards. Tonight, Dera had laid claim over Tim. Well, even the Imperial Guards occasionally got in the mood, and hell, Tim was a handsome man to Faey women.

Some may have thought it was a joke, but Zora most certainly did *not*. She came calling about an hour after Jason got home, as he was helping Rann and Shya do some math homework; Shya had decided to go to Rann's classes, if only to stay close to him. *Hey guys*, she called, looking at Jason and grinning. *You eat yet?*

*No, but you're welcome to stay for dinner*, he told her.

*Nah, I'm already cooking. I just came to get you.*

*Get me for what?*

*I'm getting my whole twenty-five credit's worth.*

From the kitchen, Ayama spluttered, then started laughing.

"Oh, shut up, you traitor!" Jason called, which made Rann giggle. He was a bit surprised when she came over and grabbed him by the ear. "Ow! Zora!" he protested as she dragged him to his feet.

"I'll bring him back tomorrow morning," she told Rann with a wink.

She literally led him out of his own house by his ear, then she laughed and let him go once they got outside. "Now, we're having steak and lobster," she told him seriously. "And Sora's waiting for us, so come on."

"Well, if you're going to mention steak, I might be tempted. I have no doubt that," he raised his voice, "Ayama might try to poison me tonight as a joke!"

*Well, that's one to file away for future reference*, she sent teasingly.

So, Zora dragged him back to her house and fed him steak and lobster. He actually had a good time, because afterwards they played games with Sora, then she literally took his interface and refused to give it back, *ordering* him to relax for a while. He decided to do just that and spent an evening vegging out on her couch with his daughter, watching viddy comedy shows. Sora really liked having him over. She certainly had no want from attention from her father, and he often came over to spend time with her, but he'd never spent the night over at *her* house before, so it was something new and exciting. Usually, she was the one that came over to his house to spend the night.



But Zora *did* expect a few things out of him, and when it came time to get ready for bed, she made it abundantly clear they were going to be doing more than just sleeping. And Jason had no problem with that. They had to bathe first, and in typical Faey custom, it was a *family* affair, him and Zora and Sora...for in a weird way, he was part of Zora and Sora's family as Sora's father, and was always welcome within their private domain. Zora's bathroom wasn't as large as his own, but it was a pattern Faey bathroom, with the shallow basin for washing and showering and the tub for soaking. Jason helped Sora get clean, then carried her over to the tub and spent a nice time just soaking in the hot water and talking. Sora wasn't a very talkative child, more serious than his other kids, but he more than suspected that she was probably one of his smartest, almost as smart as Aran, who was pretty damn close to being a genius. She was a watcher, an observer, studying everyone and everything around her, almost the same way Aran did, but since she was the most beautiful of all his children, she was usually in the center of things. However, almost as if it was passed to her genetically from her mother, Sora had a fascination for her mother's profession, piloting ships. Sora too owned a little airsled, which Temika had bought for her for her passing party, and she was *very* good on it, that genetic piloting ability breeding true. Where Jason and Jyslin kept an eye on Rann when he rode his, Zora didn't do the same, because Sora wasn't in any real danger when she rode it. She was very good on it and knew not to go far. Ilia was the most authoritarian of the mothers of his kids, believing in a firm hand and discipline, but Sora was very well behaved, just as well behaved as Zachary but without the stern rules.

He sometimes didn't feel he deserved the wonderful kids he had. Rann was bright and sincere, compassionate and clever, already starting to understand the basics of the job that would someday become his. Jason had no doubt that Rann would be a *better* Grand Duke than he'd been, if only because he was being prepared for a task that had literally been thrown in Jason's lap. Kyri was the most powerful talent alive, hands down, and while she had a few superiority issues, she was a loving child that loved to laugh and was very sociable, definitely one of the central figures of the strip kid society, a position she and Yuri held jointly. Aran was *brilliant*, an actual genius, and might someday be a scientist that would even make Myleena take notice if that was the path he chose. Until then, he was a somewhat happy-go-lucky child that just went with the flow and was very popular on

the strip with both kids and parents for his affable nature. Sora was going to be an absolute heartbreaker when she grew up, already a darling cutie of a child, but with the promise to be one of the most beautiful women on Karis once that promise was realized. She was very smart and attentive, seeing and understanding more than her siblings, but she had a fascination with her mother's job that hinted to him that flying was her future career. Zachary was a very serious, sober young man, much quieter than the others, and already instilled with a highly refined sense of right and wrong thanks to Ilia's teachings. Jason wasn't sure what path Zachary would take, but he was smart enough to exceed in any field he chose, and had the determination to become one of the best in what he did, because he already had a powerful work ethic even at his very young age. Everything Zachary did was approached as if it was the most important thing, even something as simple as making his bed. And he couldn't forget about Danelle. Though she wasn't his, she all but considered him to be her father, spent nearly as much time in his house as she did in her own, and he had a very special place in his heart for her. A highly intelligent little girl who was intensely curious, about anything and everything, and often asked questions that were surprisingly insightful...and sometimes awkwardly embarrassing in their direct nature. Danelle was nearly as smart as Aran, but where Aran didn't apply his intelligence in a focused manner, Danelle did. It wasn't that Aran was lazy, he was just too carefree to think about the *why* of things, too busy being a little boy to think so seriously. For Danelle, the *why* was the most important thing, and what she always strove to discover. He had no doubt at all that Danelle would follow her mother's footsteps and get involved in the sciences, be it engineering or some other field.

His children and a little girl as good as his own, and if the Consortium came to Karis, they would be locked in cages and dragged back to Andromeda to live out what little time they'd have as prisoners...as slaves. To become either living weapons or to be killed and disassembled so the Consortium could unravel their DNA to produce an army of Generations to do their fighting for them.

Sora took notice of his grim expression and climbed up onto his lap, her knees digging into his thighs a little. *You alright, Daddy?* she asked.

He blinked. *Just thinking about how important you are to me, dove,* he answered tenderly, touching her face. *And how much I love you.*

*You didn't look very happy about it.*

*That's because I was thinking about the bad people that are trying to hurt our friends, and if they could manage it, they'd take you away from me,* he told her honestly. *I'll do everything I possibly can to make sure that never happens.*

*It's okay, Daddy, I know you will. You can do anything,* she told him with an earnest smile, then she hugged him.

*Well, that's certainly a high opinion of me you have there, my little dove,* he chuckled as he put his arm around her. *Sometimes I wish I could do anything, because then I could make our enemies just go away and never bother us again.* She kissed him on the cheek, then he gasped in pain. *Dove, dove, move your knee,* he sent, pain bleeding into his thought when Sora's knee slipped and pushed into his crotch.

*Sorry.*

*No worries, dove, we all have accidents from time to time,* he assured her as she settled to a pain-free seat on his lap.

Zora steered them back to innocuous, harmless conversation, and he enjoyed a good half hour of soaking in the tub with his daughter and her mother, talking about nothing important at all, time spent in relaxation. They then got Sora dried and dressed for bed, and Jason made sure to tuck her in and read her a story. She fell asleep before he finished, so he kissed her on the forehead and crept out without disturbing her. Zora smiled and kissed him on the cheek when he came to her bedroom. *I love watching you with her,* she told him with a smile. *Sometimes I'm amazed that a man with so many things going on can manage to make everyone feel like they're at the top of his list.*

*It's a practiced skill,* he told her as she took his hands. *Wow, it's been quite a while since we've been in this situation,* he mused.

*Six years, and you were quite reluctant,* she teased.

*You just can't take the human out of me.*

*No, but we did a good job making him bow to the Faey in you,* she winked.

*I'm going to feel like a piece of meat in a few days. I'm still not entirely sure how serious the girls are taking that calendar gag. It is just a joke.*

*Of course it is, but it's also an excuse, Zora grinned. But don't worry, no girl would ever make you do something you don't want to do. Well, except Aya, she laughed audibly. That's quite a list of chores she tacked onto the calendar.*

*I've been working her nerves lately, it's one way she's showing her irritation at me, he chuckled. I'll humor her. It's one of the ways we keep the peace in the house. I do appreciate that I must be a nightmare for Aya to manage from time to time.*

*Nah, just a handful, Zora laughed. But hard to control men are the most fun, she added with a subtle undercurrent in her thought. Now, time to relive some fun old memories.*

*I think we can manage that.*

Zora didn't wake up when he did, gasping and sitting up as that nameless nightmare shocked him awake, and was immediately forgotten, leaving him a bit scattered and with a cold feeling in his stomach. But then again, Zora was rather tired at the moment. Jason was rather proud of the fact that he'd worn her out, that he'd been much more enthusiastic than he'd been when Sora was conceived. Zora had honest attraction to him, she was a sexy woman, so they went with it and had some damn good sex. She was not disappointed in the slightest when she fell asleep.

Jason grunted wearily and saw that it was 0317, and he had enough going to need to check his reports. He reached over Zora and beckoned to his gestalt, picking it up off her night table with his telekinetic power, pulling it to his waiting hand. He closed his eyes as he put it in place, undergoing that somewhat unpleasant sensation as it turned on and laced itself through his thoughts, then he accessed it and started reading the reports. He laid back down and started with the most important one, and that was the report that the CMS missiles were complete and were being armed with both Satan's Marbles and inducer warheads. Ten were also being armed with antimatter warheads, on loan from the Skaa, who were

the best when it came to antimatter bomb technology. Those missiles were going to be paying a little visit to the far side of the galaxy.

Antimatter was a volatile technology, but when it came to making things blow up, it was the best technology available that could fit onto a missile warhead. Gram for gram, an antimatter core bomb had more destructive power than just about any other explosive technology except particle inversion technology. The Skaa had miniaturized an antimatter bomb to where it would fit on a hyperspace missile, which was slightly larger than the old Tomahawk cruise missiles the United States employed before the subjugation. The Imperium used a hybrid fusion technology, basically a PPG designed to overload and trigger a fusion explosion, and the Collective used a chemical reflex bomb called an RSB which had only slightly less yield than a fusion bomb.

The Karinnes had also developed an explosives technology, but it was *so* destructive that the original Karinnes had outright banned any work in the field and had buried the data so nobody could access it except the Grand Duchess...or the Grand Duke, in his case. It used the spatial warping principle to the utmost, creating a spatial bomb. It compressed space around a core of *expanded* space, expanded to such a degree that it caused space within the core to take on properties almost like mass, what the synopsis called *phantom mass*, a pseudo mass-like state like a singularity core, but on a much larger scale. When the effect was ruptured intentionally, the expanded core was exponentially collapsed by the compression around it and created a backlash rift, and that caused an explosive release of the phantom mass within the core as it converted into energy and was released into real space with such power that it made an atomic bomb look like a firecracker. It was an effect somewhat similar to the experiments Miaari had once described that attempted to stop time. The explosive power was caused by literally ripping space, and the tear collapsed into a permanent spatial rift, destabilizing gravity and spatial technologies in a volume measured in light years, which included a vast majority of Karinne technology. The problem with the technology was that it was *so* destructive that it was impossible to reduce to a tactical level, and it left behind a permanent scar that could cause more problems than it solved. There was no way to alter the power of the explosion. There was only one size bomb, and that bomb could devastate an entire planet even if exploded from a

million miles away, blast its atmosphere out into space and render it dead, or it could even cause a star to explode as a nova if it was detonated within 325,450 *kathra* of the coronal edge directly over its strongest magnetic pole. The resulting spatial rift would then destabilize space for light years in every direction, making it impossible to enter or exit hyperspace or use gravometric engines. Not even PPGs would function stably within the effect of a spatial rift. It was the Karinne version of a planet killer, and for obvious reasons, Jason had sealed that research and denied it even to Myleena.

At first glance, the spatial bomb looked like it might be useful, such as exploding a spatial bomb over on the far side of the galaxy and trapping Consortium vessels permanently wherever they were when the bomb went off, as they'd be unable to use their Karinne-based engines as propulsion, and spatial flux would be too great to enter hyperspace. However, there were a few long-term ramifications that made it way too dangerous to consider, since a spatial rift lasted for eternity, and it could also *move*. There was the possibility that a rift created way over there may someday drift into *their* sector, which would create absolute chaos. And if a spatial rift ever crossed paths with a black hole, especially the huge one at the center of the galaxy...well, the Karinnes were so terrified of that possibility that they forbade the device from ever being built.

He was sure they'd see the light of the exploding Milky Way Galaxy all the way on the other side of the universe eventually.

There was only one viable use for the device. Build it and send it to Andromeda, aiming it at the black hole at the center of *their* galaxy. But, the morality of such an action was extreme. Did a species have the right to assure its own survival by destroying all life in *an entire galaxy*? The easy answer was no, but thinking of his precious children...well, morality was comparative. And since both controlling powers in Andromeda had proved or were documented to be willing to commit genocide to further their own interests, was it morally wrong to turn the tables on them and use their own genocidal tactic against them?

If it came down to genocide occurring on either one side or the other, Jason was damn sure going to make sure the genocide happened to the *other* guys.

And if he had tap shoes, he could be a dancer.

He looked over the status reports. The tactical battle plans had been finalized, and there were now 5,850 Kimdori ships slated for the attack on Faroll, combined with 262 Karinne ships, every single refitted ship they had, and an onslaught of fighters and automated weapon platforms of various sizes. The equivalent firepower heading to Faroll was like sending a fleet of 9,000 ships according to Myri's tactical projections, and now they were just waiting for the proper time to deploy. They intended to time their attack with the attack on Grevalt, but before that happened, *every single Alliance planet* would be attacked with CMS missiles. Each of the 67 inhabited planets or moons in Alliance territory would be attacked by two different missiles, one carrying a Satan's Marbles warhead that would assault the planet killer, and a secondary missile that would deploy very small "flying guns," Torsion guns mounted on small grav pods that would fly around and shoot at any Consortium insectoid their sensors could detect. Jason didn't want to use the inducers in that attack because it would give them a chance to counter them, he was saving them for the follow-up attack. That attack would come very soon after the attacks on Grevalt and Faroll, in a similar wide-ranging attack that would try to hit as many Consortium positions as possible, *including* that Goddamned base they had in that nebula on the other side of the galaxy.

Legion tactics. Hit them, then hit them again before they had a chance to figure out what the fuck was going on. Then hit them again. Then hit them again. Then change tactics and hit them again before they could adapt. Death by a thousand little cuts. Since they couldn't detect CMS-converted missiles, they could arm them with warhead after warhead of deadly little toys then load them onto a CMS converted army missile gunboat. The gunboat would jump to proper range, launch its missiles, then jump out, and the Consortium would never see it coming since CMS could operate in hyperspace.

The string jammer was ahead of schedule thanks to Kosigi's growing confidence in building initial devices and was projected to be complete in 12 days. On a similar note, the *Aegis* was also pushed up, and was now projected to be ready in two days. They were having an easier time reconfiguring the power network to accommodate the GRAF cannon than they initially projected, and the installation of the additional singularity plant to help power the cannon had gone without a hitch.

He'd be relieved when the *Aegis* was back in service. Once that beast showed up at a theater with that fucking evil gun, it would make the Karinnes much more bold in their attacks. Having a capital ship too big to easily kill and sporting a weapon that could eradicate any enemy ship in one shot, even kill multiple ships if they were in a straight line, made one all kinds of brave. With a 28 second firing cycle, a bit longer due to it not having the same access to power as the Kosigi cannon, that would let the *Aegis* kill two ships a minute. While that may not seem like much, the fact that the *Aegis* could take out the enemy flagship right out of the gate made all the difference. It could then kill off any other large ships to eradicate the chain of command, then power down the GRAF and revert to its onslaught of particle beams and plasma torpedo launchers for dealing with the smaller ships.

On a different note, the *Aravallo* was right on schedule for repairs and was projected to be back in service in 9 days. Ten more ships were slated to be commissioned over the next four days, six destroyers and four cruisers, and the factories had produced another 317 Wolf fighters since the last production cycle. Captains for the new ships were already in training, and to Jason's surprise, one was *Urumi*. He was a Karinne transplant, had left Sk'Vrae's Navy to join the KMS, and had probably done so with Sk'Vrae's blessing. Lieutenant Commander Hr'Kass, his name was, passed all telepathic screens, was telepathic himself—always an advantage when serving on a Faey ship—and his prior naval experience as a fast attack ship captain fast tracked him right to the chair of a destroyer. He'd busted his ass to pass training as a KMS officer, adapted quickly to KMS technology and tactics, and had glowing recommendations from training command. Damn fine scores on his leadership tests and aptitude exams, and he had nerves of steel going from his psychological profile. He'd be a good ship captain—had *been* a good ship captain, looking at his Collective Navy file. Four commendations, six awards for ship operational excellence, awarded the Crystal Sword medal, put on the short list for upper command positions, which for the Collective Navy meant promotion to a battleship as first officer. He'd been simply waiting in line for a first officer position to become available before he joined the House Karinne. And now he was in the KMS, bringing that experience to the bridge of his very own destroyer, which he intended to name *Long Fang* in honor of his Urumi heritage, where the length of an Urumi's spitting fangs was a measure of martial



prowess. Longer fangs meant more range when spitting venom, which was an advantage in a fight.

Eh, that was why he opened recruiting to the Urumi. The Karinnes were a melting pot, willing to accept any race so long as they were sincere in their desire to join. Jason had no doubt that Hr’Kass would be a good captain.

He was about to take it back off and go back to bed when its emergency function activated, something like the Emergency Alert System on Karis, which would automatically tune him in to the emergency transmission if he was wearing it, or his gestalt would scream out an alarm so loud that it would wake the dead if he didn’t have it on. Fortunately, he’d been wearing it, so it wasn’t going to scare everyone awake. But, if someone was using *that* to get his attention, then it couldn’t be good news. The gestalt opened a window in his mind’s eye, and Zaa looked back at him as a remote camera floated into the room. *[What’s going on, Zaa?]*

*[I’ve already sent the proper commands,]* she answered quickly. *[But you must know. They’re setting an interdicator in front of the attack force going to Grevalt to drop it out of hyperspace before it gets there. They’re heading into a trap.]*

*[What’s going on?]*

*[The Consortium correctly guessed where the next attack would take place. The ships at the Grevalt system’s three planets have been literally converted into flying bombs. An intentional explosion of a power plant the size of one in a battleship would be catastrophic. Their plan was to lure the Confederate ships in by feigning an attempt to crash them into the planet, and then detonate their ships at close proximity when the Confederate forces rushed forward to stop them.]*

*[Fuck!]* Jason growled. Clever, damn clever! It took *weeks* to remove all the safeties and rig a ship’s main core to explode, and a fusion core that big could create a *fucking huge* explosion. The core in that exomech had devastated the entire area around Chesapeake...the main power plant in a Consortium battleship would be like the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. The Consortium was proving over and over again that they were as clever as they were homicidal. They were going to bait in the

Confederate forces' attempts to save Grevalt and use it to pretty much well completely wipe out the fleet. Not even the Consortium's own armor could stand up to that kind of an explosion if it happened at point blank range... hell, it could even breach compressed Neutronium armor. Given how hard it was to rig a power core like that, bypassing the dozens and dozens of interconnected and independent safeties, hardwiring and bypassing control sections without interfering with the core's ability to generate power...it was faster and easier to build a planet killer than it was to rig a power core that big to explode without interfering with its ability to operate normally the rest of the time. They had to have received those orders *weeks* ago and had only just finished the work. *[Are we going to stop the fleet in time?]*

*[Yes. The interdicator is already in position and turned on. It should intercept the attack fleet in about sixteen minutes.]*

*[Good. Thank you, Zaa, thank you for telling me. Now we have to strike while we have this chance.]*

*[A plan?]* He nodded grimly, which made her smile. *[I will leave you to it, your Grace.]*

Jason sat up, causing Zora to stir, then he got out of bed and looked out the window, over towards Myleena's house. *Myleena!* he sent loudly, loud enough to wake her up. *Myli, wake up, dammit!*

*What?* she replied blearily.

*Meet me in your lab fucking now, I'm on the way over!*

*Alright, what's going on?*

*The Consortium was one step ahead of us, but they left the back door open to do it! Now get your game face on, woman, we don't have much time! Jyslin, get up and go over to Myli's lab!* he barked at her. *We need your TEL skills!*

*Love, I was sleeping!*

*Save it for when we have time,* he told her as Zora blinked her eyes open to see Jason grabbing his clothes up off the floor with his telekinetic power, then literally jump out her window.

“Jayce!” she gasped, but she didn’t see him use his power to slow his descent enough to land safely in her back yard.

*No time, have to move fast, sorry love,* he told her in apology as he ran like a criminal with bloodhounds on his trail towards Myleena’s house, naked as a jaybird and with his clothes chasing him from behind.

*What the fuck is going on, Jayce?* Symone complained, no doubt hearing everything.

*I’ll explain later. [Cybi, can you manifest over at Myli’s lab? We might need your godlike speed.]*

*[Certainly.]*

*[Myli, get your software for your spiders up on the editor, we have to modify it in the next fifteen minutes or we’re gonna lose our chance!]*

*[I can do that, but what am I going to make it do?]*

*[Trigger a power plant explosion,]* he answered immediately, then he transmitted the entirety of Zaa’s information in a split second through communion. *[They took off the safeties, we can finish the job!]*

She laughed brightly over communion. *[Trelle’s garland, you are such an evil-minded man!]* she complemented. *[I’ll get right on it!]*

*[Cybi, get enough of the CMS missiles prepped and ready to deliver the spiders please. We have spider warheads already, get them fitted onto the missiles as fast as you can.]*

*[I’ll send the commands up to Kosigi.]*

They had to explain what they were doing once Jyslin got there, but since Myleena already understood what Jason had in mind, she was already hard at work rewriting blocks of TEL code to tell the spiders what to do, with Cybi flash-debugging using her computer brain. *We can just put a code broadcaster in with the spiders so it can download the updated software en route,* Myleena sent with haste as she and Jyslin worked together to alter the operating code of the nano-machines. Myleena was an engineer and had extensively studied the Consortium’s plasma power plants, so if anyone could hastily write a program for robots to attack that power plant and trigger a core breach explosion, it was her. Even Cybi bowed to Myleena’s

expertise in the matter, letting her and Jyslin write the code and just debugging it to ensure it would work properly. Jyslin was linked telepathically to Myleena, writing subroutines under Myleena's orders as Myleena handled the trickier parts of the program. Jason could just watch, because software and TEL were never his strong suits, there basically to be a cheerleader.

Programming nano-machines was a tricky business, because they were, well, nanoscopic. It made their memory capacity very small, so the key to a good nanite was the most efficient operating software possible. They weren't capable of exceedingly complex tasks unless they were in range of an external control node, which broadcast updated information and commands to the nanites in a "I just finished this task, what do I do next?" sequence. They couldn't send a control node since its broadcasts might be detected, so Myleena had to program the spiders to do the job using the very limited onboard memory. That was why it took Myleena so long to program the spiders to attack the planet killers, because she had to squeeze every tiny bit of efficiency out of a very limited onboard memory. Now, they had a new job that was just as complicated as attacking the planet killers, and Myleena had to get it done and they had to have the missiles launched *before* the Consortium realized that they'd aborted the attack on Grevalt and possibly reset some of the safeties on their power plants.

But faith in Myleena was never misplaced. It took her exactly ten minutes and 31 seconds to finish the hasty code job, and after Cybi ran flash debug sims and proclaimed it viable, they dumped it to broadcaster nodes and told Kosigi to get those missiles loaded onto a CMS gunboat *fucking yesterday*. Jason watched with anxiety as the clock kept ticking, until the Karinne Marine Missile Attack Ship *Hellraiser* lanced out of Kosigi like a bat out of hell, running at full flank to get far enough away to jump, 17 minutes and 51 seconds after Jason had woke up Myleena to get the job done. It had taken the munitions experts up on Kosigi only seven minutes to get those missiles armed and loaded, with Cybi's help since she had advance warning and was already on the job.

*There he goes. Now we watch and wait,* Myleena sent, then she elbowed Jason in the ribs. *You are just too fucking clever, babes!* she laughed.

*That's why I married him,* Jyslin winked.

*Let's just hope it works*, Jason sent seriously.

They had to go to Jason's house to see the results, since Myleena's lab didn't have the security to access the Kimdori sensor nets.

Jason quickly got several holograms up showing various data and two camera views of Grevalt III. The attack fleet was behind the Kimdori blanket jammers, so the Consortium probably didn't know where they were and when they'd arrive, but it was clear from the formation of their ships that they knew they were coming, and were expecting to see them drop into normal space any minute. The reality was that the attack wouldn't have come for another 16 hours, but they didn't know that. Jason was working on the assumption that they were getting their information from the inside, since it was abundantly clear that they still had some agents within Confederate territory. That attack on Dahnai was proof enough of that. So, it was no stretch that they'd gotten information that the Confederation had launched an attack on Grevalt, but since they couldn't see the fleet and that kind of information wasn't circulated where an agent might pick it up, they didn't know *when* it was going to get there.

A look at Faroll showed that the leak wasn't on Karis, since the ships at Faroll showed no indication they expected an attack. The Faroll attack had been planned and set up on Karis, with only approval from the top generals at the war room on Terra to carry it out. So, the agent wasn't high up in the chain of command, and was not on Karis, nor in the war room.

Information to pass on to Kiaari. She'd have to hunt that mole down.

Jason saw the blip on tactical that showed that the *Hellraiser* had dropped into normal space well behind the minimum approach distance, putting a hell of a lot of territory between it and Grevalt III. New blips appeared on the grid as it launched 37 missiles, one for every Consortium ship in the entire Grevalt system, which then spread into three clusters. The other two clusters were en route to the other two inhabited planets in the system, jumping into hyperspace, but Jason focused on the 11 blips heading for the ships at Grevalt III. The missiles designated for each ship raced towards them, and at the last second, they veered away as they delivered their payload, the missiles themselves heading *back* to the *Hellraiser*, which sat in position and hidden by its CMS. The missiles themselves could be reused, since they weren't delivering explosive warheads...no reason to

waste perfectly good hyperspace missiles. The *Hellraiser* would capture the missiles and jump back out with them.

But the missiles had been noticed. The CMS only hid the missiles from sensors and from visual detection, but did nothing to hide the mass of the missiles and their effect on space, which could be detected by passive spatial sensors that searched for the spatial warping effect caused by mass moving through space, the same issue that kept his skimmer inside the gravity well of Earth back in the Legion days. The *Hellraiser* itself would suffer that same problem if it wasn't fitted with a gravity flux pod that hid its effect on space, in effect "filling in" the depression the ship made in the fabric of space with a false reading, making it invisible to passive gravity flux sensors *only as long as it didn't move*. So long as the missile gunboat stayed stationary, it was invisible to passive sensors. The Consortium ships activated every active sensor they had when their passive sensors noticed the mass of the missiles, sweeping space all around them searching for the anomaly. But their sensors wouldn't detect the spiders that had been deployed, and were even now working their way into the ships using their exterior lights. They were programmed to ride the low power plasma network back to the power core, and once they got there, attack it.

The Consortium ships continued to scan, and scan, and scan, searching for whatever had moved near them, until the ship that was closest to the *Hellraiser* just *vaporized*. The spiders had done their job, and the resulting explosion was so huge, so brilliant, that it saturated the camera with blinding light, overloading it and sending it offline for a few seconds. When the video feed kicked back in, they saw the other ten ships careening away from the explosion, caught in the blast wave, their armored hulls warping from the intense heat and force. Another of them detonated in a hellish cataclysm, which knocked the other ships directly into the blast wave of the first explosion, as another team of spiders managed to do their jobs. The nine remaining ships, caught between two fusion explosions, were literally ripped apart, shattered like crystal in the impact zone between the two blast waves, reducing them to pieces no larger than a toaster.

"Fuck yeah!" Jyslin screamed in delight, kicking her chair in glee.

Myleena laughed loud and long. "Trelle cut me from her hair, but that was absolutely brilliant!" she grinned. "We just beat them at their own

game, using their own trick against them!”

“They’ll think twice before trying that stunt again, that’s for sure,” Jason chuckled. “Cybi, send this information over to the command center, let them call in the attack. But, warn Myri about it so she’s ready to move when the orders come down.”

*“Certainly.”*

“Now, I’m gonna go explain to Zora why I jumped out the window. It just might have sent her the wrong message,” he chuckled.

Myleena and Jyslin gaped at him, then both of them burst out laughing.

It turned out, what the war room did was a whole lot of nothing, and that angered Jason.

After they managed to take out the ships that intended to ambush the fleet, the war room just had the fleet sit there and stew over it. The reasoning Jason got from Kiaari, who sat in on the meetings, was that they were unwilling to jump Confederate ships into Grevalt with the interdicator that would prevent their retreat if the Consortium jumped more ships into the system with the same orders. That they could simply blow *those* up or engage them from range using plasma torpedoes should have dawned on the generals and admirals. Instead, they wimped out and held the fleet for nearly six hours until they finally decided to recommit to the attack, forcing the KMS to delay the attack on Faroll because they wanted the attacks to be simultaneous.

