

UNIFICATION

Subjugation *Book 03*

By James 'Fel' Galloway

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Chapter 1

Daira, 25 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

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Daira, 25 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

KMS Abarax, en route to coordinates CM117 212X-334Y-105Z, system designation Exile

Jason was not a fan of extended hyperspace travel.

They couldn't make the jump all at once, because the planet Aura named Exile was halfway across the galaxy. It would take nearly 47 minutes of continuous hyperspace travel to reach the planet, and none of them could have handled such a long journey in one stage. So, Sevi and the *Abarax*, carrying the Grand Duke Karinne, Meya and Myra, Aya, Shen, Ryn, Deri, Suri and 10 others of the Ducal Guard, First Lieutenant Kyva and 4 other Gladiator pilots along with their mecha to serve as major ground power in case of an emergency, and Chieftess Aura of the Exiled, made the journey in 15 stages of three minute jumps and a final two minute jump, with twenty minutes of rest between each jump. They were in a hurry to get there, but so much hyperspace exposure so fast was not worth the risk, that was something that was only done in emergencies. So, they were enduring long jumps, and then taking a break between so everyone could recover from the long jump. Jason spent the time between jumps getting updates from home, for they were still giving him regular hourly reports on repair status, and now interdicator status. The interdicator was now their utmost priority, even over getting their fleet back in fighting shape, so he wanted regular reports on how the construction was going.

Slowly. None of them had ever built one before, and they were having to build many of the components that it ran on from scratch. Myleena was all but living in Kosigi now, personally overseeing the construction of those components with her entire engineering team, except for Jyslin. Jyslin was staying at home, watching Rann and Danelle. Jyslin and the Marines often looked after each other's children, so Jyslin was more than happy to look after Myleena's daughter while she was busy. The interdicator would be done in about three weeks, and those were three weeks that Jason would barely sleep.

When not keeping track of what was going on back at home, Jason learned much about Exile from Aura. They sat in his cabin, him and her and five of his guards, as she showed them the city using images the *Scimitar* had taken when it landed, pointing out all the important landmarks. The city was built on the shore of their island on a terraced slope with a highly salty brine lake on one side and farmland and plantations of fruit-bearing and utilitarian trees on the other. There were three flat areas with very gentle slopes between them, and the larger buildings were constructed on the flat terraces while the gentle sloping land between them was populated by private dwellings. They had industry in their town, located at the top terrace near the Hall of Council, their government building, consisting of what automation they had, their small factory that made silver wire on one side and their mills on the other, both textile and grain grinding mills. All of their factories were powered by steam generated in copper boilers; the only metal resources the Exiled had were silver, copper, lead, and zinc, and none of them were sturdy enough for heavy industry. They had made due with the four

metals they had, alloying the copper, lead, and zinc together to form a metal that, while nowhere near as sturdy and effective as steel, was nevertheless just sturdy enough to allow them to build a few things. There were hot springs at the top terrace and a large stream that bubbled out of the ground nearby and then flowed down to the sea, which served as their main source of fresh water and source of energy for several mills, which used waterwheels. They used large windmills for producing electricity, located on a high knob above their farms and plantations, and then their hand-made silver and copper wire spread it through their town along hand-cut and shaped poles. They utilized steam power, using massive boilers built using their alloy that was thick enough to contain the pressure, and that steam power was conducted through copper piping to drive machinery in their small factories, but instead of cutting down their forest to get the heat, they used their advanced knowledge of chemistry, mining elements out of the mountains and combining them to produce intense heat. They didn't have an abundance of metal resources, but their island was rich in many other elements like phosphorous, sulphur, and carbon, which was put to good use by their advanced knowledge of chemistry.

The island was very large, about half the size of the Japanese island of Kyushu, and could support a population of millions, but the Exiled remained in their one small area, leaving the rest of the island to nature. Their island had four active volcanoes on it and a very small yet rugged chain of mountains running from east to west across its center, effectively bisecting the island. There had been reports and rumors that the *Gruug*, their main competitors and enemies on the planet, had spread to their island on the northern side... but how, they had no idea. Aura said that the *Gruug* were primitive and violent, but Jason suspected it was possible, given the images he saw. The northern tip of their island was only about three days from the mainland in a canoe, only about sixty miles away. It was entirely possible that the primitive *Gruug* had built boats and settled the island. The city was built in a natural harbor, for there was a fourth, much steeper terrace that dropped down into the water, deep enough for the *Scimitar* to land and pull up to one of the wharves they'd built for their fishing vessels, which were as intricate as any one would see, sailing vessels utilizing electricity generated from fans on the masts. It had to be frustrating for them to have the *knowledge* to build steam-powered ships, but not having the *resources* to do it. Their copper-zinc-lead alloy was sturdy enough to use as a boiler, but only when it was so thick that the weight made it impractical to use on a ship.

After Aura showed them the island, she discussed her people with him. She explained that, like any Faey anywhere, they couldn't be grouped together. She was sure that most of the Exiled would want to return to Karis, but there would be some that wouldn't entirely be enthusiastic about it. Some would go only because of their spouse, some would go only to fear being left behind, and there would be some that would absolutely refuse to leave their home. Those called themselves Exiled, but to them it was just an empty title. Their world was their home, and they would not leave it. Jason and Aura discussed what they would do for those who left behind, since Jason had no intention of just leaving them to fate. There were supplies to be left behind, and the main ones would be industrial replicators capable of replicating titanium and heavier elements that they could use to build machines and equipment that had previously been denied them. Other equipment would be given to them, but out of pro-

tection for his own people, nothing that was Karinne technology. There would be no singularity power plants, no pulse weapons, no interfaces, nothing of the sort. They would be left with Faey technology, not Karinne technology, all of it stock Imperium equipment, bought right off the shelves. They would leave them a threaded hyperspace communicator that would let them communicate in real time between Exile and Karis, hoverpods to move heavy equipment, farming equipment, water reclamation equipment, replicators, medical equipment, basic equipment that a colonizing ship might need. And they would also be left weaponry. They would be left not with MPACs or the inferior hot plasma weapons, but with railguns, since they'd have a replicator on hand to manufacture unlimited ammunition for them. Railguns were actually rather low-tech as tech went, they were just an ingenious adaptation of that low tech to match higher tech weaponry. Jason was willing to supply them, but he could not leave them anything that could be captured and used against the house. They could have no technology that Karinne protected, nothing that anyone could not get by walking into a store on any Imperial planet and buying, except the railguns. They would also be left 20 Karinnes that would train them in using the new equipment, who would stay for three months before returning to Karis, and then those who remained at Exile would basically be on their own. Exile was too far for the KMS to quickly respond if they were attacked, and Jason would make sure to impress that fact on them. If they called for help, that help would not arrive for nearly 67 minutes, given eight 6 minute jumps, the longest jump time usually permitted to Faey, with just a couple of minutes of rest between them. For those 67 minutes, they were on their own.

But there was only so much they could go over before they had everything covered. They were in their last rest cycle before jumping again, and it was only natural for them to drift into personal conversation. Aura had already met Jason's family and seen his friends and his life, but she had more questions, some of them quite insightful. *So, you have a wife, an amu dozei, and an amu dorai, but you have five children by neither your amu dozei or amu dorai?*

Yeah. Before we found Rahne, everyone thought that I was the last human descendent of the Karinne nobles. The girls didn't like that, they felt that one accident would make my line extinct. So, they baked up this harebrained scheme to give me children from multiple mothers, to protect my line. I have five kids, Aura. Rann is the oldest and is the heir, then there's Kyri, the daughter of Yana. Then there's Aran, the son of Maya. Then there's Sora, the daughter of Zora. And my youngest is Zach, the son of me and Ilia. I admit I wasn't too happy with their plan, but I can't deny that I'm not ecstatic with the result. I love my children more than life itself.

I remember them from the dinner, she mused. The one with green hair was Aran, yes? That's him, though it's been darkening lately. My son Rann, he was born with orange hair, then it turned red, and now it's slowly turning blond. I wish it'd make up its mind, he sent with an audible chuckle. What about you?

Well, I was married and had a child, but they walk with Trelle now, she told him. I'm sorry.

It was years ago, she told him, a little dismissively. Since then, my duty to my people has made it hard for me to devote myself to the family life. How many Karinnes—true Karinnes—are there left?

Well, if we include the Exiled, there's about two thousand, he answered. We've been tracing bloodlines to find the descendents of the Karinnes still in the Imperium, those whose ancestors married into other houses, and we're trying to reconstitute the blood descendents. But they don't have any special place in the house, he warned. The descendents of Karinnes are the equal to those we've invited into the house when we first reclaimed it and started working

to repopulate Karis. It doesn't even mean very much to have a noble title in the house, he chuckled. Our nobles roll up their sleeves and work, probably even harder than the commoners. I'd expect nothing less from them.

It is the duty of the rulers to provide for the needs of the ruled, she nodded in agreement.

Well, we tend to let the house members rule themselves, he told her. Every city has a mayor and town council, and we let them basically run things. Each city handles its own affairs, taking care of the small things and the things that matter to them. They only bring the important things to the Ducal government, and it's us that also deal with the unclaimed land, planetwide changes in status like marriage permits, hovercar licenses, and birth certificates and such, and the central government provides power and water to all cities. Outside of that, the other main duty of the Ducal government is defense.

How do you pay for everything?

Well, on the planet itself we don't really have to pay for anything, he answered. The Ducal government operates outside of money. When something is needed, we supply it. If something needs to be built, we build it. Outside of that, where we do need money, we have three main sources. First, we have the Academy. It does turn a profit, and half of those profits go to the house while the other half goes to the Academy for expansion. The second source is through the contract with have with House Suralle for farming Terra. The contract actually favors Suralle heavily, they get the lion's share of the profits, but it's a good contract for us in that all the responsibility is also on the Suralles. Third, well, let's just say that the house is heavily involved in commerce. We don't tax our citizens, instead we make our money through wise investments and selling goods produced by the house's manufacturing companies. One of our biggest sellers is precious metals like iridium, tungsten, silver, and copper. We have replicators that can make them where the Imperium doesn't, so we replicate the metals and sell them on the metals market under a front mining company. The Ducal government also manufactures and sells some common household appliances in the Imperium from factories on Karis, then we filter it into the Imperium through Terra. We actually do a pretty good business, since Karinne technology lets us manufacture faster and cheaper than most of our competitors.

You sell Karinne technology?

He shook his head. We make what you'd find anywhere in the Imperium, we can just do it better and cheaper. We sell under several brand names, Vultech being the biggest one. So, Karinne makes most of its money off good old fashioned capitalism. The Academy and our contract with the Suralles is guaranteed low return income, where our business ventures are our primary source of income. We pay for everything literally by selling copper and tungsten, cutting knives, house cleaning robots, and a type of sonic generator that drives insects away from a back yard so you're not bothered with pests. Those are our three biggest manufactured products.

Clever.

Thank you. Karinnes were always good at science, so now the house uses that bent to make its money. Oh, how the Trefanis hate us, he laughed.

Who are they?

He didn't have to explain the structure of the nobles houses of the Siann to her, since that was part of the education she received from her ancestors and it was all still viable, so he explained what some of the nobles houses were up to. He told her about the ambitions of the Highborn houses, particularly the Shovalles now that the Trillanes were completely crushed, and the unique aspects of some of the lesser houses, like the Trefanis, who all but owned all organized crime in the Imperium. He explained how the Karinnes danced around the Trefani

stranglehold on non-noble commercial shipping due to the utter fear the Trefanis had of Jason, fearful that he would turn his creative mind to ways to disrupt their criminal enterprises, of which he had almost traitorous knowledge. The Trefanis knew that somehow, the Karinne Grand Duke had way too much knowledge of their schemes and plans for him not to have a spy somewhere in their organization, and that knowledge of their operations made them give him a wide berth. He exercised that power by chasing them away from Karinne-backed businesses, preventing them from taking their pound of flesh from his house through their control of so many aspects of general business and commerce. The Trefanis had their claws in the spheres of cargo transport through non-noble companies, mercenaries, illegal arms sales, and they owned the black market of inter-civilization trading, and through that, had a great deal of control over the legitimate trade that passed between the Imperium and its neighbors. The Trefanis controlled both the normal markets and the black markets with the Skaa and the Alliance, where they controlled the food and raw materials bartering between the governments on the surface while goods and technology were bought, sold, and moved in back room deals. It was jokingly said that in order to get a bottle of Bari-Bari juya wine, one should just give half the shelf price to the Trefanis. That wouldn't be an incorrect saying. The Trefanis were the most powerful of the lesser houses, and more powerful than about half the Highborn houses, but they actually preferred staying in the background. They made much more money controlling the shadows than they ever would walking the lit path.

Ah. We don't have that problem. We use favor at home.

Favor?

Favor. Ours is a barter economy. We trade goods or services with others for what we need. A woman's wealth is measured by how many favor slips she has collected from others, promises to do a service or promise of goods. She who is owed the most is the wealthiest.

Well, that would work for a small society like yours. What happens to the poor?

No one is poor, she told him. Any woman can pick up a hammer and swing it, and so she always has something to barter for the goods she needs.

True. I hope your people can adapt to the idea of money.

We understand the concept. It will be new, though. So much will be new, but I am looking forward to learning.

We'll enjoy teaching you.

She looked him up and down. *Why did they put you in that armored suit when it takes us so long to get there?* she asked, sending privately.

You are, he answered honestly, also privately. *Aya will never let me leave the house unmolested if I'm not completely safe, and she considers you a security risk.*

Really! she huffed, offended.

Aura, Aya considered the Empress a security risk, he sent bluntly. Aya does not like me out of armor unless she has complete control of my environment and is absolutely sure I'm safe. When I took the Empress home just before you arrived, I was in armor, even though I never left the ship.

Well, I guess I can forgive your guard captain if she is always so careful.

She's worse than a nanny, Jason complained.

I'm sure she'll love hearing that, Dera teased. Dera was like Symone, capable of hearing private sending, and her skill was one of the reasons why she was with them for this trip. Dera would pick through all the private sending to ensure nobody was planning anything underhanded.

If she finds out, I know who to spank, Jason shot back privately at her, which made her giggle silently. *Anyway, look at the situation I'm about to enter from Aya's perspective. An alien*

world filled with unknown Faey who might not like me swooping in and destroying the entire society you've built over the last thousand years. As to her putting me in it when we left, well, it's how she makes sure I stay in it. And it's also how she tells me to be careful. Any time she makes me armor up before I even get out of my house, it keeps me on my toes.

That would focus you on the task at hand, she agreed, then she started sending openly again. *How much will my people be allowed to bring?*

Anything but heavy equipment, I'd reckon, Jason answered, scratching his cheek. *They won't need anything big, but we'll have plenty of room for all your people's possessions. This is big ship, Aura. It has plenty of room.*

I can almost not believe how big it is, she told him, her disbelief at seeing the ship for the first time bleeding into her thought.

This one isn't the biggest. The Aegis is nearly five times bigger than the Abarax. I would have sent it or one of the heavy battleships, but they're all in spacedock being repaired. This is the biggest ship I have right now that's functional, and it'll be put in for repairs when we get home. Besides, if this ship isn't enough, we have a task force with us. They'll have extra room, just in case.

And for extra protection.

The Grand Duke wanted to come with three ships, Aya sent, a little accusingly. *After what happened at Karis, the Grand Duke isn't going anywhere without a task force to protect him.*

All sections report jump readiness! an open sending boomed through the ship.

Time to strap in, your Grace, Aya called. *This is our last jump and then we're there.*

Thank God, Jason grunted as he and Aura got up and went to the secured chairs. Jason's backplate of his armor sealed with his chair, immobilizing him, while Aya and Shen helped Aura strap into her chair. They locked themselves down as well, and Aya nodded to Ryn. *The Ducal party is secure and ready to jump,* Ryn called over the sending chatter as sections reported in to the bridge.

I do understand your aversion to this travel, Aura sent openly as she took a deep breath. *It's like being poisoned by a mindwrack snake.*

I'd give my hair to the person that invents a way to jump hyperspace without the effects, Jason grunted as he leaned his head back against the headrest.

Thirty seconds to jump! the first officer's sending called.

Be glad you're not a Marine, then, Shen told them. *Hyperspace training is mandatory for them. They have to be able to handle a six minute hyperspace jump.*

Well, they're braver than I am, Jason replied, which made the guards grin at him.

He hated jumping. He kept his eyes tightly shut and tried his best to ignore the cacophony of sounds and smells, even the sensations that rippled through his body, as his three-dimensional senses tried to decipher multi-dimensional space, and failed miserably. It went on, and on, and on, feeling like it was taking forever, and for an irrational moment he had this terrifying flash of being trapped in hyperspace, being driven mad by the environment. Two minutes in hyperspace was an eternity, and not even gripping the hands in his gauntlets into fists so tightly that his knuckles cracked registered to him.

And then, after an eternity, it was over. The sounds snapped away, and he felt normal again, if a little disoriented. He opened his eyes and felt his senses try to realign themselves, saw the room swim to his eyes, and then everything came back into focus as his mind cleared. He had his gestalt release him from his chair even as he reached out for the glass on the table across the cabin. It rose up from the table and floated over to him quickly and effortlessly, and he grabbed it in his gauntleted hands and took a deep, cleansing drink, getting a sandy taste out of his mouth that had persisted through most of the jump.

I cannot get used to seeing that, Aura told him.

You actually won't see it often, he answered. I don't practice often enough to suit my teacher.

Who is your teacher?

I can't tell you. She keeps her talent a secret.

Ah. Well, I can respect that. She gave him a curious, sidelong look, her gold hair tilting with her head. You keep many secrets, don't you?

Way too many, he answered honestly, going over to the table and opening the sliding shields on the port windows. Aura's planet, blue and green and white, filled the window, some twenty or so thousand miles ahead. As was normal, they had to jump outside the planet's gravity well and travel to it, which would take about a half an hour. The bow of the *Aurora*, one of two destroyers assigned as primary escort to the *Abarax*, was just visible at the edge of the window, slowly sliding into view as it took a lead position in front of the heavy cruiser. The destroyer had a nasty black scar on its flank, starting right at the bow and extending nearly sixty feet, and there was a rough scar that looked worse than it really was in its amidships, from where debris had struck it and bounced off, debris from a Consortium vessel that had tried to ram but had been destroyed. The destroyer couldn't get out of the way of the debris fan, and had been struck by a sizable piece. The *Veriven*, named for a past Empress, ghosted into view on the right, and it had a series of patches on its bow, impacts from a torsion weapon, but was otherwise remarkably undamaged.

Evidence of the ferocity of the battle that had taken place just days ago.

There were 14 other KMS vessels behind them, cruisers and destroyers that were part of the task force to defend the Grand Duke Karinne while he visited Exile, with the *Abarax* serving as the flagship of the formation. Jason had originally scoffed at the idea of mobilizing every single ship that could function, but both Aya and Myri flatly told him that he was *too important* not to go around without all the protection they could give him. Aya almost didn't let him come because she didn't think they had enough ships, but Jason had talked her into it.

Jason looked at the planet, and was amazed at how much like Earth and Draconis it looked. This, he realized, would be an *outstanding* planet to claim for House Karinne. It was all by itself way out in the galaxy, known only to Karinne and to the Consortium, and it was an arable planet, a farming powerhouse. There was no technologically dominant race on the planet, just the *Gruug*, which he could probably approach and offer to accept into the house if they wished it. With Exile as a base of operations, Karinne could claim the planet as their own. They'd just need a Stargate and some planetary defense systems.

That would have to wait, though. Right now, protecting House Karinne and Karis took priority. They could come claim this planet after the threat of the Consortium had been neutralized.

That's your planet, Aura, he told her as she came to the window and looked out, her eyes wondrous.

No longer. My home is now the home of our ancestors, she sent strongly. I'm just here to bring my people home.

Jason put his gauntleted hand on her shoulder. She looked at him and smiled. *Well, to be honest about it, I look at Exile as the newest world belonging to House Karinne. Your planet is rich and beautiful, Aura. I think I'm going to secure it for the house. I can put a Stargate right over there, and we can build a nice little colony on your island, as well as a few other continents. This planet would be an excellent farming colony.*

You think so?

Oh, yes. Arable planets with a climate like this are very rare in the galaxy. And nobody else

is around to claim it. So why not us?

Why not indeed? she smiled. How long would it take you to claim this planet?

Well, it won't be immediate. We're way too busy right now recovering from the Consortium attack, there are too many things for us to do. But in a couple of years, when we get a Stargate built, we can put it here that gives us immediate access to the planet. When we do that, we can move in and claim it for ourselves.

That sounds wonderful. My people who remain behind will truly come to be part of the house. How long until we arrive at the planet?

Probably about a half hour, but lemme check. He expanded his sending to reach the bridge. Sevi, how long until we're in orbit?

About twenty minutes, your Grace. I've already got the landing bay preparing your dropship. You can go there at your leisure.

Thanks, Sevi. Do your people know you're coming back?

Of course they do, Aura told him. Mistresses Meya and Myra promised my people to have me back within five days.

I hope they're ready, Jason noted. That they don't think you vanished forever or something.

Many were very excited about our return, she told him. I'm sure that they'll be ready.

I just hope we can convince them, Jason sent uncertainly.

You are a silver-tongued devil, as the Terrans say, your Grace, Ryn sent cheekily. I've seen you charm your way into anything you want.

Those are Faey I know and understand, Jason returned. The Exiled are very different.

They still know a handsome face and a warm smile when they see it, Dera told him. Just be yourself, your Grace. It gets you very far with Faey.

Yes, like into the Empress' bed, Shen sent with a teasing grin. How much further could he go?

I'm about to make you walk home, Shen, Jason threatened, looking back at her.

I wish I could have met the Empress, Aura sent. I would like to meet this woman that is your amu dorai and take measure of her.

Why?

A man can be measured by the women who woo him into their bed, she answered. It's often a window into his mind.

Jason laughed. *Please don't hold Symone against me.*

Against you? Symone is a wonderful woman, you could do much worse than her. She is earnest, fun-loving, charismatic, and kind. She is an ideal amu dozei.

Thank you for seeing what I see in her, he sent with a smile. And why are you trying to look into my mind, hmm? he asked with a playful undertone.

I'm about to place the safety and well being of my people in your hands, Grand Duke Karinne, she told him seriously. I would be a poor leader of my people if I didn't try to learn everything about you I can.

I can't argue with that, he agreed after a second's thought. Am I passing the test so far?

So far, she answered with a smile. So, when will you make the Empress an amu dozei?

Well, that's not really my choice, now, is it? he answered, a trifle uncomfortably. That's an issue between Jyslin and Kellin, not me and Dahnai.

Oh, your Grace, your Grace, your presence is required in the landing bay so we can fall down and worship you, Myra sent tauntingly.

Woman, you'd better hide by the time I get there, he warned. Better yet, I think I'll leave you behind. I can turn Exile into the place I send all the troublemakers.

Why Jason, if you did that, you'd be the first one you'd have to banish here, Meya sent

lightly.

I think someone wants to keep her sister company.

Sevi owes me too many favors to leave me behind, Meya teased.

I'll just threaten to take her off the Abarax, Jason sent with a sly twist. *She loves this ship more than she owes you, Meya.*

Damn you, evil man, Meya laughingly sent in response.

Of course I'm evil. Look at who keeps me company.

It's so nice to be appreciated, Aya sent dryly. *Now let's move along, your Grace. You can make empty threats when you're in the landing bay. I want to get you on the dropship so we can launch as soon as we're in orbit.*

Bully.

Always.

They went down to the main landing bay, where a wingless dropship had its rear hatch open, and Ducal guards running all over the place. The dropship and two Raptors were preparing to depart, along with a single Gladiator wearing an external harness that would let the mecha fly with more speed and control than they usually had. Gladiators were capable of flight, though not very fast and very clumsy in the air, but for something like a landing on a planet from an orbiting ship, they didn't have enough control to descend safely. The harness looked like a giant backpack containing a gravometric engine with short, stubby wings over the shoulders. When attached, the external engine was the one that produced the flight power while the engines in the mecha concentrated on stability and flight control, which stabilized the mecha in flight and made it controllable at high speeds. Myleena had built the external flight harness a year ago for the Gladiators for making planetary landings without a mecha dropship, and it had been tested, but they had never had any reason to use one of them until today. Today, a Gladiator would be making the first non-test descent to a planet, and there was no better Gladiator pilot to do the drop than Kyva. Meya and Myra were standing by the ramp talking to her. She had a golden phoenix on the shoulders of her armor, the emblem that she had been awarded the Ducal Medal of the Champion, the highest award a member of the KMS could receive. It was just outside her Lieutenant's insignia, and would forever be a part of her military rank. *Why the war machines?* Aura asked.

Protection, Aya answered. *They may be our people, but you know the history of our people, probably better than most Faey. I want more than enough on hand to protect the Grand Duke in case someone attacks him.*

You worry too much, Mistress Aya, Aura sent dismissively. *Do you really think we would attack those we have waited for for over a thousand years?*

I take no chances with his Grace's well being. Empress Dahnai would slaughter me, she sent forcefully. *Let's get moving here, ladies! I want the Grand Duke on his way as soon as we're in stable orbit!*

Jason kissed Kyva on the cheek on the way into the dropship in greeting, then went in and took his proper seat in the pilot's chair. Aya seated the copilot's chair, and Dera and Aura sat in the chairs behind them. He started the engines and got the dropship ready to take off with practiced ease. *Is everyone aboard?* he called, his mind ready to raise the stern ramp.

Hold up, I'm almost there, Myra called. He looked through the rearview camera, which pointed down the ramp, and saw her rushing up into the dropship. She closed the ramp herself using her interface, then hurried out of the camera's view. *Stern ramp closing, and we're all in.*

Sevi, the dropship is ready to go. He used his gestalt to contact the controller through gravband. *[Abarax control, this is Karinne One, ready for departure.]*

[Understood, your Grace, we're three minutes from orbit,] came the controller's response, translated into communion by his gestalt

"Everyone get locked in back there!" Jason called over his shoulder. *Kyva, stop playing around and saddle up,* he sent to the Gladiator pilot, who was standing by the leg of her mecha. *I swear, woman, two days and those bars are already going to your head.*

I am going to get you for promoting me, she sent in retort, a bit indignantly, as she put on her helmet and then floated up to the chest of her mecha using the flight engines in her Crusader armor. *They want to give me command of a squad of Gladiators!*

You'd do very well at it, he told her as she locked herself in place, and then the heavily armored chestpieces of the unit folded over her, all but entombing her inside. Jason had piloted that very same mecha, and he knew what it was like in there, the pilot literally *could not move*, literally encased in a heavily armored box inside the chest, the most heavily armored part of the mecha in order to protect the pilot from injury. The mecha was flown using the interface, it did not even *have* manual controls. While Kyva piloted the device, she literally *was* the mecha. Her mind moved it the same way it moved her own body, with the same grace and agility. Unfortunately an interface could only transmit such things, not receive, so she still had to rely on her eyes and ears for sensory information during combat, all presented to her on a heads-up display transmitted into the visor of her Crusader armor, a display she controlled utterly by interface, letting her see anything around her mecha she wanted at any time. But still, even with that, any ship or mecha piloted by interface could outperform *anything* controlled manually. *You're nasty enough by yourself. Put five other of my best Gladiator pilots with you, and that's one nasty fighting squad that would scare the piss out of any enemy. Actually, I like that idea. I'll talk to Sioa about it when I get back. I'll have all your Gladiators painted black, so the enemy knows they're about to die.*

That's asking for trouble, your Grace, Kyva sent mirthfully. *If you build a squad full of aces, you're just concentrating the estrogen.*

Pft. I'd also have a crack ground squad that could do anything.

Flatterer.

You know it. I'll call you Karinne's Baddest Bitches.

Well, I do like that name, Kyva mused, which made Jason laugh.

[Karinne One, Control.]

[Control, Karinne One, go ahead.]

[You're cleared to depart, your Grace. The lane is loose.]

[Understood. We'll be taking off in just a second.]

[Be aware that heavy mounts will be tracking you down.]

[Understood,] he said, having the computer take friendly computer locks off the alert, so the computer didn't go nuts when his own ship locked weapons on him as a means of tracking him and keeping their weapons focused on his area. If he was attacked, the weapons would immediately switch targets and be able to fire almost immediately. The engines gave that high-pitched whine as they were brought up to power, and then settled into a soft hum. *Sound off when ready to move,* he sent through the landing bay.

Gladiator One ready, Kyva called.

Raptor One ready.

Raptor Two ready, the two fighter pilots answered.

Follow me down, ladies, Jason told them. *[Control, Karinne One. We're departing now.]*

[Trelle be with you, Karinne One.]

With practiced ease, Jason lifted the dropship off from the deck. The two fighters and the Gladiator also rose up from the deck, and they followed the ship through the airskin shield

that prevented the landing bay from decompressing. Jason followed the vector supplied by the dropship, through his gestalt, then the five craft entered an entry vector that would bring them down through the planet's atmosphere at a speed that was slow enough to prevent heating but fast enough to get them down in about twenty minutes. *Aura, we'll be coming down out to sea and approaching at sea level. As soon as we're in range, you need to warn your people that we're coming, and not to panic when they see the Gladiator. Make sure to tell them it's there just as my escort.*

I'll make sure of it.

They made a nice controlled descent down into the blue sky of the planet, and while they did so Jason kept an eye on the Gladiator. Kyva did a perfect job of flying the unit out of her normal element, flying along with them at Mach 4 and rock solid in the formation, bringing up the rear as the Raptors flanked the dropship. The flight harness looked to be another Myleena success, and it opened the doors for the Gladiators to be used in an entirely different manner. With those harnesses, Jason could even see them used in space as fightercraft, landing *on* the enemy ships and wreaking havoc. After all, in space, there was no air resistance, and the engine in that external harness would give the Gladiator speed and agility. They leveled out about twenty miles from the island and then turned towards it and slowed down, to give Aura a chance to contact her people without them coming up on them too fast. At about seven miles out, Aura received a reply from her continuous sendings. Seven miles, that wasn't bad, they had some strong telepaths. *Chieftess, we are so happy to hear from you! Did they bring you back?* a female replied.

Orri, yes! The Grand Duke Karinne himself has come! Tell everyone that they are bringing flying machines to Exile, and not to worry. Just to warn you, one is in the shape of a giant Faey, it is one of their land defense machines.

Why did they bring such weapons?

Just as a precaution. They were attacked by those who attacked our ancestors, so they are keeping protection with the Grand Duke.

Ah. Understandable, but it worries me that they might bring our ancient foes back here.

Orri, we are leaving Exile. We are going home!

Not everyone wants to leave, Chieftess.

We'll discuss that when we get there. We should appear over the sea any time now. Please tell everyone that they should send to our guests, their spoken dialect is different from ours..

I'll pass the word.

Jason slowed them down to a crawl as they approached the island. The city of Exile was exactly the same as the images the twins took of it, a nice town with buildings made from stone and whitewashed wood with white tile roofs to reflect the sub-tropical heat, a sea of white nestled in green trees that looked like a cross between palms and willows, rising up in three distinct terraces from a blue sea with about fifty sailing ships. Each house had a flat tilted roof that pointed downhill, where gutters poured rainwater into cisterns at the corners of each house, and every house had a small garden behind it. Jason saw an open area on the middle terrace, some kind of park or square, so he slowly swung out over the town of about a thousand Faey, then gently and slowly set the dropship down. When the ship was fully settled, he shut down the engines as Aya ordered the guards to prepare to disembark. The Faey of Exile were surrounding the four ship, flinching and backing up a couple of steps when Kyva shifted the Gladiator to face the dropship; she would remain within the Gladiator. Aura hurried out into the large hold of the dropship as the stern ramp was lowered, then she hurried past them and down into town, hurrying towards several Faey wearing white robes, where most of the Faey were wearing wraps around their torsos with only one sleeve... and some

men and women went topless in the summer heat as quite a few of them were completely nude, mainly the younger ones. These Faey had the same concepts of modesty as the rest of the Faey.

That was an important signal to him. These may be Faey who had lived in isolation for a thousand years, but they were still *Faey*. They had clung to their beliefs and culture, but not Imperial culture, *Karinne* culture. That was an important distinction. The guards filed out as the Raptor pilots opened their canopies, and Aura greeted her people by touching hands, kissing cheeks, and sending strongly enough to overpower all the chatter going on around them, almost a cacophony to his mind. She was reassuring her people, telling them that the Grand Duke Karinne had come, and she was sure to warn them that their new Grand Duke was not entirely Faey, only part Faey, but he was the one to which the fabled living computer gave homage.

It's safe to come down, your Grace, Aya told him from outside, while Shen, Ryn, Dera, and Suri stayed with him. Meya and Myra joined him as he walked down the ramp and was gawked at by several hundred faces, since he didn't have his helmet on and they could see his human face. He heard quite a few sendings commenting on his strange pink color and round ears, but also picked up quite a few comments on how handsome he was from the women. Even the Exiled considered him attractive. Jason was escorted by the six women as he stepped out onto a grassy lawn in the center of the city, a city that had stone streets that looked like cement, power poles with electrical wires running along streets, and carts being pulled by huge bipedal bird-like creatures, the Exiled's beasts of burden. He could see the factories with their hundred-foot tall stacks wafting out steam and smoke from their chemically-induced fires that generated steam for them, and he could see a small waterfall towards the lake which was the stream as it tumbled from the top terrace down to the middle terrace.

Jason drew up his thoughts as he stopped, then sent openly with enough power to cover the entire town. *I am the Grand Duke Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne,* he told them. *I, like you, am a long-lost child of the house, descended from the line of Sora Karinne, the product of my noble line and the indigenous race on the planet to which my ancestors fled after the Third Civil War and the destruction of our house. But we are lost and destroyed no longer. The House has been reformed, and even now, we scour the galaxy searching for the lost children of Karinne. On behalf of the house, I bid you greetings, give you my joy in finding more of the scattered remnants of Karinne, and I welcome you, our long-lost kin, back into the House if that is what you desire.*

As I'm sure Countesses Meya and Myra told you when they left, I have come here to offer you a chance to end your exile and return to Karis. We will welcome you with open arms and allow you to take your place among us. But, if leaving what you have built here is more than you can bear, we do understand. It's hard to leave everything you've ever known for an uncertain future. As my own ancestors can attest, sometimes what you are forced to call home eventually becomes home, and you may not want to leave it. So, for those who wish to go home to Karinne, we will welcome you. Those who wish to remain here, we will help you. No matter what you choose, know that House Karinne will do its best to see that you are happy.

So, that's it. The truth. I know I'm not exactly what you expected to see in a Grand Duke. I'm not even fully Faey, he smiled. *But, I am a Karinne. I know my heritage, and I work to restore many of the Karinne ideals.*

People of Exile, Aura sent strongly, *let us welcome our long-lost kin to our homes. Everyone, please, consider this day a day of rest and celebration while the council and the Grand Duke meet to discuss his offer to take us home. And everyone, please, think about what you want to do. Think about it carefully. If you wish to stay here, the Grand Duke has agreed to*

leave us machines to make our lives easier and a means to communicate with Karis. If you wish to return to Karis, he has already built us homes and has our kin waiting to show us the wonders of which we have only read and dreamed. So consider what it is you wish to do.

If we don't like it there, can we come back? someone sent.

Jason smiled. *You may have to wait a while, but yes, if you really, really want to come back here, I'll make sure it happens. You deserve a choice, and you also deserve the right to change your mind. So, if you go and decide you want to come home, you may. If you stay and later decide you'd like to go to Karis, we'd be happy to help you move. Just keep in mind that it's a very long way to Karis from here, so if you decide to move back or forth, you may have to wait a while until a ship is coming here, and then make the journey. And, understand one thing. Just as our ancestors did, we guard technology the rest of the universe hasn't yet attained. If you decide to stay, and you learn the secrets of the Karinne technology through training or education, you can't come back here. You'll be a permanent part of House Karinne and sworn to keep those secrets from both friend and foe alike. So please don't think you can run back and forth between Karis and Exile whenever the mood strikes you. It's a choice you should carefully consider, just as your Chieftess has suggested.*

We'll discuss this in more detail at a meeting of council, and the councilors can tell you what was discussed, Aura sent. *Your Grace, if you'd follow us, we'll retire to the council building.*

Jason turned. *Kyva, wait here. You'll knock down all their wires if you try to walk around.*

I'd rather stay close to you, your Grace. I can't protect you from here.

I have the others for that. Just protect the ships.

Alright, your Grace.

A child hurried up to the foot of the mecha and stared up at it in surprise, a little eight or nine year old girl wearing nothing but a little sari wrap around her waist. "It's a giant metal Faey!" she exclaimed.

No, there's a Faey inside it, Kyva answered, sending in the manner that children could hear. *What you see is just a machine, sweetie. There's a living Faey inside,* she added, touching the chest of the Gladiator with a hand.

"Woah!" the child gasped, gaping up at the seventeen foot tall mecha.

Jason was escorted with Meya, Myra, and nine of his guards along streets paved with what looked like concrete, for it was definitely not natural stone. His boots clacked along it as Aura and nine others walked with them, led them up a terrace with quite a few Faey following behind them, sending excitedly among themselves. They were led to a large three story building with large glass windows and a balcony that ringed both the second and third floors. They were surprised when Aya held them outside and sent her guards in the inspect the area, to which Jason apologized rather contritely. *I'm afraid they take my safety very seriously, he explained. I'm amazed Aya didn't insist I wear my helmet.*

That is armor of some kind, your Grace? one of the others asked. *I thought it was some kind of decorative metal suit.*

It's armor, he nodded, rapping his knuckles on his chest, right over the Karinne crest.

Your Grace, that crest, it's different from the one we know.

The crest was changed when I reclaimed the house, he explained. *The bird here is a symbol of how I came to claim the house. The Empress made a gift out of my new signet ring, now that I recall. I'll explain it to you later.*

She made you change the crest? one of them asked, a bit scandalized.

Well, to be honest, I was the one that wanted to change the crest, he told them honestly. *I didn't just walk into the palace and claim the house, I had to fight for it. This bird is the*

symbol of that struggle. It's also a symbol of change. I adhere to many of the tenets of those who held the throne before me, but there have been changes. This change in our crest reminds us of who we are and where we came from, but also reminds us that we are not the Karinnes whose footsteps stretch behind us in the sand. The fact that a part-Faey man sits on the throne is just one of the biggest pieces of evidence of it, he sent with wry amusement. *When I told the Empress of my desire to change my crest to add the Legion Phoenix, the symbol of those that followed me before I took the throne of Karinne, to the Karinne crest, the Empress did it before I did. A member of the house drew the design, which I think is rather nice,* he added appreciatively. *It fits almost perfectly between the waves and under the star.*

Aya finished her sweep and allowed them in, and they did so. Aura led them all to a large audience chamber with a long table on a dais where the councilors sat facing rows of wooden chairs, and the original Karinne crest on a large flag behind the center of that table. Instead of going up to their table, they instead rearranged the chairs in a rough circle. Jason, Meya, and Myra sat down with the Chieftess and her nine council members, whom she introduced one by one, while Aya and her eight guards took up defensive positions at the three doorways leading out of the room.

For nearly two hours, Jason, Meya, and Myra explained their plan to the council. Jason stressed that they were not forcing anyone to do anything, and now that they knew about Exile, they were going to make sure that those who did decide to remain behind would be very well cared for. Jason and Aura explained their plan, and Jason used sending to show them images of the town that would be theirs, a nice town surrounded by green and with mountains in the distance to the north, a modern place still sealed in bioplas and waiting for them to move in. He explained how they would be cared for, how volunteers would teach them everything they wanted to know, help them integrate back into House Karinne. He had a detailed plan for that, a plan of education and training for everyone and advanced training and formal education for anyone who wanted it, as well as an offer from teachers on Karis to work with their own teachers of the kids here on Exile to work out a new education plan for the kids to help teach them about Karis and their new lives.

After what was awaiting them was explained, Jason went on to explain what would happen here on Exile for those who remained behind. He explained the machines he intended to leave to help them improve the quality of life and the twenty volunteers that would remain behind to train them in how to use the machines. He told them about the communication device they would leave here that would let them talk with Karis, but he also stressed that it would take many hours to travel from Exile to Karis, so if they had some kind of an emergency, help would take a while to reach them. For that time, they would be on their own.

I don't understand what you mean by replicate, one of the two male councilmen, a tall blonde Faey named Harel, sent, his confusion swirling in his thought.

The term isn't used as a literal description of the device, it's just a term for what it does. What the machine does is rearrange matter at a subatomic level to produce raw elemental material. For example, you could pour waste from your kitchen table into it, and it would use that matter to create, say, pure silicon. It does have a limit, though, it can only produce lighter elements. It can't produce iron, but it could produce anything the atomic weight of titanium or lower.

I thought you said– Aura sent privately to him, but he cut her off.

I told you, we couldn't leave them any Karinne technology. What we're leaving is a standard Imperium replicator.

Ah, I see.

What use would it provide us? Harel asked.

The main thing you don't have here is access to strong metals. Well, one of the metals that the replicator can make for you is titanium, Meya answered. Titanium is extremely strong, and you can use it to build many of the devices you keep in your history but never could because you don't have the right materials. The replicator can only produce one element at a time, but remember that it can create it in almost any shape you want, so you wouldn't have to forge and shape it yourself.

Another advantage is you can produce pure hydrogen, sulfur, phosphorous, and quite a few other combustible or useful chemical elements like sodium, which you could use to power your furnaces or use in your chemical shops. No more mining sulfur and phosphorous from the volcanoes, Jason added. It can also produce different structures of elements, which lets it replicate an extremely hard crystalline form of titanium, or diamonds for industrial use, or isotopes.

Yes, that would be useful, he nodded.

But that's just what we're leaving. For our own safety, we're not leaving anything that has technology in it we keep from the rest of the universe. Those who come to Karis will see much more powerful machines, and may even learn of them, if they decide to forswear the chance to come back here.

That condition may not set well with some, a female councilor, Devanne, told him.

It's an unavoidable necessity, he answered seriously.

We can't teach others our secrets and then let them go, Meya agreed. You know what the ancestors were like. We're no different in that regard. The secret unspoken remains a secret, as the cousins say.

That produced quite a few nods of understanding. They again returned to Karis and the town and discussed things more, like food, energy, recreation, and education, but one councilor brought up something Jason hadn't even considered. *It's a lovely place, your Grace, but it may not suit us.*

You mention that now, after we've talked about it for five hours? Jason asked, a bit tartly.

Well, it serves our needs, but... it's not on the sea. We have lived by the sea for nearly seven hundred years. To live in a place without smelling sea air or hearing the waves, well, that might unsettle some of our people. If we can, we should live by the sea. To keep at least one feeling of continuity, if nothing else.

Jason was about to send in reply, but came up short. He thought about it a moment, then finally nodded. *Well, I can see that as a potential necessity. We'll let the people decide. We'll ask them if they'd rather live by the sea, or in this grassland town surrounded by ample arable farmland. We can let them vote. Whichever side wins is where we settle your people.*

I think they'd like that. It would give them much more of a feeling of control, Aura nodded.

I think this would be a good place to stop for now, Jason offered. I'm hungry, for one, and I'd like to take a bath and spend a little time out of my armor.

We have a wonderful hot spring not two hundred paces from this building, Aura offered. And we would be honored to prepare a meal for you, your Grace.

A hot spring, you say?

Oh, it's quite popular, Harel noted.

Could you show Aya where it is, so she can inspect it? She won't let me out of my armor unless she feels I'm safe.

You're right, I won't, she sent strongly.

I'll take you there, Harel offered, standing up.

Very good. Ryn, Dera, Uva, Shiri, come with us. Shen, you have command here.

Yes ma'am, came several replies.

Jason chatted amiably with the councilors and Aura as the guards checked out the hot spring, hearing about how fishing, shellfishing, and hunting large creatures that looked like gigantic seals for their blubber combined with agriculture, tending fruit plantations, and hunting large wild herbivores that looked like hairy armadillos and other smaller game fed the entire town, with a surplus every year that was saved for times of bad harvest. They even had access to oil in the form of a natural well a ways from the village, which they had somehow managed to refine into a plastic, as well as tar, kerosene, gasoline, and lubricants. Their refinery was a surprisingly small little complex about four *kathra* from the village—to keep the smell away—that brought the finished products to town on carts and wagons pulled by those large bird-like animals, which they called striders. The sending image of the refinery showed him a small complex of copper tubes, vats, and towers, where oil was vaporized and recondensed to separate it, then it was converted to tar, a rough and unrefined form of plastic, combustible liquids like kerosene and gasoline they used sparingly. Their ingenuity with only having copper and zinc available as hard metals in any real abundance was quite admirable. It showed they were truly children of Karinne, not primitives. All they lacked were *resources*; if he supplied them with all the resources they needed, he had no doubt they'd have PPGs and fusion powered devices here within twenty years, since all the instructions for building and maintaining them were still in their records.

The Exiled were *amazing*, in his opinion.

Aya reported that the hot spring was safe, so Jason found himself going with Meya, Myra, his guards, Aura, and two council members, a tall redheaded man named Zeran and a willowy young white-haired woman named Luza, as the rest went out to spread news of their first meeting through the town. The hot spring was a spa of sorts, a large wooden building with a large fence around the back, containing the hot springs. They passed down a long hallway that bisected the building, and then Aura led them into the last doorway on the left, into a large room filled with simple benches and little shelves on the floor with many legs under it. There was a folded robe on the top of the shelf, and a pair of slippers in the nook under it. *We commonly undress and leave out clothes and shoes here, then step out to the spring, Aura explained, already reaching for the tail of the tee shirt she'd been given on Karis. They'll bring us dinner out at the spring. It's often quite relaxing to enjoy a light meal while soaking in the hot water.*

Aya, can I take off my armor? Jason asked, a bit cheekily.

Go ahead. We have the spring area secured, you'll be safe.

Jason was helped out of his armor by Meya and Myra, then in turn helped them out of their armor as Aura, Zeran, and Luza removed their clothing and waited, quite comfortable standing there nude. Jason also couldn't help but notice the appreciative stares he got from Aura and Luza after the twins helped him completely out of his armor, and he couldn't help but notice that Aura was *stacked*. She had a body much like Dahnai's, both pleasing curves and sturdy muscle, the body of a sexy woman who also did a lot of manual labor. She wasn't as tall as Dahnai, and her legs weren't as long, but she was still very nicely proportioned. Her breasts were larger than normal for a Faey and also resting on a platform of muscle, just like Dahnai, but Aura had slightly narrower hips than Dahnai. Their pubic hair was similarly eye-grabbing, though. Dahnah's bronze hair just dragged one's eyes right to her genitals, and Aura's brilliant gold pubic hair, almost glowing with its vibrant sheen just like the hair on her head, did the same thing when contrasted to her blue skin. His eyes were locked right on her female equipment for several long seconds, captivated by that golden attention-getter. He could not help but admire her handsome body a bit longer than what was normally good

manners among Faey, gone from admiring to staring, and Aura seemed to notice his look. She just gave him a slight smile and moved her hands, allowing him to see all of her he wished to see.

Why Jason, you little slut, Myra sent privately to him, though she did include Meya in her sending, giving him a teasing look. *Stop fucking Aura with your eyes.*

I am not. I was just admiring her. Her body is similar to Dahnai's, and that caught my attention.

Given how hard you were staring right at her pussy, I think something got your attention, Myri teased.

Well, he has good control, Meya noted dryly. *I don't see his dick even twitching. I guess that was mental sex, not physical.*

Oh, push off, you two, he retorted, but he kept his eyes on Aura's handsome body as he did so.

You wear nothing under it? Luza sent, a faint undercurrent of desire lurking under her sending, something she might not even have realized was there.

Jason blinked and broke his long, assessing stare of Aura's sexy form, and chose to ignore that undercurrent. *There's no room,* he explained. *The exacting fit of the armor is absolutely critical for it to protect us. There is no open space inside it, it minimizes the chance that any kinetic energy is absorbed by the body inside. This gel backing fills all space inside the armor not taken up by my body.* He flipped over a piece of Myra's armor and showed her the gel backing on the inside of the piece.

What is this gel?

It's a very soft material that also holds its shape. It cushions the armor without sliding out of position, but when its struck by a powerful blow, it stiffens up to help prevent any transfer of kinetic energy to the wearer. It's soft and comfortable until you hit it, then it congeals quickly to the same hardness as leather.

It also makes the armor comfortable to wear, Myra added as Jason and Myra unlatched her breastplate and backplate for her and helped her take them off, leaving her naked from the waist up. *It's like being surrounded by cool silk.*

I wonder what it's like to wear it, Zeran noted.

We can't show you, you wouldn't fit in his Grace's armor, Myra sent to him with a smile, boldly looking him up and down. *His Grace is a bit bigger than most males.*

Yes, we noticed, Luza sent with a light smile.

Jason blushed slightly.

The hot spring was indeed very nice. The water was heated by geothermal activity, and had a strange smell that wasn't unpleasant, smelling of minerals. The water was hot but not scalding, and the water came up to his ribcage when he sat down on the sandy bottom. A meal of roasted meat and strange purple fruits was offered to him. The meat tasted like venison, and the purple fruits were quite tangy and delicious. *Wow, these are good. I wonder if they'll grow on Karis,* Jason mused, taking another bite.

We call them bitterfruit, because if you eat one before its ripe, it's very bitter. And I'm sure we can take some seeds or saplings back, Aura told him.

You definitely need to bring seed and any animals you want along. I think your bitterfruits would be very popular on Karis.

I'm glad you said that, for anyone who owns a strider or a chechi will definitely want to bring them.

What is a chechi?

Luza showed him an image of a feline animal with striped black and gray fur, that had a

very long tail and large, eerie blue eyes. *That's a chechi. They're our pets. Them and the striders are the only animals we've ever domesticated.*

Why didn't your people ever try to domesticate the large animals you hunt for meat?

Because they're very, very bad tempered, and there's a lot of them, Aura answered. *And they're stupid. There's no need to domesticate them, since they're abundant, and no rancher would have the patience to try to manage them. We domesticated the striders when we first arrived. They're very intelligent animals, and easy to care for. They're omnivorous, so we can feed them whatever we have at hand. They eat almost anything, from roots and berries to meat. They can even eat bones.* She accepted a tray from a young girl with a nod and a smile, and the girl, nude, gave the guards a frightened look as she hurried out of the spring chamber. *I'd like to hold a townwide meeting tomorrow at noon, she told them. Our people have had days to think about it since I left with Mistresses Meya and Myra. I'll give them one day to make up their minds after the word is spread, and then they have to choose. I'd like us to be finished with the packing and on our way back to Karis in five days.*

That's not much time, Luza noted.

If we give our people all the time in the world to decide, some will take all that time without committing, she answered. *I want them to choose, not walk in circles and make everyone wait for them to decide.*

It's going to create some friction.

I'm not going to please everyone in this, so I'll just look to cause the least inconvenience to the fewest people. So, do you like our spring, your Grace? she asked him.

He leaned back against the wooden walkway around the pool, using it as a backrest, and nodded. *We have artificial bathtubs that let us soak in hot water, but there's something to be said for this place.*

The water is good for you, Zeran told him. *It invigorates the skin and soothes away tension.*

I know all about that. I've spent hours soaking in my tub back home.

Are you married, your Grace? Zeran asked.

He nodded. *I have a wife and five children.*

You sound like a busy man, Luza smiled.

He laughed. *I guess I am at that. But my wife isn't the mother of all of my children.* He explained the plan that they pushed on him, how four of the nobles in his house bore children to bolster the numbers of the Terran Karinne nobles. *It turned out that I'm not the only Terran descendent of a Karinne noble, but we didn't know that at the time. We only just found Rahne a couple of weeks ago. My wife's been trying to get pregnant again, though. She's been trying ever since we had Rann, but no luck yet.*

Just be patient, and Aris will grace you, Zeran sent confidently.

So you and this Rahne are the last of the Karinne nobles? Luza asked.

He shook his head. *There are exactly two hundred and seventy four of us, including infants. All of us are directly of Sora Karinne's line, but I'm the one that discovered that truth first and reclaimed the house. That makes me the Grand Duke.*

But what if one was of a higher generation? Would you not stand aside?