And sure enough, about three hours after the initial attack, long after they could have blitzed Grevalt and taken it with no opposition, the Consortium jumped 33 ships to the system, putting 11 at each planet, which were rigged to be used as bombs, but had enough physical safeties engaged to prevent them from using spiders to take them out.

Jason has a few choice words for the war room after that. They all but handed Grevalt to them on a silver platter, and instead of doing something about it, they acted like timid mice. He knew after he heard that lame excuse that he should have ordered an attack on Grevalt *himself* using KMS and Kimdori ships.

Jason stewed over it a little bit over the day, through the daily meeting of the Confederate Council, and then he put it out of his mind as he went to the command center and watched as the risky attack on Faroll was in the final stages of preparation. He sat at the main tactical table that held a hologram of the capitol planet of Faroll, all the Consortium defenses marked in orbit and on the planet's surface, including a red flashing blip on the surface that represented the planet killer.

If anything made him nervous, this was it. The KMS and Kimdori would be put in the very unpleasant situation of defending that interdictor when the Consortium jumped a counterattack from Trieste. It was going to be a major war, and as much as it had to be done, he didn't want to see *his* girls and the Kimdori be the ones that had to do it.

But he couldn't deny that he was proud to see his fleet formed up already at jump distance, waiting for the command to begin the attack. They were simply waiting, watching the Grevalt attack and ensuring they made the attack just as the Confederate fleet hit Grevalt. He found himself counting the seconds as they ticked off the countdown clock on the corner of the hologram, watching the first ships jump, CMS equipped ships that would attack Faroll before the main fleet arrived. Then, to his anxiety and eagerness both, the fleet jumped out.

He sat with Myri, Juma, Navii, and Sioa at the main table as they watched the tactical holograms, as sending and spoken information floated through the command center. Right on schedule, six ships dropped out of hyperspace some distance from the planet, four missile gunboats and two Kimdori SCM ships to scramble shortrange Consortium and Alliance sensors. The missile gunboats then launched their missiles, which were carrying spiders for the enemy ships and Satan's Marbles and subsonic killers for the ground attack, the original spiders that would attack the Consortium ships' computer cores. There were 21 enemy ships at Faroll, less than they expected, and with luck, they'd disable those ships without having to get anywhere near them, preventing them from being crashed into the planet without putting the fleet at risk to do so.

*Here we go*, Myri grunted mentally as they watched flashing dots representing the missiles on a tactical as they looked at a camera view of the cluster of enemy ships in high orbit on the hologram next to it. The



ground attack missiles went first, and as they passed, they alerted the Consortium ships as their mass disturbed space and gravity. The enemy activated active sensors and swept the area where the missiles had been, but by then it was too late, they were already looping around the planet after launching their warheads, and would stay in stealth mode in orbit and wait for a pickup after the battle was over. The camera changed to the planet killer, and Jason saw the first missile warhead hit it clearly. There was a small dusty eruption at the top as the compressed Neutronium armored hull of the warhead penetrated the outer wall of the facility, which would unleash the marbles within. Four warheads slammed into the facility as five others spat out subsonic killers as they lanced over the city, which fell like chaff towards the buildings of the city. When they reached 3,750 *shakra*, however, they suddenly arrested their descent and activated, generating a virtual blanket of subsonic harmonic pulses that attacked the entire capitol city.

Even from the orbital viewpoint, he saw the chaos on the streets of Faroll. Alliance citizens put their hands or appendages to their heads and cried out in obvious pain, but as the camera focused on a cluster of Consortium insectoids, the image was quite different. All five of them seemed to be in convulsions, and then one of them simply *burst* like a ripe melon, its exoskeleton exploding out greenish ichor from huge rends in their structure. The other four also succumbed to the harmonics designed to attack their carapaces, shattering them like a glass in front of an opera singer.

The theory had been viable. The inducers worked.

Jason didn't have time to feel proud of himself, however, for the second wave of missiles deployed their spiders against the defending ships. Jason watched a status bar indicating how far the spiders had penetrated into the enemy ships as he watched the countdown clock which displayed when the fleet would arrive...and they were *damn* close to each other. They wanted those ships disabled before the fleet arrived to prevent the need for them to do anything crazy to protect the planet, but the spiders weren't going as fast as projected.

They weren't going to make it.

The main bulk of the fleet dropped out of hyperspace as close to the planet as they could get before the first enemy ship had been disabled. The Consortium battleships took immediate notice of the huge fleet even as the Kimdori SCM ships activated, jamming all of their sensors and gravband and threaded communications, leaving them only line of sight light pulse communications. The ships seemed to freeze a moment, then the first of them had all its lights go out as the spiders did their job, invading the computer core and disabling it. The point ship, the cruiser *Defiant*, then launched short-range gravometric missiles loaded with subsonic killers to kill those crews before they could find some way to repair the computer cores; these spiders were designed to *disable* the computer cores, not *destroy* them, so they could capture those ships intact...that and give Siyhaa complete Consortium computer cores to disassemble and study. Another ship went dark, then another, but those still in operation were turning towards the planet to attempt to crash into it. Five more went dark before they could complete the turn, leaving them slowly spinning in space until something stopped them, which allowed 21 of them to start moving forward. But, with every second that passed, another ship's lights winked out, until all the ships were disabled. The fleet was already charging forward to set up the planetary defenses, so they weren't doing anything out of plan when they rushed up to those ships and captured them in towing beams, pulling them back out into orbit.

Now came the gamble. With all communications cut off at Faroll thanks to the jammers, by now the Consortium had to know that a major attack was under way. Everything hinged on how quickly they noticed that there was no interdicator in the system and how many ships they sent to counterattack.

Everything else was moving according to plan. Ground attack ships split off from the fleet and descended into the atmosphere as the fleet hastily moved the interdicator into position as the planetary defense weapon platforms were deployed, controlled from the *Trelle's Gift*. Swarms of Wolf fighters chased the ground assault ships into the atmosphere as others spread out around the planet, ready to respond in a second's notice to any fleet dropping out of hyperspace.

This was the hard part. Jason fidgeted ceaselessly in nervous worry as he watched the countdown timer start for the interdicator, counting down until it started its logarithmic expansion, that magical 31 minutes when the

interdictor was 10 hours of sublight travel from the planet and thus was so far out that any counterattack would have to travel too far while under constant attack to pose much of a threat, and then other magical 117 minute mark, when the interdictors entered logarithmic expansion.

They were minutes of torture. Time seemed to slow down as he watched the fleet deploy, saw the first visible indicators that the Satan's Marbles had eviscerated the planet killer when some of them erupted out of the outer wall, then a massive explosion in the facility collapsed most of it in on itself like a deflating soufflé, after a marble must have hit something pretty damn important. He looked at the countdown again; 4:15 elapsed, which was a 1.9983-hour sublight journey to Faroll from the edge of the interdiction effect. He watched Wolf fighters pound on unmoving mantis mecha, their pilots killed by the subsonic field, as the low orbital bombardment ships and corvettes destroyed what was left of the planet killer facility with plasma bolts. He saw the 31 enemy battleships parked in stable orbit, Marine and tech teams hastily transferring to them to ensure all the crews were dead and no self-destruct traps or bombs were hidden on the ships and also to physically disconnect the computer cores from the rest of the ships, to make sure the computers didn't self-destruct them the instant the spiders put the computer cores back online.

6:01 minutes elapsed. A 2.2183-hour travel time from the edge of the effect.

The first bouncers hit the ground at Faroll, as armored Karinne Marine and Kimdori infantry poured out, literally surrounded by Alliance citizens who had long ago had their eardrums ruptured and were now deaf. Faey and other telepaths should be sending instructions to them. Kyva and the KBB lanced out of a mecha lander, streaking towards where intelligence told them was an external garrison of Consortium ground units.

The tactical turned red, as Kimdori sensors detected a hyperspace jump. Sensors quickly located the jump position, a location 4 hours of sublight travel from Faroll, well in front of the interdiction effect. It was a lone Consortium scout ship, turning its sensors towards Faroll, using a hyperspace tunnel to get a real-time visual of Faroll...or at least trying. The tunnel hit the edge of the interdictor's effect and was disrupted. Not 12 seconds later, a large attack fleet of 13,438 ships dropped out of hyperspace

behind the scout. Jason almost audibly groaned, for it was the worst-case scenario. They had jumped *everything* they had at Trieste to attack Faroll. He looked at the countdown timer; 7:17, a 2.548-hour sublight cruise, during which they could attack the fleet en route and hopefully whittle it down to a manageable number. The KMS redeployed to bring their rail cannons to bear, which would be their primary means of attack. Each cannon slug had an on-board computer and grav engines to adjust its trajectory, allowing them to be fired from extreme range and letting the slugs adjust their trajectory like smart bombs to hit their targets. They couldn't turn very much at all, but when fired from long range, they only needed minor course corrections, which was what their engines were designed to do.

Just when he expected the Consortium fleet to jump towards Faroll to reach the edge of the interdictor, however, they did nothing. They just sat there. Jason was honestly confused by their lack of action. Seconds ticked by, every second adding more and more time to their travel to Faroll, yet they just sat out there, thousands and thousands of battleships and several hundred heavy battleships.

Just sitting.

*What the fuck are they doing?* Juma asked irritably.

*Maybe they have no idea how many ships are at Faroll, Navii speculated. We managed to knock out their comm and sensors pretty quickly, perhaps before they even managed to get a single warning off. They may have no idea if it's just a small skirmish fleet there to draw them out of position or a full attack, especially since the interdictor prevents tunnel telescopes.*

*If they don't move in the next two minutes, they're gonna get caught in the interdiction,* Myri sent hopefully. *I'd love to see their entire fleet trapped in an interdictor well.*

*Don't wish for what you can't have, Myri,* Navii chided her. *They know the interdictor effect is coming. They'll move before it reaches them.*

Navii was right. The fleet sat there for maybe another fifteen seconds, then, to Jason's amazement, it *began to turn around*. Were they going to attack, or retreat? Jason wasn't sure, but if they were turning around, maybe

they weren't going to attack. *I would guess that their clairvoyant light being has finished his assessment of the attack and has sent down orders*, Navii noted clinically. Jason blinked, forgetting all about that little trick. That clairvoyant energy being couldn't spy on Imperium systems, but nothing would stop it from using its ability to see into Faroll, which had no Parri protecting it from surveillance.

Then, an absolute *sea* of gravometric missiles erupted from the entire fleet. Tens of thousands of missiles streaked away from the enemy fleet, accelerating geometrically, achieving near-light speed in just a matter of moments for their 2.878-hour cruise to Faroll.

And with the missiles launched, the Consortium's entire fleet *jumped out*. They weren't going to attack!

*That's it? They're not going to attack?* Juma sent in disbelief.

*Don't snap your fingers at the gifts Trelle gives you, girl*, Navii rebuked lightly. *Organize a countermeasure to that missile attack, then we watch and wait until we have complete control of Faroll.*

*Get the Stargate ready to cruise in*, Myri called. A subordinate nodded, touching her interface as she relayed the order for the battleship *Victory* and its escort of 12 KMS ships prepared to tow a Stargate to Faroll.

Jason was relieved beyond measure that the Consortium had decided not to contest Faroll...but it didn't make sense. They *should* have tried to attack, given that they would have had a golden chance to do some real damage, not just fire missiles to keep the KMS busy and then retreat. It just made no sense. If he were the Consortium, he would have sent *everything* after Faroll, whittling down the fleet that would eventually face him at Karis.

But they didn't. They just sent a token missile barrage at Faroll and jumped right back to Trieste.

Alright, so, the Consortium wasn't Jason. They had to have other information; their plan had to involve something he didn't know. If they weren't worried about KMS ships that might repel their attack on Karis in the future, well, that meant one of two things. Either they weren't worried about the KMS, or they weren't worried about the attack on Karis.

Why pass up the chance in a lifetime to attack the KMS when it was abundantly clear that they weren't going to run?

Jason leaned back in his chair, his mind working furiously as he tried to see things from their side. Clearly, they had a plan or some intelligence that told them that a full attack on Faroll wasn't *necessary*. They seemed willing to just give back Faroll and everything it represented, including a central hub from which to attack any Alliance system quickly, a critical strategic asset in Alliance space. And they seemed not to be too worried about what they may have to face when they did finally attack Karis. That...that was nonsensical. The Consortium *knew* that if there was any ship that could kick their asses, it was a Karinne ship. They had the chance to destroy quite a few Karinne ships, yet they just let it go right by.

He blinked. The answer was *simple*...they didn't *care* about the Alliance systems.

What if...what if they attacked the Alliance and the Shio for no other reason than to give the Confederacy something to attack? Attack close to home, put something right in front of them while they did something else behind their back where it couldn't be seen? They had taken over both those nations, but now they seemed quite willing to just give them back, not defending their systems, and now passing up the chance for a major naval battle and the opportunity to hold the most important system in Alliance space.

So, if they were putting the shiny things out where they could see them, it just meant that finding out what was going on behind their backs was of critical importance. That phased FTL launcher they were building at PR-237 was a prime example of that. Perhaps there were a few other little projects out there that the Consortium was preparing, out of sight of the Kimdori and kept top secret.

That had to be it. They had invaded their sector just to, to *distract*, keep the fight on *this* side of the galaxy, giving them time and peace to do their work over on the other side. The attacks on the Shio, Alliance, and the Skaa, they were nothing but fucking *diversions*. Yes, they served a purpose in destroying anything useful that the Syndicate might capture when they arrived, but in the grand scheme of things, those attacks had only served to focus the Confederacy's attention where the *Consortium* wanted them to

look. The KMS and the Kimdori had the *capability* to jump across the galaxy and attack the Consortium, but when the Consortium invaded their sector, they had focused on the *invasion*, not what the Consortium was doing over on the other side of the galaxy.

Jason almost cursed aloud when he realized that they'd fallen right into their ploy, too! He'd ordered the entire toy box emptied attacking Shio systems, Myri had diverted even more toys to military attacks...they'd gotten so distracted by what was right in front of them that it blinded them to the *real* objective, and that was to prevent the Consortium from reaching Karis. And *that* fight sure as hell wasn't taking place out in Alliance space.

"God, I feel so stupid!" he growled plaintively. *[Cybi, find Miaari. I need to talk to her.]*

"What's wrong, Jason?" Myri asked.

*I should just put a fucking handle on my nose so I can be led around more easily,* he sent darkly, furious at himself. He stood up and looked at them. *Finish up at Faroll. I need to go kick myself in the ass a few times, then expect some policy changes and a shakeup that's going to get Dahnai and the others pissed off at us.*

*What changes?* Navii asked.

*We've been fools,* he growled as he stormed off. *We let them play us like chumps. All the attacks in our sector are just decoys, preventing us from attacking them in the PR sector, where they're doing the real preparations to attack Karis. Well, we're going to fix that little oversight, effective right now. Navii, prepare a plan for setting up a forward command post in the PR sector, as much a fucking fortress as that nebula is for them. Juma, go over PR star charts and the intel the Kimdori have and start preparing battle plans for attacking the Consortium over there.*

*We'll get on it,* Myri answered.

Jason felt like a total *idiot*. Why didn't he see this before? Well, stopping the mass genocide of entire planets was a good thing, but still, they should have been fighting this war on two fronts the entire time, both here and over there. They'd even started preparing to build that forward base when the invasion of the Alliance and Shio happened...*right when they were starting their plans to take the war to the other side of the galaxy.*

He was such a *fucking idiot*! The Consortium clairvoyant saw it coming, and they respond by invading this sector to lock the Karinnes down, force them to go along with the rest of the Confederacy to play defense. And while what they did was very important, it didn't change the fact that they let the Consortium play them like a fucking banjo. Well, that was the last free tune they were going to get out of the Karinnes.

From here on out, the Consortium was going to pay the band.



# Chapter 9

*Brista, 26 Miraa, 4401, Orthodox Calendar*

*Sunday, 11 April 2014, Terran Standard Calendar*

*Brista, 26 Miraa, year 1327 of the 97<sup>th</sup> Generation, Karinne  
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Medical Annex Headquarters (The Red Tower), Karsa, Karis*

Jason kicked his feet absently, just wanting to get out of here. Then, once he did, he was going to whack Aya with something long and unyielding several times.

She was such a damn mother hen. First she grounds him, now she drags him to the infirmary, and it was quite literally *dragging*, for she'd taken hold of the collar of his breastplate where it would usually connect to his helmet and flexible neck collar and physically hauled him out of the White House, over his very vocal and vociferous objections. He honestly saw absolutely no reason to bother Songa over something as simple as a stress headache, but Aya had decided that since it hadn't faded since this morning, it was time for Songa to check him over. Honestly, with all the pressure on him, how could she *not* expect him to have a headache most of the time?

At least he had fun before the headache started. Sheleese had wanted to get her hands on him for a *long* time, and last night she finally got the opportunity...and *damn*. She was easily as perverse as Kumi, but Sheleese being Sheleese, she was almost eternally playful, seeing the night as just another opportunity to have fun...just in more than one way. He'd left her house this morning a little exhausted, but he couldn't deny that he enjoyed it.

That was the fun part of the day. Everything else, well that wasn't so much fun. Dahnai and the others had finally received word that Jason intended to redeploy the majority of his forces to take it to the Consortium

rather than keep them local, and they weren't very happy with him at all about it. They all saw the Karinnes as the archangels that could swoop in and save them if they got in over their heads, since KMS ships were so nasty. They wanted Jason to keep his fleets here, in this sector, to continue prosecuting the war against the forces occupying the Alliance. He was still going to help with that, but even after spending over an hour trying to beat it into their heads that the entire war was about the Consortium reaching Karis, and that they were building all the equipment they needed to do that *somewhere else*, then the single-most important thing that Jason could do was take the fight to where the main threat was, and that was *not* in this sector. He had to stop them from building that FTL device, he had to stop them from building that, well, whatever that other thing was they were building, since the Kimdori hadn't found out what it was yet. He had no doubt that he and Dahnai were going to have another very brisk little talk about that after he finished up here. She was getting short-tempered because she missed Kellin and her kids, to the point where Jason was about to *make* Juma free up the ships to send them back home. Kellin was enjoying his unplanned visit to Karis, was as much a fixture on the strip as anyone else and was well liked by the others. But even though he was enjoying his time here, he wanted to go home as well.

He scratched at the bare skin of his left cheek, where his gestalt would usually be, a little annoyed. Songa had taken it and hadn't given it back yet. Not that he really needed it, since the commune network extended to the medical annex and he could keep in touch with everyone that way, but still, it was like Songa had taken his left hand off and hadn't put it back on yet. He'd become so accustomed to the features the gestalt offered that he felt decidedly less than whole when it wasn't there.

*Just be patient, your Grace,* Aya sent soothingly. His six month physical had been coming due, so Songa had gone ahead and knocked that out while he was here, which was the usual sitting still while scanners exposed every molecule of him to the viewing pleasure of Songa and Haeri, his primary care doctors. Songa was his personal physician, and Jason was her *only* patient since she was the head of the Karinne Medical Service and had other duties, but Haeri was an expert on human physiology, those tiny differences between Faey and Terrans, so she was also considered his primary care

physician. It was with Haeri that Songa would consult if she wanted a second opinion.

*This is all your fault, Aya, he accused. When this over, it'll be my turn to spank you.*

*As long as you don't use your gauntlet, she replied cheekily.*

*I swear, I think you're channeling the spirit of my mother.*

*I'm just doing what you won't do for yourself, look out for you, she answered shamelessly. It's the duty of the guard to protect your person, but it's also our duty to keep you well and whole. These headaches have been persistent and are lasting longer and longer, and I'm starting to get worried. So here you are, getting checked out to make sure they're just from stress. Whether you like it or not.*

*Bully.*

*When it comes to your health and well-being, I'm the biggest bully in the galaxy, she sent, nonplussed.*

He snorted shortly, then leaned back on his hands and went over the rest of the day's schedule. They were working on a few new ideas over at 3D, so he needed to go over and put his nose in a little bit. Luke had been working on that meson cannon idea along with Gerann, developing a heavy mount version for use on cruisers or larger, and they had a promising prototype that just *destroyed* the metals the Consortium used without posing much danger to other metals. They were tuning the device to specifically attack the alloys their enemies employed in the superstructure of their ships, which would let them fire it right through a squadron of Wolf fighters and do no damage, but then hit the Consortium cruiser and melt its superstructure, which would play hell with the equipment that used that superstructure as an anchor to hold still and do its job. A smaller version that was already perfected was being altered by Leamon that could fire while cloaked by a CMS, and while he hadn't gotten it yet, he was very close to cracking it. If a gravometric engine suddenly found itself loose in its anchors, it could rip free and do some serious damage before it yanked free of its power feeds. They were also playing with a new idea that Jenny dreamed up, a much larger version of the "magnifying glass and ants" thing, a focal lens they could put between a planet and a star, keep it stealthed with CMS, then use

its focal system to turn the star's light and solar wind into what amounted to a death ray, a concentrated laser-like beam that would be able to melt Vanidrium. Jenny called it a Stellar Amplifier, and her idea had some promise. The focal beam wouldn't exceed the speed of light, so if they were used in naval combat, they had to be employed relatively close so the beams didn't have to travel too far and thus possibly miss their targets. But to attack a planet killer on a planet's surface, well, the lens could be deployed much further away and then used, since a planet wasn't going to undertake evasive maneuvers. Sensors would detect the beam coming, but if the lens was deployed, say, 10 light seconds from its target, well, that wasn't enough time to do much about it.

The lenses were almost criminally simple and fit right into the philosophy of the Legion and 3D; devices and technology that maximized available resources, doing more with less. The amount of power to create that kind of power in a weapon would limit its effectiveness, make it much more sophisticated and harder to build, and reduce its ability to hide from sensors, so Jenny simply created something that used energy *already there*. The lens didn't use much power so it was much easier to hide, and then just gathered up the energy a star emitted and focused it into a powerful coherent solar radiation beam, an amalgamation of light waves, photons, solar particles, and cosmic rays. The array itself looked like a telescope without the tube, just a series of three lens-like rings that focused the energy that was pulled in by the collector, which worked like a ramjet. It sucked in solar energy in a *huge* volume behind it, that energy was focused and made coherent by the two focusing rings, and then a nasty blast of solar energy was unleashed from the other end. Most of the energy the device used came from its collection effect; the energy required to focus the solar energy was actually fairly minimal. The whole thing could run on a Class 7 PPG, which was serious bang for the buck given the thing generated a beam strong enough to pretty much well destroy what it hit, so long as the target wasn't made of Neutronium armor.

The liabilities thus far were that it had a limited range, limited targeting capability, and the amplifier could be stopped by shields and most heavy armors. The weapon's beam diffused to where it lost its coherence at a range of 12 light seconds, so it had to be within 3.6 million kilometers, or about 3.9 million *kathra*, but every light second of distance it had to travel

reduced the power of the beam. At maximum range, the beam had enough energy to penetrate an atmosphere and set fire to a building, but not much else. But at close range, the beam was *nasty*. Anything within 2 light seconds generated a beam that could melt about anything but Neutronium and had enough punch to go through the Consortium's standard shields. That made it pretty attractive, at least until one looked at the targeting limitations. The beam couldn't be shifted much from the alignment of the amplifier, and the amplifier itself had to maintain a variance of no more than 1.276 degrees from perpendicular to the oncoming solar radiation. Any angle higher than that dramatically reduced the amplifier's ability to gather and focus solar energy. So, the amplifier had a very narrow field of fire, it had to be deployed to where it more or less was directly between its target and the star that supplied it with its power, and it had to be relatively close to be used in naval combat, which further reduced the device's effectiveness in naval combat. But, again, if it was set up to, say, fire on a planet killer, it could be put far enough away that it wasn't detected until it was used, and the beam would get there before the Consortium could do anything about it. They either didn't have the ability to build planetary shields or hadn't bothered to do so yet, so they didn't have to worry about a planetary shield intercepting the beam.

The idea had some potential, and Jason wanted to go down and help Jenny tinker with it a little bit. If he could just get out of this damn hospital.

Songa finally returned, and he sighed in relief, sitting back up. *It's about damn time, woman*, he told her, giving her a playful smile. *So give me back my armor and let me out of here.*

*Jason...we need to talk*, she sent seriously.

The playful smile on his face faded, however, when he sensed her trepidation as much as saw her eyes. She was dead serious. He leaned forward on the exam table, putting his elbows on his knees, and gave her a more sober look. *Alright, love, what's going on?* he asked.

She blinked, and he could see she didn't want to say it, but she was the doctor. It was her job. "Jason," she said, then she took a deep breath and calmed down enough to speak. "The headaches aren't stress. It's a medical condition."

“And?”

“What’s happening is the ganglia between your neurons are literally burning out,” she told him, trying to stay professional. “We’re trying to track down the exact mechanics of it, but even if we do, it’s irreversible.”

“Irreversible? Hold on, you’re saying I have brain damage?”

“Yes, love,” she said with a sigh. “It’s very minor, at least so far. Thankfully, we caught it before it became severe enough to cause you permanent damage.”

“How did I get brain damage?” he asked, a bit shocked.

“This,” she said, holding up his gestalt.

He gave her a stunned look.

“I know,” she said, then she frowned slightly. “But tracking the age of the damage we found in your brain, it started the day the Consortium attacked Karis. As near as I can guess, love, when you joined to Cybi, it injured your brain. And every time you use a gestalt, it’s been aggravating it, to the point where now the gestalts are literally burning your brain out, one neuron at a time. So, love, you can’t use the gestalts anymore. Not even once. Every time you do, they injure you more, and the damage is extensive enough that any further injury is going to start causing you long-term, permanent problems.” She leaned back. “This is my fault, Jason,” she declared. “I should have caught this much sooner. I should have given you a type three physical the day after you joined to Cybi to ensure it didn’t hurt you, but you showed no symptoms at all, and everything was so crazy,” she sighed. “But we know about it now, so we can work around it.”

He leaned back on his hands, startled to speechlessness. All this time, the gestalts had been *hurting* him? He’d never felt a thing! Nothing ever felt unusual or out of sync! He almost couldn’t believe it, but Songa was the doctor here, and she wouldn’t lie to him. He started to say something, then he gasped. “Rann! He’s been using the tactical gestalt in the basement!”

“I don’t think the gestalts are hurting him, Jason, but I am going to give him an exam, today,” she said. “The only reason they’re hurting you is, to put it in a metaphor, you sprained your ankle the day you fought back the

Consortium, and you've been walking around on it all this time without knowing it was injured. Well, you finally tore a ligament."

He nodded, understanding her meaning. "So, the kids, and Rahne, are in no danger?"

She shook her head. "But, none of them should join to Cybi the way you did until I give them extensive physicals to ensure it won't do to them what it did to you."

"Alright," he said, digesting it. "You're the doc, doc. What do I need to do?"

"Stay away from the gestalts," she told him immediately and intensely. "They're what's causing the damage, and so long as you don't use them, you won't suffer any further injury. The headaches should ease now that you're not wearing a gestalt, because your damage reached a point where it was causing you pain every time it damaged you more. I think Myleena could design you an interface that would give you *some* of the functionality of a gestalt without it damaging you, me and her will have to get together and talk about it. Some aspects of how your power as a Generation works won't do you harm, love. You can still communicate with the biogenic systems. You just can't let them augment your power. *That* is what was injuring you. Every time a gestalt boosted your power, it hurt you."

"My other talent?"

"It's just fine to use," she told him. "Just don't let the gestalts boost it, or you'll do more damage."

"And this is more or less permanent?"

"Yes," she said simply. "This is a permanent injury, love. I can't reverse or repair the damage that's already been done, but with proper care and treatment, we can ensure you never suffer any symptoms and suffer no additional damage. I'll do some research and run some tests to see if we can heal you of the problem causing the damage and let you use gestalts again, but the damage they've already done to you is permanent. Thank Trelle the damage isn't serious, but it was *about* to be. It got extensive enough to start causing you pain. Another two weeks, and it would have started affecting you in other ways." She pointed at Aya. "You'd better kiss that woman for

dragging you down here, Jason. She saved you from losing cognizant or motor control function due to brain damage.”

Aya gave him an “I told you so” look.

“So, I want you to go home and deactivate that tactical gestalt in your basement, to isolate you from potential further damage,” she ordered. “And you will *not* wear that boosted armor of yours home. You have to go back to regular armor. Now, I want Rann here *now*,” she ordered. “I want to make absolutely sure he’s not suffering any problems. And I also want your other kids and Rahne right behind him. I’d better call in some more staff, I want this finished today,” she said, mainly to herself. “Hmm,” she mused, looking at him.

“A theory?” he asked curiously.