Jason started a little at that, but then he remembered that that was how the Generations identified themselves within the house. The generation mattered. Jason was known to Cybi officially as Jason Karinne of the 97th generation. The commoners had no idea what that meant, but they had picked it up as a means of identifying nobles over time.

I am of the highest generation, Luza, he sent carefully. *I'm of the ninety-seventh. Almost all of us are. Some are ninety-sixth or ninety-fifth. By rank or blood, I'm the highest ranking of the leftover Karinnes. The ancestor that came to Terra and created the Faey-Terran line was*

a member of the Royal family. Cybi says so.

Cybi?

The living computer, Aura told her. *It exists! I stood before it and it welcomed me to Karis! I can prove my rank easily enough*, he sent casually, wrapping Luza in his power. He lifted her out of the pool with his telekinesis. Luza gasped when she was pulled into the air, then she laughed as she hung there, suspended against gravity. *Is that good enough for you, Luza? I suppose it is. May I get down now? I'm feeling just a tad bit exposed here*, she sent with that same desirous undertone, and Jason realized he was looking up in a manner that showed him everything she had to offer.

I never expected a Faey to complain about being exposed, Jason teased as he put her back down gently. *I guess the Exiled are indeed different from other Faey.*

Oh, we're not different, she smiled. *I'm sure you noticed when you arrived, but we consider clothes an adornment, not a necessity. Many refuse to wear them at all.*

Yes, I noticed that. It's not far from Faey society today, so you aren't much different.

Well, I think maybe we hit a little snag in our thought there. I didn't mean exposed so much as vulnerable.

Ah. Yes, those two words have a similar meaning in my native tongue. I must have assigned the word to the thought, then took it for its alternate meaning. Sorry.

Not even talent is infallible, Luza smiled. *But, I must say, your Grace, you are the strongest telepath I have ever met. Even stronger than the women!*

It's true proof that you are a Karinne noble, Zeran nodded. *Only a male Karinne could have such strength.*

I'm nothing compared to my wife, he sent honestly. *She can tie me in a knot. I may be a Karinne noble, but I'm still a man, and that means I'm weaker in talent compared to the Karinne women.*

Your wife is of your generation?

Actually, she's a commoner from the Imperium, he answered. *In the years since the Third Civil War, I think the basic power of the average Faey has increased. Some of the strongest talents in the house are only Karinne by title. Yana is the most powerful telepath in the house, maybe one of the strongest alive, and she's not a Karinne. But our daughter*, he sent, then he shuddered. *She'll put us all to shame. I'm the father of Yana's daughter*, he explained. *Her name is Kyri. I guess it was a good match, our daughter was born with her talent awakened, and it never faded. She's been expressed since she was in the womb.*

Wow! Zeran sent with an audible gasp.

Yes, I'm very proud of Kyri, Jason sent with a smile. *My oldest son, Rann, just expressed last week, at the age of five.*

Congratulations! Zeran and Luza sent in unison.

Thank you. My wife is very happy, she was a bit jealous of Yana's daughter's talent already being expressed.

I see Faey competitiveness has not dimmed over the years, Luza laughed.

Not one tiny little bit, Meya agreed with a smile and a nod.

It actually gets them into trouble sometimes, Jason sent teasingly, giving Meya a sly smile.

We don't get in trouble! We just never get caught, Myra corrected him roguishly. *You're the one that always gets caught, Jayce.*

You're just asking for it. I think after we prank Kumi, I'm gonna come after you two.

Anytime, anywhere, baby, Myra sent mockingly. *You know we own you.*

Not for long.

Why do I feel we're missing half of this conversation? Zeran asked with amusement.

You are. The Grand Duke and us go way back, Meya said, reaching out and patting Jason on the shoulder. *To long before he was anything. So we get be meaner than you do.*

Oh gee, thank you so much for that, Jason sent darkly. *And I think it's time to pull out the toy box for you two.*

Oh joy, we get special toys! Myra sent with a snarky tilt to her thoughts. *You never did build My Little Pony, Jayce. I wanna ride your pony!*

Uh? I didn't understand some of that. What are you going to ride? Your small... what? Aura asked.

Jason supplied an image of the ancient *My Little Pony* toys. *A child's toy from my home planet.*

How can you ride that? It's too small, Luza protested, which made the twins burst into laughter.

The twins were more than happy to explain some of Jason's background to them as they all got out of the pool and dried off with towels offered by young teenagers that worked at the spa, who were also nude. *So, we've known him a long time, way back to when he was just hiding out in the wildlands of his planet. We've been friends a very long time*, Meya finished up, kissing Jason on the cheek fondly as he dried his hair.

Is she your amu dorai, your Grace? Luza asked.

The twins? Nah. We've never really felt it was necessary to go there. We're just good friends.

Well, we've thought about it, Myra winked at Jason. *But we kinda like our friendship the way it is. If we show him what a real woman is like we'll change our friendship, and also ruin him for his wife and his lovers.*

So sure of yourself, Jason murmured mentally.

Jyslin and Symone and Dahnai, even Kumi would be so jealous if we seduced you, Meya mused, giving Myra a sly look.

This is the perfect place. All by himself, no one to protect him from us.

He's certainly not hard to get horny, she noted, giving Aura a cursory look.

We do know all his buttons, Myra agreed.

Girls, you can't call it a seduction when you're standing here planning it in front of me.

Alright, let's plan his rape instead, Myra grinned.

Hmm... if he gets it up, can we really call it a rape? I mean, he's willing at that point, Meya sent, quite seriously, which made Jason laugh helplessly.

God, I missed you two.

We know, they sent in unison, smiling at him.

That was so much the truth. The twins were always a delight to be around, for Myra was sly and teasing, playful and bold, where Meya was more intellectual, more cerebral, more acerbic. But when they were together, they were nothing but fun.

Jason returned to the dropship after they were dressed, walking down in the warm afternoon sun. *I'm going to send down a dropship to replace us and wait until tomorrow's meeting on board the Abarax*, he told Aura. *That way you can contact me if there's an emergency, and the team staying behind can get a head start on looking over the city.*

But we can—

Aya won't let me stay down here overnight, he cut her off. *Thank you for the meal and the wonderful soak in the hot spring. I really enjoyed it, and talking with you in your territory. You're much different when you're not constantly amazed*, he sent with a sly smile. *It was nice to talk to you.*

She laughed. *I'll do my best to amaze you tomorrow, your Grace*, she answered. *And I'll do*

my best to have everything ready for you tomorrow, she promised. We should know by tomorrow how many are going back, and how many are staying.

I know you will, he assured her as they reached the dropship. I'll be back about an hour after sunrise tomorrow morning, alright?

Fine. We'll probably hold our meeting about an hour after that, so you can attend. Works for me.

Jason said his goodbyes to Aura, the council, and waved to those citizens who were still at the square. Aya herded him and the guards into the dropship, and Jason took the pilot's seat with Meya beside him, Myra behind him, and Aya in the fourth seat. *Well, that was interesting, Jason noted as Kyva and the Raptor pilots prepared to depart. This place is very interesting, and the Exiled are impressive people.*

They did do a great job here. I wonder how many will want to leave, Meya mused.

From hearing Aura talk, almost all of them. But from hearing the council, I'm not quite so sure, he answered. About half of them were more interested in what we were leaving than what preparations we were making for them on Karis.

I noticed that as well, Aya agreed. We'll debrief up in the landing bay and get an idea of how the citizens were like. Kyva and the guards we left at the dropship should be able to fill that in. They interacted with the common citizens, where Aura restricted you to the politicians.

"Yeah," Jason said aloud.

MeYa laughed. "Sending all the time does kinda make you keep doing it," she noted.

Well, it is the best way to communicate, Aya sent with a sly undertone.

"You are *so* biased, Aya," Jason teased as the Raptor pilots got back into their ships and closed the canopies. *Everyone call out when you're ready to depart. [Control, this is Karinne One.]*

[Karinne One, this is Control, go ahead.]

[Sevi? What are you doing sitting in the comm chair?]

[I was waiting to hear from you. You haven't reported in since you descended!]

[Well, I was having fun.]

[Oh really? And just who were you having fun with?]

[You'll never know,] he teased. [We're preparing to take off.]

[Hold on, let me pass you on to the comm officer, since you're gonna be all mean to me.]

[Such a flirt,] Jason laughed.

[Karinne One, Control,] came a new voice. [You're cleared to ascend. The lanes are loose, so approach at your discretion, call in at ten kathra from the bay for landing instructions..]

[Understood. Have the engineering team come down, meet the town council, and start their surveys.]

[They're all ready to go, they were just waiting for your orders. They'll pass you on the way down.]

[Understood. Be home soon, guys.]

[We'll be waiting,] came the light yet earnest response.

Back up on the *Abarax*, Jason met with the Sevi, the Raptor pilots, Kyva, and the guards who remained with the ship to get their impression of the people. On the whole, they had nothing but good things to say. They said that the citizens were curious, friendly, inquisitive, and charitable. They were all brought food, offered places to rest, were even offered a ride on one of their sailing vessels. All in all, those who had interacted with the citizens were quite pleased and impressed by them. Jason told them about meeting with the council, and his misgivings about how many might remain behind, but there really wasn't anything they

could say. There was nothing but waiting until tomorrow to find out how things went.

Jason returned to his cabin after the meeting to catch up with things. His first call was to the command center, and he got Shey instead of Myri or one of the command staff. "Shey, what are you doing on duty?"

"I traded shifts to get tomorrow night off, your Grace," she answered. "Did you receive my report on all of my evil activities?"

Jason laughed, for she had indeed sent one. It was full of all sorts of laws she broke and such, but it was all presented in a very serious manner which made it even more funny. Shey's subtlety extended to her writing. "I did. You are a bad girl!"

"I'm certain we already established that fact days ago, your Grace," she said mildly. "Did you want a progress report?"

He nodded as he unlocked his gauntlet from his armor and pulled it off. "Shoot."

Jason removed his armor and put on a soft knee-length robe as he listened to Shey tell him what progress had been made on the interdictor and the repairs to the other ships. "The Kim-dori report the *Dreamer* will be back in service tomorrow morning. It's been ordered to jump to your location with the *Raena* and the *Dela's Star*. The *San Diego*, *Liberty*, and *Defiant* are being scheduled from release from drydock tomorrow afternoon, but no plans are yet being put up to have it deploy."

He sighed. "Who's taking the chair of the *Defiant*?"

"The first officer of the battleship *Trelle's Gift* was awarded the chair," she answered. "Commander Hiae Joralle. She's already received her field promotion and been given the flag."

"I've always loved her name," Jason chuckled. "*Hee-ay*. It just rolls off your tongue."

"Too bad it means *evil omen*. I wonder what possessed her family to name her that."

"What are they saying about the *Aegis*?"

"No change in the estimate, your Grace. Two weeks."

Jason grunted. "Thanks, Shey."

"Thanks for undressing in front of me, your Grace. It almost felt like one of your middle of the night calls there for a moment."

Jason laughed. "I hope you were entertained."

"Oh, very much so, thank you," she said with a light smile, and then Jason cut the comm.

He called home next, and was greeted by a hologram projected into his cabin of Jyslin, Symone, Tim, Rann, Danelle, and Kyri, all sitting around the dinner table. "Daddy!" Rann called, waving. "Are you coming home yet?"

"Not for a bit, little man," he replied. "How are things going?"

"Fairly well," Jyslin answered. "Miaari is keeping us all up to date with what's going on. Myleena's up on the moon right now, and Yana asked us to watch Kyri tonight. She's working with Myri on something."

"Well, it sounds like a slumber party tonight," Jason smiled. "I wish I could be there."

"Then come home, papa!" Kyri stated.

Jason laughed. "I should be home in a few days."

"What is it like there?" Tim asked.

"The Exiled are *amazingly* resourceful," Jason answered. "You wouldn't believe some of the technology they've set up here, and without any heavy metals or rubber to form an industrial base. They have an agrarian society, but they also have electricity and use steam technology to power a couple of small factories."

"How long will it take to move them?"

"I'm more worried about how many are gonna move," he answered. "I didn't get the feeling

that as many want to come as Aura was saying. They're supposed to have a town meeting tomorrow to discuss the matter."

"Well, Aura is really excited to come here," Jyslin noted.

"Yeah, I hope that her enthusiasm isn't clouding her judgment about her people."

"It can happen. I don't think you'd ever think badly about any Karinne, despite the fact we have a few in jail right now," Symone smiled.

"At least they're only in jail for little things, nothing like murder," he replied. "From what Kyva said, the people of Exile are polite and friendly. She was with them most of—"

Jason stopped and turned when a powerful sending boomed through the ship, the klaxons blared, and the red lights began to blink, warning of a general quarters exercise. *Battle stations!* Sevi called in a powerful, urgent sending. *All hands to battle stations! This is not a drill!*

What's going on, Sevi?

Six Consortium ships just jumped out of hyperspace behind the planet and are moving this way! she replied. *They haven't detected us yet because the planet's in the way.*

"Fuck!" Jason gasped, jumping to his feet. "I have to go now, everyone, we got trouble!"

"Jason? What trouble? Jason!" Jyslin said urgently, standing up.

"The Consortium has come to Exile!" he said. "Six ships! I'll call you later!" he said, ending the call with his gestalt as he sent to Sevi. *Six ships? What classes?*

I'd call one a battleship, with two cruisers and three destroyer escorts. Our hyperspace probes picked them up the second they jumped into the system, and they still haven't detected us. They're no match for us, but there's no telling how many are behind them!

Jason thought furiously as he rushed back to his armor. *Sevi, form up a strike force of the Abarax and ten ships. I want the Shemali and two destroyers to enter the atmosphere and defend the Exiled's city from a possible surface attack, and the rest to stay in orbit over the island. Go destroy those ships before they can escape!*

But you're on board, your Grace! she protested. *I am not going into battle carrying my Grand Duke! Are you insane?*

That order was not up for negotiation! Jason barked harshly. *Send down the orders now!*

But—

OBEY MY ORDERS! his sending absolutely thundered across the ship, and he sent *openly*.

There was a startled silence. *At once, your Grace,* she sent, fear tingeing her thoughts. She wasn't afraid to fight, but it seemed she was terrified of going into battle carrying Jason on board.

If we're going to go through with this insanity, your Grace, then I insist you go to the deepest part of the ship, Aya sent urgently, and *openly*. He had no doubt the entire ship heard her. *Where you have the most protection.*

Yes! Sevi sent in agreement, along with about two hundred others on board.

I will, he acceded openly. *As soon as I get my armor on.*

Right now, your Grace. And that's an order from the woman who is responsible for your safety.

Jason had to laugh. *Alright. Take me where you feel I'm safest, Aya.*

We are going into battle carrying our Grand Duke, Sevi's sending flowed over the ship, urgently, almost desperately. *We must defeat the Consortium quickly!*

Jason listened as frenzied sending rippled through the ship. Aya, Dera, Shen, Ryn, and Suri escorted a robed Grand Duke along passageways where Faey, human, and Makati crew ran back and forth, preparing for battle, Suri and Ryn carrying his armor as they hustled him into an elevator. Jason listened as the first officer relayed what was going on to him through send-

ing. She shared an image with him of the fleet breaking up, as ten others ships followed the *Abarax* and moved away to circle the planet, a cruiser and two destroyers descended into the atmosphere, and the three ships took up a low synchronous orbit over the island as an extra layer of defense should any Consortium ships break through and attack the planet. The elevator let them off at a middle deck, and then the guards hurried him deep inside the ship, as deep as he could go, until he was in a small maintenance shop that repaired and cut conduit. Jason disrobed and was helped into his armor by Aya and Dera as the others cleared all small objects that could fly around from the shop, securing them. With the Imperial guards helping him, he got fully armored up in two minutes, as he saw a sending image of the six Consortium ships on the viewscreen on the bridge. There was one really large ship of the same design as all others, crescent bow, narrow neck, spiky wings on a flared aft section, but Jason also saw that instead of accelerating to attack, the ships were instead turning. They were trying to escape!

Don't let them jump out! Jason sent urgently.

They've probably already warned the Consortium that we're here, Aya told him, keeping her sending in the room.

I know, but if we destroy them here, that's six fewer ships that might come back, Jason sent grimly.

Through the first officer, Jason watched. He saw them closing on the Consortium vessels, and closing, and closing. He could sense her anxiety as Sevi kept calling out time until in range, then best guess as to how long until they were far enough out to jump. Those two numbers were almost identical. *[Every ship coordinate to target all of the enemy ships, we only get one shot at them!]* Jason heard through gravband once he ordered his gestalt to listen in on KMS gravband command and tactical frequencies.

At full speed, the eleven ships charged down the enemy vessels, which were picking up speed instead of slowing down to jump, then they turned around again. *[All ships slow to one quarter and watch for enemy attempts to ram!]* Sevi called. Jason saw why. Ships that used gravometric engines had to be all but at a dead stop in order to jump or the engines disrupted the hyperspace jump, they could only be going a maximum of .1223 engine power to safely jump, and they'd never make it before being attacked by the KMS ships with their superior weapon range. Those ships also used gravometric engines, and they had to slow down before they could jump out, which would let the KMS ships catch them before they could escape. Since they knew they couldn't run, they were turning to fight. And since they were heavily outnumbered by ships that would get the first shot, they would try to ram or conduct other suicide attacks. The insectoids that manned those ships would not allow themselves to be captured alive.

Jason could never fault the Consortium's insectoids for nearly insane bravery. They charged right at the Karinne ships in a curious single-file formation, literally lined up stern to bow, with the biggest ship leading... shielding the smaller ships so they could get in weapons range before they were destroyed. Sevi correctly deployed a counter-strategy, having the ships spread out to give them a very wide arc of fire to prevent the battleship from protecting the cruisers and destroyers behind it. Jason looked at the tactical, then saw something interesting. He had his gestalt open a channel to the *Veriven*, directly to the captain's chair. *[Captain Koye, this is Karinne One. You see that destroyer at the end? See how it's got its nose all but up the ass of the destroyer in front of it?]*

[I see it, Karinne One,] Captain Koye answered.

[Do you think you can hit the destroyer in front of it directly in its engines in such a way that it causes an engine breach? They use gravometric engines the same as we do, you

know.]

There was a brief pause, then Koye laughed. *[That's devious, Karinne One! Yes, I can do it!]*

[Go sic 'em.] He switched over. *[This is Karinne One. I want a detachment of marines assembled on the Resolute to prepare to board an enemy vessel! I want crack troops, ladies, this is going to be dangerous! Commander Resolute, I want you to swing wide to the starboard of the enemy formation and prepare to grapple the trailing enemy vessel!]*

[At once, Karinne One!] the captain of the *Resolute*, Captain Joni, acknowledged.

What are you up to? Aya asked.

"It's simple, Aya," he said aloud as the squadron closed on the Consortium ships. "Koye's gonna hit the engines of the second to last ship with a particle beam right in the engines, which will cause a breach of the engines, and that'll unleash a gravometric shockwave," he explained. "That's a wide sphere of wild gravometric flux. The insectoids in those ships are low gravity organisms, and they're very vulnerable to high gravity effects. If this works, they'll be killed by the shockwave and we'll capture that ship intact."

Aya gave him a startled look, then grinned viciously. *I knew there was a reason I liked you so much, your Grace. That's a pretty damn clever idea!*

Well, I am known for a certain amount of ingenuity, he sent with false modesty, grinning at her.

Jason watched through the eyes of the first officer as the enemy rushed into range. The KMS ships folded around them like an attacking army as the *Abarax* opened fire with its five particle beams. The five beams crisscrossed through the lead battleship and effectively cut it to pieces, an explosion in the stern scattering the huge sections in every direction as the ships behind flew right through the explosion. The other ships opened fire as well, but Jason had Giya, the first officer, focus her attention on the *Veriven*. She complied, and he saw the destroyer surge forward, hooking around the formation just enough to get in range of its target. Its single particle beam fired, sending a deadly white lance not through the ship, but focused on one point. The particle beam punched through the aft section of the destroyer, and it was right on target; thanks to Myleena and the engineering team, they had a detailed understanding of the layout of Consortium ships, so Koye's weapon officer knew *exactly* where the engines were. The stern of the destroyer seemed to buckle, then it swelled, and then it exploded violently, sending a dull wave of shimmering distortion before it.

A gravometric shockwave.

The shockwave washed over the destroyer behind it, flowed over and through it until it dissipated to nothingness about a mile beyond the stern of the ship, its power weakening as it expanded. The lights of the destroyer shuddered, then blinked out and remained out. The destroyer itself was pushed back by the force of the explosion, knocked out of formation, and what mattered most to Jason, it *did not try to correct*. He saw the *Resolute* charge forward as the right side of the formation curled around, then turned his attention back to what was clearly a turkey shoot. The Consortium ships couldn't close to firing range before being sheared apart by Karinne particle beams, though their tactic of lining up very nearly let them do it. The last two ships probably would have been able to fire their torsion weapons, had the second to last not been destroyed and its explosion knocking the two ships on either side out of position. The ship in front of it had seen it coming and broke formation, then it seemed to understand what they were doing. It turned on the drifting ship as if to fire on it, but a brilliant white beam erupted out of its bow as the *Resolute* ripped into it with its particle beam. That beam raked all the way through its bow, cutting the bow off just behind where the crescent attached to the rest of the ship, and then the entire ship exploded in a massive greenish-

red fireball.

In less than thirty seconds, the firing was over. A cloud of debris drifted towards the formation, which moved to evade it, while troop dropships launched from the *Resolute* and raced at the tumbling Consortium vessel. The *Resolute* was right behind them, and it used towing beams to stabilize the ship, stop its tumbling drift and bring it to a stop. When the ship was stable, the troop ships moved in.

That would never have worked had they not been stacked one on top of the other. A shockwave of the kind that came from breached engines only had real power at close range.

Jason could only wait anxiously as Giya sent him images of four separate boarding parties of marines attaching portable airskin shields around different sections of bulkhead at different parts of the ship, cutting into it to form large holes, then disappearing inside. The four parties had invaded the ship near where they were fairly certain the bridge, engineering, the computer core, and primary landing bay were located. Her view switched to the view of the Lieutenant commanding the boarding party nearest the bridge, broadcast from her helmet cam as Jason found the frequency they were using on his gestalt.

[I found one, Lieu! Eww, it exploded!] he heard, and the Lieutenant's camera fixed on a what could only be called a pile of green gore splattered all over the deck of a narrow, low-ceilinged passage that almost had the feel of a hive's tunnel.

[We've found one of the crew,] the Lieutenant called over the command frequency. *[It looks like it was crushed by a giant boot. There's also no power in here, just some emergency lighting. Orders?]*

[Search the ship for any survivors,] Joni ordered. *[Quickly! Remember, any survivors will try to destroy the ship rather than let us capture it! So your asses are on the line, ladies!]*

[That's why we get the big credits,] the Lieutenant answered calmly. *[Push in, ladies! No pulse weapons, MPACs only!]*

[I think your plan worked, Karinne One,] Koye called over command frequency, with a chuckle.

[Well, it hasn't worked until the boarding party has that ship.] Uhh, Sevi, can I come out now?

Not til you apologize for putting my Grand Duke in danger! she sent back, a little heatedly.

I'm sorry, and you're forgiven. Now let me go back to my cabin.

As soon as I get some distance away from that enemy ship, yes. Wait just a moment, your Grace, I'm backing us off from it as we speak.

Now that the panic was over, Jason grimly realized that the Exiled no longer had a choice. The Consortium had come back, come back to the planet they'd visited a thousand years ago, but why? Were they looking for more information? Checking to see if there were any Karinnes left here? Or was it part of a plan to lure the Karinnes to this planet, far, far away from any reinforcements? No matter why they had come, he had no doubt that the Consortium now knew that the Karinnes were here. Those ships had plenty of time to send a warning, they had the same ability to communicate through hyperspace in real time as the Karinnes. Now it was going to be a race.

Sevi, call Karis.

I did that ten minutes ago. A Kimdori task force should be here in about fifteen minutes.

Good girl.

I'm not a fool, your Grace. I'm not hanging my naked ass out in the open without plenty of people to look at it.

Jason chuckled. *Well, I'm sure you'll have plenty of appreciative viewers. It's a very cute ass.*

Why thank you, your Grace, Sevi sent with a teasing undertone. *Want me to swing by your cabin later and show it to you without my armor getting in the way?*

I don't think that's necessary, but thanks for the offer.

While Jason waited for the all clear to return to his cabin, he pondered what to do. There was no choice now, *all* the Exiled had to be evacuated. They just could not guarantee their safety, and Jason was not leaving them there at the mercy of the Consortium. With the Kimdori protecting them, they would have time to evacuate all the people and whatever they wanted to bring, but they couldn't linger. Jason wanted everyone away from Exile and back at Karis in five days. He didn't want to do it, both because some of the Exiled wouldn't want to leave and also because this was a very rich planet in resources and was fully arable. If he could secure this planet, he'd have a good farming planet, and also many of the plants and animals could be transplanted to Karis to help the planet return to life, the same way they'd been bringing plants from Terra, Draconis, Makan, and several other Imperium worlds and introducing them into the ecosystem, to see how they shook out and what kind of ecosystem developed from them. *Sevi, I want you to warn the engineering team to stop what they're doing and pull back to the dropship, and send down another dropship big enough to carry twenty people. Tell the team to find Chieftess Aura and the council, get them in the dropship, and get them up here as fast as possible. The Consortium remembered Exile. We can't leave anyone behind now. We have to tell them that they all have to leave.*

Yeah, I figured. I'll send the orders, your Grace.

Good girl. Oh, have them tell my wife and family I'm just fine. I think I might have scared them. Tell them I'll call as soon as I'm back in my cabin.

Will do, your Grace. Oh, you're free to go back to your cabin now, we're far enough away that I feel it's safe.

"Alright, let's go back. And someone get my robe!" he called as Aya formed up the guards.

Jason listened to gravband on the way back up, and heard what he wanted to hear as soon as they were back out in the passageway. *[Resolute, this is Lieutenant Yoe. We've secured the bridge of the enemy ship. All the crew we've found so far are dead.]*

[Good work, Alpha Team. Beta Team, Gamma Team, Delta Team, report.]

[Beta Team, Lieutenant Xeri. We've found engineering and are securing it as we speak. There's no power down here either, not even any emergency power for their consoles. That shockwave must have blown their power system. All we have is emergency lights. All enemy combatants we've found are dead. It looks like someone came in here with a giant fly swatter and smashed them all.]

[Gamma Team, Lieutenant Rora. The main landing bay is halfway secured. There are sixteen small ships in the bay, and we're searching them and the command center one by one for the crew. So far, all crew we've found are dead. Lieutenant Xeri's description is pretty much how they look here, too.]

[Delta Team, Lieutenant Weah. We haven't found the computer core yet, but we've found what looks like a major control center, it might be a secondary bridge or a computer control room. I have one squad securing it now while the other keeps looking for the computer core. There's no power here either. Same here as to the crew, they've all been squashed.]

[It looks like our clever Grand Duke secured us an enemy ship,] the comm officer noted. [Can't we give the Grand Duke a medal?]

[I'll recommend him for one,] Sevi answered with a chuckle. [In the meantime search that ship from bow to stern, make sure there isn't a single bug alive. Resolute, Veriven, sweep the ship with sensors. Start a data log the engineers can use when we get it home.]

[Understood, starting a complete sensor scan,] Captain Joni answered.

[Beginning sensor scans now,] Koye acknowledged.

Back in his cabin, Jason immediately called home. Half the neighborhood was now crammed into his dining room, the Marines and their kids with his family. They all sighed explosively when the screen came up showing them, which meant his face was now in the screen by the table; there were too many in the room to use the holographic projector. "I'm alright," he said right out.

"Jayce, what the fuck happened?" Symone asked. "What's going on?"

Jason summed up what happened. "They're searching the ship now, and I have the ground team rounding up Aura and her council. I'm afraid they have *no choice* now. I'm not going to leave them here, and I can't spare ships to defend a thousand Faey in a defenseless colony. I'm afraid that whether they like it or not, they're coming to Karis."

"Is the ship intact?" Jyslin asked.

"I think its power system got fried, but outside of that, it seems intact."

"Well, that might cause some friction to force them to leave, but at least you got a prize. Myleena's gonna kiss you when you bring *that* home," Jyslin smiled.

"Kiss? She'll do a lot more than that!" Symone laughed.

"Eww," Jason intoned, which made most of them laugh. "Anyway, let me get ready to talk to Aura, and break the bad news to them. I'll call tomorrow when I have more to tell you, okay?"

"Be careful, my love," Jyslin said, blowing him a kiss.

"Always," he answered with a nod, then he cut transmission.

Careful? Grand Duke Jason I'm going personally into battle Karinne? Aya accused.

Oh hush, you forget how I came to be Grand Duke, haven't you? I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty when it's necessary. Let's monitor what's going on while the ground team gathers up the council.

The Kimdori task force arrived a few minutes later, as Jason and his guards listened in on the command frequency. They had sent nearly a hundred ships, from small, sleek destroyers to a broad-beamed behemoth of a command ship with three nacelle-like wings in a triangle around a beefy hull that settled in over the *Abarax* like a protective mother, literally putting the heavy cruiser between the two lower nacelles. Jason used the same screen to talk to the Kimdori commander of the task force, a tall, slender female with reddish fur. "I am Jeyaar Ixtmerr, Task Force Commander," she called, saluting him sharply. "Are you unharmed, your Grace?"

"I'm fine," he answered.

"I see you have captured an enemy ship. My congratulations."

"Thanks. I have a team of Marines in it as we speak searching it. What I'd like you to do is spread out some of your ships and form a perimeter around the planet. I have about a thousand Faey down on the planet I need to evacuate, and we're going to need time and space to get them ready."

"Understood. I will coordinate with your task force commander. Your commander will hold the flag for this operation."

"I know, you won't initiate combat without orders," he said with a nod. "Thank you for getting here so fast, Jeyaar."

"We protect our own," she said simply.

Jason watched on as the Kimdori surrounded the planet, powerful warships armed with Karinne weaponry, deadly adversaries for any Consortium ships that jumped into the system. The marines searching the ship finally reported in that there none left alive, and when they evacuated the ship, it was thoroughly scanned for any life signs to ensure that no insectoids

had evaded the search., a process that took nearly five minutes. Outside of microbes, they found none, which meant that the ship was *theirs*. A horde of dropships rushed towards the ship, filled with engineers and technicians, waiting outside as a group of technicians installed a temporary airskin shield over the entire bay doors, then technicians went in with marines to discern how to get the doors open to let the dropships in. It took them about five minutes for them to figure it out, manually unlocking the doors and having a dropship pull them open with a grappling arm, the dropships drifted into the bay so the Karinnes could start inspecting the ship.

When the ground team called up that the council and Aura were on their way up, Jason went down to the landing bay to meet them. He reached the bay just as the dropship landed, and Aura and the council came down the ramp. The council members were a bit awed at being inside the ship, looking around with amazed faces, but Aura's face was locked on Jason's, and it did not bode well for her. *My Grand Duke, why did you call us here so quickly?*

The plans have changed, he told them. Let's go to a council room so we can talk.

What happened?

The Consortium showed up here, he sent openly. Not an hour ago, we chased them down and destroyed them before they could escape. Aura, they knew your people were here from when they came and captured some of your people and took your original ships, and they came back. Why, I don't know, but they came back. It's not safe here for your people anymore. I can't defend a planet so far from Karis without fatally dividing my forces, because it's just too far away. They have to go back to Karis, Aura. All of them, at least for now. I'd like to keep this planet for Karinne, but right now it's just too dangerous. Until I can get a solid foothold here on this planet, the Exiled have to leave.

She gave him a long, sober look. *We do need to talk, she nodded.*

The council members were herded to a room, and Jason, standing there in his armor, laid it out to them in a very blunt manner. He made sure to be ready with a recording of the battle viewed from the Abarax's cameras, showing them the Consortium ships. *About two hours ago, those ships tried to approach the planet. They are the same aliens that attacked your ancestors, Jason stressed. The ones that kidnapped some of your people and took your landing ships. They attacked Karis a few days ago, but we repelled them. And then they show up here. They know you're here, he told them. They know you are here, and that means that you are not safe. And I will not leave you to be captured by the Consortium. You are Karinnes, and it's my solemn duty to protect you.*

What do you mean, your Grace? Zeran asked.

I mean that there will be no one left behind, he told them directly. Anyone who stays behind faces certain capture by the Consortium, and that's a death sentence. I want to secure this planet for Karinne, add it to the house, but given everything that's going on right now, the attack on Karis and the depletion of our military and the need to protect our homeworld against another Consortium attack, I just don't have the resources to spare to Exile right now. This planet is too far away for us to protect it, we can't possibly leave you here. So, I'm not going to ask your people who wants to go, I'm going to order them to. They are Karinnes. I am their Grand Duke. They may hate me for it, but they will obey.

Many will be very unhappy, another council member warned.

I know, but I'm not changing my mind. I'd rather them be pissed off at me and alive, than happy I left them and dead. This isn't a matter of choice. I have no choice but to take them all home, and they have no choice but to obey. Believe me, I'd leave them here if I could, but I just can't risk it. I won't leave my people in that kind of danger.

Are you sure about this, your Grace? Are you sure they came to make war?

Oh, I'm sure, he sent darkly. They know about the Karinnes and our power and our technology, and they want it for themselves. They tried to capture the living computer when they attacked Karis. They are our enemies, and I will not leave my people defenseless in the face of our enemy that knows you are here, he stressed.

But we should be given a chance to—

*“No!” Jason growled, making sure to speak using the same archaic words they used, drawing on the encyclopedic knowledge of Faey that Jyslin had given him. “Don't you understand? Let me say it out loud to you. They will *kill you* if I leave you here!” he said hotly. “They will destroy your town, take you from this planet, torture you for information, and then kill you! I *will not* let that happen to my people! I know you don't like it, I don't like it either, but I have a duty to protect you, and I cannot protect you if I leave you here. It's *that simple!*”*

But some will choose to take that risk, the councilwoman sent with calm dignity. To some of us, this is our home. You're asking us to abandon our home in the face of an unseen threat. What proof do we truly have that we are in danger? All we have is the word of a man that claims to be the new ruler of our house. For all we know, the promises he made to us just hours ago were never meant to be kept, that this was his plan all along

Janu! I have seen the living computer! I have seen Karis! Aura protested. I know he speaks the truth! Didn't you see the black scars on the ship we are in when we came up? That is the mark of a ship that has been in combat! Or were you too busy gaping at that tremendous ship that sits over this one like a strider warming an egg? Why is it protecting this one, Janu? Perhaps, to keep us safe?

Let's put this in very simple terms, Jason sent, giving the woman a hard stare. Are you a Karinne?

I am, but—

No buts. Are you a Karinne?

Yes, I am a Karinne.

Then you are duty bound to obey the ruler of the house. Jason took off his gauntlet and showed her his signet ring. This is the signet ring of the House Karinne. Who would wear this ring?

The Grand Duchess.

Or the Grand Duke, Aura added.

Thank you, my wife would be very angry if she found out she married an ugly woman, he sent, which made Aura splutter with laughter in spite of the grave situation. Now, if you are a Karinne, and I wear the signet ring of Karinne, then that means that you are my subject. That means that you will obey me, and I am ordering you to leave this planet and return home..

I detest pulling rank on people, and you seem to think that I enjoy this, but I assure you I don't. There's not a single person on Karis that doesn't want to be there. I loathe to bring people to Karis that would rather be somewhere else, because it goes against one of the basic tenets upon which the new house has been built. But I simply have no choice. I will not leave you here, because I can't protect you, and the enemy knows you're here. They will come back, and when they do, they will destroy everything you've built. I can't say it any simpler, or enough times. You have only two choices. Come with me and live, or stay here and die. And I'm not going to let my people commit suicide.

When he saw their angry faces, he blew out his breath. Let me tell you a little story about a young man who found himself in a similar situation. He was a simple young man who found himself living under the rule of an oppressive invader. Instead of accepting his lot, he instead

ran away and hid, and then rebelled against the invaders occupying his homeland. He had a little success, because he was lucky, and because he had some support from friends and other rebels like himself. But in the end, he ended up captured by his oppressors and forced to make a choice. If he continued to rebel, then not only he would die, but so would quite a few others, and his homeland would remain in the clutches of the oppressive invaders. But if he joined, he could force the invaders out of his homeland and free his people. In the end, he chose to sacrifice himself to save his people. He joined them, and in the end, the invaders were forced out of his homeland, and his people were freed.

I know that doesn't sound like it has anything to do with this, until you learn that that young man was me, and I came to take the house of Karinne not entirely by my own choice. It was the only way to save my people from the tyranny of another Faey noble house who were occupying my home planet. I won't bore you with the specifics of the story, but I will tell you this one simple truth. I know what it feels like to be forced into a situation you would not have otherwise chosen because it was your duty. Because I know what it's like, believe me, I would be the last person to ever force another into the same situation I'm in right now, forced into a life you didn't choose because of hard necessity. But dammit, I'm in this chair now, and I'll be damned to hell if I don't do everything in my power to save you, even if it means uprooting you and taking you back to Karis with me.

I know you're going to hate it. I know you're going to pray to Trelle that my hair falls out or my skin turns green or something. I can live with that. But you seem to be forgetting, this isn't a permanent situation. I want to return to Exile and claim it for House Karinne, and when I do so, the Exiled will be free to return. This move is just temporary, because I can't protect you right now, we just don't have the resources. It may take a few years, but you will eventually have the chance to come back.

He gave them a steely, adamant expression. So. Listen to me now, subjects of House Karinne. Your Grand Duke is ordering you to prepare the people of Exile to move to Karis. We have five days to get you and as much as your people can pack up onto ships and away from here. Five days. So, we're all going back to your city, you are calling your people together, and then I will tell them the bad news. I will make sure they understand it's all coming from me, and you objected, so they won't hate you. Then, after we're done, all of us are going to be up all night hammering out a plan to get your animals ready, collect your planting seed, your personal possessions, your art, and your important artifacts. Once we have that plan set up, we carry it out. In five days, House Karinne is leaving Exile, and all of us are going home. Do you understand? And mind, that is a question that only has two answers, yes or no.

His eyes dared them to make any other comment, and they couldn't stand up to that withering stare for long. One by one, they lowered their eyes and nodded or sent that they understood. Good. I'm sorry it had to come to this. I hate using my title like a club, but this is not a situation where I have any choice in the matter. I must protect you, even if you object to that protection. To walk away and allow you to die would violate the sacred vows I made to myself and to the memory of our house when I became Grand Duke. There are too few Karinnes, and it would be a crime to allow you to blindly walk into death. So. Stand up. We're going to the city, right now. He looked to Aya. Do what you have to do.

She gave him a look that said she was proud of him, and nodded. She started barking orders via sending, orders that went through the entire ship, calling the Ducal guard, Raptor pilots, and Kyva to duty to go down to the planet.

He knew that they were angry with him, and felt betrayed, but they didn't understand the full situation, and he wasn't about to leave anyone behind. Anyone who stayed behind was

going to die. It was just that simple.

It was a quiet and tense ride back down to the city, and he saw that the entire town was gathered up in the square. Jason landed the dropship in almost the exact same spot as five Raptors and Kyva's Gladiator landed around him protectively, and as the three KMS ships he'd sent down still hovered in the air like giant birds, blatantly visible to the citizens, since the three ships were in a defensive position only about ten thousand feet up.

Jason wasted no time. As soon as the ramp was lowered, he stepped out and beckoned to the council, then addressed the gathered citizens. He sent powerfully, and he also sent in a way that would allow the children to hear him. This was news that everyone needed to hear and understand. Sending in that manner with that much power was going to give him a headache pretty quick, but it was necessary.

Hear me, people of Exile, he called. As I'm sure that many of you have come to notice, something has happened, he noted, pointing up into the twilight sky, where three triangular ships hovered overhead. About two hours ago, our ancient enemy appeared here at your world. They are the aliens that attacked your ancestors and stole the ships you came here in, and also the same aliens that attacked Karis itself just a couple of days ago.

He ignored the sudden fearful voices and sendings, moving forward. Because it's clear now that our enemy knows you are here, that they remembered where they found your ancestors, it changes everything. Let me say this plainly and from my heart, people of Exile. I can't protect you. I told you that before. This planet is too far away from Karis for me to defend. And since it's now abundantly clear that our enemy knows you are here, I cannot in good conscience leave you here. I'm afraid all of you must leave Exile and return to Karis. I didn't want it to be this way, but I won't leave you here defenseless. Let me make this clear; anyone who remains here will be attacked by our enemy, which calls itself the Consortium. To stay behind is a death sentence, and I'm not going to let any of you commit suicide.

Your council and your Chieftess have argued quite vociferously against my decision, he stressed. They don't want me to force those who wish to stay here to leave. But I'll tell you the same thing I told them. I am your Grand Duke, and your safety and protection are the most sacred of my duties to you. I cannot protect you if you stay here, and this planet is so distant, if I were to try to split my forces to defend this planet, I would be fatally weakening the defenses of both Exile and Karis. To try to protect both planets would cost us both planets, and destroy House Karinne. The only way I can protect you is to bring you to Karis.

I know many of you will hate this decision, and hate me. I understand. I accept full responsibility. This was not the decision of your council or your Chieftess, it was mine, and mine alone, and it was not a choice that I wanted to make, but my duty to protect you overrides my desire to accede to your wishes in this matter. But I am not going to change my mind. In five days, we will leave this planet and return to Karis. The Chieftess and the council and I are going to return to the council chamber and work out a plan to evacuate the city, which we'll initiate tomorrow morning. What I want you to do is go home and consider what you want to take with you. You are free to bring anything you wish except for things like tools and machines you use in your day to day chores and work. New tools and machines will be provided for you on Karis, so follow this simple rule when you pack; if you can get a new one on Karis, don't bring it with you. But everything else is going. Your striders and chechis are coming, all the contents of your houses is coming, and we're even going to pick up and move your statues of art and other important landmarks and artifacts. We have plenty of room to carry your things, so bring everything you can manage to pack except for those tools and machines that you won't need to bring with you.

I will make you this promise, though. This move is only temporary. The house simply cannot

protect you if you stay here, but the house also is not going to just abandon this planet. Right now, we don't have the resources to defend both planets from attack, since they're so far away from each other. We can get around the distance problem, but it requires us to build huge, complicated machines that are very expensive and take a long time to construct... but we don't have the resources to devote to it right now. Our factories that could build this machine are too busy repairing our damaged ships and building new ones to protect us from our common enemy, who are called the Consortium. But, when we are suitably equipped to protect ourselves from our enemy, we intend to come back and claim this planet for Karinne. When we come back and reclaim this planet, you will be allowed to return, when it is safe to do so. I know this is going to inconvenience you, to leave and have to come back and fix everything that broke down from neglect, but there's just no other way.

So, I swear to you, people of Exile, that when Karinne comes back to this planet, you will be allowed to return to this town, your home. But you won't be alone, for the House Karinne will be returning with you to claim the planet for the house. You can help us when we return, for you know this planet. You know the plants, the animals. We could definitely use your help. But until then, we simply have to do what is safest, and that is remove you from the planet until we can come back and protect both it and Karis.

He looked around at startled and sober faces, even has the headache from such prolonged, powerful sending so kids could hear started to affect him. *So, hate me if you must, but understand, I am only doing what I feel is best for you. So everyone, please. Go home. Go home and start planning on how you are going to pack, what you are going to take, keeping in mind that we have room to take anything you want to bring, but we only have five days to get it all done. We will help you in any way we can to get your possessions ready to move. Your Chieftess and your Council and I are going to go work out a plan to get everything we can moved onto the ships in those five days, and we'll tell you about the plan in the morning.*

Again, let me say that I'm sorry. I didn't want to have to do this, and I know I'm uprooting you from your homes. All I can do is promise that you will be coming back, as soon as it's safe to do so.

Everyone do as the Grand Duke commands, Aura called strongly. We'll discuss it in greater detail in the morning at a town meeting, when we tell you of our plans. Until then, please, no questions, no demands. Let's save the discussion for tomorrow. Tonight, go home and consider what you wish to bring and how you're going to go about getting it ready to move. Until tomorrow, this town meeting is adjourned, she sent with strong formality and finality, which caused muttering and dark-faced townsfolk to disband and disperse back into the city.

"Thanks," he said gratefully.

"I am happy to help you, my Grand Duke," she smiled in return.

Jason and the council did exactly as he said, they returned to the council chambers, but not alone. Sevi was summoned down with the captains of the cruisers to help, and Jeyaar also came down. She entered with two Kimdori in the guise of Faey, but they returned to their normal shapes once inside, which cause gasps and exclamations of astonishment from the council.

"These are our cousins, the Kimdori, who have come to help us," Jason said aloud. "Because they cannot send, we must do our best to conduct this meeting by speech. I know enough of the old language to keep up with your discussion, and I can send to explain to those who don't comprehend your words."

"From our very legends!" Zeran gasped.

"Truly. To meet a cousin, it is an honor!" Orii gushed, bowing to Jeyaar as she came up to Jason.

"It is unseemly for us not to be properly introduced, and then we can continue with the conference," Jeyaar said with a nod to Orii.

Jeyaar did more than anything else so far to convince the council that Jason was the real deal. The council seemed awestruck by her and her two officers, the almost mythical Kimdori, and their deference to Jason was solid, concrete proof that he really was a Karinne noble, really was the Grand Duke he claimed to be. The Kimdori *only* acted with deference outside of their race to the Karinne nobles, that was a fact plainly stated in the history they had of the house. They didn't know why, but they knew it was a fact, and that fact helped the council accept that Jason really was their ruler.

The council, Jason, his commanders, and Jeyaar talked all through the night. They worked out a detailed plan to pick up virtually *everything* in Exile and move it onto ships, leaving behind only empty buildings. They would even pick up and move the machines that they wouldn't need on Karis, if only to keep them out of the hands of the Consortium. They had even worked out a plan to pick up their sailing ships, stepping down their masts and storing them in the landing bays of assorted vessels. They worked out a schedule where ten different moving teams would systematically move through the town, coming to a house, helping the residents pack everything up, then moving both the items and the people out. The items would go to storage on one of the destroyers, and then the people would be taken up and given comfortable quarters to await their return to Karis. When a ship was filled to capacity, it and two escorts would begin the journey back to Karis, along pre-planned and determined stops where Kimdori ships would be guarding the rest points. It was decided that one council member would be going with each ship, and the first would be the most senior member of the council, Orii. They were going to maintain a presence of authority among the Exiled, there to calm them and answer their questions, and also they would be there on Karis so they could help their people and coordinate with the volunteers at Karis, but Aura would be the last to leave to maintain a presence on Exile. It would be an around-the-clock operation, packing up and moving the factories and other public buildings at night, so as not to disturb those residents still awaiting their turn to be moved. They even had plans to pick up all the crops planted and many of their orchard trees, scooping them up right out of the ground and moving them within their native soil, then placed on ships under artificial sunlight that would exactly mimic the characteristics of the system's yellow star and keep the plants alive while they were transplanted to Karis. The astrobiology department was already hard at work determining if the plants of Exile would be able to thrive under Karis' blue sun, or if they'd need to be put in greenhouses under lamps that would emulate the yellow sun of Exile.

While they were talking, the ships above were also busy. The entire area was saturated with hyperspace probes, covering literally the entire end of the galaxy's arm, which would give them a good ninety second warning if any ships entered the covered area in hyperspace. The ships were also busy building weapons platforms, temporary ones they would recover when they left that would serve as additional defense of the city in case the Consortium returned in force. The planet was also being patrolled by flights of Raptors, on constant alert for any sudden appearance or attack. The fighters had proved themselves in battle against the Consortium, for their pulse weaponry gave them powerful weapons that could do real damage to the enemy's ships. He had seen a swarm of fighters cripple a Consortium cruiser during the battle, all by themselves. The Raptors were a force to be reckoned with. Stellar Cartography was hard at work calculating the possible route the attackers had taken to reach Exile, to try to ferret out whatever base they were using.

By sunrise, they had their plan. The ships above were already preparing, and a fleet of dropships with nearly a thousand workers from both fleets, pulled off the ships, was on its way

down. The Kimdori were going to help them pack up the Exiled and move them. Jason was tired, but he felt satisfied that everything would go according to plan. They emerged from the council building to find most of the town outside, waiting anxiously for word of what was discussed. Jason let Aura explain to them what was going to happen, how they were taking everything but the buildings, even taking the ships, and she explained the plan of dividing the town among ten different teams that would help the citizens pack up their belongings and move them to the ship, then send them on to Karis one ship at a time in a constant stream that would last five days. They were assured that all their animals would go, that the crops, even many of the trees, were going to be picked up and moved in their native soil, which should save their crops.

If everything goes as planned, everything will be ready to move in five days, and I mean everything, Aura sent. Our factories, our machines, our possessions, our animals, our ships, even our crops and trees, they will all be picked up and stored for the move. When we leave, we take everything with us but our houses. A printed schedule of the moving teams will be distributed to everyone in the city by noon. So, that's it, my people. When you get the schedule, find out when the movers will come to your house and be ready to show them how you want everything packed. When your house is packed, then you will be flown up to their big ship where you will stay in a comfortable cabin and wait to be taken to Karis. Councilwoman Orit will be going with the first group to go to Karis, to serve as a liaison and assistant to the Karinnes on Karis who will receive us and help us settle in at the city where we are being taken. There will be a council member on every ship.

The townsfolk didn't look entirely happy, but they at least nodded in understanding of the plan, and they dispersed to begin the tasks... grudgingly. Jason blew out his breath and scrubbed his hair with a gauntleted hand, but Aya tapped him on the shoulder and made him look at her.

It's done now, and this is a potential battle zone, she told him sternly. You are going home, your Grace. I absolutely insist. I will not let you stay here now that your presence is no longer required.

But they might need me.

No. They know what's going to happen, and I'm not letting you stay here. You can protest all you want, but you will do it from the safety of Karis. And I'll ignore you no matter where you do it.

Jason chuckled in spite of himself. *Such the bully.*

Where your safety is concerned, yes, I am a bully, she sent with complete confidence and unwavering resolve. Now say goodbye to Aura, for you, you silly man, are going home.

"Yes, mommy," Jason said teasingly aloud, which made her flip him off, an entirely Terran gesture of defiance and insult. That made him laugh. *Aura, Aya has just told me that I am being sent home like a misbehaving child, he sent with a slightly offended undertone, sticking his tongue out at Aya, which just made her laugh silently. She feels that me being here, where the Consortium might appear at any moment, is too much to risk. She even pulled rank on me, he sent, bristling slightly. And I know better than to argue with her. If I defy her, she'll just tie me up and lock me in my room until we're back on Karis.*

Damn right I will, she confirmed, which made Ryn, Suri, Dera, and Shen grin mischievously.

Aura gave him a strange look. Was it regret? *I understand, your Grace. This is not the place for you. I will do my best to ensure that all goes smoothly in your stead. Will you let me come to see you when I reach Karis?*

Of course, he agreed, impulsively taking her hand, then kissing her on the cheek. They'll tell

me when you arrive, and you're welcome to come have dinner with me and my family.

I would be honored, your Grace.

Captain Sevi, I want ten ships prepared to return to Karis, carrying the Grand Duke, Aya called to Sevi, who was about to board a dropship and return to her vessel. The ships will be going back as quickly as possible, Captain Sevi. Six minute jumps. I want his Grace's vulnerability limited as much as possible.

Oh joy, Jason grumbled mentally.

You like to say you get your hands dirty, your Grace. Now you get to do hyperspace jumps like a woman, Aya grinned.

I think this is when I claim male softness and whine to get the jumps reduced, he teased, which made Aya laugh silently.

We'll give you a treat when you get home, your Grace, Dera winked. We'll all dance the Beya naked for you.

A reward? A reward for who, Dera? I've already seen all of you naked, what more can you possibly show me that I can't get a better look at from my wife and Symone? he sent teasingly, which made Dera laugh, a soundless wheeze.

Well, variety is the spice of life, as humans say, Ryn winked.

Two minutes surfing viddy channels and I can get all the variety I need, he retorted, which made Ryn smile broadly. It is absolutely impossible to surf viddy for more than two minutes without seeing at least one naked Faey.