“I think it’s the fact that you’re human,” she told him. “I checked the Karinne medical archives, and this kind of injury to a Generation doesn’t show up anywhere in the medical histories. I think that it’s the fact that you’re human that caused it. You’re not *exactly* the same as a Faey. You’re very, very close, but not absolutely the same, and obviously, the gestalts and biogenics were designed around a Faey’s brain. I think those very minor differences in your neural pathways was what caused this. I want to check over the children, see if their neural pathways are like yours, or like their mothers’. That should give me some more information to make a prognosis.”

“Feel free to throw all the weight around you need to, hon,” he said seriously. “I want to be sure my children aren’t being injured by the gestalts.”

“You being part human and part Faey seems to amplify your regular talent...hmm,” she mused again. “Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe you’re just too strong for your own good. And when Cybi joined to you, augmented your power exponentially, it was more than your brain could handle. You *are* the documented most powerful male telepath in the Imperium, love,” she smiled at him. “It might have just been too much for your brain to handle.” She slapped her knees with her palms. “So, you’re free to go home, love. I’ll have Rann and the others called to the annex so I



can give them a thorough exam, and I'll have more information for you once I have some more data and run some tests, okay?"

"If it's alright with you, I'll hang around while you run the tests," he said.

"That's fine. I'm sure Aya will have either your old armor or some clothes brought over."

*I'll have his old armor sent over immediately,* she nodded.

Jason stood up, stepped over to Aya, then quite deliberately kissed her full on the lips. She was a bit startled but gave him a wolfish smile when he backed off. "But you're still a bully," he declared, which made her laugh soundlessly.

He felt both a little worried and a whole lot of relieved. He sat back and basically observed when Rann was called out of class to come to the annex, and Songa immediately got to work. The idea that he had *real* brain damage was a little frightening, even more so because he never felt anything wrong. The headaches, yes, but he didn't attribute those to the gestalts injuring him. He was surprised that he didn't *feel* that something was wrong. But, Songa said that the damage he'd suffered wasn't going to cause him any problems, so that in itself was one tremendous relief. This was something he could easily work around. He'd bend heads with Myleena over a worktable and come up with an interface that would do everything except boost his power. Already, a few ideas came to mind about how to go about it, mainly just tinkering with the existing gestalts, putting in an inhibitor system and some software that deactivated its boosting ability, yet was still there and able to activate if he had a real crisis and absolutely had to have that boost...like his life was in danger. He'd trade a little brain damage for continuing to breathe any day. He was fairly certain that Jyslin would freak at first, but then calm down when she found out that the damage was cosmetic, as it were, and he was in no danger.

In all, he felt like he dodged a bullet. Aya, nosy, pushy, bully Aya, had really saved his butt. He owed her. He *seriously* owed her.

Miaari, on the other hand, sniffed at the idea of it when she came over to find out what was going on. "Permanent? Posh," she snorted when Jason told her about it. "There's no such thing as *permanent* injury."

“Maybe for the Kimdori,” Songa said, a bit tartly, as she affixed a sensor net to Rahne’s red-haired head. “Unlike you, we can’t simply rebuild our brains at a cellular level.”

“Bah. I’ll call my son, Kereth. I’m sure he has some knowledge that might fix this problem.”

“Who’s that?” Rahne asked, slapping Songa’s hand testily as she attached another sensor lead to her temple.

“My son is the Elder repository of all knowledge medical,” Miaari answered, wagging her tail a bit. “If there is some medical treatment that can be enacted to reverse the damage to Jason, he will know of it.”

“Well, I’ll take all the help I can get,” Jason said. “I’m kinda needed.”

“How so?” Songa asked.

“Nobody can join to Cybi as well as I can,” he said simply. “The other Generations can’t come anywhere close to what I can do when I’m joined to her. Me and Cybi, we just *gel*, hon. We’re far more compatible than the other Generations. Myleena’s probably the next best, but she’s barely half as strong as I am, and that burns her up,” he chuckled.

“Faey competition,” Miaari sighed accusingly.

“Anyway, if the chips are put on the table, our best bet is for *me* to be sitting in that chair,” he declared. “If the Kimdori can find some way to fix this little problem I have, then I’m all for it.”

“Perhaps you manage to outstrip Myleena because she can sense where the line is and won’t cross it, where you will. And now you’re injured,” Songa noted.

“That’s possible,” he acceded with a nod. “But this is like football. I’m the first-string linebacker, so just tape up my sprained ankle and get me back on the field. I’ll worry about the limp after the game.”

“I will summon Kereth immediately,” Miaari declared, swishing her way out of the exam room.

“Well, let’s see what Miaari’s son comes up with before I make any judgments,” Songa said. “Hold still, silly woman.”

“Och, *you* wear these cold things!” Rahne protested, squirming a bit in the exam chair.

“They’d better be cold, I just took them out of the freezer,” she grinned.

“I hate doctors,” Rahne growled, then she squeaked when Songa pinched her forearm.

*Don’t say that when the doctor’s right in front of you,* Songa teased. *Now hold still and don’t send, let the scanner do its work.*

*You don’t look hurt to me,* Rann sent seriously as Aya hefted him up onto the exam table beside his father.

*I should be alright,* he answered. *They caught it early, and if Miaari’s right, they might be able to help fix it.*

*I hope Miss Cybi’s okay,* Rann mused. *She might be sad to know that she accidentally hurt you.*

Jason blinked. Now that he thought of it, Cybi had been eerily silent since he reached the annex. *[Cybi?]* he communed privately, using the communal network Cybi had more or less demanded they install throughout the city.

*[Rann is ever observant,]* came the reluctant, meek reply.

*[Oh, don’t be silly,]* he chided. *[How could I possibly blame you? It was just a big accident, we know about it now, no harm was done, and things are going to be fine. So no blaming yourself, and absolutely no moping. I forbid it. That’s a direct order as your Grand Duke.]*

There was a startled silence. *[That is highly unfair, commanding me as my Grand Duke,]* she accused.

*[I’m fairly well known to be an outrageous cheater, woman,]* he replied dryly. *[Cheating gets results.]*

*[I am sorely tempted to show you where my programmed loyalty ends,]* she retorted.

He laughed aloud, which drew a few curious looks, but then the others just shrugged and went back to what they were doing. It was fairly clear he

was sending privately to someone. *[Someday I'll take you up on that, but not today. Now manifest and ensure Rann you're not mad at yourself.]*

She obeyed him, one of the floating cameras that tended to follow Jason and Rann around so Cybi could see them without using the planet's surveillance system projecting that familiar pseudo-nude hologram of Cybi into the room, this one complete with feet; sometimes she projected a hologram that ended around the knees, since the hologram just floated in the air anyway. She bent over and put her hands on Rann's shoulders, then touched her forehead to his, communing privately with him. He gave her a beaming smile when she pulled away, patting her seemingly solid forearm. "Actually, since you're here, Cybi, I think I'd like to run a few tests from your side of things," Songa announced as she watched a readout. "Get some readings of what goes on when you're joined to a Generation, maybe that data will help us pinpoint exactly what happened to Jason."

*"That is a logical idea. I need not join to a Generation to give it to you, Doctor. I have logs of that data, of every joining I have made since the Karinnes returned, so that you have multiple subjects to study. I'll make it available to you immediately."*

Songa nodded. "I'll look it over as soon as I finish with this," she declared. "Well, no damage anywhere in that fidgety head of yours, Rahne," she announced. "Just a minute more so I can get a complete neural map, and you're done."

"Och, thank God!" she exclaimed.

"Now remember, *any* headaches or unexplained pain, you come straight to the annex. And while you're just fine to use gestalts, don't join to Cybi until I have more information, until I'm sure it won't hurt you. I don't want *another* recalcitrant patient."

"I'm not recalcitrant, I'm just intractable," Jason teased.

"More like incorrigible," she retorted, giving him a wink. "It's a good thing Aya keeps you in line."

"Pfft, she rules me in her own mind," he replied flippantly, which earned him a swat on the back of the head. Aya even had the presence of mind to take her gauntlet off before she smacked him. "Ow! Hey! No touching the Ducal person!"

*With all due respect, push off, your Grace,* she declared bluntly, which made them all laugh.

Hara marched in, looking a little groggy, a full visor on her face to protect her sensitive eyes from the daytime light. She was carrying a box holding his old armor. *Here it is, Captain,* she announced, holding it up. *Sorry it took so long. It was put in storage, I had to track it down.*

*Just in time,* Aya declared, then she grabbed Jason by his ear. He squeaked in pain when she pulled him off the exam table, and Rann just couldn't control his giggling as Aya led Jason over to the far side of the exam room. *Now you're going to put your armor on, your Grace. If you're a good little boy, I'll make sure Ayama gives you a dessert with dinner tonight,* Aya teased.

*Woman, you just got on my list!* Jason declared, grabbing Aya's strong forearm with both hands. *You've seen what I do to people on that list!*

*I'll worry about it when you're all grown up, boy,* she replied, which made Songa splutter and then burst out laughing.

Jyslin took the whole thing a lot better than he expected, but then again, he had the feeling that Songa or Haeri had already called Jyslin and told her everything. The first thing she did when she got home was give him a crushing hug. *I'm so glad you're okay!* she sent sincerely.

*Just fine,* he assured her, then he sat her down and told her everything... which she probably already knew. He assured her that the damage was minimal, and now that they knew it was there, that he was going to be alright. *Songa said that with treatment, I'll suffer no adverse effects. Miaari even thinks that Kimdori medical knowledge might be able to reverse some of the damage. They'll make sure I'm just fine.*

*You better be,* she warned with a smile. *If you die on me, I'll kill you!*

*I'll hold you to that,* he grinned. *The even better news is that Rann is perfectly healthy. The tactical gestalts aren't affecting him in any way, so he's perfectly safe to keep using them. I'll have to sit down and design a new interface that doesn't augment my power, but aside from that, things just keep moving forward.*

*Well, things will just stop if you're not well, she declared, kissing him passionately. You are more than my husband, my love. You're the sun my entire world revolves around.*

*Oooh, well, in that case, I think I need a few more kisses or my fires are going to burn out, and your world will be left in perpetual darkness.*

*Let me stoke those for you, she said with an impish grin, wrapping her arms around him and giving him another kiss.*

The design of his new interface really wasn't all that difficult.

He and Myleena sat down with Songa, Jyslin, and Gerann, and they spent the morning designing and building him a new interface. The end result was an interface that had all the capabilities of a typical Generation gestalt except for one, and that was the ability to augment his power. However, that function was still built into the interface, which would allow him in a moment of crisis to risk injury to himself to use his boosted power. It was locked behind both a software and a hardware firewall, requiring him to physically push a button on the back of the interface and enable the augmented mode via communal command.

After that, Songa went back to her work on his problem, Gerann and Myleena returned to work at 3D, Jyslin went back to Kosigi to continue her current project, and Jason went to the White House to tackle his in-box. That was primarily getting briefs on the plans the KMS were making to invade the PR sector. They'd already chosen their target system, PR-371 instead of PR-227, a binary star system consisting of a blue giant and a yellow sun-like star on the edge of the PR sector that had three planets in its system, two gas giants and a terrestrial planet. They'd changed targets because the Kimdori felt that PR-227 was too close to the Consortium's sensor networks to risk, where PR-371 was on the very edge of the PR sector. That terrestrial planet was their target, because it was 2.1 standard gravity and 2.3 standard air pressure but had an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere and a tropical climate...and was in fact a lush jungle planet that some might call a Gaia. Besides the obvious farming opportunities, the planet's conditions were tolerable to humans and Faey with some conditioning and preparation but were downright lethal to the Consortium's

insectoids. Their bases there would have large-scale inducers to take the edge off that gravity, but outside the need to pressurize to the over doubled air pressure compared to the norm, they could survive on that planet without any equipment. PR-371 was going to be their fortress in enemy territory, and 3D was already hard at work devising some defenses for the planet while the Kimdori completed their sweeps and reconnaissance. As soon as they gave him the final report, they were going to move. Juma already had an invasion plan and they had a site picked out, a large island near the equator whose southern peninsula was primarily grassland rather than thick jungle. The atmosphere there had very high oxygen content, so fires weren't uncommon. A fire sparked by a thunderstorm had burned off the entire forest on the south side of that island, so it gave them a good place to set up without having to level thick jungle.

The plan wasn't a conventional war in the PR sector, the plan was to use PR-371 as a base of operations to do whatever it took to sabotage, destroy, or disrupt the Consortium's construction efforts on everything they were doing, both what they knew they were doing and what they didn't. The entire goal of this war for the Karinnes was to prevent the Consortium from reaching Karis, and it was about damn time they started doing just that.

As far as the rest of the war went, that was right on schedule. Faroll was completely secure now, and there was a Stargate there allowing the Confederate forces to pile in. Ba'mra'ei was hard at work getting the Alliance back into a semblance of order, and all production in Kosigi and around the allied nations was on schedule. There were four more interdictors coming off the production line today, and all four were going to quickly be put to use. The War Room was already preparing to retake the rest of Alliance space, except for Trieste, since the Consortium still had a huge fleet sitting there protecting the system. Zaa was scheduled to have a briefing with him in about an hour, bringing more information about what was going on over in the PR sector, and there was a daily briefing of the allied powers in three hours. That gave him time to plow through his considerable in-box, often with Chirk and Brall standing behind his desk explaining things, elaborating, or advising him. He'd found both of them to have good common sense, and often the edicts coming out of his office were their decisions with his blessing.

Miaari wandered in about halfway through, since she was usually there when he had his briefings with Zaa. She sat and idly played with the end of her tail, her face clear she was lost in thought, no doubt pondering her own pile of work, or maybe her pregnancy. Miaari was actually a very busy girl, since she was the one responsible for the security of Karis. That was a full-time job now that so many others were here, all the workers up in Kosigi, the construction crews on the northern continent building factories. A few minutes later, Siyhaa scurried in, having to duck to get her head and horns under the doorframe. Moridons were a very tall species, and most of the doors in the White House weren't built with her eight-foot body in mind; more like nine feet if one counted the horns. "Mahja," Jason nodded. "What brings you to my door?"

"I came to see if you are well, your Grace," she answered, holding out a small box. "Custom among my people is to come to call when a family member or one's work superiors are fallen ill and bring a small token of favor to bring cheer to them."

"So, I guess the rumors hit the general public," he grunted. "I'm fine, Mahja, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"That is good to hear," she said in something as close to emotion one would ever get out of a Moridon. She put the little black wooden box on his desk.

"Have a seat, Mahja, we may as well go over some of the reports while you and Miaari are in the same room."

The two glanced at each other, Siyhaa with suspicion, Miaari with light amusement, then she took the other chair. Jason finished up what he was doing, sending it out with Brall for him to kick some shins and get things going, then he, Siyhaa, and Miaari discussed the Moridon's attempts to further break the Consortium's computer languages and codes, continuing her work with new Consortium computers to inspect, and one of them quite a prize. They'd captured a Consortium flagship in the battle at Ravarra, Jenny and Sevi doing a damn fine job of using nanites to disable the enemy ship and then kill the vast majority of the crew. Marines had boarded the ship and captured it, and they'd towed it back to Kosigi the next day. It had taken a hell of a lot of doing to get that behemoth into Kosigi, and Siyhaa's was just one department that had been elbows deep in that ship, all but



taking it apart to further study Consortium technology. The nanites had disabled the computer core without destroying it, so Siyhhaa had been doing some very detailed analysis of the enemy computer as well as further cracking their computer language and algorithms. After they finished the capital ship, they had battleships to inspect they'd captured at Faroll, not all of which had come back to Kosigi. The Alliance, Imperium, and the Skaa had claimed ships to inspect and disassemble to study, and Jason had permitted it. He seriously doubted they'd find more than his own scientists would, but to *not* give them those ships might cause some friction. She gave him a very detailed report of her progress, which so far had revolved completely around breaking the encryption and protections of the computer to get at its data without alerting it that it was under active attack. The computer would self-destruct if it knew it was under attack, so their efforts so far had been delicate and methodical.

The warning light on his desk blinked, warning him silently that Zaa was calling. "I hate to interrupt, Mahja, but I'm being called to conference," he said. "Would you mind continuing the report at three?"

"I will be at your disposal, your Grace," she nodded, her horns dipping. "Might I call you from my office? I have much work to do in Kosigi, and even a half hour's journey here is hard."

"Of course, I don't mind. Thank you."

After Siyhhaa ducked under the door, Chirk put the office into secure mode and then withdrew to the outer office. A hologram of Zaa appeared behind Miaari, a tall, regal representation of the Kindori Denmother. "It is good to see you well, Jason," she noted.

"Songa assures me it's nothing that we can't work around," he replied.

"Be that as it may, Kereth has researched the matter using the data Songa has collected, and is on his way to Karis as we speak. He will assess the situation and advise a course of treatment, if one is known to him."

"I won't put my nose up at it," Jason said simply. "Alright, what news do you have for me?"

"Good news," she replied. "The system you had us scout seems to be of no interest to the Consortium or their allies in that sector. They have no sensor posts within twelve light years. We should be able to set up a sensor

masking station, and once it is up and running, bring in an interdictor and begin the occupation of the system. The KMS is aware about the conditions?”

“Juma knows. I’m sure she’s already made plans to get the soldiers ready to deal with it. Many of the KMS are ex-mercs, and mercs are used to dealing with different gravity and pressure.”

“Truly,” she nodded.

“How are the CMS equipped ships working?”

“Perfectly,” she replied. “The enemy is totally unaware of our infiltrators and scout ships as they move through their sector, literally right under their muzzles. We still cannot approach too closely to their most heavily guarded systems due to the passive mass sensors, but we can get close enough to get a four-day old image of their activities. They don’t scramble light leaving their systems,” she said with a sniff of disapproval. “However, I now have six CMS-equipped hyperspace probes en route as we speak. We had some issues making the CMS function while a probe was in a locked position. The hyperspace interference is stronger when an object is trying to hold position and not drop into normal space. We had to make some modifications. Once those probes are in position, we will see what they are doing in their highest-security systems in real time.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason said.

“I will be on Karis in fourteen days, so that I might take Miaari’s infants back to homeworld,” she declared.

“That soon?” he asked, looking at Miaari.

“I told you three weeks, Jason,” she replied with a smile. “It’s already been a week since then.”

“You don’t even look pregnant.”

“And I will not,” she replied. “I am carrying three cubs,” she added in a tender voice, putting her clawed hand on her stomach gently. “When they are born, they will about the size of a Terran cucumber, but not quite as long,” she grinned. “Much as the marsupial mammals of your world, my cubs will be tiny and helpless.”

“I don’t see a pouch anywhere,” he noted, looking her up and down.

Zaa chuckled. “The female does not carry around the cubs, she nestles them in a burrow. I have a nice burrow prepared for them. They will be sensitive to light, and as we used to burrow in dark dens before we evolved, I have a warm, dark place ready for them when I bring them home.”

The command center called him on his intercom, Jae’s face appearing on a small monitor that raised up. Jae was one of the day duty officers, and was almost criminally cute, with her thigh-long, side-parted black hair, hair that drove Faey men absolutely wild. Jae was an extremely popular girl with the men. “A Kimdori single passenger shuttle just dropped out of hyperspace, your Grace,” she informed him. “The pilot says you’re expecting him yourself, but we haven’t got any updates on inbound traffic.”

“Kereth,” Jason nodded. “Have him land at the medical annex. That’s where he needs to be.”

“Certainly, your Grace. I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Good girl.”

She gave him a smile, then her face vanished from the monitor. “Well, Kereth’s here,” he told Zaa.

“Right on time,” she noted, glancing away from the camera. “I guess I may as well wander over there, I know he’s gonna call me any time now.”

“Most likely. You *are* the reason he is there,” Zaa agreed. “I will let you attend this serious matter, Jason. Miaari.”

“Yes, my Denmother?”

“Attend him. I am sure you would like to greet your son.”

“Of course, Denmother. I was planning to see him after his work was done.”

“Alright, let’s get this circus on the road,” he chuckled. *Aya, I need to go to the medical annex*, he sent.

*I’ll have the corvette land immediately.*

So, Jason boarded the *Lion* with Miaari, Aya, Shen, and Suri, and they were in the air for all of 26 seconds as the corvette lifted off from the White

House and then landed at the medical annex, sovereign Medical Service territory. That was why the smaller clinics and hospitals were called thus, but the major hospitals where the service had major administrative offices were always called *annexes*, because that was exactly what they were. When he landed on the pad at the annex, he was standing on territory he didn't control. This was the domain of Songa, commander of the Karis prefecture of the Imperial Medical Service, and she ruled it as surely as Jason ruled the rest of Karis. Two red-trimmed officers of the Medical Service greeted them at the pad, Crusader armor in white and red, the crest of the Medical Service emblazoned upon their chests. These two were doctors for sure, but their armor denoted them as combat medics, those brave doctors that served on military vessels or embedded with ground units to provide medical care to the wounded, often in the middle of a battle. They were some of the bravest Faey around, and just about every Faey alive would defend them with selfless ferocity. Faey treated doctors almost like royalty. "Your Grace, a Kimdori has arrived and is in consultation with Commander Songa," the rather tall male said, a handsome man of middle years and with dark red hair, speaking aloud for Miaari's benefit. "They were about to call you to an appointment."

"I know, just beating them to the punch," he chuckled. "Here comes another two hours being stuck with needles."

"How else can we learn what's going on if we don't stick needles in you?" the woman asked with light eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, be glad you're standing on annex territory or I'd show you a few needles. Take me inside," he grunted, which made her laugh and Miaari grin at him as they followed along behind the doctors.

Kereth was just as big and shaggy as he remembered, a hulking Kimdori with dark fur that was a tad shaggy. He was sitting with Songa at a terminal when Jason came into her office, a terminal she often used to consult with other doctors, so it had three seats in front of it. "Your Grace," Kereth nodded to him.

"Long time, Kereth, how are you?" he asked.

"I've been well. Mother. Congratulations on your success."

“Thank you, my son,” Miaari smiled. “Have you had the chance to study the data?”

“I have, Mother. There is a viable treatment, but it carries some small risk,” he replied. “We are researching to determine that risk.”

“What kind of treatment?”

“You are a Generation, your Grace, so you have some of us inside you,” Kereth told him. “Because of that, a Kimdori healing stem virus could repair the damage to your neurons. The virus would enter your brain, locate the damaged areas, and then transform into replacement ganglia and take their proper places. This would regenerate your damaged brain tissue and restore you to perfect health. It would also immunize you against further damage, since those particular neurons would be capable of producing new stem viruses if properly stimulated.”

“A stem virus? What’s that?”

“Similar to stem cells in humans and Faey,” Kereth answered. “They are what you might call blank slate viruses, common in a Kimdori’s body. They are the fundamental building block of our ability to heal and shapeshift. When we shapeshift, some of our viral cells take on specific duties and functions, but some do not. They are capable of assuming any of the various viral types that perform specific duties. It’s the viral stem cell that allows us to change our shapes. Our bodies don’t produce specific viral cells, they only produce stem cells, which then go where they are needed and assume a role. The same cells also react to injury by rushing to the injured site and transforming into cells to replace those damaged. With a little gene therapy, we could adapt Kimdori stem viruses to your physiology and program them to seek out and repair your injured neurons.”

“Oh, okay. I get it. So, a Kimdori’s stem viruses can heal me?”

“Not in their natural state,” Kereth replied. “But a virus stamped with the specific DNA of your neurons should. That would cause them to seek out only your injured neurons and seek to replace them.”

“And this risk you were talking about?”

“The virus tries to rewrite the DNA in every cell in your body to match itself,” he replied. “Obviously, this would be fatal, which is why we’ll need

a specific counter virus ready to stop that should it happen.”

“Alright, that’s a risk,” he replied with a chuckle. “Alright, let’s get the needles over with,” he said grimly.

Kereth smiled at him. “I’m not quite ready for the needles, your Grace. But you can relax a while and wait, so you’re available when we get to that point. It should only be about ten minutes.”

“Take him to my exam room, Arai,” Songa ordered. “He can wait there.”

“Yes, Commander,” the woman nodded.

Jason went back to Songa’s exam room, where he’d been not too long ago, and he and Miaari sat calmly and waited. He did get some work done as he waited about half an hour, going through the reports they were sending to his interface at regular intervals, and he saw that the *Aegis* had completed its shakedown cruise to actively test the refit in real conditions and was put back on the board, returned to active service...thank *God*. With the *Aegis* back in service, they could get Kellin and the kids back home, because the *Aegis* needed no task force to satisfy Aya. That monster could take them home safely by itself. Jason accessed some cameras to look at it and saw that the refit hadn’t changed its appearance at all. The GRAF cannon was in a bay near the bow of the ship, part of the major structural modifications, which was concealed behind gunport doors. When the cannon was to be used, the doors would open, and the cannon would fire from its heavy mounts. The cannon had no tracking; the ship had to move to aim the cannon, but that was relatively easy. Despite its huge size, the ship could actually turn fairly quickly, and besides, the weapon wasn’t really meant for short range.

*Aya, the Aegis is back on the board. Think that’s enough to get Kellin and the kids back home?*

*I’ll allow it, as long as it has a squadron for escort,* she replied with a nod. *I can’t think of anything that could threaten it.*

*Alright. Myri,* he reached out.

*Yeah, Jayce?*

*Get the Aegis prepped along with a tactical squadron escort to take Kellin and the kids back to Draconis as soon as it gets back into orbit, he told her. Aya gave consent for it to take them home.*

*Sure thing. I'll contact Kellin and tell him to pack, and we'll have him and the kids on the way home in about two hours. That alright?*

*Just fine. Call Dahnai and tell her we're finally sending her family home.*

*She'll be overjoyed, Myri noted lightly. And be glad you put that on the board before Juma got her hands on it. She has plans for the Aegis.*

*She always does, Jason noted dryly.*

Kereth, Songa, and Haeri arrived about ten minutes later, and Kereth gave him a thorough exam as the two Faey watched. It took about an hour, as Kereth spent long minutes at a time studying a brain activity readout, then gave him a very long and detailed scan to see the interior of his brain, a much higher resolution scan than Songa had taken, right down to finding every single damaged neuron. After it was done, he expected someone to stick a needle in him just to keep in practice, but Kereth waved him out of the chair they used for the scans. "You may go home now, your Grace," he said. "I have the data I need. May I come visit later, Mother?"

"Of course, my son. It's been a long time since we sat together and talked of affairs."

"I'm looking forward to it," he said with a gentle smile. "As soon as I have news for you, your Grace, I'll contact you. But it will be tomorrow before I have anything."

"Just in time for me to get home and have the twins chase me down," he noted, then chuckled. "They were on the calendar for yesterday, but with me getting this news, we missed the appointment."

"Eh?" Kereth asked as Songa giggled.

"It's an inside joke, Kereth. I'm sure Miaari will explain it to you when you visit tonight."

"And who got bumped tonight?"

“Nobody. Some joker put Temika’s name down for today, and you know *that’s* not happening.” He stood up. “Tomorrow’s basically open too. Myleena put her name there.”

“That’s not a joke,” Songa told him, suddenly serious.

“What do you mean?”

“Last takir, she had me isolate her most fertile window. Tomorrow is her best day.”

“She—that *bitch*! She was serious!” he declared. “She really meant it!”

“Of course she did,” Songa said mildly. “You’re her best friend, Jason. It was fairly rude of her to not give you the chance to sire her first child. Nobody really blamed her, we all know how you two feel about each other, but still, it was rude.”

“Okay, that’s just fuckin’ creepy,” he said, shivering a bit. It wasn’t that Myleena wasn’t attractive or desirable, but she was *Myleena*. His best friend outside of *amu*, the one woman that had never once flirted with him, at least by Faey standards.

“I’m sure you’ll get over it, Jason,” Songa smiled. “After all, close your eyes, and all girls are the same, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, yeah, bite me, Songa,” he retorted, which made her laugh.

Aya, Shen, and Suri took him home, and he kept up with work as he waited for Rann to get home from school. Juma was almost done with her plans to invade and set up in the PR sector, and Jason was looking over her timeline, finding it efficient. It wouldn’t be a large military base, it would be a launch point for attacks through the PR sector meant to cripple or destroy Consortium construction efforts, mainly through toys and clandestine attacks. But there had to be some defense there, which would be about 200 KMS and Kimdori ships. There were currently no plans to put a Stargate out there, but the idea was being floated around. A Stargate there would be risky, for if the Consortium somehow attacked, they wouldn’t have anything there big enough to tow the gate out. They’d have to destroy it, and that was just a *little* too expensive to consider. Stargates were dreadfully expensive and not easy to build, so the idea of putting one where it might have to be destroyed didn’t sit well with just about anybody. Myri



called and told him that Dahnai wanted to hold off Kellin's return until 1600 local time, so she'd be done with court and would have proper time to welcome him home. That worked for Kellin too, since he and the kids were over on Virga, touring the Kizzik hive there by invitation of the Hive Leader. He called Jyslin to tell her about it, then worked through his inbox from home to pass the time, until Rann and Dera came in downstairs. His son rushed into his office and jumped in his lap with Amber in his arms, hugging him with his free hand. *I can't believe you're actually home*, he teased a little.