But that's not live, your Grace. That's viddy! And you get to choose your vantage point when it's live, you don't always get to see the good parts of a girl on viddy unless she bends over or sits down and spreads her legs. Girls are lucky, the good parts of the boys are hanging out right where we can see them easily, she winked.

True, but viddy offers much better closeups, fast forward, reverse, slow motion, and pause, so a man can savor a really, really nice closeup, he remarked dryly, which made all of them, even Aura, laugh.

He didn't want to leave, but he was, quite simply, bullied into it.

Ten ships took the Grand Duke home, led by the cruiser *Demir's Sword*. The *Demir's Sword* was commanded by Drae Feralle Karinne, the wife of a human telepath, a tall, skinny woman with long chestnut colored hair and large rose-colored eyes, almost the same hue as Myleena's eyes. Drae put Jason in her personal cabin, which was just off the bridge, through the ready room that served as her official office for ship business. Drae's cabin was cluttered with all kinds of books and old artifacts; Drae's hobby was Imperial archaeology. Jason didn't get much chance to explore her old artifacts, though, for his guards had him strap down and prepare for his first extended jump almost as soon as he was in the cabin.

He didn't like short jumps, and he found that he liked maximum exposure six minute jumps even less. It felt like an *eternity* in hyperspace, and when the first leg was over, he felt a little dizzy and disoriented. Aya made Drae and the task force wait to give Jason a little extra time to recover, nearly fifteen minutes, and then they jumped again. By the time they were nearly home, Jason had to admit that he was at least able to tolerate it a little better.

It's like anything, your Grace. Training and repeated exposure can help you build up a resistance to it, Aya told him as they prepared for their last jump, which would take them to Karis.

The final leg was only a minute or two, and he had managed it fairly well as he blinked to clear his head, and the familiar continents of Karis were visible in Drae's window. "Home," he sighed in contentment. "Do they know I'm coming?"

Aya nodded. *I called ahead.*

“Good. It would have been nice to surprise Jys, but that’s fine. What time is it at Foxwood?”
About five in the morning, she answered.

“They should be up, then. Good. I think I’m going to take Jyslin right back upstairs when I get home.”

The guards gave him sly smiles. *You were only gone two days. Such a weak will*, Shen teased.

“What can I say, I’m weak,” he said blandly, which made them all laugh soundlessly. “You forget, I’m used to having a woman available to satisfy my lust at all times.”

You’re the Grand Duke, just grab some woman subject and ravish her, Ryn winked.

“Ravishing is only fun when you ravish the willing,” he answered her. “That way you don’t walk out with scratches, bruises, and bite marks all over you.”

Well, you can if you do it right, Ryn grinned.

“I’m no bondage boy. I’ll leave the rough stuff for people braver than me,” he said blandly, which made her laugh. “I’ll leave the extent of my kinkiness to sharing my bed with our *amu dozei*.”

Pft, that’s not kinky, Aya protested. *That’s an entirely proper and healthy relationship. An amu dozei relationship between two couples should definitely be celebrated together, in the same bed. To separate it would be little more than having an amu dorai.*

To Faey it’s a proper and accepted practice. It’s considered kinky to humans. Couples don’t commonly share beds with other couples, and certainly not when both couples are married. It’s considered kinky just to have two partners in bed with you at the same time. One couple is the accepted practice, and in many cultures, that couple is only being proper if they’re married. Sex before marriage and out of the marriage, with a partner not your spouse, is considered improper in many human cultures.

Trelle’s garland, no wonder Terra has such a violent history. Such sexual repression must inevitably lead to frayed nerves and tension that has to be released somehow.

Jason chuckled. “You know, I’m not going to argue that point. But I can say that the Faey don’t have any kind of excuse. You’re just as violent as the Terrans, and it’s *not* an issue of sexual tension.”

True, but at least we’re much more relaxed and happy when we’re making war on each other.

Jason laughed helplessly.

Jason was home about an hour after the ship arrived at Karis, mainly because Jason stopped over at Orbital One to talk to the command staff about the progress of repairs and the interdictor. When he finished, he returned to Foxwood, and found Ayama waiting for him with a plate of eggs. “Welcome back, your Grace,” she said, sitting him down. “I’m afraid you’re the only one here, your Grace. Lady Jyslin is over at Symone’s house, and Rann and Danelle and Kyri spent the night at Maya’s. Go ahead and eat before going over, I know you must be hungry.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Ayama,” he smiled, sitting in a padded chair he often used when sitting at the table in his armor. “Can you go lay out some clothes for me please? I’d like to get out of my armor before going over to see Jyslin.”

“Certainly,” she smiled. “I’ll put out a robe for you, and pack your clothes in a bag to carry with you.”

Jason laughed. “That would probably be safest,” he said mildly. “I’m not entirely sure when we’ll be back.”

“I have to go to market this morning anyway,” she smiled.

After a light breakfast, Jason went up and took off his armor, stored it away in its special

locked closet to keep Rann away from the dangerous weapons, put on the robe, picked up the little canvas carry bag, and headed out for Tim and Symone’s house. They lived next door, and the garden behind the house connected Jason and Tim’s houses together. That was the path he commonly took to their house. He entered through the back door and went upstairs, confidently navigating the dark halls since he spent enough time here, and found Jyslin, Symone, and Tim asleep in the master bedroom, Jyslin nuzzled in between Tim and Symone. He couldn’t resist leaning over Symone and blowing lightly in her ear.

Symone’s eyes fluttered open, then she looked up at him and smiled broadly. “Jason!” she exclaimed, twisting to a sitting position and giving him a strong hug as Jyslin and Tim stirred. *When did you get back?*

“Just now,” he answered, sitting on the edge of the bed. *Aya forced me to come home, she said it was too dangerous for me to stay there.*

Well, she was right, Jyslin told him, leaning over Symone and giving him a loving kiss. *Why didn’t you call ahead?*

I didn’t want to bother you, and besides, I figured that Myri woulda told you I was coming. She knew I was on my way home.

I guess she didn’t want to disturb us, we were just a little busy last night, Symone laughed.

Well, I’m just glad I got here in time, Jason sent with a smile.

In time for what?

Before you began the morning session, he sent, letting his desire and ardor bleed into his thoughts as he looked down at Symone’s bare breasts, then pulled down the bedspread to gaze at her platinum blond pubic hair, and the delights hiding just beneath it.

All three of them laughed, and both Jyslin and Symone grabbed hold of him and pulled him down into the bed, stretched over both of them. *Well, c’mere you horny boy, let’s see what we can do about that*, Jyslin sent with lust swirling through her thoughts, kissing him quite passionately.

Chapter 2

Brista, 27 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 1 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 27 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar
 Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

His family would have probably disapproved, and he knew that most of the people of Earth would have, but they just didn’t understand.

They couldn’t. Only a telepath could understand.

Jason lounged almost lazily in bed, glancing at the clock that Tim and Symone kept on the wall, and saw that it was nearly noon. He wasn’t alone in bed, however, for they were still there. Jyslin was cuddled up against his back, and Symone slept with his arm thrown over her stomach, and Tim’s arm over her chest and his hand resting lightly on Jason’s elbow. He didn’t want to get up, despite the duties he knew were waiting for him. Being here, surrounded by love and acceptance, hearing the breathing of two women he loved and a friend he would call brother, a man with whom he was so close that he shared his thoughts, his wife, his very life with him, and the feeling of telepathic union that surrounded them as they kept light touches on each other even through sleep, it was simply impossible for anyone who was not a telepath to understand. Jyslin... God, how he loved her. She was the focus of his entire life. Symone, wonderful Symone, so happy and cheerful, so full of life, she was impossible not to love. And Tim, his best friend, his brother, the only man who shared his life to such an extent that he could look on and watch Tim make love to Jyslin and only feel

happiness for them both, a man who had, in the way of men, imprinted onto Jason. Jason loved Tim. It was that simple. And he knew that Tim loved him in return. There wasn't any sexual attraction between them, but there was a kind of familiarity between them that made some barriers dissolve. There was no attraction, but there also was a lack of barriers between them. Jason could, and indeed had, hold Tim's penis in his hand, and had had fondled him, and had cupped his scrotum. And he felt absolute no trepidation at the idea of it, a boundary that was usually taboo among men. He could reach over right now and grab Tim's genitals and not bat an eye, and neither would Tim. And it would bother him a bit if Tim did the same. Jason was absolutely certain he could kiss Tim full on the mouth, and *mean it*, and not feel any kind of shame or revulsion at the idea of it. More than once during threesomes or during their full groups, Jason had caressed Tim with his hands, and had been caressed in return. Jason was certain that he could masturbate Tim and not bat an eye at all at the idea of it. He would even go so far as to say that if it did come to it one day, he could have sex with Tim. He'd feel uncomfortable at the idea of it, but it wouldn't change things between them. If Tim came to him one day and asked him to give him oral sex, Jason would, if only because he loved Tim. In that respect, Jason was at that same point that Jyslin had been when she first started exploring her attraction to Symone, where she was awkward with sensations she had never had before. Jason didn't have those same feelings that Jyslin had, but there was also a lack of resistance to the act if it was asked of him. It wasn't his cup of tea, but if Tim wanted gay sex, Jason would give it to him.

That was how close they were. There were no boundaries between them except for a simple lack of sexual attraction between them, and if that were ever to change, then he could admit to himself that he could willingly have sex with another man... but *only* Tim. The idea of having sex with Tim did not *repulse* him as it did if he had the same thought about any other man. The feeling was one of... neutrality. A certain distaste for the idea of it, a lack of enthusiasm, but no bells and whistles in his head telling him not to do it.

Which, he had to admit to himself wryly, was exactly how Jyslin had started down the path of her new relationship with Symone.

He considered that a moment. Would it bother him if he and Tim ended up imprinted to that degree, that they became willing partners? The idea freaked him out a little, he could admit that, but there was no aversion to it in his mind. To him, if it happened, it *happened*. So long as it was what both of them wanted, then so be it. He loved Tim too much to deny him what he wanted, and if Tim wanted Jason, then so be it.

But that was an issue for another time, a situation that would come later. For right now, he was just having too much fun living in a way that would give an evangelical pastor a heart attack, living in delicious sin with his wife and lover, and his lover's husband, giving and sharing equally, reveling in a feeling of unity, of an uncomplicated, pure love that was shared among all four of them. It was the bond of the *amu dozei*, not the *casual* love between a man and woman outside of the marriage, but deeper, more personal, encroaching on the bonds between him and his wife. But he only allowed one to enter Jyslin's territory that Jyslin loved in return, and where Tim and Symone reciprocated, letting Jason and Jyslin into an intimate part of their lives usually only reserved for husband and wife. Jason had gone to that level of intimacy that would only belong to Tim with Symone, and Jyslin had done the same with Tim. Theirs was all but a marriage of the four rather than the two. The fact that they lived in separate houses was a mere formality.

That was what it meant to be *amu dozei*. When it was two couples, it was a joining of couples, not a joining of individuals. When it was a single joining a couple, it was a complete acceptance of the individual into the pair-bond of the couple, literally the taking on of a sec-

ond spouse. Because Jason and Dahnai both were married, Dahnai would forever be *amu dorai* unless Kellin and Jyslin entered into the bond as well, grew to love each other with the same passion Jason and Dahnai loved each other, forever denied a part of Jason she had often tried to take when they made love, that realm reserved only for Jyslin... and also for Symone.

Amu dorai and *amu dozei*, known simply as "the *amu*," was probably one of the most common subjects in much of Faey literature and poetry. Jason found it oddly curious that the love between a man and woman seemed to not catch the interest and passion of writers and poets as much as the *amu*. Entire operas were written about it. Books by the score had been written about it. And Faey history was rife of instances of *amu* either starting or ending wars. It was one of those interesting little personality quirks of the Faey that made them so curious, that they found a multiple relationship much more interesting than "old fashioned" love. But then again, for a telepathic race, the concept of the multiple relationship probably would be one of intense curiosity and inspiration, because of the overwhelming power of the telepathic pair bond. It took a *lot* to cause that to change, and the inclusion of a third or fourth into that powerful bond between two would certainly set fire to a poet's muse.

He felt Jyslin stir against his back, then she hummed softly in her throat and wrapped her arm around his side, gripping his shoulder as she kissed him lightly on the side of his neck. *Morning, my love*, she sent softly, delicately, so as not to disturb Tim and Symone.

Afternoon, actually, he replied, barely having to send at all since she was touching him. Touch dramatically magnified their telepathic bonds.

You should go on trips more often. You're such an insatiable beast when you come back, she teased, running her hand across his chest, caressing it. *I thought you were going to bend Symone in half there for a minute.*

She certainly didn't seem to mind, Jason noted lightly.

Fuck no, I didn't mind, Symone agreed with a satisfied tilt to her thoughts, patting Jason's hand on her stomach. *That was unbelievably hot. I felt like a Barkan whore, and Trelle, did it make me horny. But we have to have a little talk, babe*, she sent, looking over at him with a sly smile. *Why did I keep getting flashes of Aura running through your mind while we were fucking?*

I'm honestly not sure, I don't remember it, he answered. *We bathed at a hot spring on her planet, and I did notice that her body is somewhat like Dahnai's. I thought she was sexy. I guess that's why.*

What, you don't get enough pussy at home, love? Jyslin accused playfully, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. *Between us and Dahnai, you'd think we'd keep you too tired to let your eyes wander.*

You said it yourself, love, I was away for two days. I escaped the power of your pussy, he retorted, *and that let me start noticing another woman.*

Well, we'll have to make sure that doesn't happen again! Symone declared, sitting up, pushing him onto his back, and swinging a leg over him, sitting on his stomach. *We're just going to have to wear you out so much before you leave that you can't walk, so you don't get a chance to recover before you come home*, she winked.

You two and Dahnai very nearly pulled that off, he accused.

*I think I need to find an *amu dorai* of my own*, Tim mused as he woke up. *Then I'd get three women in bed at the same time, too.*

It's an overrated experience, Tim.

Overrated? Overrated? Jyslin sent with mock outrage. *We rock your world in a way it's never been rocked before, and that's overrated? What an utter ingrate!*

Tim sat up and gave Symone a long, loving kiss, making sure to get himself a healthy handful of her breast while doing so. *Oooh, is my Tim-Tim getting a third wind?* she asked with a bandy tilt to her thoughts.

Good grief, woman, can't a husband feel up his wife without having to have sex?

Not when it's a husband as hot as you, Tim-Tim, she replied, giggling as she grabbed hold of him and pushed him to the bed, kissing him passionately. Symone knew how to push Tim's buttons, knew exactly how to send to arouse him, and Jason saw that Tim was committed. He turned and wrapped his arms around Jyslin, giving her a loving kiss and then rubbing the tip of his nose against hers with a gentle, contented expression.

I guess I should get up, I have a mountain of work to do today, Jason sent with a sigh. *But some of it I can't do for a while yet.*

Don't go looking for work today, love, just relax for a little while, she told him, running her hand up and down his side languidly. *Since the Consortium attacked, you've been running yourself ragged. You deserve at least a little time to rest, or maybe pay attention to your wife and your amu dozei,* she smiled. *If it's important, they'll call us.*

I think someone's listening too much to the other side of the bed, he accused with a light smile as Symone groaned. Tim was on top of her, and they had begun intercourse, judging from the shaking of the bed and the sensations they were sending, which both Jason and Jyslin were receiving. *Symone's certainly frisky today,* he noted dryly, which made Jyslin laugh.

She's been especially frisky since yesterday afternoon. She went and saw Songa about a little problem.

What problem?

Jayce, Symone's the only one of us girls who doesn't have a baby, she reminded him. *She finally broke down and went and saw Songa about it. Songa gave her a detailed checkup focusing on that part of her, and found what she called a minor imbalance. She gave Symone a treatment for it and a medicine to take for a couple of weeks, and sounded hopeful that fixed it. So, Symone's looking to get pregnant.*

Ah. Well, she shouldn't have come after me, she should stay with Tim. Tim should be the father of their first baby.

Well, she's not in her fertility phase yet, Jyslin winked. *She's just practicing.*

Like she needs any more practice, Jason noted dryly.

Like... I could... have you in... my bed... without fucking you, Symone sent in a disjointed manner, her thoughts disrupted by bursts of pure sensation and pleasure and encouragement. *I'll... stay with Tim... when Songa says... I'm close to... my window.*

Just tell us when, and we'll stay clear hon, Jyslin assured her.

Love, wait til she's done. You know she'll never remember anything you say when you send to her while she's having sex.

True.

Jason was content to kiss and caress Jyslin while Tim and Symone finished up, the two of them more than happy to just lay there and let Tim and Symone's pleasure flow through their minds, revel in the joy of their *amu dozei*. Usually, the sensations of one couple drove the other to sex, but sometimes there was much to be said of just laying there and experiencing it through Tim and Symone rather than do it themselves. Symone jokingly called it *sex by proxy*, but no matter what they called it, it was a wonderful thing. When they were done, Symone reached out and put her hand on Jason's back, then she slapped him. *I remember enough to be get you for saying that about me!* she sent, which made Jason and Jyslin laugh.

Mommy! Where are you? Rann called. Jason was startled; it was the first time he had ever

heard his son send. In just a few days, he had learned enough about sending to reach out for his mother, and while his sending was a little fuzzy and hesitant, it was still strong. Very strong. Rann was going to match his father in power, at least. Maybe even exceed him. Power he had, but power was not the only part of sending. Many men were weak in talent, but masters of sending, capable of far more than stronger but lesser trained women. Rann would learn that power may come naturally, but clarity and speed would come in time, as he mastered the art.

I'm over at Uncle Tim and Aunt Symone's, baby, she answered in a nurturing manner, sending slowly and carefully in return. *I'm having some private time. Can you be a good boy and wait at home with Ayama and Surin?*

I can, Mommy. I was just worried, you weren't home when we came back from Aunt Maya's.

"They grow up so fast," Jason said, then he chuckled. "He's gonna be so strong."

"He certainly walked through Trelle's hair," Jyslin agreed with a proud smile.

Is Daddy with you? Miss Ayama says he's home, and Captain Aya is here. Did he go see Miss Miaari?

I'm with your mother, little man, Jason called, using the same slow, careful sending. *We're not quite ready to come home yet, but it won't be long. You just wait there at home and we'll be over to see you real soon, okay? Go do your exercises with Captain Aya while you're waiting for us, she's back home too and she's probably waiting for you. If Aya says you're really good, we'll take you and Danelle to the boardwalk.*

We'll be really good! he promised, enthusiasm bleeding into his thought. The boardwalk was Rann's favorite place in Karsa to visit, because of the rides and the games.

Now you're neglecting your child to pursue your sexual whims, Symone teased.

Rann can wait just a little bit, Jason noted, kissing Jyslin languidly. *Promising to take him the boardwalk is the ultimate form of bribery.*

It works, though, Jyslin agreed, giggling against his lips.

He could only shirk duty in the arms of his wife and lover for so long, though. The pull of duty, the thought of *what can I do today to make the lives of my people better* had taken control. There were reports to read, people to see, plans to make. He had to find out how the repairs were going, how promotions were being handled, how the people at Exile were doing in the plan to uproot them. He needed to talk to Miaari, he needed to send a report to Zaa, and he needed to get an update on the progress of getting that Consortium ship back to Karsis. If they couldn't get it going on its own, then the *Dreamer* would have to tow it back.

He gave his wife a final kiss, then regretfully left the comfort and inclusion of his *amu dozei*'s bed and wandered to the shower. He reached out, reached all the way to Karsa, using his impressive power to touch on many minds, searching for someone he knew. He finally contacted Sioa, and then reached out to her. *Sioa,* he called. *Can you reach me?*

Of course I can, she answered, a bit testily. *Where are you? We've been trying to get in touch, but Ayama's stonewalling us.*

I needed a little time, I was very tired, he answered. *What's going on?*

The Dreamer as at Exile, she told him. *They had another brush with the Consortium, but no shots were fired. Fifty-three Consortium vessels jumped into the system, but turned and jumped out before we could engage. Hyperspace probes show that they completely abandoned the sector, they didn't just jump some distance away and wait. Military intelligence has a theory. Well, the same theory we had, just with more substantiation now.*

Well, what is it?

We think they don't have any more ships close enough to assist, she answered. *The Consor-*

tium used the Urumi to help attack Karis, we think it's because they didn't have enough military force to do it themselves. We believe that they've depleted their forces in this sector, and must wait for reinforcements. We believe those fifty-odd ships are all that's left of the Consortium fleet in the sector.

I hope that's not just wishful thinking.

It does have some solid evidence backing it up. But Zaa has still deployed an additional two hundred ships to Exile as a precaution.

I'm going to have to bring her to Karis and give Zaa a big kiss.

I'm sure she'd enjoy it. The Kimdori are actively searching for the Consortium, hunting for their base. Those ships had to go somewhere. If we can find them, we can attack them. We'll deal them a serious blow and disrupt their attempts to continue operating in this sector.

They're from Andromeda, so the logical place to look is the closest point between this galaxy and that one.

That happens to be the arm of the galaxy where Exile is, Jason. No, they have a base somewhere else. The Kimdori agreed to search for it, and help us attack it.

Well, another reason I need to kiss Zaa repeatedly. This isn't the Kimdori's war.

I think you underestimate how angry the Kimdori were about the Consortium attack, Jayce. Not only did they get blindsided by something they never saw coming, Karis, you, and Cybi herself were directly assaulted. You know how Zaa reveres Cybi. You didn't see Miaari when the Consortium appeared. I've never seen her so furious. This may not be a war aimed at the Kimdori, but this is definitely the Kimdori's war.

What's the status on that Consortium ship?

The main power was blown out, and the computer core might be beyond repair. The technicians believe they can repair main power, but they're pessimistic about the computer core. They're not going to do anything until they get it back here, and after they remove the computer core. The Dreamer is going to tow it back, and might already be on the way, I'm not sure. I haven't gotten a status report. They're leaving it alone until they get it back here because they don't want the computer to try to destroy the ship if they can repair it, and it's brought back online. Myleena's clearing space in Kosigi for the ship. She's already drooling at the thought of taking that ship apart.

She's not the only one. How is it going on Exile?

Pretty smoothly. The Exiled aren't too happy about your decision, but they're cooperating. The first ship will be jumping back to Karis in about two hours.

That fast?

They're not playing around, Jason, she intoned as he lathered up his hair and began to wash it. When Sevi showed the Exiled pictures of the battle that took place at Karis, and then showed them the captured Consortium ship in orbit, they got the picture quickly.

I should have done that, Jason grunted. I just ordered them without really explaining why I was giving them the order. I tried to explain the danger. I guess it would have made more sense to prove my words.

We all err, Jason. Be glad yours was a little thing, Sioa sent supportively. Given how rarely you do make a mistake, I think we can let you slide a little on this one, she added lightly.

Gee, thanks. Are the repairs still on schedule?

All on schedule. Myleena's revised her completion date of the interdicator, she moved it up one day. She wants two days to test it, then she'll put it on line.

Two days? We may not have two days.

If our estimates as to Consortium fleet strength is true, then we do have two days, she corrected. Think about it, Jason. If they had the forces to take on the Kimdori battle fleet pro-

tecting Karis, wouldn't they be attacking right now?

He could only send a wordless agreement to that.

We have a tactical advantage, and we need to press it. That's why the Kimdori are hunting for the Consortium base. It's better to put the enemy on the defensive than stay on the defensive ourselves.

I can't argue with that. Sioa, word that we have a Consortium ship can't leave the Karinnes. The Urumi must have spies in the Imperium, and that means that the Consortium might still be getting information, even if the Urumi aren't passing it on anymore. That means we must keep our secrets. Dahnai can't know. The secret unspoken remains a secret.

Naturally. That's why the Kimdori deployed some devices that scrambled light and energy patterns that left the Exile system that will prevent any kind of passive observation, so they can't just point telescopes or passive sensors at Exile and see what happened. The Kimdori are pretty clever, Sioa sent appreciatively.

Jason had to agree. Light moved at a set speed, and what happened in the past could actually be seen by using telescopes aimed at planets, based on ships that would jump hyperspace to a predetermined point calculated to look at a specific time. Using that trick, Jason could jump to a point in interstellar space and point cameras back at Karis, set the magnification, and then watch the entire battle, were Karis not protected from just such actions. The Kimdori had probably deployed hyperspace-based units that scrambled energy passing through an area of real space, disrupting all coherent light and energy signals passing through. Given that hyperspace was much more encompassing than normal space, a single device could disrupt signals in a huge area. Those defenses were part of the ring of satellites that had been around the inner system, that disrupted light passing through to prevent telescopes from seeing what was happening on the planet, rendering any image of Karis fuzzy... which could be blamed on the intense radiation that was supposed to be present. But now that Karis was no longer a secret, more substantial defenses were in place that completely disrupted all light and coherent energy signals passing through, isolating Karis from surveillance. Kimdori were masters of hyperspace, knowing the secrets of the Karinnes from before their destruction, and that gave them powerful tools.

Anything else to pass along?

Not really. We just wanted you to know about the Consortium. I assume you're fine with allowing Sevi to make tactical decisions there?

I wouldn't have left her in charge if I wasn't. There's something you can look into for me.

What?

The Exiled seemed a little unsettled with the idea of living inland. Look around and see if we don't have a premade town big enough to hold them that's on the ocean that most closely matches the weather conditions of Exile. Probably northwest of Karsa, closer to the equator.

Jason, all our volunteers are already in place.

I know, but after what I heard, I think we might want to think about giving them something more like home to them. It might make those who resent being moved maybe a touch less antagonistic.

Always at the last minute with you, she accused, but not harshly. I'll talk to your interior cabinet and have them see what they can find.

It's how I keep myself interesting, Sioa. I thought women liked unpredictable men.

Not when they make the rules, I don't, she sent playfully in reply.

Keep up with me if you dare, Sioa, Jason shot back. I'll be home in a while, you can get me there.

Alright. Talk to you soon.

Later hon. [Cybi, can you link me to Myleena?]

[Certainly. Myleena, Jason wants to talk to you.]

[Sure, Cybi. Hey, Jason?]

[It's me.]

[Babe, when I see you, I am gonna kiss you so hard!] she communed ecstatically. [How did you do it? How did you pull off capturing a ship?]

[I remembered Songa's report,] he answered, then explained how they had done it.