*I've had a pretty chaotic day, pips*, he replied with an audible chuckle. *How was school?*

*Boring.*

*Well, go ahead and take your armor off, and separate your stuff from Shya's. She's going home today.*

*Awww! Can't she stay longer?*

*She's been here too long already, she may forget she has a home*, Jason chuckled. *And her mother misses her, so show a little consideration for Dahnai. Besides, you two are going to spend your entire lives together once Shya turns fifteen, so it's not like you're being separated for life.*

*I wish I was fifteen already*, he sulked as he slid down.

*You're older than Shya, that wouldn't do you any good*, Jason sent cheekily. *She's the one that has to be fifteen. You just wasted your wish, silly!*

*Stop being mean, Daddy!*

*But I'm so good at it*, he protested, which made Dera laugh soundlessly.

Jyslin got home about ten minutes before Kellin returned with the kids, and Jason helped Shya pack, rather unwillingly, as she constantly tried to talk Jason into letting her stay. He was kind of used to this by now. Shya and Rann had an almost disturbingly deep connection, and they *hated* being separated. It was almost as if they'd already pair-bonded, because there was certainly *something* there. Rann proved how much he objected to the idea of being separated by trying to go over Jason's head, and talk Jyslin into letting him go to Draconis while Jason stopped to attend the daily leader

briefing, which lasted about 45 minutes. Thankfully, Aya played the bully there, absolutely forbidding Rann from leaving Karis. *If your father can't leave Karis, then the heir to the Ducal throne cannot leave Karis*, she stated flatly when Rann tried to wheedle Jyslin into letting him go to Draconis. *You are just as important as your father, Rann. I will take absolutely no chances with your safety.*

*But, but, it's the palace! I'll be safe there!* he protested.

*What you'll face in the palace is an entirely different kind of danger*, she drawled mentally, which made Jason chuckle. *And it's my duty to protect you from that as much as physical danger.*

Jason did have a little sit-down talk with Shya about twenty minutes before their corvette was scheduled to arrive. *Alright, little lady*, he sent evenly. *Let's have our usual talk.*

*What?* she asked.

*You know what I'm talking about*, he replied. *I know you've heard a lot more than you should have while you were here.*

Shya blushed a little.

*Good, at least you had the sense not to deny it*, he sent dryly. *Now, you know what I'm about to say, don't you?*

*Keep my mouth shut*, she replied immediately. *That I'll be a Karinne someday, and I have to keep the family secrets, even from my own mother. And if I say a word, you'll make sure I don't see Rann again until I'm fifteen.*

*I'm glad you have such a good memory*, he told her, poking her lightly on her upper chest. *So, remember, pippy, a secret unspoken remains a secret. And as a listener, it's your job to keep a lot of secrets.*

*I'll remember*, she promised.

*That's my girl. I love you, Shya, and I'm depending on you. Now give me a hug.*

She smiled at him and let him pull her up into an embrace. *I love you too, Daddy Jason*, she replied, kissing him on the cheek.

*Well now, don't let Kellin hear you call me that, or he might get jealous,* Jason chuckled aloud, patting her on the back.

*You'll be my daddy when I'm fifteen,* she reasoned.

*Be that as it may, let Kellin enjoy the time he gets to hear you call him father,* he replied, patting her on the bottom. *Now go make sure you have everything packed. You'll be leaving in just a little bit.*

*Okay,* she agreed as he let her down. She rushed from his den on her little legs, hurrying to more or less hog as much time with Rann as possible before she had to leave more than make sure she was packed.

They got Kellin and the kids out onto the pier just as the corvette appeared, slowly descending to make a water landing far enough away to not splash them and then come up to the pier. Usually they'd have the kids in armor for the return trip, but since they'd be on the *Aegis*, Aya deigned to allow them to travel in regular clothes... Terran tee shirts and jeans, and Sirri's *Blood Nugget* tee shirt would no doubt send court into a tizzy to see the Crown Princess wearing a black shirt depicting a skull weeping tears of blood. Maer and Sirri looked both excited to go home and a little unhappy to leave, since being on Karis was like a vacation for them. Kellin, on the other hand, looked all kinds of ready to go home and see Dahnai. Jyslin and Symone gave Kellin a fond hug when they got there, then they kissed their way through the kids as the corvette neared the dock. *Now you guys call every day,* Jyslin ordered as she hugged both Maer and Sirri. *I'm going to miss you!*

*We'll miss you too, Auntie Jyslin,* Maer replied seriously, kissing her on the cheek.

*Sorry we couldn't have more fun, Kellin,* Symone sent naughtily as she hugged him, then patted him on the butt, which made him laugh.

*It's alright, I understand. Dahnai went through the same thing with Shya, and no doubt she'll go through it again with the twins.*

*When she gets like that, just come on back, we should be over it,* Symone invited. *In fact, I think I'm just about there. A couple more days, and I'll be back to chasing my men around the house,* she declared, giving Jason a sly smile.

*I'm sure they won't mind getting caught, Symone,* Kellin laughed.

*At least after all the wounds heal,* Jason noted, which made Jyslin giggle.

They almost had to pry Rann and Shya apart, then they waved as the hatch closed. They watched the corvette take off, and Jason sighed. *I loved having them here, but I'm also happy to see them go home,* he noted. *It's less work for Aya and the guards, if anything.*

Aya snorted. *We can handle it. Kellin and the Empress' children are much easier to handle than you.*

*I don't take orders easily,* he winked at her.

*I've noticed,* Aya replied blandly, which made Jason chuckle, step over, and pat Aya on the cheek.

*Now that I won't embarrass you in front of the visitors, it's time to go back to giving you gray hair.*

*You'd better not,* she warned. *I can add a whole lot more chores to that list.*

*I'm the Grand Duke. It's called delegating authority,* he replied flippantly, which made Symone and Jyslin laugh.

*I'm gonna miss Shya,* Rann sighed as the corvette dwindled out of sight.

*Well, I think a visit to the boardwalk to cheer up my sulking pippy is in order,* Jyslin declared, putting her hand on his hand and patting him gently. *Go get your armor on, baby, and we'll go.*

*Okay!* he sent excitedly, running towards the house.

*Well, that's one way to distract him. Bribery,* Jason noted, which made Jyslin smile slyly.

They enjoyed a good few hours at the boardwalk, watching Rann ride the rides, playing games, eating junk food, and Jason got home just in time to get corralled by Lyn and Bryn. They intercepted him just before he made it into the house then turned him right around, which made him laugh. *Can I at least go in and take my armor off?*

*No, they replied in unison. You won't need the armor, and you won't need clothes either, for what we have in mind.*

Jason chuckled. *Well, lead on, then.*

Twins were the same, but not all sets of twins were.

He'd shared a bed with Meya and Myra, and it was nowhere the same as Lyn and Bryn. For one, the trouble twins were much more mischievous and a little competitive and combative with each other, but Lyn and Bryn almost shared the same brain. They were very gracious of each other, much less intense, and much more laid back.

They didn't just drag him back to their house and throw him in bed, though. He had a nice dinner with the twins and their children, then, much as with Zora and Sora, he ended up spending time with them almost like a father, though he wasn't the father of the twins' children. They enjoyed a little time on the beach, enjoying the warm sunset, then they had a bath to wash off the salt water. After that, though, the kids went to bed, and the twins lured him into their bedroom. They even shared a bedroom, and while they didn't sleep in the same bed, both of them had king size beds, since when one twin brought home a man, both twins indulged in him.

And he couldn't deny that he didn't have a blast. Any time a man got two women in bed it was erotic, and the fact they were twins just jacked that up. But Lyn and Bryn were unique in that they telepathically shared everything they were feeling with each other at all times, so while he was having sex with Lyn, Bryn felt absolutely everything, linked to her sister that way. Meya and Myra wouldn't do that, but then again, Meya and Myra weren't as interconnected as Lyn and Bryn were. They shared a unique form of telepathic pair-bond that only twins could really cultivate. If they ever got married, their husbands would more or less have to understand that they weren't marrying just one of them, they were marrying *both* of them. The other twin was part of the deal, a deal most men wouldn't mind all that much. But, while they were so interconnected, they were still very much individuals, in bed as well as out of it. Lyn liked to do certain things, Bryn liked to do certain things. Still, for a guy, it was pretty wild, and Jason had maybe a little *too* much fun.

They made sure to keep him all the way up to dawn, when the sunlight streamed in through their bay window and hit him right in the face. He was on his back, and he had a twin cuddled up to each side of him, Bryn's arm thrown over Lyn's side. That had been something of a shock. Lyn and Bryn weren't afraid to touch each other. They didn't have sex with each other, but there was a familiarity between them that went way past most sibling relationships. Jason saw that it was more like an extension of self: what one twin would do on her own, she wasn't afraid to do to her sister. Lyn had no qualms about touching her own body, so she had no qualms about touching Bryn's, and vice versa. It was just another demonstration to Jason how a telepathic pair-bond could invade a relationship and alter it and fundamental levels. Symone and Jyslin had imprinted and entered into a sexual relationship despite having no bisexual tendencies beforehand, due to the bond they had with Jason, and the sibling bond between Lyn and Bryn allowed them to go a little further than what was considered moral in human society, but not all the way into the realm of incest, since neither Lyn nor Bryn had any interest at all in other women. It had surprised him a little when Bryn and groped Lyn's breasts and crotch while she made love to him, literally sticking her hand in their business, but after thinking it through after they stopped to rest a bit, it made a lot more sense to him. Bryn would touch herself there any time she pleased, so she thought absolutely nothing of doing it to her sister, and vice versa.

He used the biogenic network to check the time and found that it was only 0748, just a bit past dawn. His first appointment of the day wasn't until 1040, so he had plenty of time. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, causing the twins to stir, then he put an arm around each of them. *Morning*, he called.

*Morning*, they answered in unison. *So, did we put Meya and Myra to shame?* Lyn asked.

Jason laughed. *So competitive*, he teased.

*That was a skillfully dodged question, your Grace*, Bryn replied lightly.

*Yes, it was, wasn't it?* he replied flippantly, then he gasped a bit when they both slapped him on the stomach, just to each side of his navel. *Uh oh, I feel an interrogation coming on*, he predicted, which made them laugh.

*You're damn right you are, Lyn warned. Who's the best twins on the strip?* she demanded.

*You think I'm gonna answer anything other than you two with me being outflanked and outnumbered?* he asked, grinning at Lyn.

*Well, he's not dumb,* Bryn noted dryly, which made him laugh.

*I hope you enjoyed last night as much as I did,* he told them.

*Oh, it was everything we'd heard,* Bryn grinned at him when he looked at her. *And you're not getting out of answering the question.*

He laughed helplessly. *Alright, alright. Lyn, Bryn, you are the most awesomest twins in Karsa.*

*Ha! Eat that, Meya and Myra!* Lyn called loudly and openly. *Jason just admitted we rocked him way better than you two did!*

*Is that so?* Myra called in challenge. *And pray tell, are you two holding him down right now?*

Bryn burst out laughing, and Lyn just gave him a sly little smile. *Maybe a little bit, but we still got him to say it!*

*Under duress,* Jason added, which turned into a little broadcast of pain and a whoosh of his breath when Bryn slapped him on the stomach again. *See? They tortured me into saying it!*

*That won't save you from making you admit we're way better than them,* Meya replied teasingly. *War has been declared, and the Zoyanne sisters never back down!*

*I'm not a football, ya know,* Jason protested, which made both Lyn and Bryn giggle a little.

*Yeah, I know. When I stick a football between my legs, nothing fun happens at all,* Myra replied, which made Jason laugh ruefully.

*You two are terrible,* he told them, to which they just grinned at him. *Now, since I woke up so early, I think it's time to reassess that opinion I just gave,* sending with erotic undercurrents that they couldn't possibly miss, rolling on his side towards Lyn. *Clearly, I need to do some more research before reaching a scientifically sound conclusion.*

*I love science*, Lyn purred as she let him roll her over on her back, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him seriously.

The twins were more than willing to let him have a little fun with them, then he let them cook breakfast for him as he took a shower. He had no clothes, so he just wore a towel down rather than scratch up their dining room chairs with his armor. Uven, Riza, and Miza were already down and eating, getting ready to go to their school, and he kissed his way down the line before taking an empty chair. *You're running late, pippies*, he noted, looking at the clock.

*That's your fault for keeping our moms from cooking breakfast*, Uven replied seriously.

He chuckled. *Sorry. We were having fun.*

*Well, that's alright then*, Miza noted.

*How are you liking the school?*

*It's a little weird*, Riza answered. *I liked being at Aunt Maya's more, but it's okay, I guess.*

*Just give it a chance, you might like it*, Jason told them, reaching over and tousling Riza's blond hair. *You get to do more things at school than you could at Aunt Maya's.*

*Yeah, but Aunt Maya never made us do this at this time, then that at that time*, Uven answered.

*Welcome to the rest of your life, Uven*, Jason laughed. *All adults are ruled by the clock. Even me. Me more than just about anyone else, if you wanna be serious about it.*

"But, you're the Grand Duke," Miza protested. "Nobody tells you what to do!"

"Pippy, *everyone* tells me what to do," he answered her aloud, with a slight smile. "My job is to make life better for everyone in the house. How could I do that if I don't listen to what they need? What they need tells me what I have to do, and I do it. So, in a way, I do what everyone else tells me to do. There's also the meetings with other houses and the Empress and



other people in other nations so we can make deals and buy and sell things, but that's not as important as keeping the people in the house happy."

"Oh. Ohhhh, I get it!" Riza said, nodding.

"I'm glad you do," he smiled at her. *Now, where's that breakfast?*

*Keep your towel on, Jayce, it's almost ready,* Lyn replied coolly, which made Riza and Miza giggle.

He enjoyed breakfast with the twins and their kids, then he armored up and got back to work. He had appointments most of the morning and early afternoon, with the cabinet, with Dellin over some scheduling problems up in Kosigi, with Myri and the upper brass, and then the daily briefing with the leaders. That was where the day started going downhill. "Lorna said she tried to procure a KMS squadron on the attack on Emdarao, but your commanders said there aren't any available," Dahnai asked right off the bat.

"That's right," he replied, putting up a picture of the construction going on over at the PR sector. "Remember when the Kimdori briefed you about this project? We can't let that go unchallenged, Empress. If they finish that machine, they can breach the interdictors. All KMS forces are off the board for Confederate action while we deal with this threat. Once we destroy what they've built and take out their construction yards, KMS ships will be put back on the board."

"That sounds like a matter for the entire Confederation," Assaba noted.

"It would, if they weren't building this machine over in the PR sector, all the way across the galaxy," he replied evenly. "Only KMS and Kimdori ships can get over there, so it's up to us to deal with it."

"I have already assigned a portion of the Kimdori Defense Forces to the upcoming operation," Zaa announced. "The Grand Duke is correct. Remember, all of you, that the primary focus of the enemy at this time is to capture Karis. If they complete that device, it will give them that capability, so it must be destroyed before they can accomplish their task."

"Myri assures me that Confederate fleets can retake the rest of Alliance space with little trouble, except for Trieste," Jason added. "They won't let that system go, either to keep a foothold over here or because they're doing something in the Trieste system they can't afford to have interrupted."

“But we need KMS ships in the attack fleet,” Vizzie protested. “They form the core command of an attack!”

“They’ll have to do without my ships for a takir or so,” he said simply. “Don’t forget, Prime Minister, if the Consortium can build that machine and circumvent the interdictors, then *every* interdicted system is vulnerable, not just Karis. That includes Republic systems currently protected behind interdictors,” he said pointedly. “Do you want the fleet that wipes out Karis to pay a visit to interdicted Republic systems next, Vizzie?”

She gave him a fanged frown, her scales shifting.

“As soon as we get things set up, KMS ships will be back in the rotation,” he assured them. “I just need them for a while. Until then, the picketed defense ships will stay where they are, the supply lines will stay open, and everything else we do for the Confederation will keep happening. You’ll just have to work without my military vessels for about ten days, that’s all.”

“What do you intend to do?” Assaba asked.

“Take the war to them,” he said with a grim smile. “While we’ve been chasing our tails over here, they’ve been very busy over there. Well, I’m going to remind them that they’re not the only ones that can jump hyperspace in real time,” he said darkly.

“Then perhaps it is time for the Karinnes and the Kimdori to share the engine technology that permits jumping in real time,” Ba’mra’ei posed, to which several of them nodded.

“If you could actually use the technology, that might be a point of debate, High Staff,” Jason replied as Zaa gave him a cool, warning look. “Your power systems can’t handle the requirements.”

“Then that should be shared as well.”

“When I took this chair, I took an oath, High Staff,” he replied immediately and intensely, “that Karinne technology would never be used to allow one group to enforce their wills on another. Karinne technology will only be used to *protect*, not *make war*. We will never, ever, use our gifts or our technology to subvert another group to our cause, nor will we be instruments for another to make it come to pass. The simple truth of the

matter is that I can't *trust* anyone I'm looking at except for Zaa to take what I give you and use it peacefully. I'm not arming all of you and giving you the ability to fight more brutal wars. I'm not breaking one of the most sacred vows I've ever taken. I was willing to share Consortium technology because it's not part of my oath. But the technology of Karinne will *never* be given to another group, not even the Imperium. If I'm not willing to give it to my own Empress, I think you can be fairly sure I'm not giving it to the Alliance, the Empire, or the Republic either." He crossed his arms. "We will fight with you, we will even die to protect you, we will use our technology to protect our sector from invasion, but we will *never* share what we know until we are absolutely convinced that it will never be used by those who get it to make war on someone else. We will not help you kill each other more efficiently, but if you want us to help you develop some new technology to improve your farming efforts or reduce your mass transit power demands or help you build a new orbital station for trade, then we're at your service. That is what it means to be a Karinne, and I *am* a Karinne."

"And that's what I've been dealing with for six years now," Dahnai sighed, smiling ruefully at him. "He's got his hackles up, so I suggest we take a break," she added lightly. Zaa gave him a prideful look as he glared a bit at the other members of the council.

"A break would be in order," Ba'mra'ei said, giving Jason a hard look.

"*Yes, and also for more than just to calm down. Would you kindly make an appointment for us to confer, your Grace? I would like to talk to you about building the very orbital station you mentioned,*" Grran signed, his vocoder translating it into Faey. "*Homeworld needs a new station to help alleviate a bottleneck in our trade supply lines.*"

"Make an appointment with my secretary Chirk, Field Marshall, and we'll sit down with my secretary of infrastructure and Ayuma, dean of the Academy, and talk about it," he answered calmly and with a nod. "The Academy builds such things as school projects to train engineers in real world applications and problem solving. The Master Builders oversee the students and ensure that things are done to *their* specifications and requirements, so the work is as if the Master Builders had done it themselves. I'm sure the Academy would be happy to tackle that kind of project; we'll just need to hammer out the financing."

“Yes, the Academy helped us refit and upgrade one of our orbital stations at Uruma,” Sk’Vrae added. “They also built a radiation shield at Bellar that has made mining efforts there much, much easier. It was excellent work. They may be students, but they are students of the Master Builders of the Makati. That is saying something.”

*“I will make the appointment immediately,”* he signed.

“We’ll be happy to help,” Jason assured him. “Now, if everyone doesn’t mind, I’ll take a break.”

He knew that was eventually going to come, the day the Confederate Council just came out and said that the Karinnes should share their technology to further the war effort. That little speech hadn’t been rehearsed, but he’d had a lot of time to think about it. He knew there were going to be some hurt feelings over it. He’d just come out and said he couldn’t trust any of them, but at least he explained *why* he couldn’t. That would help, at least with more pragmatic rulers like Grran and Vizzie. Dahnai was used to it by now, but Assaba would probably take offense. He wasn’t a bad Skaa, Jason actually admired him, but he had his pride, and Jason had just stepped on his toes, so to speak. He ruled a vast empire, and he wasn’t used to being talked down to like that. But Jason wasn’t the typical ruler, either. The Karinnes had a line they would not cross, and Jason had just explained that line to them in stark terms.

The Karinnes would not become what they very nearly became, had the Third Civil War not destroyed them.

They never did return to conference, deciding to save it until tomorrow, so Jason plowed through his work at the office, then went over to 3D to check up on how all the projects were coming along. Myleena was there, overseeing the last touches on the gravity beam Jenny had invented, and she made sure to pull him into his office just before they were about to quit for the night. *[My house, twenty-two thirty,]* she told him curtly.

*[You know, this will be the creepiest thing we’ve ever done,]* he told her.

*[Songa blabbed, didn’t she?]*

*[Not on purpose,]* he replied artfully.

*[I was going to try to surprise you with it so you didn't have to think about it all day like I have]* she grunted audibly. *[And you're right, it's gonna feel...I dunno. Wrong. Well, not wrong, just strange. Like I'm having sex with my brother.]*

*[We can always not do it.]*

*[No. I need at least three more children by Generations, and I'm not going to be anything other than your best friend. I'd be the worst best friend ever if I didn't honor our relationship and give you the opportunity you should have had in the first place. That means that we might have to do something a little creepy. Besides, I bet if we had a daughter, she'd blow Kyri out of the water,]* she added with a competitive little smile. *[Anyway, once we get going, I'm sure biology will take over.]*

*[Well, that's one way to look at it,]* he chuckled.

*[I'm at the peak of my fertile phase, so don't think this is a one-night deal,]* she warned. *[Tonight and tomorrow a couple of times. I'm sure we can struggle through it.]*

*[If this is what you really want,]* he replied.

*[Yeah, it is what I want, Jayce,]* she answered with an honest look. *[I didn't decide to do this on a whim. Not that I want to wrap my legs around you—well, you are handsome, it's not that you're ugly or anything—but, you know.]*

*[I know exactly how you feel,]* he assured her.

*[I'm positive that I'm going to enjoy the result, though. A chance to have one of your children, and a child that I think will be special. But most of all, I'll love our baby because it'll be part of both of us, an expression of the friendship we have.]*

*[Then that's all I needed to hear. Should I bring blindfolds?]*

She laughed. *[No, I think we can pull this off without drugs or blindfolds,]* she answered. *[I just hope it doesn't change our relationship.]*

*[I haven't noticed any changes with the girls on the strip since I opened up, except they're maybe a little closer to me now. Besides, we're best friends. Best friends can weather anything.]*

She gave him a glorious smile. *[Fuckin' right we can.]*

He told Jyslin about it after he got home, relaxing in the jacuzzi after a stressful day as she kicked her feet in it, sitting on the edge. *I'm not all that surprised. She does love you as a friend, Jayce, and no girl could go wrong having a baby with you. Besides, you're an endangered species, you know,* she winked. *There's just you, Rahne, and your children. That's it. That's nowhere near enough. We fully expect you to try to have a couple dozen babies, since you're a man and Rahne's kinda limited since she has to grow them and push them out one at a time,* she winked.

*Ah yes, the pact. Fifteen children by 4410.*

*Yup, she nodded. We're well on our way, you know,* she winked. *Five already, two in here, and Yana's carrying number eight. So, seven to go, and we have nine years to get there. I'm not really counting Raisha, since she's Dahnai's daughter too. But if we do, that's six to go and nine years to try. Oh, what wonderful years those will be,* she sent, her thought tinged with desire, something he hadn't felt from her in a few weeks.

*Why Jyslin, you're getting horny,* he declared.

She gave him a look, then laughed brightly. *I am! Oh baby, I have plans for you now!*

*I have an appointment, remember? Myleena's fertile right now, it's not like she can reschedule this month. But I'm sure Tim would be willing to let you break his back.*

*Oh Trelle yes! Tim! Tim!* she called.

*What is it, love?*

*My room after dinner baby, I got my mood back! Jason's gonna be occupied, so bring your sexy bod up to my room and let me work out two takirs of frustration!*

He heard Tim laugh audibly in his house. *No sweat, baby. I'll just tell Min that she'll have to reschedule, because tonight you're mine. She's off tomorrow, I'll go over to her house and give her a proper apology before I go to work.*

*You act like you'll have the energy to crawl out of bed in the morning,* Jyslin replied naughtily. *Jason had to miss a day of work after I got my mood back last time. I took him to bed, and I left him there,* she winked at Jason.

*You wear me out that bad, and Miaari's gonna kick your ass,* Tim warned.

*I can deal with the furball,* she replied confidently.

Ayama fed him a fairly big meal, then sent him off with a word of encouragement; Ayama knew *everything* going on around the strip. He sat up in his room and pondered what was to come, at least until Tim and Jyslin came into the room, pawing each other and laughing, Tim trying to get Jyslin's panties off as she pulled urgently on his shirt. He finally managed to pull her panties off, leaving her nude from the waist down, then picked her up by two healthy handfuls of her voluptuous backside and swung her over the bed as she kissed his neck hungrily. She laughed when he dropped her on the bed, then started unbuttoning his jeans while she watched. *I'm gonna make you come so hard you won't be able to walk straight, baby,* Tim promised as he unzipped his jeans.

*Talk, talk, talk, I want to see some action!* she retorted, whipping her shirt off so fast she nearly tore it.

*I've got your action right here, bitch,* he answered playfully, pushing his jeans down. Jason could see that he had an erection.

*My, that's a pretty little dick, Tim,* she grinned up at him. *Sure you remember how to use it?*

*You're about to find out, aren't you?* he answered, kicking off his jeans and underwear and all but diving on top of her. She laughed as he wrestled with her a little, then her laugh turned into a coo and a sending of sexual pleasure when he mounted her. *I think I'm using it now, ain't I?*

*Ohhhh, baby, use it some more,* Jyslin purred.

Jason left after they really got into it, pretty sure that he wasn't going to have to worry about being able to perform. Jyslin was all kinds of wound up, and her pleasure was bleeding through their telepathic pair bond and forcing him to actively concentrate on *not* getting an erection.

He wandered over to Myleena's house maybe ten minutes early, coming in without knocking. [*Myli,*] he called.

[*Upstairs.*]

He went up to her room and stepped in, then stopped and leaned against the door and chuckled. "You know, I think you were supposed to wait for me to get here," he said as he watched her masturbate, and since her bed faced the door, he got a pretty detailed look at what she was doing.

"Just making sure we don't get friction burn, Jayce," she replied a little breathlessly, stopping, leaning up onto her elbows, and looking at him from between her spread legs. "If you can get it up, bring it over here while I'm wet and ready."

"That won't be a problem, Jys got her mood back. She's tearing Tim apart as we speak," he told her as he pulled off his shirt. "I'm picking up so much sexual charge off her a rock could get me hard if I looked at it the right way."

"Well, that makes me feel like a woman," she said, a bit tartly.

He laughed. "You know what I mean," he told her as he started on his jeans. "Besides, looking at you like that would do it anyway. Watching you frig yourself was pretty fucking hot."

She gave him a slight smile. "Well, get over here, goof, we don't have all night," she ordered, crooking a finger at him.

It turned out, he didn't need Jyslin's help to go through with it.

Once they started getting into it, both of them suddenly discovered that they were really enjoying what they were doing, and it made him really relax. They didn't have mechanical sex where the objective was to impregnate her, they had *real* sex. They kissed, touched, caressed, groped, did all the things couples do, and while the guy is virtually guaranteed to orgasm, he was both happy and relieved that he'd brought Myleena to orgasm as well. Touching Myleena while they were heavy into sex was a lot different than putting his hands on her in the bathtub, a world of difference, because in the bathtub, he wasn't concentrating on *feeling* what he had his



hands on. Myleena was a tall, voluptuous, thoroughly sexy woman, and he made sure she knew it by making her feel like a woman.

It was strange, how what he felt changed once he realized that not only was Myleena his best friend, but she was also an excellent lover. Once he realized that, he stopped thinking about her as *Myleena* and started thinking of her as a *woman*, and that got him going with earnest zeal. His enthusiasm got her to relax and enjoy it, and it wasn't long before neither of them had any trepidation whatsoever.

They had sex twice that night, resting and talking between sessions, as Jason rather amusedly told her what Jyslin and Tim were up to. Jyslin was showing no mercy to Tim, and she was pretty much well guaranteeing he was going to either be late or miss work the next morning. But it was still different than any other woman in that when he woke up, they weren't snuggled up together. She was on her side of the bed, he on his. He put his arms behind his head and pondered the night before and how he felt now and found that he really didn't feel any differently about Myleena at all. She was still his best friend, and while they'd had a lot of fun last night, he wasn't thinking about her the way he thought about his wife, or even Aura. It hadn't been as creepy as they thought it would be, but it was still something they wouldn't do without a reason. She woke up and looked at him, then chuckled and put her hands behind her head as well, both of them looking up at the ceiling. *[Alright, that was awesome,]* she admitted. *[The entire night was.]*

*[It certainly was,]* he agreed. *[And the best part? You're still my best friend, Myleena.]*

She gave a chuckle, reached over and patted him on the chest. *[Now remember, we're not done,]* she warned. *[Last night was more fun than I expected, but we're not doing this for fun, you know. Once or twice during the day today, come over again tonight, then I'll have Songa check and see what's going on tomorrow. We'll see if that track record of yours concerning knocking up us Faey girls holds true,]* she winked.

*[It'll be such a chore,]* he communed dryly. *[In fact, I think we can manage one of those right now.]*

*[They said you were fuckin' insatiable,]* she laughed.

*[My wife and amu are morning girls, Myli,] he replied lightly. [So daybreak gets me in the mood.]*

*[Well, I think I can get wet without having to jack off this time,] she communed crudely as she scooted over, rolled up on top of him, then leaned down and kissed him.*

He proved to her again he was capable of having sex with his best friend, a lesson she enjoyed immensely, then they took a shower together and went downstairs. Danelle padded down sleepily as Myleena started breakfast, which she cooked while naked and damp from the shower. *[Morning kidlet,] Jason called to her. [Sleep well?]*

*[Yeah. How did it go?]*

*[Well, let's say that there's a very good chance you'll have a baby brother or sister very soon,] Myleena replied with an audible chuckle. [I'm making anda, baby girl.]*

*[Yay! Is it ready yet?]*

*[No, it's not ready yet. Go up and get your armor on, and it should be ready when you get back.]*

*[Okay!]*

Jason watched Myleena cook and realized that things had changed a little. She was still Myleena, his best friend, but where before he wouldn't pay much attention to what she was or wasn't wearing, now he was checking out her ass. Despite that little change, she was still Myleena, and she was still exactly what she'd been in his life before last night. Best friend, confidante, and all-around fixture in his life.

He ate breakfast with them and went back up to dress, and she pulled her armor out of the closet on its little motorized stand. *[What's on the plate for you today?] he asked.*

*[Mainly working up at Kosigi on the captured ships,] she replied. [I'll be down at thirteen hundred for lunch and sex, so don't forget.]*

He laughed. *[I'm sure Chirk will give me a long look when I tell her put that on the schedule.]*

*[I'm sure she's been around Faey enough to understand our quirks,] she grinned over her shoulder at him as she grabbed her codpiece. [Where do you want to do the deed?]*

*[I have a fourteen fifteen, so probably my office. I have a bed in the back room.]*

*[Works for me. Mind if me and Danny come over for dinner?]*

*[Please, we'd love to have you.]*

*[Great, I don't have to cook!]*

*[Always weaseling out of cooking,] he laughed.*

He didn't bother dressing, just collected his clothes and walked back to his house as Myleena took Danelle to school before heading up to Kosigi and got up to his room in time to see Tim and Jyslin wake up. Jyslin stretched and gave Jason a satisfied little smirk as Tim groaned and sat up. "Damn you, woman," he told her aloud, which made her burst into laughter.

*She warned you, Tim,* Jason noted as he sat on the edge of the bed.

*So, did you manage to carry through with Myli?* Tim asked.

*Multiple times,* Jyslin answered for him, giving him a wink. *She really got him horny.*

*It was like looking at her with new eyes, and then going right back to normal after it was over,* Jason said. *I'd seen her and touched her lots of times, but it was entirely different when I was having sex with her.*

*She's a really fun lay, really energetic and a touch kinky,* Tim noted. Tim would know, he'd been having sex with every woman on the strip except Temika for the last five years, and that included Myleena. *So, now that you've boned your best friend?*

*She's still my best friend,* he replied with a gentle smile. *And yeah, she's a fun lay. So, I'll tell Miaari you're going to be late for work.*

*I think you'd better,* he agreed, flopping back into bed as Jyslin laughed, then rolled up on her side against him, patting him on the chest. *This bitch almost ruptured my spleen.*

*Which is why I'm glad you had to deal with it this time instead of me,* he noted dryly, which made Jyslin grin at him and throw one of the pillows in his direction.

*Demir made men weaker than women, you know,* she teased. *I'm raring for more, but here you are, totally worn out like an expended PPG. I thought you were the strip's number one stud, Tim! You're a disappointment!*

*Bitch, you are so digging that grave,* he warned, grabbing her and rolling her over on her back. *I'm going to prove you wrong, right here, right now.*

*So, I'll tell Miaari you're calling in.*

*Yeah, that's a good idea,* he agreed as desire tinged his thought. *It's time to see who can't get up out of this bed when it's over. Now spread your legs, bitch, and get ready to take it.*

*Bring it on, baby,* she challenged playfully as she obeyed.

Jason let them have their fun as he armored up, then he went downstairs and nodded to Ayama. *Myli's coming over with Danny tonight for dinner, just to warn you.*

*Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when I decide what to cook.*

When he got to the White House, he first warned Myleena that Jyslin wouldn't be at work, then Miaari came into his office. "Where is Tim?" she asked. "He didn't show up for work."

"Jyslin has him, he won't be coming in today," he answered dryly. "She got her mood back, and since she can't really waylay me, she got her hooks into him."

Miaari laughed. "Ah, that explains it. Though I doubt that the desire to copulate is a reasonable excuse to miss work outside of the Imperium."

"Well, Faey women go into total overdrive when their frigid phase breaks, like a dam breaking. So yeah, it's more or less a viable excuse. She'll wear Tim out until she gets over it, then she'll be back to normal."

"How long will this take?" she asked.

“She should be over it by now, leaving Tim to try to figure out how his legs work,” he chuckled. “He fancies himself a stud that can make any woman beg for mercy, but he’s never dealt with a Faey woman coming out of her phase before. So, his pride is coming up against her raging hormones. He’s going to lose.”

Miaari laughed brightly. “That’s a fair description of my best analyst,” she agreed.

“I remember when it happened when she was pregnant with Rann. She was a beast. It was fun until she completely exhausted me and still wanted more. I had to take the next day off just to get over the exhaustion.”

“Poor baby.”

“Bad dog,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “How was your visit with Kereth?”

“Very good. We haven’t seen each other since sister Kiaari called him to Cheyenne Mountain. By the way, he told me that he’s close to beginning a treatment regimen for you. They are simply waiting now to culture the virus they need. Both of them, the treatment virus and the countervirus should something go wrong.”

“Sounds good. I wonder what that’ll be like.”

“Completely painless,” she told him. “Kereth told me that the virus should take about fifteen hours to repair your damaged neurons.”

“That’s it?”

“Kimdori viral stems work very fast, Jason,” she told him. “Think about how quickly we can shapeshift.”

“True,” he nodded.

“The viruses will gather at your damaged neurons, invade them, and regenerate them from the inside, as they are programmed to do, and do it quickly,” she finished. “Where your brain cells are unable to repair themselves, the stem viruses will do it for them.”

“Hmm, you know, that might have applications outside of just me.”

“No. Kereth said that the only reason it would work is because you are a Generation. Kimdori viral cells are too proactive and volatile when uncontrolled by a Kimdori to introduce into a species without Kimdori DNA, where your Kimdori DNA will protect you from the viruses attempting to destroy you from the inside out. They will not attack their own, and all types of various Kimdori viral cells see Generations as their own. That’s why you can sense us, why you can feel us share. Were you a human, the stem viruses would kill you, for they would go out of control and attack your brain, try to rewrite every brain cell to match the viral cells’ own DNA pattern. There is a risk of that happening even with you being a Generation, which is why they’re preparing countermeasures before the treatment. You are a little too important to risk, my friend,” she said with a toothy smile.

“I just love being so important,” he said dryly, which made her grin. “So, a Kimdori’s viral cells are lethal to other species?”

“Think about what they do, my friend,” she said simply. “That is how we metabolize organic matter, we have specialized ‘attack viruses’ that we release into organic matter which transform it into a viral biomass we can control, either absorb to increase our own mass or consume as food. Introduce some of the Kimdori’s viral attack cells into the host’s nervous system, and the viruses attack the host and kill within thirty minutes. The Faey call it Freka’s Disease, though they haven’t had a case of it in nearly four hundred years, since their medical technology became advanced enough to analyze the dead to figure out exactly what happened,” she noted with a slight, dangerous little smile. “We are the most virulent disease in the galaxy, my friend, should we so wish it,” she said lightly.

“Well, you’re certainly a cancer on me, woman,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “That’s a creepy thought.”

“What is?”

“Have you...have you ever metabolized someone else?”

“It’s an efficient means of disposing of a body you don’t want found, Jason,” she said simply. “How do you think our infiltrators in the Consortium replaced their targets without leaving evidence behind? They consumed them and took their shapes.”

He shuddered involuntarily, which made her chuckle. “Alright, that’s just damn creepy.”

“Creepy, yet effective,” she chuckled. “You’ve seen me absorb food before.”

“Never something alive and sentient though.”

“True. However, they die long before the process is complete.”

“Well, that’s a small favor, I reckon,” Jason noted.

The first appointment of the day was the daily briefing, and Jason slogged through it with a little cool distance from Ba’mra’ei and Assaba. Both of them were still stinging a bit from his proclamation the day before, he reasoned, but it also let him basically sit and listen and not be bothered. After that, he had a cabinet meeting, then he sat in with the general staff as they had a planning session. They were almost ready to begin what Juma had coined Operation Javelin, the invasion of PR-371 to set up a base of operations to attack Consortium interests in the PR sector. The Kimdori were already on board, and they were waiting for some final reconnaissance about the route their ships would take to PR-371, the Kimdori scouting out their planned hyperspace jump points where the crews would drop out and rest, searching for any dangers to their ships and placing SCM ships at those points to hide them from any Consortium long-range sensors. There was little they could do about the possible clairvoyant spying from the energy being, but it was only one being, and it was trying to watch over a *big* fucking galaxy. After that, Myleena arrived for lunch and other things, so they went down to the cafeteria and grabbed a bite to eat, then they retired to his private room off his office where he had a small bed and took care of their other business.

And again, it was the same “on switch” deal with him. Myleena went from Myleena to *woman* as soon as they started fooling around, and he not only gave her what she wanted, he managed to bring her to orgasm. Then, after it was over, the switch went off and things were right back to normal.

His 1415 was Field Marshall Grran, and he called in Ayuma and his Secretary of Infrastructure, a Makati female named Bunvar Koan, a certified Master Builder who had held her golden hammer for nearly twenty years. It had been a coup to get her, and her knowledge of engineering and

construction made her the most qualified infrastructure secretary in the galaxy. Her responsibilities were layered with other departments, like energy generation and logistics, but while the others made the schedules and planned the routes and wires, it was Bunvar's job to build the energy transmission lines, build the transports and commercial orbital stations, build the mass transit, buildings, and just about anything that dealt with house infrastructure. It was a fairly complicated system they used, but it worked, because it let the other departments worry about things like maintenance, staffing, planning, and monitoring and let Bunvar handle the construction, which was done absolutely to the specifications of the requesting department. The only infrastructure that Bunvar's department didn't build was CivNet interlinks, the biogenic network, and Teryon comm systems. They had specialists that handled those construction projects. Her other job was to monitor house infrastructure and look for weaknesses or problems and propose solutions to the controlling department. Bunvar was like the house's contractor to whom they took their plans and projects, and it was her job to coordinate the construction of those projects. For a house that was building up as rapidly as Karinne, having an infrastructure department was absolutely necessary.

To build an orbital station that would primarily be a cargo terminal, they needed Bunvar's input as well as Ayuma's ability to tell the Academy what to do. Jason basically just sat back and listened as Bunvar demanded a detailed description of what Grran wanted, how much cargo would pass through the station, possible other uses of the station such as having a section devoted to military ship docking and resupply, and so on and so on. Grran had to pull in one of his own government officials who had that information, and Bunvar listened as she rapped her little red fingers on the table. For a Makati, Bunvar was almost cute, but among her race, she was considered just on the homely side of plain. Makati favored strong, blocky features, where Bunvar had a more rounded face and smaller nose compared to other Makati females, though she had the sturdy, husky frame that Makati males found to be desirable. She also had longer, more prominent than normal horns sticking up out of her pulled-back white hair, pulled into a ponytail, which was seen as an attractive feature to Makati. Homely face, attractive body, nice horns, that's how males saw her. Despite her homely stature among her kind, she was married and had nine children,



four of them halfway through the ordeal to earn their Master Builder's hammer themselves.

After about two hours, Bunvar finally quoted a price, and Ayuma assured Grran that said station was well within the Academy's ability to build. Grran found the cost of the station a bit pricy, but he couldn't deny that had he not gone through the Academy, it would have cost twice as much to get a Makati engineering firm to build the station Makati were expensive, but they were, quite simply, the best. One paid for that perfection.

*"I believe I can arrange financing through the Moridon, since they're granting us loans at significantly reduced interest for the duration of the war,"* Grran's vocoder intoned as he signed. *"And this station will increase our trade profitability significantly."*

"Well then, Field Marshall, I'll have the Academy's planners draw up several station design proposals while you're dealing with the Moridon, and you can have your trade minister pick the one he finds most aesthetically pleasing," Ayuma replied.

*"We are Jobodi, Dean, aesthetics aren't all that important,"* Grran replied with a playful flick of his seven-fingered hands.

"You'd be surprised how much it matters when you have something built and you realize you think it looks ugly," she replied lightly. "But I'll make sure to have the planners study Jobodi architecture and stay within your cultural style when they draw up the proposals."

After the conference, Jason looked over the latest military reports. The *Aravalo* was on schedule for repairs, and a new heavy cruiser was in the final stages of construction and would be launched tomorrow for official christening and commission. They already had a captain for it, Farea Karinne, the captain of the cruiser *Imai*, named for an important figure out of Faey history, Imai Dovalle, the savior of the Reandis system during the war with the Urumi after the Third Civil War. Jason had already made time to be there for the commission ceremony, though he already knew that Farea intended to name her new ship *Hailaeri*, which was the name of a mythical sword once wielded by a Faey warrior that was both part of actual Faey history and also some of their oldest myths. Her name was Jarani

Horalle, and she was an Arthur-like figure, a warrior queen who unified the entire Draconian continent on Draconis some twelve thousand years ago and was the precursor to the eventual unification of the entire planet under single Imperial rule, which happened some six hundred years later by one of her descendants, Malai Horalle, the First Empress of what would eventually become the Imperium. That was the fact. The myth came around Hailaeri, a sword that was reputed to be unbreakable and sharp enough to cut through solid steel, Jarani's counterpart to Arthur's *Excalibur*.

That wasn't the only ship almost ready to come off the docks. One destroyer was also slated for completion tomorrow, and what was more important, the second tactical battleship was only one day behind them. And projected at two days behind that, moved up in the timeline because Dellin was shifting workers and resources to it, the first of the carriers was projected to be complete. Those carriers were going to be *huge*. With the smashing success of the Wolf fighter, a dedicated carrier ship could mean all the difference in a large scale battle, a ship that could launch absolute hordes of Wolves, against which the Consortium still had not managed to effectively counter.

Jason could almost envision a carrier task force, much akin to the way the American Navy used to do it. A carrier protected by dedicated attack ships, the other ships supplying the firepower while the carrier supplied the fighters, each ship performing its role. Myri and the generals weren't sold on the idea until they saw how powerful the Wolves were against the Consortium, then they couldn't get the carrier on the construction board fast enough. Building the carrier was much easier than other military ships because it lacked the heavy weapons and power requirements, but where it was easier to build in that respect, it was a little more complicated in another, and that was in building a ship to house so many people. The ship had to carry out its mission as well as being able to house, feed, and support the huge numbers of personnel required to run the carrier and carry out its mission, nearly as many people as there were on the *Aegis* in a ship a third the size. Ship officers, fighter pilots, fighter maintenance crews, technicians, cooks, and so on and so on, it took a lot of people to man and operate a carrier, so it took a lot more design and construction to build a ship to house them all and still allow the carrier to perform its task. They'd cut over a month off the projected construction time by shifting assets to get

the first carrier completed and into service, because everyone could see just how fucking important it was going to be when the fat hit the fire and the Consortium finally decided to come after them in great numbers. Their vulnerability to Wolf fighters, and fighters in general, was something they had to exploit like there was no tomorrow.

He perused the officer charts, and saw that they had people moving up, as usual, focusing on the names he knew best. Koye was moving from the *Veriven* to take over the *Imai*, promoting up to the next ship class, and a human officer named Danielle Childers was taking over on the *Veriven*. The two new destroyer captains had already been chosen, the Urumi officer Hr'Kass and Toiri Karinne, wife to the Generation male Foran. Jaiya was being moved to the new carrier on its completion, and Yura was being promoted up to replace her on the *Trelle's Gift*. Jeya was moving up from the *Defiant* to command the *Temeron*, which was normal for the *Defiant's* captain to replace a heavy ship class captain when a position came open, and she'd been awarded that position before Jarani was given the new ship. Drae was moving from the *Demir's Sword* to the *Defiant*, and probably wouldn't be there long since there were more big ships slated for completion within the next two weeks. Joni was moving up from the destroyers to command the *Demir's Sword*. The second tactical battleship still had an open slot, meaning that Myri and Juma were probably fighting over who got the chair. Most likely, Pemai Foralle from the heavy cruiser *Jefferson* would get the chair, they wouldn't give a ship like that to someone that didn't already have experience commanding at least a heavy cruiser. If they did that, then they'd have two heavy ship slots open, so their next best cruiser captain would move up...which would probably be Drae and Ravai Karinne, captain of the cruiser *Shaivi*. Her scores were only slightly better than the other cruiser captains. If that was so, Hora had the next best scores and would probably move up from the *Devenne* to take over the *Shaivi*. The 16<sup>th</sup> of the tactical cruiser class ships was also soon to be off the line, in about 6 days, which had the interim designation *Warlord* and still had an open chair.

The *Defiant* would probably lose its status as the gateway ship up to the big ships with the tactical cruisers coming into service in viable numbers now, since they were larger and more advanced than standard cruisers...but the *Defiant* would always be special to him. It was the first of the cruisers,

the first of the big Karinne ships, and there wasn't a single person in the KMS that didn't see serving on the *Defiant* as one of the greatest privileges in the Navy. After the war, he was of a mind to put the *Defiant* in orbit as a floating museum of sorts and leave it commissioned, like the *U.S.S. Constitution* had been, a ship that would eternally be ready for action but wouldn't see another battle, but would let civilians take a tour of an operational KMS warship. That seemed a decent thing to do for his favorite ship.

The KMS. He remembered when they only had three ships. With the latest ships coming off the drydock, the KMS was up to 317 vessels; one command ship with one more in production and nearly complete, the first carrier nearly complete with four more in production, four battleships with 26 more in production (Cybi had altered the battleship plans slightly, which delayed producing more battleships), soon to be two tactical battleships with 18 more in production, 8 heavy cruisers with five in production, 16 tactical cruisers with 13 in production, 76 cruisers with 33 in production, and 210 destroyers with 67 in production, and the rest of his drydocks were in a "build another drydock" cycle. The army had 72 corvettes with 30 more in production (they could build 6 corvettes at a time in a standard drydock), commanding a huge force of 7,250 Wolf fighters and 15,012 Gladiators, along with nearly 90,000 infantry and various smaller support units like logistics transports and armored personnel jumper dropships. They'd had to scramble to get Karinne volunteers trained to man those ships, since they'd had such a huge influx of new soldiers since the war began. And virtually all of those ships had been built since the war started. Kosigi could now produce a destroyer in 9 days due to the sheer number of workers they had available; the addition of the Kirgan Kizzik had dramatically increased production, and that was added to Dellin's wise decision to focus all early construction on drydocks so they could build ships. They gave up 12 days of ship production for the ability to produce up to 167 ships of various classes at a time...and those were just KMS drydock facilities. The INS had 300 docks, many brought from their other shipyards, the CSS had 252 docks in operation, again brought from other shipyards, and the Kimdori had 193 which they'd built themselves. And Kosigi was only at 6% operational capacity. The honest truth was, they could build *thousands* of ships at a time within the hollow moon if they had the docks and facilities built to do so. And Dellin was working diligently to reach that

capacity. He had a new project underway that had a shipbuilding crew build a drydock after finishing a ship, which they could do in about five days. Drydocks weren't all that complicated to build.

The KMS was a viable military force now, a powerful force against which *nobody* in the sector would want to battle. And every day, more and more ships came off the line. Usually a ship a day came off the line, at least a KMS ship, but the reality was there was a new ship coming out of Kosigi to be parked in the staging area literally every hour, be it Kimdori, Faey, or Collective, with a constant stream of dropships ferrying new crews out to take them over. Everyone was building up and building up fast, but the idea that the House Karinne was employing such a huge fleet—huge to him anyway—and getting bigger by the day was a strange feeling.

Ships. He looked up the status of the second capital ship, being built over at Kimdori Prime. They too had accelerated production, and accelerated production *vastly*. They'd originally had a year to go on the thing, but when the war started, they quadrupled the workers assigned to the ship, to get it built and out of their drydock so they could build their own ships if for no other reason. The ship, conditionally named the *Iyaneri* because that's what Haema said she'd name it, was 39 days from projected completion. It already had a GRAF cannon installed on it, and while it looked to be complete on the outside, inside they were still doing the last phases of the installation process. The superstructure was complete, they were now installing all the equipment the ship needed to operate. That let them get it out of their drydock, and the keel for a Kimdori command ship had already been laid

Jason almost found it silly how fast an officer could move up in the KMS...if only because they almost had more ships than they had qualified captains to command them, and more ships kept coming off the docks every day. It was a running joke with the top brass in the KMS that a ship captain shouldn't unpack her luggage when she took command, because she wouldn't be there long. They were almost at a critical shortage of Wolf pilots now, literally producing more than they had pilots to man them, but the Wolves were one of the critical keys to winning this war. So, the KMS was on a major recruiting drive, offering flight training to just about anyone who could pass the physical and screenings to pilot a Wolf fighter. And they were getting volunteers from *everywhere*. The newest class of hopefuls

weren't just humans and Faey. There were Shio, Alliance races, Colonists, and Skaa in with them, who had joined House Karinne and the KMS when the call went out for pilots. They were thoroughly investigated by the Kimdori and were screened for sincerity, but the house was more than happy to have them. Through diversity came strength, and the house would only get stronger with Shio, Bari-Bari, Jakkans, Shurai, Stevaki (the plural of Stevak), Beryans, Skaa, and Colonists joining the multi-racial House Karinne and adding their talents and strengths to the house. The Makati, Kizzik and Parri had proved in spades to Dahnai that an inclusive atmosphere that let each race do what they were good at was a working model for efficiency, and Jason wasn't going to stick his nose up at the intelligence and radiation immunity of the Jakkans, the blisteringly fast reflexes of the Shurai, the durability and strength of the Stevaki, the implacable determination of the Bari-Bari, the cunning of the Beryans, the charisma of the Shio, or the wisdom of the Colonists. They even had applicants from outside the sector. Two entire Moridon companies, some 83 Moridon, had officially applied for membership to the house because they could smell the opportunities to build successful computer companies in the highly advanced Karinne system, seeing how Mahja Siyhah's company had skyrocketed into prominence when Jason hired them to protect Karis from cyber-attacks and threats. To Jason's surprise, 223 Veruta had also applied, which were an empire from the next sector over, with which the Alliance had a treaty and relationship. Veruta looked somewhat like the Parri in that they were a feline race, but they were fully bipedal and had highly evolved four-fingered hands and plantigrade feet...just tipped with wicked claws. They all had green fur with black stripes, natural camouflage from their evolution in the jungles of their home planet and were reputed to be ferocious ground-based fighters and masters of guerilla warfare. All of them had both applied for house membership and also applied for entry into the Karinne Marines, wanting to help because they knew that the Consortium wouldn't keep the war in just the next sector over, something the Verutan Empire discouraged, trying to stay out of it. Jason could see the value in learning the Verutan methods of stealth and guerilla fighting. A tribe of 116 Jobodi had applied for membership offering their specialized extreme cold weather skills, and 12 Zyagya had as well, a mated pair, four grandparents, and their six cubs. The adults were farming specialists that wanted to work on Exile, of which Jason approved. They wanted to test Exile's climate in

raising Zyagyan plants for export back to their homeworld, and Exile had all kinds of room for such experiments.

The Shurai especially, an Alliance aviooid race that had the instincts of flight while having lost their wings to evolution, were panning out to be devastating fighter pilots. Not only did they have flight instincts, but they had ridiculously fast reflexes which made them agile as hell and hard as fuck to hit in a dogfight. They specialized in fighter combat in the Alliance, the backbone of the Alliance's Warhawk fighter squadrons, and now they were bringing their insane reflexes and natural aptitude for flying into the cockpits of Wolf fighters. The Shio as well were showing a curious aptitude for the Wolf fighter, mainly because they seemed to be extremely compatible with the interfaces, able to sync with them much more efficiently without any kind of training whatsoever, and in a Wolf, that natural sync translated to faster response times.

After working through the military reports, he moved on to the more mundane production reports, at least until Dera got his attention by poking him in the chest. *It's time to go home, your Grace*, she told him with a grin.

*Already? It's only like fifteen hundred.*

*It's fifteen fifty*, she replied. *You've been reading reports for a couple of hours now, and Lady Jyslin told us to make you come home if you were out of appointments.*

*Really? Wow*, he mused. *Time flies when you're doing stuff you hate.*

She gave him an impish smile. *I'm sure she'll entertain you*, she winked.

*I'm sure*, he drawled in reply.

It turned out that Jyslin was up at Kosigi when he got home, and Tim was sitting on a lounger by the hot tub. He hadn't bothered to put on any clothes, and Dera gave him an appreciative look when they arrived. *Hey. Can you walk?*

*Barely*, he replied. *I've never seen Jyslin like that before, even when she's raging horny.*

*Now you know what breaking phase is like for the man*, Dera told him teasingly.

*And think, you get round two when Symone gets over it, which shouldn't be long, Jason noted.*

*God, he grunted mentally in reply, tinged with reluctance, which made Dera giggle wheezingly.*

*Don't worry, Tim, you have lots of stamina, Dera sent lightly. And you'd better find some quick, because I demand a full twenty-five credit's worth out of you.*

*Oh, you bought tonight?* Jason asked.

She nodded with a grin.

*You realize you may not get him. I still owe Myli one more night, and Jys won't want to be alone.*

*Then I get him tomorrow, she shrugged. And that gives him one more day to recover. We just move the schedule back one day, no problem.*

*Are you back, Jayce?* Maya called.

*Yup.*

*Can you watch Danelle for me? I need to go into town.*

*Sure. Where's everyone else?*

*Up in Kosigi with Jyslin. Danelle had a doctor's appointment, so she had to stay.*

*No problem. Come on over, pippy.*

*Alright, Daddy Jason, she replied. Doc Songa said I'm all healthy and stuff!*

*Well, that's good to hear!* he replied earnestly.

Jason had no problems looking after Danelle, her gabbing away as he got out of his armor, sitting on his bed and kicking her legs as he got his armor off, then decided to take a bath with him when he picked up his towel. He washed her hair as she continued to tell him all about her day, communing easily and flawlessly, then they enjoyed a nice soak in the tub as she practiced her telekinesis, making the soap fly around them in circles as she wore a serious little expression on her face. Myleena had been



training Danelle fairly effectively in the time she had to spare. *[You're getting very good at that, pippy,]* he complemented.

*[Mommy tells me to practice every time I think about it, that the more I do it, the easier it gets,]* she replied, her brow furrowed in concentration. The soap stopped, then rotated in midair with building speed, until it was spinning in place with some decent rotational velocity.

*[She's right,]* he affirmed. Danelle squealed in surprise when she suddenly lifted up out of the tub, wriggling her legs a little, then she laughed and gave him an accusing look.

*[Stop cheating!]* she protested.

*[Cheating? Cheating how?]* he replied, putting his hands behind his head and looking up at her. *[I'm not doing anything.]*

*[Put me down!]* she demanded, putting her hands on her little hips and trying to glare at him the way she often saw Jyslin do it.

*[I'm so afraid of a naked six-year-old,]* he drawled. But he had to duck when she used her power to launch the soap at him, wresting it out of her telekinetic control with his own power and shooting it right back at her. She flinched when it rushed towards her nose, then she gasped and giggled when he pulled her horizontal and about an inch from his nose. *[You better ask nicely to get down, pips, or you'll be up there all night,]* he threatened. *[In fact, I think you'd better give me a little love,]* he added, tapping his nose imperiously.

She laughed and capitulated, kissing his nose, and he put her back in the bathtub gently. She then turned on him and attacked, and he had to wrestle a very determined little girl bent on revenge.

Myleena opened the door and laughed when she saw him trying to fend Danelle off, who had hold of one of his ears. *[Stop harassing my daughter, Jayce.]*

*[Pfft, she's as good as mine too,]* he retorted flippantly, tickling her. *[She spends almost as much time with me as she does with you.]* He grinned down at Danelle. *[Wanna give over on your mom and come live with me, pips? I have a spare bedroom, you know.]*

*[Jason!]* Myleena communed in shock, then she laughed helplessly when she saw his expression.