[Brilliant! Babe, you'd have been such an awesome member of Black Ops! When is it getting here?]

[Sioa said that the Dreamer is towing it back. I'm not sure if they're on the way or still preparing, you'll have to talk to her about it. She said you're clearing out space?]

[Yeah, I cleared out a destroyer bay and I'm getting ready. You gotta be here, Jayce! You can't pass up the chance to get your hands in their intact technology! If we're lucky, we can restore their main power and get the ship working. Imagine, using the ship as a decoy to slip behind their lines!]

[I thought you were gonna take it apart.]

[You bet your ass I am, but that doesn't mean I can't put it back together when I'm done,] she answered. [When are you coming up? Oh, and bring Danelle!]

[I have some other things to do, but I'll see if I can't find some time.]

[Alright babes. Let me get back to work.]

[Sure thing. Later Myli.]

[Later Jayce.]

Jason ended the communion as he rinsed his hair, tilting his head slightly to let the soap rinse off his gestalt. The gestalt had, over the years, completely rubbed away the hair that used to grow underneath it, but that made little difference, since he never took it off. He had become so completely used to it that he couldn't fathom not having it bonded to his face, not having it tickling the back of his mind at all times. Jason and Myleena were the only Generations that had such complete attachment to their gestalts, though. Erinn and many others preferred to take them off when sleeping or bathing or when they didn't need them, but Jason felt that it was a *part* of him, and he'd take it off with the same feel of unease he'd have taking off his left hand. Jyslin was already used to seeing it on his face, and Rann had *never* seen his father without it.

But it wasn't the *same* gestalt he'd worn all these years. This gestalt was 40% smaller than the last one he wore, the newest version just built last year, with the curved upper prong gone from the design. That prong had once held the circuitry of part of the gestalt and had also contained the antennas for its communion, but Myleena had streamlined the design and worked out a way to use the case of the gestalt itself as the antenna. The new gestalts *did* have slightly less power than the old ones, but that was a fair tradeoff for not having that upper curved prong digging into the side of his head when he was sleeping. The new gestalts were thin and comfortable, and it was so easy to forget they were there, so comfortable, that never taking it off didn't matter.

Tim stepped into the large shower and took up a position at the other shower head. Their bathroom was much more human than Jason's, with a large shower and only the soaking tub, and the shower and tub both were big enough for two people. *Pass the shampoo, will ya?* Tim asked.

Sure. What's on your agenda today?

Well, after Miaari bitches me out for being late for work, odds are I'll still be working on the Consortium data. She's been having me work on the Consortium data. I've been put on

the team deciphering their alphabet and writing. I've been spending most of my time looking at pictures and inspecting the wreckage, searching for writing samples to add to the database. I guess my job will be a hell of a lot easier when that captured ship gets back, he noted with an audible chuckle.

I'll tell Miaari to give you a pass, Jason sent with a chuckle. I'll assert my Dukal privileges. That's a new way to call a conjugal visit, Tim laughed. A Dukal privilege indeed, he grinned, slapping Jason on the butt.

Hey, hey, I'll sic Aya on you for assaulting my royal person! he threatened, which made Tim laugh. What did Songa say about Symone's problem?

That it was chronic but minor, and it was easily fixed, he answered. Songa said the best time to try to get pregnant would be in about ten to thirteen days. So, we're gonna try.

Good luck, man. Children make life so much different. And better.

Thanks.

Hurry up you two! We wanna shower too! Jyslin called.

Well, what's stopping you? Get in here, silly woman! Jason answered. Aya.

Yes, your Grace?

We'll be over in about twenty minutes or so. Can you get the kids ready to go to the boardwalk?

We'll get started, she promised.

I should be going in to work, but I promised Rann, and I'm not gonna break promises to my son. It'll set a bad precedent.

You'll have more fun with your kids anyway.

Amen, Jason agreed as Jyslin and Symone invaded the shower. It was a little cramped with all four of them, but Jason was done anyway, so he slithered out... but not without making sure to get all kinds of feels of both women while he did so.

Such a fucking tease! Symone challenged with a grin when he groped her on the way out of the shower.

I was just making sure you didn't fall over as I squeezed by, Symone, Jason told her as he dried off.

By grabbing my pussy?

Well, it must have worked, since you didn't fall over, he sent mildly, which made all three of them laugh.

Keep your calendar open tonight, baby, cause you just got yourself an appointment.

Promises, promises, he sent flippantly.

Jason dried off, dressed, and went back home. He picked up Rann and Kyri and gave both of them big kisses. "And how are my two babies?"

I'm no baby! Kyri challenged, but she did hug him around his neck.

Alright, how's my little man and my little lady? he corrected, sending slowly for Rann's benefit.

He's the baby, he can't even send right! Kyri taunted, giving Rann a smug little look.

Hey, I'm just learning, and Mommy said I send really good!

Good for a baby!

That's enough, Jason chided them, which made Kyri fall silent, Rann glare at her, and then Kyri stuck her tongue out at him. Kyri! Jason barked. Apologize right now, and you'd better mean it.

I'm sorry I called you a baby, she sent, a bit sulkily.

Better, Jason assured her, then he kissed her on the cheek and made her giggle. I swear, I have no idea where you pick these things up. That's not even an insult in Faey society, it's

something that might get you in trouble for an entirely different reason when you're older, he sent to Kyri.

Mommy said it's a way human kids tease each other.

Your mother needs to teach you better things than how to annoy your brothers and sisters, Jason told her mildly, which made her giggle.

What? Rann sent suspiciously.

Nothing, Daddy was telling me something meant only for his daughters, she sent, a bit smugly.

Yes, I was lecturing her on how impolite she's being, Jason sent flintily, which made Rann sprout a smug smile of his own. "Are you two ready for the boardwalk?"

"Can we go now?" Rann asked excitedly.

"Let's wait for Mommy Jyslin," he said, using Jyslin's name because he had Kyri. To his kids, their own mother was *Mommy* and Jyslin was *Mommy Jyslin*, but to Rann the other mothers were *Aunt*. It was subtle, but a very telling distinction in how Jyslin asserted her authority as Jason's wife and the Duchess Consort over the other mothers of Jason's children. All the ex-Marines had Duchess titles, but Jyslin's official title of Duchess Consort was higher than a regular Duchess, which allowed his wife to outrank all the other Marines as more than just the wife of the Grand Duke. "Where's Danelle?"

"Upstairs," Rann answered.

She's changing into a new pair of shorts, Kyri elaborated. *Daddy, Mommy said that if we go to Draconis, we'll turn blue. Was she just kidding?*

No, it really happens, he nodded. *That's why I try to avoid going to Draconis and staying a long time. I come back home looking very strange.*

So it doesn't stay?

Only as long as you're there. It fades after few days when you come home.

Oh.

Why do you ask?

I was just curious. I was wondering what I'd look like if I was blue like Danelle is.

You'd still be my little lady, he smiled, kissing her cheek and making her giggle.

I can't understand you two, Rann sent sullenly.

Just keep practicing, little man, and you'll be able to understand us in no time, he promised, kissing Rann on the cheek, then putting both of them down. "Danelle!" he shouted. "Get a move on, girl, we're leaving as soon as Mommy Jyslin gets back!"

"Coming!" she shouted from the stairwell.

The car is ready whenever you are, your Grace, Aya reported.

Thanks, Aya. Jyslin, you about ready?

I'm dressing now, love, be over in a minute.

"Jyslin's almost ready, so go ahead and go out to the car," he told them.

They hurried out to the car, and Jason swooped down and grabbed Danelle as she tried to run by. Danelle giggled and hugged his neck. Like the children of the other Marines, Danelle was almost like his own. She spent probably a much time in his house as she did at home, because Myleena was so busy, but Jason didn't mind at all. Since Danelle's father wasn't in her life, Jason was more than happy to fill that role, for Danelle and for the children of Lyn, Bryn, Min, Sheleese, and Myri. They, like the others, were trying to get pregnant, and Jason had found it strange that all ten women seemed to be having the same problem Symone was, a curious lack of conceptions since having their first child.

That, Jason had heard, wasn't unusual. Faey women seemed to have this gap of two to three years between their children, some kind of biological issue with them that discouraged con-

ception while the youngest child was still an infant, probably some kind of adaptation to their species that made them different from humans. Perhaps the conception gap after the first baby was some kind of genetic assurance that the first child had plenty of time to develop without competition. It also showed in Maya through her two daughters; they were almost exactly three years apart.

But, it had been about four years since they'd come to Karis. Perhaps the planet itself was having an effect on the women. He'd have to have Songa go through the birth records and see if it was a consistent effect. Until then, maybe all of the women should go see Songa and see if they had the same minor imbalance that Symone contracted.

With Aya, Ryn, and Dera, Jason and Jyslin took Rann, Kyri, and Danelle to the boardwalk. It was his first casual trip out among his people since the battle, and he hadn't expected quite the reaction he got. His people *cheered* when they realized he was on the boardwalk, and he was surrounded by well-wishers who clapped his shoulders, kissed his cheek, and shook his hand. He even had one of the rare Kizzik that lived on Karis, one of the nobles, perform the *kree'kthk*, a ceremonial tasting of his blood so as to absorb what they felt were his noble qualities... and which almost got her head blown off by Aya when she pricked Jason's hand with one of the spines on her armored wrist. But Jason was aware of the ceremony, a ceremony meant to honor *him*, since the Kizzik was saying through the ritual *I want to be more like you*.

The Faey were remarkably human-like, and their cultures and attitudes were amazingly similar, but the Makati and Kizzik on Karis reminded him that the House Karinne was a multi-species house, and species that were *much* different from humans and Faey.

They played games, rode a few rides, and visited some shops on the boardwalk, enjoying a little rest and relaxation after a hard couple of weeks. But real life had to intrude on his day out with his wife and some of the strip's kids, while Jason and Jyslin were eating ice cream at a little parlor with tables set up on the boardwalk while the kids, watched over by Dera, watched a Faey juggler with amazement in their eyes as the brightly dressed young man made five red balls dance over his blurring hands.

[Jason, Myri is trying to contact you,] Cybi communed with him.

As it always did, any time Jason used communion near Kyri, it caused her to react. She seemed to stiffen slightly and looked around, a hand to her head. Kyri couldn't yet hear communion, but she was definitely sensitive to it. But Jason knew it was just a matter of time until she could. Kyri was a Generation, and was probably the strongest telepath in the Imperium. In ten years, once her powers fully matured and she had more experience, she would be the most powerful telepath alive.

[Can you connect us please?]

[Certainly.]

[Jason?]

[Go ahead, Myri.]

[The Dancer just arrived, Jayce, and the Consortium ship came through the tow in perfect condition. Two destroyers are towing it into Kosigi as we speak, and the Dancer is going to return to Exile as soon as the crew has a chance to rest.]

[That sounds good. Hand it over to Myleena as soon you can and let her get to work. I'll try to go up and take a look at it when I have a chance.]

[Buried in paperwork?]

[No, in butter pecan ice cream,] he replied with a light current. *[I'm spending a little time with the wife and kids.]*

[Never anything wrong with that, as long as you do it in moderation,] Myri chuckled in re-

ply.

The enemy ship just arrived, Jason told Jyslin, sending privately.

She nodded. They didn't waste any time getting it here.

That ship is the second most important thing we have right now. Between the interdictor and that ship, we have real weapons now, concrete weapons to battle the Consortium. As soon as we tear that ship apart, we might find some weakness in their technology we can exploit to protect ourselves, maybe even learn more about them to take the fight to them. Who knows, we might get their computers intact, break into them, and learn all about their operations in our galaxy.

It would be nice. They know so much about us, and we know almost nothing about them. It would even the playing field. They captured the Karinne ancestors and their ships, and now we've captured theirs. And when we learn all we can from it, we'll come after them and show them you don't fuck with House Karinne and the Imperium, she finished with an adamant set to her thought.

Nor should they be fucking with the balance of power in our sector, Jason added. Outside of the war with the Skaa a few years ago, things have been nice and quiet around here, and I'd like it to stay that way.

What do you mean?

When I sent that technology to the Academy, I meant it, he answered. I want everyone to have access to it, because I don't want anyone to be vulnerable to the Consortium, either militarily or tempted to enter into an alliance with them in exchange for their weaponry. I also want everyone armed with the same weapons, so there's no imbalance of power between the Imperium, the Skaa, and the Alliance. If everyone has the same potential for destruction, it keeps all three sides nice and unwilling to get into wars with each other.

And the Urumi?

I'm sure they'll survive. If they get conquered, oh well, that's the price they pay for dealing with the devil. They've already lost their border systems to Dahnai, and their fleet was decimated. They're vulnerable, and everyone knows it. Hell, even the Nine Colonies on the backside of the Collective might try to annex the Debarix system. The Urumi are in no position to do anything about it. I figure they're gonna lose their ring systems but continue with their core systems. They'll lose half their territory, but the Collective will live on.

And now there's another race in the Imperium, Jyslin mused. The Urumi did surrender. Dahnai will probably keep the populations of those systems intact and just make them pay tribute, but she'd better be careful. The Urumi will only behave if they're treated fairly by the established rules of combat agreed to between the Urumi and the Imperium some three thousand years ago, at the end of our first war. As long as she doesn't mistreat the Urumi, they won't rebel or fight back. It would be the smartest thing to do to just leave them be and let them pay tribute, since tensions with the Urumi are going to be too high for our races to mingle for a while.

I'm going to do something about that. I haven't gone into work yet because the first thing I need to do is talk to the Queen of the Collective, and I'm waiting for it to be morning on Uruma so I'm not waking her up. I'll have to talk to the Alliance and to Dahnai too.

What do you have in mind?

Well, the Urumi attacked us. Doesn't that mean we should get first choice of taking on the Urumi planets as Karinne holdings?

Jason, the Karinnes have never held territory outside of Karis before.

That's the old Karinne. I intend to keep Exile as it is. I have an idea for Aurigae and the other border systems, a way the Urumi can help us and also not feel like they're going to be

punished by the Imperium for the treachery of their queen. Like you said, they did surrender. They deserve a little leeway for that.

You really think Dahnai is going to give you an arable system? She loves you, baby, but not that much.

I think she might after she hears my idea, because the last thing we need right now is for us to fight among ourselves when the Consortium is lurking out there. The Urumi could be allies, and they'll probably jump at the chance to pay the Consortium back for their betrayal. I need to contact the Collective queen anyway. In fact, I should do that right now, because she'll be in her window of activity in about an hour, he noted, having his gestalt bring up local time for the Collective homeworld, I have to make the call before Queen Sk'Vrae gets involved with other matters. Love, watch the kids for me.

Certainly.

Aya, I'm going to the White House, he called. The White House was the seat of the Dukal government. It wasn't a house so much as it was a complex of buildings, all painted white, in the center of the city. It had started as something of a joke when Jason noted that he'd be in a white building as he looked at the plans for the complex, like the American President, and the idea took off to where it became official. It was there that the municipal Dukal government operated, overseeing those planetary programs that dealt with the house as a whole. It was there that land grants were issued, marriage licenses, birth and death certificates, and other permits were handed out, where planetary systems like power, water, and waste reclamation were administered, it was the location of the military headquarters where Shey worked, and it was technically where Jason had the seat of his power. In typical Faey fashion, Jason had a throne room there... which amounted a ten by ten room with a simple chair. But, when he talked to other rulers except for Zaa and Dahnai, that was where he did it, from the official seat of his house, wearing formal robes. Find me a car or something.

Jason was there in half an hour. He padded quickly through the polished halls, nodding to the administrators and secretaries as they bowed to him, until he reached his throne room. Who's running the comm today? he called as he stepped into the antechamber to put on a court robe. Appearances were very important when dealing with the leaders of other governments.

I am, your Grace, answered a young male named Gerin, who was a very proficient technician and knew all the various forms and customs when dealing with other races on the communications console.

Good. Get me the Academy, Gerin. I want to talk to the Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Urumi Collective.

There was a startled silence. Uh, certainly, your Grace. It may take a while, though. Would you like to wait in the lounge?

No, I'll wait right here, he said, sitting in his polished walnut chair.

It took about ten minutes for Gerin to finally get through to the Collective, having to go through the Academy, which gave Jason plenty of time to put on his blue court robe embroidered with the crest of Karinne over his left chest, and in typical Faey fashion, had one sleeve longer than the other. The Urumi ambassador was still there, but he had all but barred himself in his office while the Urumi students tried to leave.

Sk'Vrae was not a very handsome female. She was Urumi, which meant she was an odd cross between a reptile and an insect. Urumi were reptilian in appearance, like the Skaa, but they had bony plates on their outsides that almost looked vaguely like an insect's carapace, bony armor protecting their sensitive areas, with tough scales between them, and no bony plates on the face or neck. Urumi were formidable in unarmed combat because they were

from a moderately high-G homeworld that gave them good raw strength in addition to their natural armor. Sk'Vrae was a massive female Urumi with a bony crest over her eyes, the crest a mark of a female, and her plates and scales were all painted red, the mark of her royal station. "What doesss the leader of Karinne want with me?" she asked, hissing at him in Faey. "Doesss your bitch queen sssend you to make more outrageoussss demandsss? You have our border sssysstemsss, what more do you want?"

"I want you to send your Urumi students *back* to the Academy," he told her immediately. "I want your ambassador to remain, and I want to make you a deal."

"What deal?" she asked.

"I've sent samples of Consortium technology to the Academy so their scientists can analyze and understand Consortium technology so all governments participating in the Academy can copy the technology and build the weapons themselves. I'm doing this because the Consortium threatens all of us, so we all need weapons capable of fighting them. That technology will not be held by any one government, it will be available to anyone who needs it, including you, your Majesty. My deal is your scientists earn a spot at the table when the Academy starts that work so you can take part in the project *if* you provide samples of the armor they gave you, so we can also analyze that."

"And why would I do thisss?" she asked. "We *have* thossse weaponsss. We can take them apart and learn their sssecretsss ourssselvesss."

"Because the combined efforts of us all will make that happen much faster than if you do it yourself. I guarantee you you'll be at least two years behind, and all your neighbors will have those weapons while your factories are still retooling to produce the new technology."

She was silent a long moment, so he continued. "I have a couple of other offers."

"Prossseed."

"I have something of an idea to try to reduce tensions between the Collective and the Imperium. I'll offer the neutrality of House Karinne as a buffer between you and the Empress. I'll make Dahnai back off, and I'll make her give *me* the border systems she conquered from the Collective. When she does, I'll split the farm production from the farms of Aurigae with you. I know you're going to need the food, your Majesty. I don't believe you had anything against my house. I think you got lured into an alliance by a partner that hid the truth from you and then tried to use you, and I for one am not going to punish the Collective for it. Yes, you attacked my planet, but you were repelled, and as far as I'm concerned, that is a moot point in the face of the current situation. I'm willing to let that go in the interests of a greater peace."

She glared at him icily. "And what *favor* will I owe the Grand Duke Karinne for hisss generossity?" she asked.

"Allow me to recruit Urumi on the border planets into my military and into my house, those I see fit to invite."

"You would trussst them?"

"We're telepaths, your Majesty. We'll *know* if they're lying to us. I'm not going to induct them fully into the house, what I'm looking at doing is establishing a *splinter* house staffed by the Urumi who will oversee the border systems I control. In short, your Majesty, I will allow the Urumi to govern themselves however they wish, even have agents of the Collective there on the planets to ensure the good treatment of your people, so long as they don't actively oppose Karinne. What I want from you is your blessing. I know your people, Queen Sk'Vrae. Their oaths of loyalty will hold them to the Collective unless you give them the option to forswear them if they so wish." He gave her a steady look. "And you'll get your chance at revenge against the Consortium," he added. "We intend to take the war to them,

your Majesty. I'm sure you'd like a little payback for their betrayal of you. Your soldiers inducted into my house would strike a blow for the Urumi, and when the time comes, I'll welcome Urumi ships among us as we destroy the Consortium for their dishonorable acts."

She stood up, and she hissed. Jason knew Urumi. They were very honorable creatures, no doubt carrying out their side of the bargain in good faith until the Consortium betrayed them, and the backstabbing they received from the Consortium would be like a raw wound. There was that, and there was the fact that the Urumi could hold a grudge like nobody's business. They called it *a matter of blood*, and when a matter of blood came up, Urumi would devote their entire lives in the pursuit of justice. They had nursed a thousand year grudge against Merrane and the Imperium over the destruction of the original Academy. The Consortium may have power and technology, but they didn't *know* the races in this sector very well. If they had, they'd never had been stupid enough to backstab the Urumi, because now the Urumi would hunt them for the rest of time until they felt the matter of blood was settled. "You have my attention, your Grassse," she said seriously. "You will plead the Collective'sss cassse to your bitch queen?"

"I can make no promises, but I'll impress her with the fact that the Urumi could be more useful as allies... if they agree to a written peace treaty, and you'll finally forgive Merrane for the destruction of the Academy."

"Blood hasss yet to be repaid for that," she said, sitting back down. "But we can honor a temporary trussse in the matter, ssso that we might both focuss our attention on a greater foe. Our fuedsss againsst Merrane and Trillane may resssume after we have avenged ourssselvesss againsst the Consssortium."

"She might go for that," Jason noted absently, forgetting the formal forms for a moment. "Trillane, you say?"

"They broke a deal bargained in good faith," she hissed. "That isss a matter of blood."

"Well, far be it from me to get in your way with Trillane. As you know, we have no love for them either. I'd be happy to let you take big bites out of those bloodsuckers after we deal with the Consortium."

"At leassst in that regard, you and I do sssee the sssame picture," she agreed.

"So, you will return your people to the Academy?"

She nodded. "And I will sssupply sssamples of the armor which we were given," she agreed. "In return, you will include our ssscientisssts in the ressssearch of their technology, and you will ssspeak on our behalf to your bitch queen."

"I make no promises how far I can get, but I will do my best. Regardless of how well I do, your Majesty, we can't afford to be divided right now. The Consortium is a threat to *all* of us. You, me, the Imperium, the Skaa, the Alliance, the Nine Colonies, the Zyagya, the Confederated Trinary, even the Kimdori."

She was silent a long moment. "I will honor our agreement. The contract will be drawn up and ssent to you ssso you may sssign and affiksss your ssseal. Asss isss proper, it will be ssent to you with my mark and ssseal upon it."

"Have it delivered to Secretary General Kim of the Terran's United Nations, and from there it will find its way to me. I will read it, and if it matches our spoken agreement, I will sign and affix my seal and return it to you."

"Then we have a bargain in good faith," she declared, touching her nose, her cheek, then her bony crest in succession with her reptilian hand. He clapped his hands together twice and gave a short bow in his chair in the response to her ritual act. It was an old Urumi ritual giving "the bond of word" that would hold until the agreement was drawn up as a proper contract. "I will contact my ambasssador at the Academy and give him the proper commandsss."

“And I’ll contact Empress Dahnai right now and see what I can do.”

“Now, ass to this offer of government. If you take control of the border systems, you will allow them to govern themselves?”

“Yes.”

“Would you permit me to send a daughter to each system to act as Brood Princess Ruler? The Collective is quite lost without a queen to rule.”

“I... will consider it. If your daughters suitably convince me that they won’t simply try to make the systems rebel against Karinne and rejoin the Collective, I’d probably permit it.”

“If you were conquered by the Ssskaa, would you not yearn to rejoin your home government?”

“I would. How about a contract of years of service? They agree to thirty years of loyalty to Karinne. After thirty years, House Karinne and the Queen of the Collective meet to discuss the matter and the possible return of the border systems to the Collective.”

“I... will ponder the matter,” she said slowly. “It has merit, but I must seek counsel with my advisors before I agree to such a contract.”

“Fair enough. We’ll talk about that after I talk to Empress Dahnai and see if I can get control of the border systems.”

“Then until you know, our business is done.”

“Not yet. Your Majesty, in three weeks from tomorrow, I’m convening a council of all parties about the Consortium. It’s going to be so we can all sit down and talk about the threat, put our cooperation over Consortium technology in writing, and iron out any wrinkles. I’d like you to attend.”

“Personally?”

He nodded. “I’m going to extend the invitation to everyone, and it’ll be held in the Academy, a neutral site.”

“I will discuss the offer with my advisors.”

“Then I believe we’re done, your Majesty.”

“May Tr’Bakk bless your path, Grand Duke Karinne of the House of Karinne.”

“Walk under the shadow of Grx’Vin, Queen Sk’Vrae of Uruma.”

Her image disappeared from the screen, and Jason leaned back and sighed. That was easier than he expected. He thought Sk’Vrae was going to fight about it. She’d inform her council about their agreement, and then she would have the contract drawn up and delivered to Earth.

Now came the other fight. *Gerin, get me Empress Dahnai.*

At once, your Grace.

It took about a minute. Her image appeared on the screen, dressed in her court robes and holding her crown in her hand. It was midafternoon there, so she had probably just finished a court. “Hey babe,” she called with a smile. “Uh oh, you’re in your throne room. Is this business?”

“It has been, yeah,” he answered. “I just finished an audience with Queen Sk’Vrae.”

“That horny bitch? What were you talking to her for?”

“I got her to put her people back at the Academy,” he began. “And I promised her a place when the scientists start working on the Consortium technology. She even agreed to bring the armor the Consortium gave her people with her so we can analyze that as well.”

“What? Why?” she demanded. “Babe, we’re at war with the Collective!”

“No, you’re sitting with your fleets in the border systems making a lot of noise about invading the Collective core worlds when you have no intent to do so, trying to scare her into giving up more than what you’ve already taken,” he said calmly. “But that’s not what I called about. I want to make a deal with you.”

“A deal? A deal over what?”

“I want the border systems you conquered.”

“What? The Karinnes never—”

“We’re not the Karinnes of old,” he said. “I want Aurigae and the other border systems, Dahnai. That will put the Urumi under *me*, and I’ve already promised Sk’Vrae I’d treat her people with respect. I can keep order there and their farms producing better than any other house, because the queen will tell her people to obey *me* completely. She won’t do that for you.”

She gave him a hot, unfriendly look. “What deals have you been making behind my back, Jason?” she demanded. “You say you’re not the old Karinne, but making your own private deals with other governments is a page out of the old Karinne’s book!”

“I know I’m pushing things, Dahnai, but I’m looking at more than just what I can get out of you or the Collective. The Collective was betrayed by the Consortium, hon. They were backstabbed. Do you know what the Urumi do when they’ve been betrayed?”