*[Nah, Mommy would be sad if I left. Besides, you need that room for the twins,]* Danelle replied seriously. *[But I'll remember that the next time Mommy nags me to clean my room.]*

*[Danelle!]* Myleena barked, then she snorted and broke down into helpless laughter when she saw Danelle wink.

*[Girl, you have got to stop hanging around Kumi and the twins,]* Jason told her with a conspiratorial little smile.

*[They're sneaky, I like them.]*

*[And they're teaching you things you shouldn't know until after you're old enough to move out of your mom's house, or else you'll give her gray hair,]* he replied with a grin.

He helped Danelle dry off and dress as Myleena went back to her house to get out of her armor, and they met her in the living room. *[Any word from Songa about that treatment they're cooking up?]* Myleena asked.

*[Not yet, but Miaari visited with Kereth and told me they'd probably be calling after me tomorrow sometime, they're just culturing the two different viruses they need.]*

*[I'm not sure I'd let them monkey around with my brain.]*

*[I have every faith in Songa,]* he replied. *[Besides, the treatment is for neurons already damaged. If the treatment fails, well, not much more damage they can do.]*

*[Kill the other neurons,]* she snorted.

*[That's not how the damage is,]* he told her. *[The neurons are all still there, it's the ganglia between them that got destroyed, according to Songa and Kereth. That's what the viruses are supposed to regenerate. From what I understand, they'll enter the neurons with damaged ganglia and grow new ganglia using the neuron as a base of operations, as it were.]*

*[Oooohhhh. Well, that's not quite as bad, but it would still freak me out. Faey don't let anyone anywhere near their brains.]*

*[Protecting what little you have,] he quipped.*

She punched him in the arm. She was not gentle.

*Ryn, Suri, you saw that! he barked. She assaulted the Ducal person. Do something, something guardish to her!*

*And just what did you say to make her punch you?* Ryn asked, amused.

*He said Faey don't let doctors into our brains because we're protecting what little we have,* Myleena supplied.

*Well, I'd say that's a justified thwap,* Suri winked.

*Traitors!*

*We're here to protect you from harm, not from trouble you get yourself into,* Ryn teased.

*Pfft, it's not like I wasn't speaking the truth. We all know why the male Faey are the ones that go into science.*

Myleena gave him a frosty look. Danelle joined her mother with a pretty convincing frosty look of her own.

*Nobody can dig a hole faster than our Jason,* Suri noted to Ryn, who nodded with a light smile.

The cavalry arrived, in the form of a garbled sending from Jyslin, sending from maximum range. But the fact that she was at maximum range meant she and the kids were almost home. After a few seconds, her sending clarified. *You better be home, buster!* she called.

*Of course I am, you have Rann with you?*

*All the kids, Ayama, and Surin,* she replied. *Ayama doesn't feel like cooking, she ordered out. She had a busy day herding the kids.*

*That's fine with me. Why did you have them up in Kosigi?*

*Them and their entire first year class,* she replied. *Field trip.*

*Ah. I guess the rest of the class rode Rann's coattails.*

*If you mean they used him to get into Kosigi, yeah, they did,* she replied with a chuckle. *The teacher was the one that pulled that off, actually. He went over all our heads and asked Aya about it.*

*Naturally. I really need to put that woman in her place sometime soon.*

Good luck with that, Dera murmured privately to him, which made him chuckle.

Ryn and Suri stood down to get some rest as the afternoon shift came in, Kaera, the second watch commander, and Yoi, a shockingly tall Faey with dark green hair, taking their place. Yoi was seven feet tall and willowy, one of the tallest Faey on Karis, and she'd naturally gravitated to basketball as a recreational sport of choice...and she was *good*. She could easily play in a semi-pro league as it was and could go pro with some more development.

Jason was about to go out to the pad to meet the family, but another communication stopped him. *[Your Grace]*, She called through his interface.

*[What is it, Shey?]* he asked.

*[It's a bit strange, but the Parri shaman has asked to come to your house tonight. She wants to talk to you. It's taken a little while to come down through the channels.]*

*[Well, that's fine,]* he replied. *[Get in touch with the liaison at her village and arrange for a dropship to bring her here.]*

*[I'll have her there within the hour.]*

*[That's my bad girl,]* he replied lightly.

*[I'm so glad you remembered,]* she retorted just before she broke contact, which made him laugh.

*Kaera, Ayama ordered out. I need to you to order extra, food fit for a few Parri, he told the second watch commander. The Shaman is coming to talk to me, we should offer her a meal as well. She may be alone, she may have her apprentices, I'm not sure, so let's err on the side of caution and order enough for three.*

Kaera nodded, her sapphire blue hair bobbing in her comb-over style that Jyslin had originally wore as a Marine, one side of her head's hair cut very short and the other side reaching her shoulders, which she then combed over the cut side. It was a popular style among military women.

And Kaera's handsome face and very dark blue hair made her quite popular among the Faey men.

Jason managed to get out to the pad as the last of the kids filed off, and he put his arm around Jyslin and let her tell him about her day working on the captured Consortium ships, as most of 3D was doing at the moment, studying their big ships and looking for weaknesses to exploit. All the food arrived as she was taking off her armor, and the Parri *Shaman* arrived just as she finished. Jason felt a bit justified when he saw that she had her two apprentices with her, each of them carrying a shoulder bag that hung down as they padded down off the dropship on all fours—Parri preferred moving about on all fours if they had to travel any distance, since they weren't very fast walkers when walking on their hind legs. Unlike the Veruta, the Parri were built on that quadrupedal base and simply able to take a vertical one to use their hands. But, the trade-off for that was that the Parri could run *very* fast on all fours, as fast as a horse.

"Honored *shaman*," Jason greeted, offering her his hands. "It's good to see you again."

"And you as well," she said in reply, clasping his hands in her rugged paw-like hands.

"What brings you to my home, honored *shaman*?"

"I wished to visit your tree, and talk of affairs," she replied with a gentle expression. "There is much to discuss."

"Certainly. I had some dinner arranged for you and your apprentices," he said, turning to walk with her. "You are welcome in my home."

They first visited his tree, which now towered over the backyard, nearly 20 *shakra* high, or about 24 feet. It looked like a sixty-year-old oak tree, but its leaves looked nothing like oak leaves, shaped like the spades suit from a deck of playing cards and a vibrant green. It was also starting to canopy out, to widen through its upper branches like a Terran savannah raintree, which was the same as the *oye* trees at the Parri village. Eventually, if it kept growing to be the same size as the other trees here on Karis, it would shade the entire house, and probably require them to move the landing pad when it got so big that it made getting under the canopy to land a tricky proposition. Jason still managed to find time to water the tree every day, to

show it the love the *shaman* had described, and he did find time to sit on the bench and view it when he could. It was one of Jyslin's favorite places, and she always managed to get the tree in the background when she talked to Dahnai so she could see it and fume over not having her own, Jyslin being the competitive bitch that she was.

The *shaman* and her apprentices enjoyed dinner with his family and friends, many of them coming over to visit when they heard the Parri were here, and they both had the *oye* dishes Kaera ordered and tried out some barbecued chicken and some seared and spiced *huaga* fish from Menos, which they found delicious. Parri didn't *only* eat products from their trees, they enjoyed the occasional meat dish from time to time.

After dinner, the *shaman* and her apprentices bade him to come down to the beach, where they built a fire and she brewed tea. She was silent until she poured out the cups, and they both took a sip. "The other *shaman* have informed me that their protections hold," she told him. "The darkness has tried to reach its fingers past the light of our interdiction but cannot abide."

"That's good to know," he answered, taking another sip.

"It is important to know that they try," she added. "They have not tried before. Some of us sense desperation from the fingers of darkness when they try to endure our light to get close."

That fit in with the current intelligence that the Kimdori had, that the Consortium was getting desperate. The Syndicate was coming, and the Confederacy had turned out to be a lot more resilient than they expected. And what was worst for them, the Karinnes were deeply entrenched behind multiple layers of defense which made taking Karis extremely difficult with the resources they had available.

"That is what the Kimdori tell me as well, honored *shaman*, but it's good to have corroboration. Our enemies are getting desperate. Things have turned out poorly for them, and their old enemies from their home are following them here. They're running out of time and are no closer to taking Karis than they were when they started."

"The desperate often surprise, my friend," she told him. "There are omens in the wind, Jason Karinne, and they bode ill for this world."

“I’ve had the same feelings,” he grunted, leaning back. “They’re building something over on the other side of the galaxy, something that will let them bypass our defensive device that slows down their ships. We’re just a couple of days away from invading that side of the galaxy to destroy those devices before they can complete them.”

“This is not what I feel,” she told him. “There is something already here, Jason. It bodes ill. We feel it shivering the leaves of our trees. Whatever it is, it is already on this planet.”

“You mean you think we’ve been compromised?”

“I...do not know,” she replied. “The omens are not clear. But there is a darkness starting to coalesce on this world, and it comes from within. We are striving to locate this darkness, but it senses us and hides from us. It is forever lurking at the fringes of my awareness, watching and waiting.”

“I’ll take that seriously, my friend. I’ll talk to Miaari and pass on your fears. She’ll look into it in the mundane world. Between you and her, perhaps we can find this darkness and deal with it before it becomes a threat.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed, taking another sip of her tea. “I would ask a boon of you.”

“Anything, *shaman*.”

“Do not leave your house,” she declared. “Not for some few days. The darkness is attracted to *you*, Jason. It lurks as close as the light protecting you will allow. Within your home, close to your tree, you are safe. The protections I invoked upon your home repel it. You are the heart of the house, and the darkness knows that to kill the body, it need only still the heart.”

“I will do as you ask,” he said immediately. “I’ll stay at home until you send word that you feel it safe for me to leave.”

“That relieves me, my friend,” she told him, patting him on the leg. “Now, on to other matters.”

Those other matters were just smalltalk, but to a Parri, the small things were just as important as the big ones. He played the gracious host, but as soon as the Parri were tired and ready to return home, he had Zora fly them

home and immediately called Miaari. Once she got there, he sat her in his home office. “The Parri believe we’ve been compromised,” he told her without preamble. “I may not believe in their mysticism, but I’ve seen too much to discount that they have their own ways of getting information.”

“What kind of danger does she see?”

“She can’t tell. She just said it’s a growing darkness that’s coming from *within*. She said that it’s lurking around me, trying to get past the protection she put down to get at me, to try to kill me. So, it has to be somewhere on the planet. She’s worried enough to ask me to stay in my house for a few days, inside the protections she placed around the house, and I’m gonna do it. Aya would skin me if she found out I was ignoring a warning, even if it’s from a source she may not believe is feasible.” He looked at her. “If they could get an Imperial Guard to try to kill Dahnai, I’m not going to pretend I’m safe here just because all the outsiders are in Kosigi and up at Virga. They’re just one stolen shuttle away from me.”

“True. I will start hunting for this invader, my friend. I usually keep a very close eye on things given how important the Karinnes are to us, but you are right. We cannot ignore the warning, and with all the foreign workers working in Kosigi, there might be an agent among us that somehow managed to evade all my precautions. I will ask Denmother for some additional help, some brothers and sisters with a great deal of experience to come and start investigating.”

“Remember, she said it was coming from within. So don’t just focus on the foreigners.”

She nodded. “Perhaps they have concocted another virus targeted at someone close to you, and are simply waiting for the right moment,” she pondered. “Or perhaps, they have found a Karinne that could be bribed.”

“Unlikely, but I guess it’s possible,” Jason grunted. “People do change. Someone that passed the screening five years ago might have changed his mind by now.”

“Aya,” Miaari barked. Within seconds, she opened the door and she looked in. “Jason is not to leave the strip until told otherwise by both the Parri *shaman* and myself,” she ordered. “The Parri have sensed a threat against him, and he is to be kept protected until that threat is exposed.”



She nodded grimly, then touched her interface. *“I’ll put the strip on stage two alert and put a full squad with the Ducal family at all times when outside the strip,”* the mechanical voice intoned, the thought to speech device they’d invented for the guards so they could interact with those who couldn’t hear sending, such as the Kizzik and the Kimdori. Clearly, Aya had felt it was not a violation of their oaths to use it in certain circumstances.

“That should be satisfactory,” Miaari agreed.

*You belong to me now, Jason,* Aya purred, giving him a hawkish smile. *I have so many plans for you.*

“Out, hussy,” he retorted, which made her wheeze with that voiceless laugh and close the door.

“What did she say?” Miaari asked curiously.

“Just lording it over me that I’m grounded,” he replied, which made her grin toothily at him.

They discussed the matter for about an hour more, then Miaari left to call in reinforcements, Gamekeeper-level Kimdori she wanted on the planet to ferret out this mysterious, unknown threat. Jason wandered down to the beach and sat with the waves lapping at his bare feet, his jeans pulled up to his knees, pondering it himself. It didn’t make him feel all that good knowing that something hostile was somewhere on Karis, but at least the *shaman* had given them advance warning. He was confident that Aya could keep him safe, and she’d keep Jyslin, Rann, Tim, and Symone protected as well, since all of them were part of his immediate family. He watched as some of Aya’s precautions took effect, in the form of larger patrols of guards who were now patrolling the strip using the grav pods in their armor, watching everything from above with hand-held sensors and telepathy. The strip’s fence was now powered up and the gate was closed, which prevented citizens from coming in to talk to him, but that was the price he paid when the guards were on heightened alert. If Aya decided to go to stage three, a shield would be activated that would enclose the strip. He backed up as the tide came in, backed up a bit more, then abandoned that and took off his clothes to keep them from getting wet and let the waves roll up over him, leaning back and looking up at Kosigi as he contemplated things.

Jyslin came out and joined him, having already shed her clothes before she sat down to prevent getting them wet. Jason smiled and patted her blue thigh, then caressed it gently. *Hey baby. How are you feeling?*

*Like I miss you already,* she smiled at him. *I want you upstairs, but I know that you're doing Myli a favor, so I'll endure Tim for another night.*

*Make it sound like a chore now,* he teased, which made her laugh.

*He's just the amu, love, you're the real deal.*

*It's so nice to be appreciated*

*So, you're grounded now?*

*Yah. The Parri think there's someone here on Karis that wants to take me out, and Aya and Miaari are taking it seriously. So am I. I don't know how they know what they know and do what they do, but I believe it when she says it.*

*Well, that means you'll be here in the morning, and I'll tell Myli I'll be late for work,* she purred, kissing him on the ear.

He chuckled. *I accept your invitation,* he replied, putting his arm around her and feeling her lean against him. *I've missed you too this last month.*

*Trelle's garland, I am so glad to be out of my phase,* she declared in relief.

*From nun to psychotic sex slut in twenty-nine hours. What a change,* he teased.

*Half of that was just putting Tim in his place,* she replied impishly. *The strip stud had to learn he's not all that. We had to put Kellin in his place, and Tim was getting a bit too full of himself, so Symone and me got together and made plans.*

*I think you drove that point home,* he replied lightly. *He looked like he'd run a triathlon when I got home today.*

*And when Symone comes out of her phase, she's going to go after him too,* she laughed.

*Mean girls.*

*But you love mean girls.*

*So I do*, he agreed, kissing her again.

Jason, as a rule, never missed a ship christening. It wasn't just his duty, but his privilege to welcome a new ship and a new crew into the KMS. And while he was restricted to the strip for his own safety, he made sure to *find* a way to be at the christening of the newest destroyer.

Cybi had already shown him how to do it.

So, when Commander Hr'Kass greeted him in the docking bay of his new destroyer, what he greeted was a hologram of Jason. Jason was safely back at Foxwood, and he was in an induced merge as he shunted his consciousness through the biogenic network and into a little hovering pod that generated a hologram of him through which he could see and hear, to give the illusion that he was really there to himself as well as the crew. It wasn't entirely exact, and everyone knew it wasn't really him, but the word had gotten out that they were keeping him locked down due to an undisclosed threat, and every single officer and enlisted, what the Faey called a striper, in that ship would beat him senseless if he showed up in person. They were more than content to get the fake Jason.

"Welcome aboard, your Grace," Hr'Kass intoned in his sibilant voice, bowing as his Crusader armor creaked a little around his bony plates. "I am honored you found a way to attend."

*"As much as I'm allowed to, since I've been grounded,"* the hologram replied with a cheeky smile. *"So, let's get this inspection under way. I'm told you have a shakedown cruise scheduled in an hour."*

Looking through the pod was a curious exercise. It didn't threaten to do any harm to him, so Songa permitted it, and it was a lot like linking up with a Wolf or Gladiator, looking through its cameras using his interface. What made it different was the distance involved. He'd never tried to link with a biogenic device that wasn't literally right there, and the very, very brief delay between him and the pod as communion data passed through the biogenic network made it feel a bit...tweaky.

He endured it as Hr'Kass took him on an abbreviated tour of the ship, then let him talk with the crew, which looked less and less Faey with every new crew. Only about half the crew were Faey, and the other half were

human, Makati, and a lone Kizzik noble and four drones. The engineering department was dominated by the Makati, which was also where the Kizzik was assigned, but that was just fine with Jason. They were built for that department. It just meant that Hr’Kass’ ship was going to run smoothly and be hard to take out in combat due to outstanding damage control and fast repairs. After the tour was complete, they went to the bridge. Jason didn’t sit in his chair due to him being a hologram, and it was an Urumi chair and looked highly uncomfortable for anyone but Hr’Kass anyway, then Jason asked him the question.

“I have pledged my allegiance to the House Karinne and you, my Grand Duke, but I would like to honor the one who personally permitted me to seek my fortune among you. So, with your blessing, I would honor the Brood Queen and name this ship after her.”

*“Then this ship is now the KMS Sk’Vrae, and I declare it commissioned and ready for active service,”* Jason said with a nod. *“May you bring honor to her name, Captain.”*

Hr’Kass nodded soberly. He received the flag and charter of the ship from an aide that had been assigned to hold them, and he bowed deeply to the hologram before touching the flag to his forehead, an Urumi custom, then he reverently handed them to his Ex-O, a Faey with dark purple hair and green eyes. “Place these in my ready room, Gana. I entrust them to you.”

She nodded to him and carried them towards the ready room.

Jason went from that christening straight to the second one, which for him was just moving from one pod to another. This ship was the newest heavy cruiser, and Farea was there to greet his hologram when it activated, along with her command staff and rows of enlisted, in the main hangar. Farea was a cutie, an almost insufferably cute woman with dark pink hair and hazel eyes, but with one of the saltiest vocabularies in the known universe. The woman could swear in 37 different languages and do so fluently. But that was only when she was mad, and it wasn’t easy to make Farea mad.

*“Hey cuteness,”* he teased. *“I hope I made it in time.”*

“Cutting it a bit close, your Grace,” she grinned. “We’re scheduled to leave in thirty-two minutes.”

*“I know, I’m sorry. I got bogged down in the office. So, we’ll have to dispense with the usual inspection and tour and just get to the heart of the matter.”*

“You can always grace us with a personal visit later. And dinner in the mess hall with the crew,” Farea noted.

*“Deal,”* he agreed.

It took them nearly twenty minutes just to get to the bridge from the main hangar deck, due to the size of the ship and where those locations were placed within it. The whole time, Jason and Farea basically talked shop, about the fleet and their upcoming plans, as well as the new ships and crews. “We might have to slow down ship production, or just park them, Jason,” she told him. “I’ve seen lower and lower performance scores coming from the new destroyers, because they’re plundering them of experienced crew members to man the larger ships. Most of them aren’t even battle tested. I’d rather not have my own destroyers scraping my shields in tactical maneuvers.”

*“We know, it’s something Juma’s been watching as well,”* he agreed. *“She’s trying to hold back the greenest ships so they can get more practice and drills in before they’re sent into combat. From what I read, half of your shakedown cruise will be wargames.”*

“Good, I’m glad they’re paying attention up there,” Farea nodded.

*“So, how does it feel to jump over the Defiant and go straight to a big ship?”*

“Like I was cheated somehow,” she chuckled. “But I’m not the only one. There are way too many ships in production for us all to cycle through one ship. When’s the next one due out? Tomorrow?”

The hologram nodded. *“There’s both a cruiser and a tactical battleship slated for christening tomorrow.”*

“The next bulldog, eh? Too bad I didn’t get that one.”

*“Patience, grasshopper. Cut your teeth on the heavy cruisers first, then you’ll move up,”* he replied.

“Who’s getting it?”

*“Pemai,”* he answered.

“Well, she’s a good choice at least,” Farea grunted in agreement as they reached the bridge deck. “That woman is almost scary.”

*“How so?”*

“I think she’s got some precognition in her; she’s well known for being able to out-think the opponent. Always a step ahead, always right where she needs to be to kick your ass during wargames.”

*“Well, that just makes her a good choice for a bulldog.”* His pod floated along with Farea as they entered the bridge, then they stopped at her chair.

*“Well, I can’t sit in it, so I declare that I am sitting in your chair in my heart, Farea,”* he told her, which made her chuckle. *“Are you holding to the name?”*

“Yes. This ship will be the *Hailaeri*.”

*“Then I declare that the KMS Hailaeri is commissioned and ready for active service. May he serve long and well,”* Jason intoned, to which the bridge crew applauded. An aide presented Farea with the flag and charter of the ship, which she held to the breast of her armor, fighting back tears.

*“Now, you have ten minutes to get ready to head out, so I’ll leave you to it,”* he told her.

“Remember, dinner in the mess hall as soon as you can,” she told him.

*“You won’t let me forget.”*

“Damn right I won’t,” she winked.

Miaari was waiting for him when he opened his eyes, sitting in the chair across from his desk. “Sloppy, Jason,” she smiled. “I could have been an assassin.”

“Suuuure,” he drawled. “What’s up?”

“The Kimdori I sent for are here and already at work,” she answered. “Already they’ve uncovered something I thought you should know.”

“And that is?”

“Dahnai sent three spies along with the construction crews. Highly trained, one of them a listener and the other two certified mindbenders. They somehow managed to slip through the initial screens. I’m going to be discussing that failure with Graazi, the Kimdori in charge of Kosigi screening,” she sniffed. “But we know of them now, so we can keep them under control.”

“I should be surprised, but I’m not,” he sighed. “It seems that Dahnai can ignore our relationship for her own benefit as much as I’m forced to ignore it to protect the house.”

“She’ll admit it herself, Jason. Love is love, but politics is politics. I’ve decided to leave the spies alone for now, they might be useful to us later. I’ve attached shadows to them to edit their memories when necessary to protect Karinne secrets.”

“I’ll leave it in your hands,” he nodded to her. “Anything else?”

“Nothing of importance. The main threat the Parri told us about has not been found yet.”

“Alright, how about less important matters? The latest batch of applicants?”

“Ninety eight percent were approved,” she answered. “I think only about five percent are Imperium races or Urumi since we opened applications to all races, and the majority of them are Shio. I start to worry that the house might lose its Faey majority to the Shio if they don’t stop applying to enter the house, and then passing,” she chuckled. “We just finished screening those Veruta last night. They’ve already been admitted into the Marines and start basic training tomorrow.”

“That’s good. How about some of the other newcomers?”

“I’ve already hired four Beryans for my staff,” she chuckled. “They’re very intelligent and highly cunning, and that’s always an asset for a spy. We Kimdori have always admired their race.”

“Well, that’s saying something,” Jason noted. “I’m sure the Makati like having another race their size around to talk to, as long as they don’t mind the tails.”

Miaari laughed. “As far as the enemy goes, nothing new has come from Denmother. Our infiltrators are still working to gain more access to the planets building those devices. But security has been extreme. Our foes know we are there and have put up as many obstacles as possible to keep us from what we seek. But we will prevail,” she said simply, and that was honest truth.

“PR-371?”

“On schedule. All scans have come back favorable. The enemy has no interest in that part of the sector, and we’ve set up our SCM network along the projected route. We only wait for the final report and for the invasion force to jump.”

“Well, the final report is due today. In about three hours, in fact,” he noted, looking at the clock. “So, the invasion force will probably jump out late today or tomorrow, that’s up to Juma.”

“They’re ready, so the only question is, will 3D be ready?”

“They’re ready,” he answered. “We’ve got new toys to throw at them as well as some defensive gadgets to reinforce the system. The gravity gun is perfected, the solar accumulator works, and Leamon finally got the stealth meson cannon working right, so we’re adding that to the toolbox.”

“Can it fire while cloaked?”

“It can now,” Jason said with a smug smile. “That’s what Leamon ironed out. It can’t hide the barrel flash or the meson pulse, and the pulse isn’t shield-piercing, but it doesn’t bring down the CMS when it fires like it did at first. Leamon’s one of the best when it comes to getting cantankerous conflicting energy systems to cooperate, and now it’s a perfect weapon to hit ships when they have their shields down, when they think they’re safe.”

“Interesting. Might I inform Denmother about this? We might have a use for a weapon that can fire while cloaked.”

“Sure, have her send some techs to 3D to get trained,” he answered. “It has some power consumption issues, but I don’t think it’ll cause you any problems.”

“Overheating?”



“No, it just drains the grid when it fires,” he answered. “Massive power hog, one of the biggest power hogs I’ve seen in a while. We had to give it its own power plant on the stealth platforms, it sucks up all the power otherwise.”

“So that was what Leamon was fixing.”

“One of them yeah. When he finally got it to fire while cloaked, the cannon drained off the power to the CMS and made it come out of stealth mode,” he chuckled. “It took him another day and a whole lot of cursing to fix that.”

“I’ll send it on to Denmother, then,” she nodded, standing up. “I have an appointment, my friend, I need to begin orientation with my new Beryans,” she smiled.

“Alright. Come back for dinner.”

“I’ll be here. Make friend Kumi come as well, we haven’t sat and talked for a while.”

“She’s always a busy girl,” Jason chuckled.

He looked over the applicant batch after she left and saw that she was right. There were 28,290 applicants to the House Karinne in the latest application cycle, and the majority of them, 18,904, were Shio. The Shio wanted revenge for what had been done to their planets, and since the Federation was in no condition to fight, they were so incensed that they were applying for entry into House Karinne so they could fight *now*. There were only 971 applicants from the Imperium or the Collective, the rest were mainly Alliance races, Shio, Colonists, and Skaa mainly, all of them in this sector outside of those Verutans. They wanted to fight the Consortium, but if they passed both Karinne and Kimdori screening, then they truly wanted to be in the house, and he would gladly take them. Nobody was in House Karinne that did not *want* to be in the house.

His musing was interrupted when he got a call from the medical annex, and Songa’s face appeared on his monitor. “Jason,” she called with a smile. “We’re ready now.”

“So, we’re making an appointment?”

“Yes. As soon as you get here,” she answered.

“Then you’d better talk to Aya, I’m not allowed off the strip right now,” he answered.

She nodded. “I’ll arrange it. Be ready to stay overnight.”

“Alright. I’ll call Jys and let her know.”

To his surprise, it didn’t take Songa long at all to get everything arranged. Two hours after she called, Aya, Shen, Dera, and Suri were escorting him to a sealed and heavily guarded part of the annex, where Ryn was commanding 14 other guards who were already there, sealing off the place against the threat sensed by the Parri aboard the *Dragon*. The corvette didn’t land, it hovered over the roof of the annex with its skids only about an inch off the surface, a real feat of piloting, and Songa and Kereth met him there. “Everything’s ready, Jason,” Songa told him. “You’ll stay overnight, and after we give you some tests in the morning, you’ll be on your way.”

“Alright. Jys is bringing the kids over to stay with me.”

“They won’t get much out of it, my friend, you’ll be in an induced coma so the viral stems have the opportunity to do their work without your brain making it hard for them,” the Kimdori warned.

“I sorta figured it’d be that way,” he sighed. “Alright, let’s get it over with.”

The guards had cordoned off almost an entire wing of the annex for him, with guards at every door and rovers carrying hand sensors while Kimdori counter-infiltrator specialists lurked about the entire annex, hunting for anyone who tried to invade the building to get at Jason. They took him to a standard hospital room, with a bed, table and chair for guests, a vidlink monitor on the wall facing the bed for the patient, and a medical scanner bank on the wall behind the bed. The walls were painted in bright, cheerful colors, part of the Faey philosophy of happy patients healing faster. They had him take off his armor, and all five of his normal guards stayed in the room with him as four guards stood outside the door, armed with motion sensors and railguns on top of the pulse weapons in their armor. He had no doubt they’d shoot first and ask questions later.

“Aren’t we waiting for Jys to get here?” he asked as Songa started an IV, which came right out of the wall.

“Not if you want to leave in the morning,” she winked. “Just relax, dear. You’ll wake up in the morning and be right back to normal.”

“Just so you know, I hate these induced comas,” he told her as she leaned him back in the bed. “And I’m going to find a way to make you pay for this.”