She opened her mouth, then she laughed. “They’ll go after the Consortium!”

“Exactly. So, me and Sk’Vrae have something of a common interest, and we’ve already agreed that when the time comes to kick the shit out of the Consortium, the Collective is in. In a show of faith of our new partnership, I offered to try to talk you down, and that’s what I’m doing. Sk’Vrae won’t fight over the systems you’ve already conquered, if you give them to me and let me handle it. I’ll promise you here and now half of all food exports off the arable planets. Karinne will run the planets at zero-profit. We’ll take nothing but what’s necessary to make the systems self-sufficient. My only interest is to put a cushion between the Imperium and the Collective, and I can provide that. It will keep the peace, the border systems will produce for the Imperium, and you score some brownie points with Sk’Vrae.”

“And Sk’Vrae gets the other half of the food?” she asked with a wry smile.

“I’m not going to starve the Collective, hon,” he said simply. “They’re going to need that food. In return for that, you get half the food production of two arable planets that aren’t going to rebel on you if whatever house you give them to start doing to the Urumi what the Trillanes did to Terra.”

She pursed her lips, then nodded slowly. “Yes, that is a risk,” she agreed. “I’ll think about it, babe,” she said. “No promises. Let me think about it for a while.”

“While you think about it, consider just one more thing.”

“What?”

“Can you really afford to keep pursuing war with the Collective when the Consortium could come back? This is your chance to keep what you’ve taken and get a peace treaty in the bargain. Sk’Vrae agreed to sign a temporary truce with the Imperium until the Consortium is removed as a threat.”

“A temporary truce?”

“She said there’s still a matter of blood with Merrane, but also with Trillane,” he said with a wolfish smile.

Dahnai laughed. “Maeri’s gonna pay for backing out of her alliance with the Collective, I take it?”

“Oh yes. She violated a treaty, and the Urumi do *not* let that go unchallenged. And I’m gonna pull up a chair, grab a beer and watch it with a big grin on my face.”

Dahnai grinned. “I’ll give the Collective one thing. They’re consistent,” she said with a nod.

“Oh, by the way, your people that Trillane took are almost halfway returned.”

“That was one of the things I needed to talk to Terra about,” Jason grunted.

“What kind of condition are your people in?”

“Most of them are functional,” he answered. “the Trillane conditioning left their personalities and memories intact, they just programmed them with absolute loyalty. The Marines stationed on Terra are reversing that conditioning. It’s slow going, and it’ll take them a few months to heal three million, but at least the Terrans are cooperating.”

“They are?”

He nodded. “The Trillanes ordered them to obey all orders from *us* as if we were Trillanes, and their programming binds them. So they do as they’re told until we can get rid of the brainwashing. It makes it a very orderly process.”

“I can imagine,” she mused. “It sounds like Maeri actually held her side of the deal.”

“She did. I’m still gonna enjoy watching Sk’Vrae cut little pieces out of her, though.”

“I think I will too,” Dahnai laughed. “That bitch has been nothing but trouble since the day I took the throne.” She gave him a smile. “I thought I knew you, babe. I thought you’d go after the Collective for attacking Karis. I’m surprised you haven’t.”

“I get the feeling that the Urumi got screwed by the Consortium, and while I’m not entirely happy with what they did, I’m more worried about the Consortium than I am angry with the Collective. This isn’t the time for the governments here to be fighting each other. Not when the Consortium is going to come back and fuck with all of us... and it will be all of us. The Alliance, the Skaa, they’ve seen the Consortium in action now, and they’re not gonna cooperate with them, not after what the Consortium did to the Collective. If the Consortium somehow conquers a part of the Imperium, then they’ll be surrounded by enemies, and not *just* the Imperium. The Alliance, the Skaa, maybe even the smaller empires past them, they’ll resist the Consortium if they return. And I’m going to make sure that *all* of us are armed and ready for them.”

She sighed. “I wish you would change your mind about that.”

“I told you a long time ago, hon, I will not arm the Imperium and unleash them against their neighbors. But the Consortium changes the rules a little bit. So, instead of arming you and watching you make war on everyone, I’m giving *everyone* the same weapons so they can protect themselves from the Consortium *and* from the Imperium. That keeps the balance of power without upsetting it too much. Yes, whoever has the biggest fleet will have an advantage, but they’ll still face dreadful losses if they make war on another government.”

“Mutually assured destruction,” she chuckled.

“Precisely. If you want to declare war on the Skaa, you’ll do it fully knowing they have weapons that can wipe out your fleet if you attack them. And they’ll know the same thing. Everyone will have all these deadly weapons, but will be afraid to use them against each other because whoever attacks first will lose their fleets trying to conquer defended planets.”

“Sometimes you’re just too fuckin’ clever, babe,” she said sourly.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “Just so you know, I’m going to try to arrange a meeting of all parties involved to discuss the Consortium in three weeks. State leaders, not just ambassadors.”

“That might get tricky, but sign me up. I’ll warn my schedulers to leave three weeks from today flexible until we have specifics.”

“Sounds good. You have any free time coming up? I’d like to see you.”

“A state visit?”

“State? Hell no. I want to *see* you,” he said. “I don’t have to hide Karis anymore, I want you back in my life.”

She gave him a bright smile. “Oh, well, in that case, why don’t I clear some space next week? Bring Jyslin and Symone and Tim. I want to get to know them better, and of course, I have a promise to keep,” she said with a sultry smile.

“You realize if I tell Symone that, she’s gonna go crazy.”

“I know,” Dahnai purred.

“Bitch.”

“I love it when you call me names,” she said with a sly little smile. “How about, um, Thursday by your calendar?” she asked, looking at a monitor under the camera. “I’ll cancel court that day. You can get here Wednesday night and leave Friday morning.”

“Sounds good. But I want you to think about my offer, and we’ll talk about it face to face next week.”

“See you then. I can’t wait. First I’m gonna kick your ass for dealing behind my back, then I’m gonna fuck you til you can’t walk straight,” she purred, blowing him a kiss, then the communication terminated from her end without saying goodbye.

Jason chuckled. Dahnai wasn’t stupid. She’d see the value in what he was talking about. Jason could get cooperation out of the Urumi in the border systems if Sk’Vrae told them to behave. And with the threat of the Consortium, lurking, stability was very important right now.

But, he had one more call to make. *Get me the High Staff of the Council of the Alliance, Gerin.*

It may take a few minutes. Do you want something to eat while you wait, your Grace?

I’m good.

The Alliance was composed of five different races; the Makati-sized Beryans, the huge simian Bari-Bari, the skeletal Jakkans, the avian Shurai, and the silicon-based Stevak. Their form of government was a leadership council at the head of a bureaucracy that managed the 51 systems. They had a Zyagyan and a race called the Veruta on their council as neutral observers during non-secret council meetings. The Zyagyan was there since the independent system of Zyagya was completely encompassed within Alliance space, but the Veruta was invited as part of a peace treaty between the Alliance and the Veruta from a war they had over a hundred years ago. There was an Alliance member in the Verutan Emperor’s advisory staff, so the two governments could try to avoid a second war. The leadership of their council passed from race to race in 2.5 year terms in Terran years. The current High Staff of the council was a Jakkan, Graith Meribial.

Graith’s visage appeared on the screen. It was like a large yet slender skull with skin pulled tightly over it and black teeth and eyes and an open-cavity nose. The Jakkans were not a pretty race to humans, but they were very intelligent and remarkably kind despite their grim visage. “Ah, your Grace! It is good to hear from you. Are things well?”

“Well enough, High Staff,” he answered. “I wanted to ask a favor of you.”

“Certainly. The Alliance is always willing to listen to the requests of the Karinnes.”

“I’m sure you’ve gotten word of what’s coming to the Academy?”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ve sent six additional experts on astrophysics and energy generation to the Academy to help analyze the Consortium technology.”

“Good. Well, as everyone knows, the Alliance is among the leaders of long-range sensor technology. I’d like to ask you to search for something for me.”

“For the Consortium?” he asked.

Jason nodded simply.

“I’m *already* searching for them,” he answered seriously. “I want to know where they are, and what kind of potential threat they pose to our sector. I would be glad to pass along any information we discover to the Karinnes.”

“I’d like you to make it public through the Academy, High Staff. We *all* need to know what the Consortium is up to.”

He was quiet a moment, then nodded. “Agreed. I’ll inform my ambassador to make the ar-

rangements to disburse any information we collect about the Consortium to a central office in the Academy we can set up for it.”

“You’ll have a place to send it as soon as I talk to the Academy. I’m going to have them create a department of cooperation where all Consortium information can be centralized and accessed by *all* necessary parties.”

“Excellent! I’ll make the arrangements, then.”

They exchanged pleasantries before saying goodbye, then Jason leaned back in his chair. *[Cybi, could you get me Ayuma please?]*

[Certainly. Just one moment.]

[Jason? Cybi said you want to talk?]

[I do, and it’s business. I want you to set up a new department at the Academy that’ll act as a central depository for all Consortium information. Not just their technology, but something of a situation room where we can pool all intelligence about them and share it.]

[Ah. I think I know exactly what you want, and Kiaari already has something similar to that for her own spy network. I’ll ask her if she can organize it for us. A Kimdori would be best suited for such a task.]

[She’ll probably agree to help us set it up and explain how to best run it, so long as we don’t try to make her run it herself. The Kimdori won’t get involved like that without direct authorization from Denmother Zaa.]

[True.]

[In about an hour, you’re gonna get an official missive from me, announcing that the Karinnes are sponsoring a summit to debate the Consortium threat in three weeks. If you could, please push it out to all the ambassadors. I’ll be calling them personally to invite them, but I want the public to know we’re working on the problem.]

[Certainly. You been practicing your TK?]

Jason chuckled. *[When I think about it,]* he answered. *[I’ll be coming to Terra in a couple of days to see Kiaari. Wanna have lunch?]*

[Sure! Want me to warn Temika and Mike?]

[I’ll call them myself.]

[You got it. Let me get down and see Kiaari.]

[Alright, thanks hon.] Gerin, get me Emperor Assaba of the Skaa.

Jason paid call on every leader of every government that had ambassadors in the Academy, some 34 calls. Some got through to leaders, some were answered by ambassadors because it was off-hours there and their leaders were resting or busy. He told each one about his summit and invited each one to Terra personally. Most of the leaders he managed to contact agreed to come immediately, while the rest either said they’d get back to him or he’d reached representatives who had to deliver the message to them. After he had that done, he went to his office in the White House, which he rarely used, and prepared the announcement and had it sent off to Ayuma. Miaari joined him not long after that, and he told her about his plans and his idea with the Urumi, to which she nodded. “I find it a logical and workable idea. It will depend on if Dahnai is willing to do it, though, and she is under some pressure from the *Siann* about those border systems. Merrane can’t keep them, and there’s already a great deal of jockeying to gain the contracts to them.”

“Well, I have an advantage over all of them.”

“Yes, and the *Siann* will believe your agreement with Dahnai is unfair, that you slept it out of her.”

“They can believe whatever they want, they don’t concern me.”

“They should. If Dahnai angers the *Siann*, they can remove her from the throne regardless of

your alliance with her.”

Jason leaned back. “Hmm,” he mused. “Then I think I should head that off.”

“How so?”

“I’ll offer to split Karinne’s profits from the industry of the border systems with *all* of the *Siann*, and take no profit myself. After all, I’m not interested in those systems for what they can make for me, I want them so I can keep Dahnai and Sk’Vrae from stepping on each other’s toes.”

Miaari gave him a strange look, then laughed brightly. “*Shingrha jhee*, my friend, I forget how cunning you are sometimes,” she said in admiration. “Such an act would undercut any kind of protest the houses could offer, while at the same time preventing any one house from gaining too much advantage from control of those systems. And it also reinforces the image you pose of a neutral party not interested in the politics and machinations of the Imperium to those inside. You will earn a reputation for wisdom and generosity. Yes, I believe that would be a very effective tactic.”

“Then let’s draw up some paperwork we can send to Dahnai to let her look over.”

“Yes. Bring in our legal team,” she called to the open door.

Jason employed 14 legal experts for the house, his legal team, whose job was to write contracts and treaties and review offered contracts and treaties from others. They listened as Jason explained the objectives of the agreements he wanted to make concerning the border systems, and then, after copious notes, they took them back to their main office and started working on the language of the contracts. They were very efficient, and when they promised to have a first draft for him tomorrow morning, he knew it would be on his desk exactly when they said it would be. He also warned them that a treaty would be en route from the Collective in the next couple of days, and be ready to examine it.

There was one call he did need to make, though. It was early evening on Draconis, so he was fairly sure that she was awake. He had the call sent from his office, and with Miaari listening just outside the view of the camera, Jason leaned back in his chair as a face winked onto the screen.

Yila Trefani.

“Grand Duke Karinne,” she intoned, nodding slightly. “And what do I owe the honor of this call?”

“How would you like to go into a little business together, Yila?”

She looked honestly surprised. “And what business would that be?”

“The Trefanis have many business contacts, and with those comes the almost unintended matter of gathering information. I’d like to see if I can’t have you ask your trade agents to keep their ears open for rumors beyond the Imperium of Consortium activity.”

“And how can we do what the Kimdori cannot?”

“Oh, the Kimdori could find out, but the more ears are open, the better chance of hearing what might only be spoken once,” he said, to which Miaari nodded in agreement.

“And what would you offer in exchange for me passing along certain tidbits that might cross my desk?”

“I think I might be persuaded to speak on Trefani’s behalf when trade relations reopen with the Collective,” he told her. “Unlike the rest of the Imperium, I’m still on speaking terms with Queen Sk’Vrae. She sees me as a neutral party, like the original Karinnes. I think I might organize a couple of meetings between Trefani and Collective business agents so you might get an early jump on lucrative markets over the Highborns and House Moyanne.”

She pursed her lips. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow with my decision.”

“Fine with me. Until tomorrow then?”

She nodded. “Fare well, Grand Duke Karinne.”

“Fare well, Grand Duchess Trefani.”

When the image of her vanished, Jason laughed. “Got her!” he proclaimed, slapping his hands on the desk.

“You’re so sure?”

“I know Yila Trefani, my friend, and that was her *I’m about to make some money* face, no doubt,” he said confidently. “What I’m offering is too tempting, given she thinks she’s giving me nothing I can’t get from the Kimdori.”

“You could.”

“I know I could, but like I said, the more people there are listening, the more you hear. And it really doesn’t cost me anything to get it, I just have to ask Sk’Vrae to meet with Trefani agents to talk about trade agreements. She’d welcome them, the Collective is going to need money after this disaster, and Urumi goods actually sell well in the Imperium. They make very good metalworked goods, and people love their trimetal fountains that sing with harmonic resonance when the sun hits them. They have a knack for it.”

“Well, you’re right about it not costing us anything,” she said. “And it benefits both Trefani and the Collective.”

“And it never hurts to have a friend in the Trefanis,” Jason added. “Ever since the Friendly Puppies, Yila’s given me the cold shoulder. I wouldn’t mind getting off her shit list, the Trefanis can be very useful when you need them.” Jason’s eyes glanced to one of those very Friendly Puppies, which now sat on a shelf on his wall, an Odie-looking toy that was actually a very cunning robotic device. Beside it on the shelf was a plush Hello Kitty wearing a cute little pink dress and a powder blue My Little Pony with a silver mane, just waiting for their turn to be unleashed on an unsuspecting enemy.

“I think we’re about done, my friend,” Miaari said, smoothing the white fur on her chest, the mark of the Handmaiden. “I’ll pass on what we’ve done here today to Zaa.”

“Please, I tried to call her to fill her in, but got her ambassador.”

“I’ll send it along. Are you going home?”

He nodded. “I’ve only been here like seven hours,” he grunted, looking out the window at the sunset. “I’m hungry.”

“Aya, prepare for the Grand Duke’s departure,” Miaari said, to which Aya and Dera nodded, then went from the room while Ryn remained.

Jys, Jason called, reaching the twenty miles from his offices to the house.

Yeah love?

I’m on the way home. What’s the dinner situation?

We’ve already eaten, but I can have Ayama make you something.

Could you please?

Just tread lightly. Symone’s looking for you, Jyslin sent with amusement. *She may not let you eat dinner if she catches you.*

Think I might be looking for her too, at least after dinner, Jason answered lightly. *Wanna join us?*

No, I have a date with Tim, she answered with anticipation in her thoughts. *We figured you two would be busy.*

Well, have fun.

Oh, we will, no doubt, she sent impishly. *Besides, after we have our separate fun, we can get together and have even more fun,* she added lasciviously.

Symone corrupted you.

She didn’t have to work very hard to do it, Jyslin noted nonchalantly. *And she certainly didn’t have to work at all to corrupt you.*

I guess I’m a pervert at heart.

And I love it, she told him with a dirty eddy to her thought.

Stop it or I’ll have to walk out of here with my hands in my pockets, he warned as Aya returned and nodded without sending.

Then get home and eat so Symone can do something about it, she ordered.

I guess I will.

Jason woke up to Rann’s cheerful cry as he barreled into the room and jumped into the bed. “Wake up!” he called, shaking Jason’s shoulder. “Wake up, Daddy!”

“It’s too early in the morning, you little rugrat,” Symone complained, pulling the covers over her head.

“Aunt Symone! Where’s Mommy?”

“Over at Uncle Tim’s,” Jason told him, shaking the cobwebs out of his mind and waking up.

“She’ll be over for breakfast.”

Rann was aware of the dual relationship between the two couples, but he didn’t entirely understand it. What he knew was that his parents were *very special* friends with Tim and Symone, and that sometimes his father had private time with Symone and his mother had private time with Tim. Unlike a human child, Faey didn’t hide sex from their children, even though they didn’t entirely understand it, nor did they hide the openness of their society. Rann was fully aware that Jason slept with Symone and Jyslin slept with Tim, but he saw it as perfectly normal, because that was how he was raised to see it. It wasn’t the first time that Rann had bounded into the room and found Symone in bed with Jason instead of Jyslin, or found Tim in bed with Jyslin instead of him, or even had come in to find all four of them asleep in the same bed together. “Oh. Can I have pancakes for breakfast?”

“Go ask Ayama,” Jason told him. “Now scoot, little man, and close the door so I can get a little more sleep. I’m a little tired.”

I wonder why, Symone sent in a bandy manner, reaching out and touching his shoulder fondly. “I think your father and me are going to have some private time, kidlet, so go down and see Ayama about breakfast.”

“I… that didn’t make any sense,” Rann said, screwing up his brow in concentration. “I mean, there was a feeling in there. I didn’t understand it.”

“You will when you’re older,” Jason told him dryly. “Now do as Aunt Symone says and go down and see Ayama about breakfast.”

Rann left them and dutifully closed the door, but Symone chuckled and rolled over, pulling the covers aside and shimmying up onto him. *Hello there,* she sent with a leering smile. *Can Jason come out and play?*

Such a morning girl, Jason teased as Symone’s lust bled through her thoughts and attacked Jason, trying to excite him.

So is Jyslin, that’s why we’re such a good match, she winked, then kissed him quite seriously.

They weren’t alone for long. Just about when they were committed to it, Jyslin came in. She was wearing a simple robe that ended at her thigh, belted so loosely and casually that her left breast was hanging out of it, showing it off to the world, and it was parted from the waist down, all but showcasing her red pubic hair between blue silk curtains to anyone who gazed upon her. Jason, however, didn’t notice, since Symone was on top of him and aggressively making love to him. Jyslin watched them for a moment, smiling, then padded past the bed

and to the dresser, laying out the clothes she intended to wear. She didn't bother them, didn't disturb them, was almost indifferent to them as they had sex, her thoughts touching on both of them to share their pleasure without getting actively involved.

She didn't actively take note of them until after they were done, after Symone collapsed on top of him with a satisfied, lusty sigh after they achieved their climaxes. *My, that was short*, Jyslin teased.

I like it hard and dirty in the morning, you know that, Symone answered, giving Jason a hot kiss. *And that was both. Thanks baby.*

Any time, love, anytime, Jason returned, slapping her lightly and fondly on her butt.

What's on the agenda today?

I'm going up to Kosigi to go look at the Consortium ship while I wait for Dahnai and Sk'Vrae to call me back, he answered. *So I'm gonna be busy most of today. You know Myli's gonna keep me distracted.*

Yeah, I'd better warn Rann you may not be home tonight, Jyslin laughed.

Next week, we're gonna go see Dahnai, Jason told them. *All of us. She invited us over for Thursday.*

Nice! I wonder if she talked to Kellin, Symone said, sitting up and licking her lips in anticipation. *I want all six of us in one bed in the worst way. I could wrap my legs around that fine hunk of a Faey, no doubt about it.*

So could I. He's taller than most Faey men, and really buff, Jyslin agreed. *And of course, he's got a really nice dick*, she hummed, sending a memory of him at the beach, where Jyslin had taken a very long, detailed look at his genitals, all but studying him.

I've only seen it limp, but it looks plenty big, Symone agreed. *You've seen him hard, baby, when you threesomed Dahnai with him. How big is he?* she asked Jason.

You may find out someday, who would I be to ruin the surprise? Jason asked with a smile.

You dare deny me? I'll have to torture you for the information! she challenged, attacking his ribs. He laughed and squirmed under her, but her weight held him down as her fingers tore laughter out of him. *Talk! Talk! How big is he hard? Huh? Huh? Talk or I tickle you til you throw up!*

She gasped in surprise when she was picked up off the bed by nothing, lifting her hands out of reach of her fingers. "Now, you were saying?" Jason asked, putting his hands behind his head and crossing his feet casually, smiling up at her.

She laughed. "Oh baby, just imagine you doing me like this," she grinned, spreading her legs in a vulgar manner. "I've never been fucked while hovering in midair. It would almost be like joining the Zero-G club," she told him with a naked leer.

"Leave it to you to even turn my talent into something perverted," he accused with a laugh, setting her down gently, back in her original place. She laughed and leaned down, then kissed him quite seriously. *Wanna come up with me?*

I will, Symone nodded.

You know I'll be there, I'm on Myli's staff. We should bring all the kids, Jyslin said. *They need more exposure to the workings of the house.*

Sounds good. Jason expanded his power to send across the entire strip. *Everyone get up and get ready, we're all going up to Kosigi today to inspect the captured ship*, he boomed. *Including the kids. So everyone get your breakfast and get dressed and we'll meet up at the main gate in two hours, and remember that we have to wear our armor!*

Two hours, eh? Symone asked.

Yup, that gives me a little more time, he remarked, grabbing both of Symone's breasts and fondling them.

Oho, so Jason's still feeling frisky, Symone grinned.

I seem to recall a certain challenge to keep me to where I couldn't walk straight, he sent teasingly. *I'm nowhere near that exhausted yet.*

Jys, I think a certain overconfident man of ours needs to have his nuts shriveled, Symone called, putting her hands on his shoulders and pushing him down. *Come over and give me a hand.*

I do hope you'll let me use more than that, she noted dryly as she unbelted her robe and came over to join them.

Jason *could* walk after he came down for a quick bite to eat, but his legs certainly didn't feel entirely stable... so it was a good thing he was in his armor and his powered armor could help his legs out a little bit. They were all in armor, everyone but the kids. Jyslin and Symone came down a minute after him, carrying their helmets and sharing a naughty little smile as Meya and Myra gave them a curious look. *What?* Jason asked, giving them a little smile that made them look a bit irritable.

That made his day.

After breakfast, the entire strip piled into the *Scimitar* and flew up to Kosigi. The lunar base was like a tennis ball inside a hollow bowling ball, reminding Jason of the old literary creation of a Dyson Sphere, an artificial construction that encompassed a star. There was a real moon in Kosigi, but the moon that everyone saw was built around that very small rocky sphere, rendering the moon effectively hollow. The real moon had become a foundation for the entire shipyard operation, which was suspended in zero-g because of a very exacting balance of mass between the small rocky core in the center and the heavy-metal exterior so that the space between the inner core and outer shell was balanced in mass at the shipyard zone which rendered a huge swath of volume inside the base zero gravity. This balance wasn't perfect, so it was augmented by gravity inducers here and there, which also created pockets of gravity here and there inside the base to give the workers places to work, rest, and have recreation. The balance of mass was so detailed that the moon actually projected a gravity well one would expect from a moon of its size consisting of rock, and sensor jammers returned a false reading about the interior of the moon when being scanned, making it appear to be a solid mass of the same rock as that at the surface. The *Scimitar* entered through the huge doors and passed down a tunnel that was nearly two miles long, bored into the solid rock and heavy metal that reinforced it. It then opened into a vast empty void that was nearly ten miles wide, where bays were either built on the moon below, hanging from the roof above, or docks floated freely in the void. There were 137 berths in the moon, where the rest of it was open and available to be developed, giving them room to build bays to build even more ships... and that construction was in progress. The moon base could build anything except a capital ship and the heavy battleships, since they wouldn't fit through the doors, and there was so much room inside, they could build a ridiculous number of ships if they only had the facilities within to do it. The Karinnes had not yet finished building Kosigi when they were destroyed, so what Jason had inherited was a half-finished project that was very useful to them, but could also be much, much more once they finished building all the bays and built more floating docks.

The ship flew past a two mile thick supporting column that attached the outer shell to the moon below, on the way one of the docks that floated in midair, which looked like some kind of gigantic spider that had wrapped its legs around the Consortium vessel. The kids, who almost never got to come to Kosigi, gaped and stared at the wonder within with wide-eyed fascination, and that attitude infected a few parents as well. Lyn and Bryn and Sheleese didn't come to Kosigi often enough to be used to it.

“Wow!” Zachary said in wonder. “It’s like the inside of a dollhouse!”

“There’s even air out there,” Meya told him, pointing out the window. “We could open the door and you could breathe, but it’s cold outside.”

“It’s cold?”

“Just a bit above freezing,” she nodded. “But it’s warmer wherever we do work, because we heat things up around the ships. We even have clouds in here.”

“Really?”

“Yup. The clouds form in the boundaries where we heat the air so we can do work without freezing. It would rain if there was enough gravity to pull the water out of the clouds.”

“And that’s what we came to see,” Jason added, pointing at the Consortium ship ahead, passing by the *Jendra*, one of the destroyers damaged during the battle, hanging in midair with a floating dock around it and workers repairing it.