Songa kissed him on the nose. “I’m sure you will,” she teased as he started getting drowsy. “Alright, Kereth, let’s attach the sensors and start the infusion,” her voice drifted to him, and then her voice dropped into darkness.

He wasn’t joking that he *hated* those comas.

They weren’t just closing his eyes and opening them again. While he was under them, he *knew* he was in a coma, yet couldn’t do anything about it. There was a kind of helplessness about it, knowing he was asleep but unable to wake up. He couldn’t really think or dream while in that state either, so it was a *primal* sensation of knowing he was asleep, and primal states were the hardest to ignore. Being aware but unthinking was a scary thing for anything but a pre-natal infant, who *only* knew that state.

His eyes fluttered open and all he could see was blue and red blur, but it slowly focused down to Jyslin’s lovely face. She smiled gently at him and put her hand on his cheek, then leaned down and kissed him. *Good morning*, she sent lovingly. *How do you feel?*

*Same as always*, he replied, blinking and looking past her. He was still in the hospital room, and his guards were not in the room. His armor was on a stand in the corner, and the vidlink was on, tuned to ESPN; Jyslin had been watching a batchi game. He felt perfectly fine. No tingling, no headache, no sensation that they’d done a thing, just the usual sensation he felt after an induced coma, like he had to kick-start himself to get moving. He yawned and looked around. *Where is everyone?*

*The kids are at school, Songa and Kereth are on the way back from the lab after running a couple of tests*, she answered. *Everything went just as they said it would, love. They say all the damage has been repaired. They’re so confident about it that they’re not standing here watching you every second*, she winked.

He accessed the biogenic network, and the instant he did, he felt Cybi take notice of him. Her hologram shimmered into existence in the room, and she was giving him a glorious smile. *"My Duke, I am so pleased that you are awake,"* she said brightly, ghosting up to the other side of the bed from Jyslin. *"How do you feel?"*

"Just fine," he answered her aloud. "Jys said that Songa said the treatment was a success."

*"Yes, she reported the same to me as well, but it did not feel so until you were awake,"* she replied, reaching out and touching her holographic hand to his forehead. *"The hospital scanners show that your biometrics are quite normal, but that is nothing compared to seeing you smile."*

He laughed. "Watch out, Jys, she's looking to replace you."

*"I am not!"* Cybi retorted, a bit indignantly, which made Jyslin laugh.

"Yup, he's feeling just fine," Jyslin grinned at him, leaning forward and touching her nose to his. "Such a flirt."

"You're the one that gives the leash, woman," he teased, reaching up and poking her in the sides, which made her laugh even harder when he shook his hands after jabbing them into her armor.

"Speaking of your escapades, Myleena said it was alright to tell you. She's pregnant."

"Well good for her!" Jason said happily.

"She's having a girl. She's already named her Siyara. So, that's one more closer to fifteen," she winked at him."

*"Congratulations, your Grace,"* Cybi intoned with a smile on her holographic face.

Songa came into the room, with the hulking Kereth right behind her. She gave him a smile and walked over to him. "I see you're already feeling better," she told him.

"Much. Jys said you said it was a success?"

"A complete success," Kereth answered. "We have some tests to run, and then you're released and allowed to return to using gestalts, your

Grace.”

“Alright then,” Jason said, clapping his hands. “Let’s get this going.”

They gave him a battery of tests and scans, including another in-depth brain scan, then they had him actually use a gestalt while under that scan. He felt no headaches, nothing out of the ordinary while connected to a gestalt...but then again, he hadn’t when he was injured either. However, Songa and Kereth assured him that using the gestalt didn’t cause any damage. “We need to schedule a few tests using Cybi herself,” Songa told him, “to have you merge with her while we’re there to observe, see if we can track down exactly where and how you were injured in the first place. But those will have to be later. I want your brain to have time to fully heal and settle in with the new ganglia, for your ganglia to break in, as it were, before we take that risk. We’ll do those tests in about a month. But, for now, you’re allowed to use gestalts and tactical gestalts again. So, you can go back to Mark II armor, and you can reactivate the gestalt in your basement.”

Aya stepped up to him and gave him the gestalt he’d been using before he learned of the injury. He chuckled and accepted it from her, then closed his eyes and put it on. He underwent that slightly unpleasant sensation of it entwining itself through his thoughts, then he blinked and stood up from the test chair in which he’d been sitting.

“Alright, so, I’m done?”

“Yes, Jason. You’re free to go home. And I expect to be invited to dinner tonight as a thanks for all my hard work,” she said lightly.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll have Ayama make something *special* for you,” he teased, which made her laugh.

*As soon as we have your Mark II armor brought in, then you’re done, Aya sent sternly. If you can wear it, you’re not leaving this secure position without maximum protection. Ryn should be back with it any minute.*

*Alright. [Myli, Jys gave me the good news!]* he communed to her using his gestalt. *[Congratulations!]*

*[Thanks, babes, and it’s for both of us. We’re having a daughter, Jayce. Siyara.]*

*[It's a lovely name, if a bit front loaded,]* he told her. It also showed that Myleena was putting some stock into their child, since the word *siyara* in the old Faey that the Exiles still used meant *savant* or *highly gifted*. Only Aura, Jason, and Jyslin, and possibly the twins since they'd worked with the Exiled so long, would really know that meaning.

*[I'll bet my left tit she'll make Kyri look like a human,]* she sent smugly.

Jason had to laugh. *[Competitive bitch.]*

*[Damn right I am,]* she communed back without a hint of shame. *[Now let me get back to work, babes.]*

*[Alright. I'll see you tonight. I think I'll have a barbecue to celebrate my successful treatment.]*

*[Sounds good to me.]*

Jyslin stole a few toe-curling kisses, then she went back to work. Jason too had work to do, so the guards took him back to the strip, he took his armor off and replaced it with swim trunks, and he went about the serious business of having a swim, celebrating his successful treatment a little bit, then he visited his tree and watered it, noticing that it looked to have grown a few more inches or so, its spade-like leaves green and vibrant. The tree wouldn't fruit for quite a while, but according to his data, it would start to flower soon...and an oye tree in flower was a wonder to behold. They had small round soft-petalled flowers like the Japanese cherry blossom, small flowers that bloomed in multitudes on the tree, and like the cherry blossom, the tree's flowers would shed their petals in a gloriously beautiful rain of soft pink and red and white teardrop shaped petals. The Parri didn't have a celebration about it the way the Japanese did, but that didn't make the event any less beautiful. His tree would flower without bearing fruit for years, then, when it was mature enough, it would start to produce fruit. After tending the tree, he sent Ayama and Surin out to get enough food for an old-fashioned barbecue for the entire strip, burgers and brats and hot dogs and a side of *parga* ribs, which was a delicious rich-textured meat that tasted like a cross between pork and beef, supplied by animals that grew to be nearly five tons.

After that, he attended the christening of the new tactical battleship via holopod, right on time. Pemai and some of her new crew were formed up in

the main port side landing bay, which was large enough to hold about 30 dropships and interfleet shuttles. Pemaï Faralle Karinne was a curious Faey. She was from that same planet that produced a much darker hue of blue skin than standard Faey, so her face and hands, the only parts of her not in armor, were sea blue. She was quite lovely, as most Faey were lovely, but there was a certain something about her that drove men extra crazy, a kind of, of *sensuality* that men couldn't ignore. Even Jason wasn't immune to it. Pemaï was called the Succubus by many of the human male KMS members, a woman with a nearly mystical air about her that just turned men on, a trait that she was not unhappy to possess. She had even taken that nickname as a badge of honor and had had a painting of a Succubus from human mythology hanging in the ready room of her cruiser, which was no doubt in her new ready room already. What really made her a curious Faey, however, was her hair and eyes. Her hair was almost so perfectly matched to her skin that it was hard to see where her hair ended and her skin began when they were together, and since it was dark, it made her just that much more attractive to Faey men. Her eyes really jumped out at you, since they were almost unnaturally large and shimmering gold, and that gold surrounded by her cerulean skin was like a pair of lighthouse beams on a dark, foggy night. Pemaï almost never spoke, one of her little quirks, and she was well known to be almost a taskmistress, very demanding of her crew. She ran a tight ship, but she was also fair and very loyal. A crewwoman under Pemaï would work hard but have a captain that would go to bat for them when it came to getting extra training, recommendations if they were deserving of them, and even help changing job classifications. Pemaï busted her ass for her crew and expected them to do the same for her.

“Welcome aboard, your Grace,” Pemaï said in her husky voice, a voice that made it clear she didn't speak often. “I see you found a way to make me talk to you.”

Jason laughed back in his study. “*That's right, this was all just an elaborate setup to force you not to send to me,*” he teased. “*And I'm keeping myself immune from your charms by not being within a thousand kathra of you.*”

“Posh,” she replied, then she laughed. “Well, are you ready to begin the inspection and tour?”

*“Let’s get to it.”*

She first let him inspect the crew, the vast majority of them Faey and human, but with a couple dozen Makati, a single Kizzik noble with six drones, and to his honest surprise, a male Shio wearing KMS ensign’s rank just over a Shio military rank of Major. He had to stop to talk to the handsome green-skinned man. *“I didn’t realize anyone from the Shio had gotten through basic training yet,”* he remarked to the man.

“I only just graduated yesterday. I was the first, and for my accomplishment, I was assigned to this ship,” he said proudly. “Ensign Javra Blackstone, your Grace, at your service.”

*“Well, welcome to the KMS, Ensign,”* Jason replied, nodding to him. *“What’s your PTS?”*

“Security, sir,” he replied. “I’m tactical response.” Tactical response was the dedicated combat arm of ship security, the SWAT team of shipboard police, like the Marines, but they were attached to a specific ship and were part of the Navy, where the Marines were their own military service. If the ship were ever boarded, Blackstone would be one of the primary soldiers tasked to fend them off, being backed up by the Marine complement on board. They also trained for boarding other ships along with the Marines, and often backed them up if the Marines needed more manpower for a boarding operation. Tactical response also handled basic damage control and crew safety during emergency situations where they weren’t needed to fight off boarders. Tactical response soldiers were very well trained in shipboard small arms combat and were just as effective at unit-based combat as the Army and Marines. Any Consortium enemies that boarded a KMS ship would be facing both Marines and the TRs or Tarks, as they were called, and that was a formidable combination. Jason was a bit surprised that the Faey on board hadn’t had a fit when they found out that a male had become a Tark, but then again, there were males in the Army and Marines as well, in infantry units. The Faey were slowly starting to accept gender equality in the military.

Then again, looking at the muscle twitching in Pemai’s jaw, maybe they weren’t quite as over it as they pretended to be. He had no doubt that Pemai would probably keep Ensign Blackstone way the hell away from any real combat if she had her way.



“Well, congratulations, that’s not an easy job to qualify for,” Jason told him.

“Thank you, your Grace, but I was a security chief on a Shio frigate before I joined the house, so I have prior experience,” he said with a graceful, flourishing bow that made a few Faey women nearby almost sigh. Shio men were just as attractive to Faey women as Terran men were, and their natural charisma and charm made them *very* popular. There was little doubt that he’d be chased all over the ship by amorous Faey women.

He visited the Makati and Kizzik as well, and found that they too were in engineering, which was something of a growing trend within the KMS of which he approved. Only one of them wasn’t in engineering, and that was a Makati male who was part of a gunnery crew for one of the plasma torpedo batteries.

Jason knew his way around a tactical battleship, but he was surprised at how much Pemai knew about it. Then again, he had no doubt that she’d been getting as much time on the *Prophet* as possible once she got her own tactical battleship. She impressed him with her knowledge of the ship, from stern to bow, top to bottom. They ended at the bridge, which was more of tactical center in a ship that size, which was manned and operating, about two dozen Faey and humans in armor carrying the gold stripe of command deck officer scurrying around. They ended at Pemai’s chair, where he told her that due to the fact he wasn’t really there, he couldn’t sit in her chair.

“That’s quite alright, your Grace,” she smiled. “I’d rather you be safe than in my chair anyway.”

*“It’s a good thing you said that, since Aya’s in the room with me. Any other answer and she’d probably pay you a personal visit with a switch.”*

Pemai laughed. “Which is why I said it,” she winked.

*“Alright, time to settle the bets, Pemai. What name will we put on this bulldog?”*

“I’ve decided to name him the *Jason Karinne*,” she declared.

Jason blinked both through his hologram and in his study. *“The what?”*

“Come now, do you *really* think we’d tolerate a ship in the KMS named after the Brood Queen without an even bigger one named after our Grand

Duke?” she asked with a winsome smile. “And I can name this ship anything I please, that’s the KMS tradition. So, this ship is named after *you*, your Grace. We will carry the honor of your name and the strength of your convictions into battle, and this ship will be a beacon of hope for our allies and a sight of terror for our enemies. This will be the most prestigious ship in the navy, the one ship everyone wants to serve on, because we will work twice as hard as any other crew to put them all in the dust behind us... because we carry *your name* on our hull.”

“*Wow. Pema, I’m...I don’t know what to say,*” he said in honest emotion, looking at her through his hologram’s camera. “*I’m, I’m honored. Stunned.*”

“We love you, you silly man,” she said simply. “We all love you. Actually, I’m shocked that someone hadn’t named a ship after you already. And I was serious, Jason. I’ll make this ship the shining star of the Karinne Navy, because it carries your name.”

“*Well, then it should have been put on a command ship,*” he said lightly, which earned him a short glare. But then Pema saw the expression on the hologram, and she laughed helplessly.

An aide presented her with her flag and charter, which she cradled to her chest. “Now then, with all due respect, your Grace, get off my ship,” she winked. “We have to join the wargames in progress at Karis IV.”

“*Keep me posted on your progress, Captain, and good luck.*”

“We don’t *need* luck, your Grace,” she sniffed.

Jason didn’t go very far, for twenty minutes later, he was attending the christening of the new cruiser. It hung in space beside the *Aravalo*, which was looking better and better with every passing day, and the differences between them were noticeable. The cruisers had been slightly redesigned since production began, part of the endless improvements, so the new cruiser, first of the Mark II class, was about 70 feet longer than a standard cruiser. The extra length was taken up primarily with enlarged fighter bays, allowing the Mark IIs to carry 20 more Wolf fighters and 15 more Gladiators than a standard cruiser, including new recessed bunker positions on the hull for Gladiators to be outside on the ship firing at other ships or

fighters during combat. It also had 6 more heavy mount rail cannons and pulse weapon batteries than a standard cruiser.

The new captain of the ship waited for him in front of his pod, and that captain was one of the real symbols of Karinne progressivism compared to the Imperium. Jann Wilson saluted sharply, the *only* Faey male military ship captain in the entire KMS. He had been promoted from the destroyer *Jeza's Hammer*, where he served with distinction. Jann was, to a female Faey, an absolute heart crusher. He was devastatingly handsome, had jet black hair so long that it reached his knees, and what put almost every Faey in the KMS into utter despair, he was married to a human woman who had human women's attitudes towards letting her husband stray. His wife was a human telepath, Alyssa Wilson, who worked in the Academy satellite center as a teacher. Jann had followed Faey tradition and had taken Alyssa's last name when they married, and despite being in the house and being allowed to take the last name Karinne, Alyssa had kept her human surname. Not only were most women almost violently opposed to Alyssa not sharing her husband with her friends, they were equally furious that a *human* woman had managed to catch and marry one of the most handsome Faey men on Karis.

"Your Grace! Right on time!" Jann said, saluting sharply.

"*It's easy when I'm not being shuttled around on a corvette,*" Jason answered through the pod. "*Ready to begin?*"

"We'll have to make it quick, we're already under orders to join the wargames as soon as we can clear Kosigi," he answered, a bit apologetically.

Jann's crew was more like what he was used to seeing, predominately Faey and with a smattering of humans and Makati, but his ship as well had a single Kizzik noble officer and five drones under her command, and again, they were assigned to engineering. Jason chatted with the crew for about ten minutes, then Jann gave him a tour of the changed parts of the cruiser compared to the Mark I, the redesigned engine room, the larger fighter bays, and took his pod down to one of the particle beam nacelles, where a crew of ten tended the weapon wearing black armor with red and yellow stripes, the color code of weapons and munitions specialists. After that, they went up to the bridge, again slightly redesigned but looking

familiar enough, and they reached the *question*. “I’ve decided to name my ship after a beast from both human and Faey mythology. Your Grace, welcome aboard the KMS *Dragon*,” he said, using the Faey word.

“*Nice name,*” Jason said with a smile through the hologram. “*Alright, I declare that the KMS Dragon is commissioned and ready for active service. May he serve long and well.*”

“I hope they don’t mind if I have a dragon painted on the hull,” he mused as the bridge crew applauded.

“*I doubt it,*” Jason chuckled. “*I like it when captains have hull art done, it gives a ship real character.*”

Jason was again hustled off the ship after Jann was presented his flag and charter of commission, since the crew had to do its shakedown, but he did watch the *Jason Karinne* and the *Dragon* leave Kosigi through his cameras, then jump out when they reached jump distance. He just hoped that naming that ship after a living person didn’t jinx it, he remembered some old superstition or whatnot about that.

But that was the last of his official appointments until the daily leader briefing in six hours, so he sat down and tackled some work. Chirk and Brall came over to his house and they talked about things, and once they got his inbox cleared out to an acceptable level, he decided to take a relaxing soak in the hot tub. Kumi came over with Yila Trefani, who still had access to visit Karis whenever she pleased and visited quite a bit as she and Kumi worked on their nefarious plan to take over the entire galaxy. The fox-faced Yila gave him a slight smile as they looked down at him, wearing a Faey woman’s shirt with one sleeve much longer than the other in blue and bearing the Trefani crest, as well as showing off quite a bit of cleavage. She had no pants, just a pair of white silk-like panties that peeked out under her long-tailed shirt, and a pair of black synth-leather boots that ended just above her knees. *Been digging through Kumi’s closet there, Yila?* he asked lightly.

She chuckled and touched her bare thigh. *I don’t think Kumi’s in the habit of wearing the Trefani crest, Jason,* she replied dryly.

*Hey babes, want some company?* Kumi asked.

*Since when do you not try to crash my hot tub, Kumi?*

*That's a yes to me,* she grinned naughtily, grabbing the tail of her tee shirt.

*What are you on Karis for, Yila?*

*Oh, you know, the usual,* she replied, pulling her own shirt over her head and displaying the fact she had no bra. Her gracefully ample breasts jiggled a little when she tossed it aside, one of Yila's best features. And she knew it. Jason made room for Kumi after she struggled out of her jeans, panties, and shoes, and Yila joined them after she fought her boots off; boots like that were quite in style for Faey women, but they were a beast to get off and on.

*Piracy and general mayhem?*

She chuckled. *More general mayhem today. We did the piracy on my last visit,* she answered as she sat femininely on the edge of the tub, splashing her hand in it as it bubbled around her legs. Jason noted absently that she had a *jaingi* tattoo just to each side of her neatly trimmed, dark pubic hair. One was an ancient Faey pictogram depicting wealth, and the other was the pictogram depicting power. Wealth and power, what Yila was all about, marked permanently on her body, but not in a place where it was easily seen. Noble women of Yila's rank weren't of a habit of large tattoos or dramatic body piercings, though *jaingi* tattoos were more common than Jason had realized. It was definitely Yila, breaking tradition but doing it in a discreet manner, almost like her personal brand. *I heard that your treatment was a success, Jason. I'm glad to see you're well, but I was surprised to find out you were ill.*

*We kept it quiet, for obvious reasons,* he nodded. *It wasn't anything anyone needed to know about.*

*Well, you do need to keep me more up to speed, Jason. We're not just business partners, I'm starting to feel that we might be friends,* she noted, giving him an amused look.

*Said the spider to the fly,* Jason retorted, which made her laugh. *You're far too dangerous to be my friend, Yila.*

*Oh come now, we haven't made this much money in years since me and Kumi teamed up on a few mutually beneficial opportunities, not since the days of the Chagga smuggling routes through the wasteland,* she retorted.

*Anyone who fills my bank account on Moridon is definitely my friend, Jason.*

He laughed helplessly. *So, money is your friend.*

*As well as whoever brings me more of it,* she replied shamelessly.

*So hopeless,* he teased as she slid down into the hot tub, *he leaned back against the lip. There's more to life than money.*

*Yes, yes, I know, the Templars say that money is the seed of sorrow within the tea of false happiness, but I disagree. Money may not bring happiness, but it certainly buys a girl a good time.*

Jason laughed as Kumi grinned and nodded in agreement. *I've been trying to teach him that for five years,* Kumi added, *lifting a leg out of the water and pushing her toes against his shoulder.*

*Alright, so, exactly what are you two up to today?*

*Oh come now, you think we're going to tell you?* Yila teased.

*Today you are.*

*Alright. Kumi and me are going to expand Karinne's metal ore sales into the Verutan sector,* she replied. *I have the connections and the available freighters, you have the materials. It's a mutually beneficial relationship.*

*Just keep it at least somewhat legal,* he warned. *I don't want the Verutans or the Haumda beating down my door in a hissy fit over your shenanigans.*

*Shenanigans? Us? Shenanigans?* Jason, *we don't do shenanigans,* Yila answered dryly. *We do complete and total chaos. Shenanigans are for amateurs.*

He laughed again, then took a glass of oye juice that Ayama offered as she came out. She served Kumi and Yila as well, then silently went back into the house.

*Faey nobles are about three things, babes,* Kumi grinned. *Power, money, and sex, and not always in that order.*

*I'm certainly getting two of those here,* Yila smiled.

*I'm not going to ask which, Jason sent dryly as he took a drink of his juice.*

*Coward.*

*That's me, Jason the chicken-hearted, he replied. Were you at court yesterday?*

*Yeah, and it's getting annoying, she replied. All the Siann wants to talk about is the war. There's not nearly enough gossip and plotting going on to keep me entertained.*

*That place could do with a lot less gossiping and plotting.*

*Really, Jason, they're the only things worth going to court for, she winked.*

*That does remind me. Feel like staying for dinner?*

*Sure, I don't have any pressing business back home.*

*I'll call Anya too, I haven't talked to her in a while, and I'd like to see her.*

*That works, I have a few ideas I'd like to discuss with her.*

*Get your claws out of Terran farming, Yila.*

*Who says I don't already have my claws into the Terran farming operations, Jason? she asked lightly, fluttering her eyelashes at him.*

*I wouldn't be surprised if you did, he replied blandly. Footsteps made him turn and look, and he saw Zachary padding up onto the deck. He was alone, carrying a hoverboard. Hey Zach, Jason called lovingly. What's up, kidlet?*

*My board broke. Can you fix it, Daddy?*

*Well, I might. Come say hello to Yila, right before you tell me why you're not in school.*

*School's over, Daddy, he replied.*

*Well, where's Rann and Danelle then? he asked.*

*Dunno. Hello, miss Grand Duchess, he said to Yila, bowing to her.*

*You can drop the formality, pippy, she smiled at him, reaching her hand out to him. Come join us! I haven't talked to you in a long time!*

*Well, I guess, he replied, setting his board down.*

*And she keeps you from leaving to fix his board, Kumi noted lightly to him privately.*

*She always has an angle, Jason replied with a light smile.*

*That's why I like her so much, Kumi grinned.*

Zachary was his most serious child, and with that seriousness came a certain amount of silence. Ilia had taught him the value of listening over talking, and he was usually very quiet in settings where he had to deal with strangers. He wasn't shy, he was just cautious. Yila surprised him a little with how warm she was to him, however, pulling him down onto her lap and putting her hands around him after he shed his clothes and got into the hot tub with them. He looked a little unsettled on Yila's lap, but he relaxed a little as Yila joked with him. Her real motives were revealed after about ten minutes, however, when she patted Zachary on the chest. *You know, Zachy, I have a daughter that you might really like, she noted to him, smiling down over his shoulder. Her name is Dara, and she's about two years older than you. I think I'll bring her to visit the next time I come, so you can meet her.*

*Don't even think you're getting a betrothal out of me, Yila, Jason warned with a light smile as Zachary leaned back against Yila's chest, looking up at her. My boys get to pick who they marry.*

*Well, I might like this Dara, and I won't know if I don't meet her, Zachary reasoned, looking up at Yila. Can you share what she looks like?*

*I certainly can, pips, she grinned, then she sent an image, a memory of her daughter. Dara had Yila's foxlike face, but her hair was jet black, not the brunette hair that Yila had, and her eyes were a dark violet. That made her very exotic and very pretty.*

Rann and Danelle arrived just then, both of them laughing as Danelle chased Rann across the deck and into the house. Kaera came up behind them and nodded to Jason. *All the children are back on the strip, your Grace, she reported.*

*Thanks, K. Any trouble?*



*Just the usual, your Grace.*

*Now then, let's talk about you meeting Dara, Yila sent, nuzzling Zachary a little bit. I can get her here tonight for this dinner your father's having, she noted.*

*Why not, Daddy? You say we should get to know the other houses, Zachary reasoned, looking at him. Well, played, minx, Jason sent privately to Yila, who just gave him an arch little smile. Alright, we'll try, he sent openly.*

*I'll inform Captain Aya. She has to approve any visitors to the Ducal compound at this time, Kaera interrupted.*

*Tell her I'm inviting Anya as well, he added.*

Yila set Zachary in Kumi's lap as she went off with Kaera to make the call, and Jason couldn't resist watching her walk away; she was a dangerous woman, but she was also *very* handsome. Kumi tickled Zachary, making him giggle and squirm. *Say it, say it!* she called. *Who rules you, Zachy? Who rules you? Stoppit!* he demanded, pushing at her. She got more than she bargained for, however, when he used his power to launch a column of water in her face. She let go of him, spluttering and coughing, and Jason both laughed and was a bit startled that he had that much control over his telekinetic abilities.

*Where'd you learn to do that, kidlet?*

*Do what?* he asked as he surfaced, then laughed when Kumi gave him a hard look.

Jason laughed. What a surprise lurking inside his quiet little son! *You just used telekinesis that even Kyri would be hard pressed to do, he grinned. Affecting liquids like the way you did is not easy!*

*I did?*

*Yeah, I'd say you did, Kumi grunted, spitting out a little water, then wiping more off her nose.*

*I think you and me are going to sit down and have some extra lessons, Jason told him. And that's what you get for being a bitch, he added teasingly to her.*

*This is being a bitch, she grinned in reply, reaching over and grabbing him, and she didn't let go.*

*No, that's you being you, he replied easily as Zach climbed back onto Kumi's lap. If you didn't grab my equipment when it's within arm's reach, I'd think you were sick.*

Yila returned faster than he expected, climbing back into the tub, this time beside Jason on his other side, and pulled Zachary back onto her lap. Zachary settled himself, his feet resting on Jason's legs, and endured it as Yila tousled his hair. Faey girls of any age could not resist touching his thick, coal black hair. *Your captain agreed to let Dara come, she informed him. I called my manor and told them to let your KMS take her. They're sending a ship for her now.*

*Sounds good. Aya, how about Anya?*

*She accepted and is on the way, Aya replied. Anya had rights to pass through the Karis Stargate as well, and she had her own ships to bring her. She told me to remind you that if you don't make some barbecued chicken, she'll tear up your contract.*

*That woman has an obsession with chicken, Jason chuckled. Now, Yila, let's have a little chat about you worming your way into my family.*

*Talk all you want, Jason, she sent with a sly smile. I know how to go over your head.*

*And he was checking out your ass when you got out of the tub, Kumi added, giving him a lascivious little smile.*

*Oh really? And did it meet your expectations, Jason? she asked with a smile.*

*Almost. You didn't wiggle it enough, he replied.*

*Well, we can try again, I suppose, she offered.*

*Nah, I'll just steal my looks when I think you're not looking. I like to see natural beauty, not women trying to shake it to get my attention.*

*Well, at least I have natural beauty, she noted to Kumi.*

*That's just his way of saying he'd bone you, Yila.*

*Oh really? Let's talk about that a little bit, Jason,* she sent sensually, leaning against the lip of the tub.

*Kumi,* he sent warningly.

*Oh come on, you were checking out her ass like you wanted to yank her back in the tub and make her squeal like a chabi,* she pressed.

*Well, that certainly makes me happy,* Yila laughed. *A girl likes to know that men think she's worth it.*

It wasn't all fun and games, however. He sat in on a conference with the generals, and they told him that they'd received final clearance and would have the invasion fleet on the move in four hours. About 72% of their active fleet would be going out there, most of them towing external cargo containers holding automated weapons that had been built for the operation, and the system would be packing some fearsome defenses as well. They fully intended to *hold* PR-371 and colonize it after the war was over, establish another extreme distance colony, and they'd take a Stargate out there after they had the Consortium out of the picture. So many of the defenses they were taking were intended to protect the system long after the war was over. The interdictor on its own was protection enough on their side of the galaxy, but given that the Consortium had taken the FTL tech they were going to use against Karis from the conquered race over in the PR sector, they couldn't *only* rely on interdiction to protect the system over on the other side.

That was what the twins were getting ready to go back to doing. They were about to resume searching for long-lost Karinnes, but they were also going to send out probes to search for worlds like Exile, temperate, life-sustaining planets out in the middle of nowhere that they could colonize and use as a base to search those sectors of the galaxy in greater detail. The difference was, instead of going in a scout ship, now they were going to be doing it from a squadron of a tactical cruiser, a standard cruiser, and three destroyers, and they'd be taking an interdictor with them everywhere they went. They would arrive at a system, turn on the interdictor, conduct their scans, then turn it off and move on. They had the cruiser chosen for the mission in drydock now, emptying some of its internal space to make enough room for it to carry an interdictor in a huge cargo bay, though it would have to be launched in order for it to operate. The cruiser would have

reduced fighting capability, converted into a science vessel and carrying the interdicator for protection, but that's what the tactical cruiser and destroyers were for. The tactical cruisers didn't follow the same philosophy as the tactical battleships, they didn't trade off fighter bay space for extra weaponry. They did sport four particle beams and two plasma torpedo launchers on top of bristling with multiple rail cannon and pulse batteries, but they gained those weapons by increasing the ship size rather than sacrificing bay space. The tactical cruisers were 21% larger than the Mark II cruiser, nearly the size of a heavy cruiser but still handled like a standard cruiser, and still carried the standard complement of 27 Wolf fighters and 14 Gladiators.

Jason had decided that the house needed to expand, and how they were going to do it was by spreading out, having a planet or system in every quadrant of the galaxy, giving them galactic-spanning capability. They weren't going to fall into this trap again, where an enemy could hit them, but they couldn't hit back. They had Exile in the N quadrant, they'd soon have PR-371 in the P quadrant, they'd have at least two more systems in each of those quadrants, and at least three house systems in the Q quadrant. That would give them reasonable response time to any part of the galaxy save the core...but nobody lived near the core anyway except the Kimdori. It would also allow them to produce a hell of a lot of food, since they'd be searching for unclaimed terrestrial planets. With the Kizzik to manage farming efforts, the Karinnes would be the breadbasket of the home quadrant, making sure nobody ever went hungry...and nobody would dare go to war with one of their primary food producers.

After getting through the briefings and meetings, he went back out to meet Anya, who had just arrived, and also meet Yila's daughter, Dara. Dara was just as cute in person as she was in pictures, a lot taller than Jason expected and quite athletic. Athleticism wasn't unusual for little girls, but Dara took it to extremes, having actual muscular definition and was amazingly strong. "She trains using gravity inducers to increase her weight," Yila told him after he met the little girl, and she and Zach were picked up by Rann and Danelle to go try out their body surfboards. The waves on their beach weren't often big enough for actual surfing. "She's almost obsessed with batchi. She wants to play professionally."

*And you're going to let her do that?*

*She's my fourth born, I guess I can let her pursue her dream a little bit. Besides, having a famous pro batchi player in the house might be useful, at least from a public relations point of view.*

*Is she good?*

*They put her in the next age group because she dominates the field, she answered smugly. And she still dominates the field. She can score a goal from the midcourt line.*

*At eight? Holy shit.*

*I told you, Jayce, she's good. She's also started playing Terran tennis, says it helps her aim with a batchi stick.*

*She should play golf.*

*Ah, I like that game! Yila sent happily. Secretary Kim took a few of us house leaders out for a game the last time we made a state visit to Terra, and I really enjoyed it. I'm having a course built back at our estate on Tamiri. Tamiri was the home planet of the Trefanis. It's very relaxing.*

*Nothing like hitting the links after slitting throats and swindling pensioners, eh Yila?*

*She gave him a tart look. Don't start with me. I'm not as afraid of your My Little Pony as I once was.*

*Uh oh. Sounds like I need to remind you how nasty I am, Jason sent teasingly, patting her on the cheek. He gasped when she reached down and grabbed him by the testicles, and she kept a firm grip.*

*Never tease a woman when she's within arm's reach of these, you silly man, she taunted, making him wince.*

*Any excuse to get your hands on me, he retorted.*

*Who needs an excuse? she winked.*

*He did talk a little shop with both Yila and Anya as more and more of the girls came in from work, heard about the barbecue, and started getting involved. It certainly wasn't a very official meeting, since they were sunbathing nude on the beach, watching the kids body surf or swim or play in the sand as Sora coasted around on her little hoverbike. Anya and Yila*

had entered something of a friendship since the radiation shield ceremony, and Yila was spreading her claws into House Suralle, getting access to a Highborn house and the advantages they enjoyed. Jason stayed out of it, since it wasn't really his concern. He discussed the upcoming farming season on the northern hemisphere with Anya and some of the changes Grik'zzk had sent down, introducing a few extra extra-terrestrial crops into North America for the first time now that environmental impact studies had been completed, in case the plants started growing wild outside the farm belts. Anya and Yila discussed some business they had while Jason enjoyed the sun, then the kids came over and made them stop such ridiculous things to go out and have fun. They swam a bit, then helped Ryla, Riza, Miza, and Kyri build a sandcastle, then Danelle joined them. Yila noticed how close Danelle and Jason were, and commented on it after she decided to go body surfing with Rann. *She's as good as my own*, Jason answered with a fond smile at Danelle. *She spends as much time at my house as she does at her own. Myleena's always so incredibly busy, and I rather like babysitting her.*

*Must be hard on Danelle.*

*She understands. Myleena's very busy, but she's also very loving and attentive to Danelle when she's here. Danelle doesn't feel like she's being abandoned.*

*That's good*, Anya noted. *It's hard for a child when she feels her mother doesn't have time for her.*

*Myleena makes it clear that her always being so busy is my fault*, Jason chuckled.

There was a high-pitched whine, and a sudden reddish tint washed over the beach. Jason looked up and saw that the perimeter shield was activating, cascading down and then solidifying into a visible hard shield that extended about 100 feet out into the water. *Aya, what's going on? The shield just came up.*

*Miaari sent down the order*, she answered.

He had a finger to his gestalt immediately. *Lemme find out what's going on*, he told Anya and Yila. *[Miaari, what's going on?]*

*[We have something. The shield stays up until I give the order.]*

*[What is it?]*

*[I'll tell you when it's over.]*

“Pfft,” he grunted. *Miaari ordered it.*

*And that means?*

*That I won't have the faintest bloody fucking idea until she decides I need to know,* he answered. *She likes to keep her secrets, even from me.*

*I used to envy you, having Miaari as your ambassador. I don't anymore,* Yila sent impishly.

*Ain't that the fucking truth,* he agreed, which made Anya laugh.

The shield wasn't the only defensive protocol Aya ordered. She put her guards on stage one alert, and that included bringing out the Wolves and Gladiators. Kyva and three members of the KBB were summoned from the Karsa barracks, and the shield was turned soft so they could step through it. Eight Gladiators were stationed at strategic points around the strip, and the four Ducal Wolves were prowling the air over the shield, their weapons hot and ready to shoot at *anything* that didn't have permission to be there. The residents just kept going with their plans for a barbecue, since Aya hadn't ordered them inside. Jyslin got home not long after the shield was turned on, and she joined him out on the loungers, chatting with Anya and Yila. Ayama started both the grills, and soon the smell of hot dogs, hamburgers, bratwurst, chicken, and *huaga* was drifting across the strip, enclosed by the hard shield. He wandered over to filch something and saw she was also grilling corn on the cob and something wrapped in foil, either potatoes or *ruga* roots, a Makati vegetable that wasn't as bland as the rest of their fare. Ayama slapped his hand when he reached for a freshly grilled brat, and he had to laugh. He backed off, waited for her to start flipping a piece of chicken, and stole the brat using his telekinetic ability. She threatened him with the spatula, chasing him off the deck as he laughed and returned back to his lounge with his prize.

*Is she making chicken?* Anya asked eagerly.

*With spicy barbecue sauce, just the way you like it,* he affirmed, taking a bite of his bratwurst.

*Fantastic!* she exclaimed.

Surin and the guards set up tables on the beach, and they all started to eat, about 30 of them, including the guards nipping burgers, dogs, or pieces of chicken or *huaga* when they had the chance. Anya managed to make a royal mess of herself with the barbecue sauce, even getting it on her bare breasts somehow. Ayama and Surin kept refilling the platters with fresh grilled goods, keeping them going until they couldn't eat anymore. The adults chatted, the kids ate and then ran out to play and then came back to eat more, and they generally had a pretty good time.

After he ate his fill, however, he did go up to his office and got hold of Miaari again. She blew him off, so he went back outside and chatted some more with Anya and Yila, until Miaari stalked up onto the beach in person. She gave him a single look, then walked past and motioned for him to follow. He hurried after her as she took him up to the office, then she put it in secure mode. "The Parri were right," she said right off. "There was definitely something here."

"Well? Spit it out, woman."

"It was one of the energy beings," she told him, which made him widen his eyes and whistle. "It seems that each of them has their own little special tricks. One of them can look across the galaxy, well, this one had the ability to possess corporeal beings."

"You mean take control of them?"

"From the *inside*," she nodded. "We caught it by sheer luck, one of my added Kimdori brushed past it at the Karsa barracks. As soon as he touched it, he knew it wasn't a Faey's mind. He reported in, and we locked you down as we chased it."

"Did you get it?" he asked eagerly.

"I wish," she sighed. "It changed bodies to get away from us, but we had the barracks on alert and under sequester. It took nearly three hours to find it again, and by then it was already readying to escape."

"Short version, Miaari!"

"It's dead," she told him. "Believe it or not, the Parri *shaman* showed up once we had it pinned down and trapped in a hard shield. She did something that forced it out of its host body, questioned it for about ten minutes, and



then the thing committed suicide once it broke free of the *shaman's* control.”

“Shit,” he growled. “How long was it here?”

“Just a couple of days. It was here to do two things, Jason. Steal a destroyer, and kill you,” she declared. “They wanted one of our destroyers to take apart and reverse engineer how we jump the interdictors. They also wanted to kill you, since killing you would cripple the house. It had already arranged for an assassin to come in, who was about to try to get into the system. We have the assassin under surveillance and will take her into custody when she attempts to travel to Karis. Had she somehow managed to evade screening, she might have managed to get into a position to kill you,” she growled. “A single assassin with a railgun could assassinate you from *miles* away with the proper aiming equipment. An oversight I intend to rectify quickly.”

“How were they going to steal a destroyer?”

“It wouldn’t be that hard. Destroyers can actually run without a crew if they’re rigged for automation, and that would have given them a chance to jump it to Consortium space, if they could get out to jump distance before they were stopped. Their plan was to have the being get control of a pilot or engineer, board one of the new destroyers parked outside of Kosigi that’s already rigged for automated operation, so it only needs a pusher pilot, then jump it to Trieste.”

“Naturally,” Jason grunted. “And if it was at the Karsa base, it just had to hang around and wait for a crew change.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’ve recommended that ships waiting outside Kosigi have their jump drives both manually disabled and held on computer lockout controlled by central command until the ship is manned by a crew.”

“A good idea, I’ll back it,” he nodded.

“Fortunately for us, the creature had no opportunity to send back any intelligence of anything it learned here,” she said. “We keep too firm a control on our gravband frequencies and interstellar transmitters, and the one time it tried to transmit an unauthorized message, the automated anti-espionage protocols killed it and triggered an alert. That was what doomed

it. That brought several Kimdori to the base, and they happened to find it by random chance.”

“Luck favors the prepared,” Jason stated. “Why did it try to use our comm?”

“Because to get here, it could bring nothing,” she answered. “It possessed a worker that was stationed in Kosigi and somehow managed to get down here, probably taking over a dropship pilot. And now we know the energy beings can’t communicate over vast distances the way the Parri seem to be able to do. If it could, it would not have tried to use our comm to send data. It must have learned something so important that it risked sending a message, and that led to its capture.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, frowning. That had been *damn* close, and if not for the Parri, they’d have had no idea that thing was on the planet. It very well might have actually managed to steal a destroyer, and that could be potentially disastrous. They could have reverse engineered their power system, which would have given them the ability to mimic the modifications to make their ships able to jump through an interdictor. And what was just as bad, they’d have gotten their hands on Karinne particle beam technology.

“I’ve also enacted changes to our screening policy to prevent this from ever happening again,” she added. “With us finding spies that evaded Kimdori screening and now this energy being slipping through, it’s obvious that our current system is a failure. I also intend to rescreen *every* off-system worker systematically. And thanks to some scans while we had that thing in the shield, we can actually scan for it. Even within a host, it gives off a unique energy signature our sensors can detect. We’re currently in the middle of a high sensitivity sweep of the planet, searching for another one. Once that sweep is complete, I’ll allow the shield to be lowered.”

“Alright. You’d better inform Denmother. I’m going back to the barbecue.”

“Evil man, giving me work while you indulge in pleasure,” she said with a light smile.

“Your fault for locking me in here. If I’m gonna be in jail, I’m gonna enjoy it,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “Actually, I need to get rid of

Anya and Yila. We have some things to talk about. Stay here, Mee, we'll talk after I get them to go home."

"I'll call Denmother from here," she said with an apprehensive sigh.

At least they could joke about it. Miaari would take some heat for allowing that thing onto the planet, but the fact that she stopped it before it did anything was the balancer. Personally, Jason was both relieved and concerned. He was relieved that it was found and neutralized with no damage to the house or any member but concerned that these energy beings seemed to have some serious tricks that made them exceedingly dangerous. One of them could see all the way across the galaxy, and now they find out that one of them could possess people like some mythical spirit. It had been stopped before it could steal a destroyer or kill him, but the fact that it got as far as it did was a reason to worry.

But, one good thing came of it...now there were only *three* of those things in this galaxy now. It would have been far better if they'd captured it, so they could get every bit of information it had about the Consortium, but he wouldn't cry too much that it was dead. Dead was better than escaped and free.

He rejoined the barbecue as it waned down to simple talk and only a few people left on the beach, as Ayama and Surin picked up the leftovers that they'd be eating for the next three days or so. Anya and Yila were still there, and Dara and Zachary were riding Sora's hoverbike, Zachary driving it and Dara with her arms wrapped around him as he zoomed them to and fro along the water's edge. *I hope he knows how to ride that thing*, Yila sent cautiously.

*Of course he does, Sora taught all her brothers and sisters*, Jason assured her as he rejoined them, sitting on his lounge beside Jyslin, who immediately sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. *Hey there, sexy*, he sent lovingly, putting his arm around her and setting the other in her lap, then kissing her under her pointed ear. *Been keeping them in line?*

*You know it*, she giggled audibly in reply, kissing him on the forehead.

*What did Miaari want?* Yila asked.

*To tell me why they raised the shield.*

*And?*

*Not anytime soon, you nosy wench, he replied slyly.*

*Wench? Watch who you're calling a wench, buster, she replied tartly.*

*If there were ever a truer word to describe a Faey, it's wench, he teased. Bitch comes in a close second, but wench is the clear winner.*

*Now I can live with bitch, Yila nodded to Anya, who laughed in her nasally, annoying voice. And I hate to say it, but I'll have to leave soon. I've wasted most of the day here when I didn't mean to.*

*Eh, everyone has to stop and have a little fun now and again. And sure, you guys can go, I think I'd like to have a little fun with my wife, he told them, boldly pawing her breasts with his free hand, then brazenly sticking his hand under her pubic hair.*

*She laughed. You basically just guaranteed that's going to happen, buster, she warned. No man grabs me there and gets away with it, she trailed off huskily.*

*Well, now I know how to drag you back into bed in the morning.*

*As if you didn't already know, she winked at him.*

*Well, I think we've been dismissed, Anya, Yila sent lightly.*

*It seems so, she agreed as Jyslin kissed him, quite seriously. Let's go arrange it with Aya so we can go home.*

*Good idea. "Dara! Dara, it's time to go!" she shouted, then resorted to sending in a way her child could hear her when she failed to respond.*

*I'll talk to you two later, Jason sent.*

*Definitely later, Jyslin agreed, her sending turning hungry. Let's go to our room before we show them way more than they need to see, she ordered.*

*I won't mind, Yila teased, then she laughed when Jyslin got up and grabbed Jason by the hand, and then started dragging him towards the house.*

*Jyslin was a bit shocked when he wasn't half as amorous once they got inside. He held her up at the door and waited until Anya and Yila were on a*

dropship and on the way home, then he kissed her and patted her shoulder. *Give me five minutes, love*, he told her. *I had to send them on their way without alerting them that anything was wrong.*

*Oh, if you think you can—*

*I fully intend to come to the bedroom, just give me five minutes. Think of it as getting ready for me to arrive*, he sent lightly.

*I'm setting my timer*, she warned, touching her interface.

*At least don't start it 'til you get to the bedroom; I have to talk to Miaari.*

*Well...alright.*

He went back up to his office and found she hadn't left yet. She was talking to Zaa, whose hologram was pacing angrily in front of Miaari as she stood with her tail drooping and her head bowed meekly. "Good, I got here in time," he said. "Don't blame Miaari for all of it, Denmother."

"Oh, I do not, but the screening failure is most *definitely* her fault," she said icily, which made Miaari wince a little. "However, I approve of her proposed changes to seal the hole through which four enemies have slipped."

"I don't have much time, I kinda did something to Jyslin and now she's counting down to explosion," he said. "Denmother, do our enemies *know* that we've killed their spy?"

"I do not think so, there is no indication within their comm networks."

"Good. Denmother, they're expecting a Karinne destroyer to jump to Trieste. We should *give them one*," he said intensely.

"A trap?"

Jason nodded. "We custom build a destroyer and fill it with Consortium gear we stripped off the other ships to make it operational enough to get there. We jump it to Trieste, then, when they come after it, we set off the trap. We can blow it up, we can do whatever, but we need to decide quickly. Could you come to Karis so we can convene 3D and discuss it face to face? Whatever we do, we have to do it quickly, before they realize we've eliminated their agent and smell out the trap. We need maximum damage."

“I will be there in two hours,” she nodded. “And we will further discuss this matter when I arrive, Miaari,” she added frostily, just before her hologram winked out.

“Well, at least she has two hours to cool off and has something else to think about,” Jason said, patting Miaari on the shoulder. “Let me go placate Jyslin. Call Myli and assemble the Legion for a meeting in two hours, alright?”

She chuckled. “I will do so. You are truly a friend, Jason Karinne,” she told him, licking his cheek.

“Hey, I’m considering doing something to force Denmother to give me Jinaami too,” he winked. “I want *all* the cleverest Kimdori working for me. Now, let me get in there and deal with Jys.”

“What did you do that makes this so urgent?”

“I convinced Yila and Anya to go home by getting frisky with her in front of them, so they didn’t think anything was wrong,” he replied. “Now she’s all worked up, so I have to face my punishment like a man.”

“Punishment,” she noted clinically, giving him an amused look.

“I’ll endure it with stoic fortitude,” he replied dryly.

“I’ll make sure she knows you said that,” Miaari teased, feeling a little better.

Jyslin had been quite serious about timing him. *You only had twenty seconds left*, she demanded archly when he entered the room.

*Well, we only have two hours then we have an emergency Legion meeting*, he told her. *So, let’s get this over with.*

*Excuse me?* she asked in a dangerous tone.

He laughed. *Gotcha.*

*Bastard.*

*Your one and only. Now c’mere.*

Jyslin gave him a fun time, and then they armored up, Jason got special permission to leave the strip from Miaari, and Aya took him to the Shimmer Dome...which was probably the only reason she let him leave. The

Shimmer Dome's ever-present shield was powerful protection. The corvette landed and they disembarked, then entered 3D to find most of the crew, Miaari, Kiaari, and Denmother Zaa already there. Jason greeted Kiaari fondly, letting her put her hand on his neck in greeting. "When did you get here?"

"Ten minutes ago. Denmother felt I needed to attend this meeting."

"Well, you'll definitely be handy. Let's sit down and get down to business."

Jason explained their window of opportunity, then he let some of the most evil thinkers on Karis run away with the idea. Ideas ranged from totally obliterating the entire planet using a hull filled with antimatter bombs to a trojan horse to try to take back Trieste using some kind of pulse, signal, or weapon that would disable the thousands of Consortium warships in the system. The Kimdori supplied information that kept their ideas within the bounds of actual practicality, allowing them to refine their ideas down until they had a working concept.

Nanites.

Bo had come up with the idea, and they all agreed that it was the most practical one. They would fill the ship with nanites set up to run on their power system, which would be ejected out into space once the destroyer arrived. They would certainly scan the ship before getting close to it, realize it was a fake, then most likely destroy it, but it would be perfect for delivering the nanites into the system. Consortium sensors couldn't detect them when they were powered down, picking them up only as microscopic space dust, which would let them spread around the planet. They would attach to the hulls of Consortium ships by static electricity, and that would cause them to turn on. The nanites would invade the ships and take residence within them but *would not* do anything. They'd just be in the ships, attempt to spread to the crews, attempt to spread to other ships, like a virus. There were 9,450 Consortium ships at Trieste, the majority of the fleet that came from Andromeda, as well as an absolute slough of Faey and Karinne built weapon platforms on top of the cheap copies the Consortium had been building as well.

And that was what was so fucking clever about it. Myleena furthered the idea by promising that she could make the nanites behave entirely differently when they invaded the weapon platforms. They would try to disable ships and Consortium-built platforms, but they would *take over* the Imperium-built weapon platforms the Consortium had taken from the Shio, then turn around and have them attack the Consortium-built platforms and their other defenses. There were nearly 1,000 Faey-built platforms there, and if those platforms attacked the Consortium's own defenses, it would cause chaos. It would be easy for them to take them over, since they were built using Faey technology and Faey computers. Myleena could hack an Imperium computer in her sleep and was certain she could program the nanites to do the same.

It was deliciously insidious. If they could keep the nanites spread out enough to where the Consortium didn't notice an area where their broadcast power was suffering unusual drain on its energy field, those nanites could infect ships and platforms and severely weaken any defense the Consortium mounted when they attacked Trieste. They could get back the last planet the enemy held in their sector, taking away a base of operations within close proximity to Confederate space, which would deny them the ability to launch FTL missions from Trieste to get around the interdictors.

Jason approved it, and the Legion gathered up their tools and headed for Kosigi. They would take over one of the in-production destroyers and take out everything Karinne and replace it with just enough Consortium gear stripped from their other captured ships to allow it to jump to Trieste. Siyhaa would build a computer that would do the job without giving the Consortium anything they didn't already have. Jason, of course, wasn't allowed to go. He kissed Jyslin goodbye and then was taken back home, back to safety, where all he could do was watch and wait.

He was in time to witness the other important thing going on for the war. From his office, he watched as the fleet was given final orders, and then headed out to begin their three-day journey to PR-371. It was led by the *Aegis*, and it numbered over 400 military ships and freighters carrying the gear and weapons they would employ. Conventional weapon platforms, an interdictor, solar accumulators, CMS stealth meson cannons, gravity guns, Buzzsaws, marble bombs, as well as a build crew that would start building an orbital station and two military bases on the planet's surface. It



was the beginning of their new policy, the colonization for quick reaction policy, as well as claiming arable planets to increase the food supply in their sector.

He watched the ships until they jumped out, then sighed and sat at his desk, rubbing his temples. At least he knew *this* headache had nothing to do with brain damage. His girls were going out again, going out and putting themselves in danger at his behest, and doing it gladly. The enemy had sent one of their most important to Karis to kill him and steal a destroyer, but they had failed thanks to the Parri. And what wasn't forgotten, Dahnai had sent three spies to Karis, to try to steal Karinne technology. That...he would have to deal with. He wouldn't enjoy it, but he couldn't let her get away with it.

She was just doing what they all wanted to do, though. Any of them in the Confederation were probably trying to find some way to get a spy on Karis to get their hands on Karinne technology. He'd opened the planet's northern continent to factory construction and Kosigi to shipbuilders. It had been the right decision, but now he was dealing with the consequences of increasing Confederate industrial output. The original Karinnes had managed to keep their technology secret when outsiders were at the Academy, so he was fairly sure they'd do the same.

He leaned back in his chair, looking out the window. He could sense that this war had entered a new phase, now that the Karinnes were going on the offensive, moving to attack the Consortium in their claimed territory on the far side of the galaxy. They would attack Trieste and kick them out of the sector, then prosecute the war all the way across the galaxy, fighting until they completely destroyed all Consortium presence in their galaxy and sent what was left of them running back to Andromeda with their tails between their legs. Then, they would have two to three years to prepare for the arrival of the Syndicate, and the possible second war that would ensue with their arrival. Denmother had told him that they were *worse* than the Consortium, so he had no doubt that war would be the end result.

Either way, it was going to be a fucking mess.

He closed his eyes and gathered his thoughts. The daily briefing with the leaders was in about an hour, and he wanted to be ready for it, both mentally and physically.

The day was almost over, yet there were still many things to do.

Deep under the low, grassy hills of Kosiningi, within the core room, Cybi hovered in her holographic form, looking at a hologram of Jason as he sat at his desk, leaning back and eyes closed. Her glowing eyes showed no indication of where she was looking, if indeed she was looking anywhere at all, for at that moment she could have been accessing any of the millions of cameras on and around the planet or delving into the pathways of CivNet. She had come of the habit of manifesting the hologram of physical self almost all the time now, leaving it hovering motionless within the core room when it wasn't projected through a floating camera to be in the presence of Jason or some other person in need of her personal attention.

But at this time, the need for the projection of self was important. The large, black-furred Kereth stood beside her projection within the room, having delivered his final report to her in person, as she had commanded. He stood there with arms folded, tail swishing absently as he looked at the image of Jason, then glanced at Cybi. "You don't have to worry about him, Cybi," he assured her. "He may suffer an occasional minor headache, but no other side effects."

*"How long will it take?"*

"Three to five months," he replied. "If Songa catches it in its early stages, she might try to interfere."

*"I have access to her medical scanners. She will not catch it."*

"Just keep a close watch on him. You know how volatile Generation DNA can be when it's forcibly manipulated. The long history of cancer in his family is a glaring indicator of that. Make sure you scan him for cancer at least once a week. It will appear quickly and spread like wildfire within him."

*"I will ensure he remains well. Thank you, Kereth."*

"I am ever at the service of a CBIM, my Lady," he replied easily, then he was quiet a long moment. "Are you sure this was the right path? Perhaps we should have had Rahne undergo this procedure first? After all, they are

the only two who are susceptible to being harmed by you in a merge. The children share Faey synaptic maps, they're immune to the damage."

*"No. Jason is the most compatible with me. We have the strongest merge. For this to work, it had to be him. The safety of the house depends on it."*

"But the risk. If we lose him, the house will fall apart."

*"I have every confidence in your skill, friend Kereth,"* she answered easily. *"We also cannot afford to lose him if he must merge with me again to defend the planet. I will not see him harmed by my hand again, even if it was accidental."*

"If things get out of my predicted course, call me immediately, Lady Cybi," he warned.

*"I will take good care of him, Kereth. He is not just my Grand Duke, he is also my closest friend. I will watch him every second and keep him healthy and well."*

"Very well, Lady Cybi. I'll leave it to you and return to Kimdori Prime."

*"Good journey to you,"* she told him without looking at him. The tall Kimdori stalked out gracefully, leaving her alone to perhaps stare at the hologram before her, or perhaps not. She was absolutely motionless for nearly ten minutes, then the hologram shimmered and vanished.

The appearance of her then shifted and floated past the core at the center of the room, shifting to where it usually hovered, motionless, when she was busy with other matters. It was from there that she began her vigil, watching her Grand Duke every second, keeping scanners on him to watch for any cancerous cells that appeared because of the Kimdori stem virus within him, slowly altering the DNA in every cell of his body in a very small, very subtle manner, correcting the minor genetic error that had caused her to harm him in the merge. It was a genetic flaw that Jason and Rahne shared, and a flaw that only Jason and Rahne suffered, that would cause them harm if they exerted too much power in a merge. Rahne too would undergo this therapy once Jason had completed it, and it would be done quietly, so Jason would not know about it.

He had forbidden her to restart the Program. This was not the Program but altering her Grand Duke's DNA to heal him of the flaw that harmed him in the merge would certainly fall within those restrictions, should he know what she was doing. For his own good, she would keep this secret.

Her devotion to Jason as a friend and a Grand Duke was eclipsed only by her duty to the house. For the good of the house, this had to be done.

But *only* if it was Jason. She would not be denied the right, the duty, and the pleasure of joining her mind to his once again, to know what it *felt* like to be alive, to almost feel as if she had a *soul*.

This had gone beyond programming.

*Thus ends the story of  
Tribulation.*

*In the next story,  
Secession, Jason and the  
Karinnes escalate the war  
against the Consortium,  
even as old hatreds and  
machinations from within  
threatens to tear the  
Confederation apart.*

*And there will be other  
stories to tell.*