“It’s all so big,” Kyri said quietly, looking out the window. “I thought it would be smaller.”

“There’s a lot of space in here, little lady, but not much equipment. That’s what restricts us,” Jason told her. “We could build an entire fleet of ships all at once, if only we had the materials and facilities in here to do it. The only limitation is we can’t build anything that won’t fit through the doors.”

“Well, we should make bigger doors,” she decided.

“We are,” he chuckled. “On the far side of the base, they’re building a new set of doors big enough for any ship to get in and out. It should be done in a few months, digging through the outer shell of the base is a very long process.”

The *Scimitar* docked with the floating dock, and the Dukai party filed into a large staging room where Myleena and quite a few others waited for them. They all bowed, and then Myleena ran up and gave Jason a hug, armor scraping against armor. “Thank you for bringing me this toy, babes!” she grinned.

“How far have you gotten?”

“Not much. We’re still documenting everything and cleaning the remains of the crew out,” she answered. “We won’t start really tearing it apart for a couple of weeks. Everything has to be inspected first.”

“What about the power and computer?”

“Power, we can restore that,” she answered. “The shockwave blew out most of the plasma exchangers and shattered a fuckton of conduit, and their power systems aren’t too different from ours. They use a kind of hyperphased plasma that’s more advanced than the Imperium, but behind us. But their computer, well, we’re not sure about that. The shockwave did extensive damage to it, and it’s a hardware architecture we’ve never seen before. It’s some kind of cybernetic system using crystal nodes not much different from moleculartronic alignment storage, but it uses four states rather than three. The shockwave destroyed much of its storage, and we’re not sure we can recover enough data to reconstruct their software. If we ever put it back together and use it, we’ll probably have to replace the computer.”

“But you can recover data?”

“Bits and pieces,” she said, wagging her hand. “I have Siyhaa working on it with her Moridon team, if anyone can comprehend their computer network, she will.”

“That’s good. So, is it safe for a tour?”

“Safe enough. There are some microbes still on the ship, so we can’t let anyone go in without an e-suit. But, I have some just for the kids,” she smiled. “So, let’s get the kids ready to go, and go take a look around.”

The ship was very... small. They entered through the landing bay, where teams from Songa’s medical service were decontaminating the ship one section at a time. They were

hard at work in the landing bay, bathing all surfaces with an energy field that killed the microbes. Myleena showed them into low, honeycomb-like passages, hexagonal in structure and with doors in the ceiling and floor. “Near as we can figure, the insectoids don’t use artificial gravity in the ships,” she said. “The walls, floor and ceiling are made of this rough material, so their claws grip I would imagine, and all their rooms are low and set up in a way that makes it clear that they float around. It looks like about two thirds of the ship is oriented in one direction, but then there are things like that,” she said, pointing at a door in the ceiling over them.

“Songa said they were low-G. I guess they had no gravity at all in here,” Sheleese mused, looking at the ceiling that was only a couple of inches over Jason’s head.

“How much gravity would be in a ship like this naturally?” Ilia asked curiously.

“Negligible,” Myleena shrugged. “The ship doesn’t have enough mass, and it’s not centralized enough to produce enough gravity to matter.”

“That’s a very strange way to do it,” Jason grunted. “The crew of this ship couldn’t land on a planet. They’d be killed.”

“Well, they have exoskeletons, so I’d guess that that would give them some protection,” Myri noted. “But these things couldn’t pilot their landing craft without some kind of gravity manipulator, or they’d die.”

Myleena took them all over the ship, from the bridge to engineering, and again the design of the ship showed its operation. There were no elevators in the ship, only long tubes with what looked like would be moving belts to move the crew back and forth. The rooms and passages were all low and long, almost never any large empty space, except for the landing bay and a section of the ship in the bow that had higher ceilings and little or no equipment. “I bet this is where those energy beings stay when they’re on the ships,” Jyslin mused as they moved through.

“We think the same thing,” Myleena nodded. “There’s no equipment of any kind around here, just what looks like a comm device.”

Engineering was more cramped than a Karinne ship, but the engines found there looked *remarkably* similar to Karinne technology of a thousand years ago, which put it about equal to Imperium technology. “They didn’t even change the casing,” Jason grunted, a bit offended that the Consortium would so blatantly steal Karinne technology.

“Yeah, just gives you even more reason to hate the bastards,” Myleena growled. “The engine is powered by a striated hyperphased plasma system, different from ours, but almost as powerful as double metaphased. They’re about equal to current Imperium standards, a bit stronger. But this is a damn big engine for such a small ship, so this thing has some serious maneuverability and speed in combat.”

“Then they have to have *some* kind of gravity system in this thing, the G forces induced by a turn might kill,” Jason grunted. “Maybe some kind of *anti-gravity* system, that only nullifies gravity effects to keep maneuvers from killing the crew. I’ll bet it got blown out by the shockwave... too much for it to handle.”

“Probably, but we’ll have to wait until we start gutting the ship to find out,” Myleena agreed.

My Grand Duke, I’m getting a communication for you from the Academy. The Urumi ambassador says that he has a message for you from the Collective, one of his administrative staff sent.

Alright, I’ll take it in a few minutes, he answered. “Afraid work is calling, kidlets,” he said aloud. “An ambassador wants to talk to me.”

“Aww, make him wait, Papa!” Kyri complained.

“This is really important, so I gotta go, little lady,” he chuckled. “Show them the rest of the ship, I’ll catch up,” he told Myleena.

Jason took the call in a lounge in the floating dock, that gave nothing away. All anyone could see was a gray wall behind him, and that anyone was the Urumi ambassador, the same one he’d pinned to the ceiling not two weeks ago. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing fluidly despite his scales and bony plates. The ambassador, unlike Sk’Vrae, could speak Faey without any distortion. “My Queen has contacted me to relay her decision on a matter you discussed with her.”

“Go ahead.”

“I am not privy to the agreement, your Grace, so I can only give you her answer and hope you understand it. She orders me to relay to you that she agrees, and a contract is on its way to the Academy as we speak. She insists, however, on brood Princesses.”

“Tell her that I accept those terms provided I can get the border systems from Dahnai,” he said.

The Urumi’s black eyes narrowed, then widened, then he seemed quite pleased. “Yes, yes, of course,” he said brightly. “I’ll inform my Queen of your acceptance, and stress your condition.”

“I’m confident it will reach her quickly, then,” Jason nodded to him calmly.

Jason let the ambassador go, quietly relieved. Keeping Dahnai and Sk’Vrae from butting heads along the border was critically important to the overall peace of the sector, and it was imperative to keep everyone focused on the real threat, the Imperium. He couldn’t afford some war between the Imperium and some other empire to flare up because the Imperium would take advantage of it, and protecting the Faey was nearly as important as protecting Karis. The Consortium would *need* Faey to create artificial Generations, if they held to the plan that Jason suspected they had, so defending the Faey was of critical importance right now. It was why he was willing to give Dahnai interdictors, and why he’d do everything in his power to prevent another border war that might or might not be manufactured by the Consortium.

They might even try for humans, but Jason had a suspicion that they didn’t think humans could be Generations. He was sure that the Consortium knew that Jason was a Generation, and there might be other Generations on Karis. Jason was a Generation, but he had *Faey* ancestors, so that was a commonality he felt the Consortium wouldn’t overlook. They probably wouldn’t think to see if a human could be a Generation without Faey blood, unless they had no access to Faey in order to test.

That would be an issue further down the line, but an issue he meant to address. He fully intended to put an interdictor at Earth, but before he could do that, he needed to build a Stargate that went from Earth to some central point to all members of the Academy where they could put a Stargate, then defend that Stargate with so much fearsome weaponry that the Consortium couldn’t get through to the planet. That would give everyone access to the Academy, but also protect his planet from Consortium attack.

Instead of waiting, he had his staff call Dahnai. She appeared on the monitor in the midst of donning her court robes, with her inner robe on and two maids helping her wrap herself in a shimmering ruby outer robe. “Hey love,” she smiled. “What, too impatient?”

“Something like that. You’ve had a day to think it over, Dahnai.”

“So I have,” she said with a smile. “And I’m inclined to give you what you want, but you have to pay for it.”

“You know I’m broke, and you know I won’t give you any of our technology.”

“What I want you don’t have to give me now,” she said. “Which is more than I’d give about

any other house. You *do* have to offer me something, I don’t hand those contracts out for free.”

“Well, what do you want?”

“Ten percent of the gross product of the border systems, *before* you divide it up among the *Siann*. And I want the ships you took from Maeri attached to the Imperial Navy.”

“You can’t have them,” Jason said immediately. “They’ve been dismantled and recycled. I wouldn’t send my people out in those things.”

And they had... almost. All those ships were currently in Kosigi, hanging over on the far side as one of his teams worked on them. They were using the ships as test hulls for new designs and ideas, a kind of working lab where prototypes were tested. The ships had been decommissioned from active service after they got their own fleet going, but those ships still served Karinne by helping them test and experiment.

“Well then, I want some of *your* ships attached to the Navy,” she said. “I want one of your little attack groups in Draconis orbit at all times.”

“As long as you don’t try to integrate my ships with Imperial staff, I could agree to that. That’s extra protection.”

“And I want one more thing.”

“What?”

“I want *you*, here, at least one day a week,” she told him. “I want you in court again. I want you to rejoin the living!”

“Hon, look at this,” he said, rapping the chest of his armor. “I’m not wearing this because it’s comfortable. I’m *busy*, and what I’m doing is very important.”

“It can keep being important, but I still *demand* that you come to court at least once a week,” she declared. “And I will *not* be moved. You either come to court, or at the very least come see me once a week, or it’s no deal. And I want it *in writing*.”

“You’re serious?” he asked incredulously.

“As Aris herself,” she stated, giving him a flinty look. “You’re a member of the *Siann*, but you’re also my *amu dorai*, and I want to *see* you!” she told him. “And if I have to write it into a planet contract, then by Trelle, that’s what I’m going to do!”

“What, is Kellin making you unhappy?”

“What kind of stupid fucking question is that?” she demanded hotly. “I don’t have to be mad at Kellin to want to see you, you dipshit!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said placatingly. “I just thought—”

“No, you *didn’t* think,” she told him. “So, if you want those border systems, you will be in court tomorrow morning my time,” she told him. “And that is *not* up for negotiation!”

He sighed. “Any chance at all I just come see you instead of coming to court?”

“No,” she growled. “You will be *in court*. If I have to go, you have to go. Besides, I’m going to announce the contract award to you, so I want you there. We can go back to my apartment afterward and hammer out the details, then you can hammer something else.”

“And the true motive is revealed,” he said, giving her an amused look.

“What can I say, Symone corrupted me,” she said with a slight smile. “Besides, I think I’d like another shot at you and Kellin, I don’t think my hubby will be quite so nervous next time.”

“Well, I guess I won’t complain too much about that. Besides, if you’re too impatient to get in bed, I think I can bargain a better deal out of you,” he said with a light smile.

“Conjugal visits will sweeten my disposition,” she winked in reply.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to do something about that,” he told her.

“You better. Remember. Here. Tomorrow. If you’re not here, I’ll declare war on you!”

“I’m just surprised you couldn’t wait until next Thursday.”

“I don’t have to share you if you come tomorrow.”

“You will if I bring the others.”

“Oh no, you’re coming to court on *official* business! And besides, I want you to myself,” she said with a grin.

“Greedy, greedy, greedy,” he teased.

“I’m the Empress, babes, I’m allowed to be greedy,” she smiled.

After she cut the transmission to get to court, Jason just chuckled as he reached for his helmet. Thank God, Dahnai wasn’t going to fight him over it. She saw his point, she saw that he could keep the peace and keep things calm. Since he’d be distributing all profit from the operation of the systems to the entire *Siann*, and was letting the Urumi run things themselves, he was fairly confident that his plan would work. He wanted stability and the Urumi to be if not allies, then comrades in arms against the Consortium. If he had to make a deal with the devil to get it, he’d haggle with Dahnai any day.

That haggling took place the next day. Jason had plenty of time to prepare, since he had 30 hours before court would begin the next day, and that was close to Karis’ 28.93 hour day. He spent that time going over reports, touring a few ships still in Kosigi for repairs, and then going down to tour the new town where they’d put the Exiled.

The Interior department found what Jason felt was a perfect place. It was a village built on a small island off the coast of the continent of Karga, about 47 miles west of Karsa and about 3 miles off the coast. It was big enough to hold all of the Exiled and their volunteer helpers, and have enough room to store all of their equipment and machinery, and what Jason found most important was that it had a spectacular view of the town of Embraijn on the mainland, which was one of the recently populated towns, just opened within the last year. The town had a couple of docks, but it had a natural harbor where the Exiled could moor their ships. The ships would be nice to sail here, but since the ocean had no fish in it, they wouldn’t be fishing.

There would be... eventually. The fish would need an ecosystem, and Cybi had been working on that. They were going to focus on the marine ecosystem first, and then move on to develop land-based ecosystems. They could set one up on land now, since they had the plants, but a healthy marine ecosystem would sustain a land ecosystem better than a land ecosystem would a marine one. They had already started part of it when they introduced several species of algae and marine plants into the seas around Karga, and they had seeded both critical species of marine bacteria and plankton from both Draconis and Earth into the oceans in several areas. Plankton and bacteria could survive in the sea because the water had the minerals and nutrients the plankton needed, drawn up from the last place on Karis where life-sustaining nutrients could be found; the ocean floor. The radiation that had blasted the planet had killed everything and destroyed virtually all organic material, but the organic matter at ocean floor had somewhat survived. It wasn’t life, but it was organic compounds that bacteria and plankton could eat, and Cybi had had reclamation robots stirring up those nutrients from the sea-floor for nearly a hundred years after the radiation was cleaned up. Those robots had failed centuries ago, but they had at least started the work, and there were also natural currents that brought some nutrients up. In the five years since the Karinnes returned, they’d restarted those organic pumps, and now they had sea life feeding on it. Between the nutrients deep under the ocean and sunlight, they had a very small yet stable marine ecosystem going in seven “lifeblooms” in Karis’ oceans. After they gave the plankton a chance to reproduce, giving them ideal conditions to spread like the plague, they would then introduce krill, tiny crustaceans that fed on both the same nutrients and plankton, and they would also create some arti-

ficial webwork and sink it, then introduce coral to that area. After the krill, they would slowly start introducing species of fish, shellfish, mollusks, and crustaceans in a staggered pattern where each new stage could feed on something already there, but not allow “super-predators” from depopulating a lifebloom area and wrecking the ecosystem. Their hope was that as they introduced more species, they would start spreading out, and eventually they’d have an ocean-wide distribution of life.

And the backbone of the whole system would be plankton, coral, and krill.

There were some unofficial land ecosystems already. Part and parcel of the farming effort was livestock, and there were a whole lot of animals on Karis. Food animals like pigs, cattle, sheep, *joba*, and *keerits* could be found on any farm, and bees had been introduced from Earth to help with pollination both on crops and in the wild. Some joker had brought some rabbits from Earth and promptly let them escape, and in just one short year they multiplied to such an extent that they had to introduce coyotes, foxes, and *vulpars* to control their population. There were dogs and cats and birds and *griia* lizards and the little simian *peki* that Faey favored in the cities, and the herbivorous *griia* had started to show up out in the wild as well. The largest ecosystem they had was just around Karsa, and it was all of three organisms; rabbits ate the plants, and the coyotes, foxes, and *vulpars* ate the rabbits. *Vulpars*, being the overly clever little animals they were, had already started raiding the managed beehives for their honey, which was vexing the beekeepers who sold that honey. Jason had already forbidden them from killing the *vulpars*, since they were needed to control the rabbits, so his interior department was working up a way to keep the fox-like animals away from the bee farms. But it would all work out.

There were already Exiled there, and they did not greet him with complete happiness. There were fifty volunteers there already helping them settle into their new houses, and while some of the Exiled greeted him with smiles, he got several scowls as well. But, the all agreed that the village he found for them was nice enough, and it was on the sea, so at least it had an ocean to soothe them.

He got up early the next day, ate breakfast with Rann and Danelle, then did something he hadn’t done in five years... put on court robes. He chose soft charcoal gray robes with the pattern uneven sleeves, which had the crest of Karinne embroidered into each side and the crest done in brilliant silk threading on the back. Rann laughed a little when Jason came downstairs in his court robes, but Jyslin, who was giving him a lesson in telepathy, swatted him on the knee. *Be nice, you’ll be wearing those too*, she warned.

They look itchy, he countered.

They’re actually heavy, I’m wearing three layers of clothes here, Jason told him. *The outer robe, an inner robe, and a shirt and pants under it all.*

Well, why wear so much?

Because it’s tradition, and I’d look strange if I didn’t, he answered.

Well, don’t you already look a little strange, Daddy? Didn’t you say you were the only human that’s a Grand Duke?

Jason laughed. *Yes, but this is a tradition I can’t get out of, little man*, he answered. *If I want the others to take me seriously, I have to observe their little customs. This ridiculous robe is one of them*, he sent with a touch of annoyance. *Aya, I’m ready to go. Is the Scimitar ready?*

I object to you using that ship, your Grace, she answered. *It’s unarmed!*

It’s also heavily armored and defended and it can outrun almost anything that tries to chase it down, he answered calmly. *Besides, I’m taking a patrol group, remember?*

I’d rather you be on the cruiser, not the scout ship.

I’ll be completely safe, Aya. I used the Scimitar before, and I’m comfortable in it. Just make

it happen. And that's an order, he warned, cutting her off.

I thought we established that I'm the bully around here, your Grace, she sent dryly.

Only when I let you, he replied cheekily. Now, I'm ready to go, so warn the Scimitar whether it's ready or not. They can get ready while I'm sitting there giving them all dirty looks.

Despite Aya's objections, Jason took off in the *Scimitar* with only two guards, Aya and Dera, who would be his escort in the palace; it was still considered improper for men to move about the palace without an escort. Jason and Kellin were in a sort of gray area, since they did it all the time, but Jason tried to obey the custom when it didn't inconvenience him. Besides, nowadays, Aya would never let him out of her sight or let him roam around a potentially dangerous area without protection... and she defined *dangerous area* as virtually anywhere beyond the strip. That was the only place she allowed him free rein. The choice of Aya and Dera was deliberate; Aya would not feel safe about letting him loose without her there, and Dera's ability to hear private sending would give them plenty of warning in case of an attack, or plotting. Give Dera fifteen minutes in the throne room during court, and she could learn all kinds of interesting things, though never anything truly damning, since the Grand Duchesses were well aware that the Empress would be stupid not to employ *jhemae*, or *listeners*, as those who had the gift Dera and Symone had were called.

It had been a long time since he'd attended court, nearly five years, and Dahnai certainly didn't miss showing him off when he arrived. As soon as she entered to begin court, she called him up to the throne and had him stand at her left as Kellin stood at her right, which meant that Jason had a place of honor for the day.

After she called court to order, she stood and addressed the assembled nobles of the *Siann*, using sending, which meant that she was making an official announcement. Court traditions called for Dahnai to speak most of the time, for it was long considered that sending would contain only the truth. So, to avoid being caught in a lie, Dahnai only sent when she was making official announcements, when she was summoning someone in the palace to her presence, or when certain customs demanded it.

I am announcing the dispensation of the four border systems captured from the Urumi, she sent, strong enough so even those still on the way to the throne room could hear her. We have agreed to an operations contract with the House Karinne, she declared, which caused immediate hostile looks and dark whispers and private sendings around the nobles. But, she continued, The Grand Duke Karinne has voiced, reluctance, to take and hold systems beyond his own. So, in compromise, he has decided to share all profits resulting from his possession of the systems equally with all houses of the Siann.

That caused some stunned looks. *This contract was reached for one simple reason, she told them. The Imperium cannot afford to engage in a protracted war with the Urumi at this time, because of the Consortium threat. The Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Urumi has agreed to allow the House Karinne, which she sees as a neutral party, to occupy the space between our two empires, to prevent the outbreak of war. The Grand Duke Karinne, wishing to maintain his neutrality in all matters of the Imperium, has therefore decided to share all profits earned from the border systems with all the noble houses. I see this as a fair and equitable action, since it both prevents further war with the Urumi until after the threat of the Consortium has been removed, and also allows the entire Imperium, allows every noble house be it Minro or Hightborn, to enjoy the spoils of war. And it continues to show the Collective that since the Karinnes gain nothing from the operation of the captured systems, they will be fair and impartial administrators.*

The contract will be finalized after lunch. Until lunch, then, let this court proceed as sched-

uled.

It had been a long time, years, since he'd been at court, but he found it to be the same poisonous atmosphere he remembered. He received all kinds of false calls of welcome from the women of the *Siann*, a place dominated by the women because the Grand Duchesses were much more prone to bring their daughters and nieces to court rather than their sons or nephews. The few men that were there were the husbands or sons of nobles; the only male attending court on his own was Jason himself. Jason drifted from group to group as Dahnai attended to mundane matters to which nobody paid any attention, formal readings and decrees that went on while the rest of them talked out in the throne room.

The only real business Jason did was to have a long talk with Yila Trefani in one corner, as they discussed their deal for Jason to get the Trefani merchants back into the Collective before anyone else. Jason fully intended to honor his deal, and he was already prepared to talk to Sk'Vrae about the matter when he talked to her about her sending Brood Princesses to the four systems the Imperium had wrested from the Collective.

After lunch, the official contract was signed. It was drawn up that morning and sent to his legal team, then when they sent their approval, he signed it in a little ceremony that afternoon. It put the four border systems under the control of the Karinnes, to run as they saw fit, until such time as the Empress wished to renegotiate the contract, but for a term not less than thirty years barring activity that caused the Empress to withdraw the contract.

Jason's response to this was to take the rest of the afternoon off and contact Sk'Vrae, and inform her that she could send Brood Princesses to the border systems, and that in three days, he would meet with the Brood Princesses and the Urumi in command positions of all four border systems, so they could hammer out how the Brood Princesses would rule and what materials the systems would need to get back on their feet. He assured her that Imperial ships would provide protection, because he made sure that Imperial protection was part of the contract.

In all, Jason felt that it was the best solution to the problem. Both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae would honor his neutrality and allow him to administer the border systems. The *Siann* had their teeth pulled when they found out Jason was going to operate the systems at no profit to the House Karinne, which strangled any objection they could raise.

He'd have plenty of time to get it all ironed out before the summit meeting about the Consortium.

But it was an important step. Just the first step in his plan to protect his house, the Imperium, and the entire sector for that matter, from the Consortium.

Chapter 3

Raira, 34 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 8 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 34 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Heaven.

Jason was half asleep, and he was surrounded by children. Rann and Kyri were cuddled in on one side of him, and Zachary and Aran were on the other. Sora, his little Sora, was snuggled against his chest, exhausted and asleep, and very, very happy. Jason himself was very tired, since it was the first day since the contract signing where he hadn't been running around like a maniac. He'd spent two days on Draconis, basically in Dahnai's clutches, and she was very reluctant to let him go. After he finally extricated himself from the palace, he went to the border systems to survey them, and to meet with the four Brood Princesses and

their advisory staffs.

There were four systems that had been captured, and two of them had arable planets. Two systems also had more than one planet inhabited. Aurigae was the jewel of the four, for it had a large arable planet and had an airless yet mineral-rich planet that was also inhabited, used for mining. Skralla also had two inhabited planets. One was an arid planet not too much unlike Makan IV, arable but not quite as productive as the temperate, wet Aurigae. Skralla V was a tundra planet, where some farming could be done in special domed areas where the temperature was raised using technology. The system of Bellar was only occupied because it had one of the largest terrestrial planets in the entire sector, and had *huge* deposits of various light and heavy metals. The only problem was the planet was irradiated, due to one of its five moons that seemed to be all but made of radioactive isotopes, which bombarded the planet with radiation with every orbit. The Urumi had set up radiation shield domes to build one city of size on Bellar, a city of about twenty million Urumi. The topography and weather of the planet were the most unusual and unique Jason had ever seen. Exposed heavy metal ore deposits had eroded over the billions of years by the savage windstorms that raged across the planet, and spread the metals over the surface in a film of metal ore dust that helped block the radiation. The first couple of feet of soil of Bellar was so laced with metallic dust that it was almost a metal shell covering the surface, which could actually be mined by sifting the soil to separate the various ore dusts, and that shell both protected the interior, and also blasted the domes of the city with such powerful scouring metal-dust sandstorms that the outer dome of the three-domed structure was almost constantly in a state of repair. The metal coating in the soil partially shielded the interior of the planet from the radiation, so they mined by digging down from the city and then branching out. There were tunnels hundreds of miles long under Bellar's surface, radiation-shielded tunnels that led to the deposits they mined, where miners wearing E-suits labored to mine valuable heavy ores, like the ores that were refined to form Vanadium, Teratium, Adamantium, and even deposits of Uzerium287 and Allarium317, which were two of the core metals that formed the alloy Neutronium. The fourth system was Immiran, a small red star with a single planet that was so close to the star that it had a year of only 46 days, but that proximity gave the surface enough heat radiation to be temperate... if for the fact that it was barren and airless. The planet had no magnetic field, which allowed the star's radiation to rake the planet, and which had scoured away its atmosphere over billions of years. It was also phase locked in its orbit, which caused it to rotate at exactly the same rate in which it orbited the star. The planet always pointed the same hemisphere to the star, which was effectively an endless day where the red sun took up nearly half the sky. The only reason it was inhabited was because the sun's radiation made the planet a unique place to experiment with forms of non-standard farming; hydroponics and synthetic soil farming, all done under domes that filtered out only those harmful spectra of radiation that would kill the plants, but allowed all others to pass. That abundance of solar radiation actually allowed the planet to produce prodigious amounts of food for its size.

Jason was reminded of one of the ways he was truly different from both humans and Faey while he was there at Immiran. The Generations were part Kimdori, and the Kimdori were utterly immune to radiation. Jason himself wasn't completely immune to radiation, but he was much, much more tolerant of it. The DNA-damaging aspects of radiation didn't affect him, since his DNA could repair itself... and that was why radiation therapy had done nothing to help Jason's father when he was battling cancer. Jason's DNA couldn't be damaged or mutated by radiation, but it was actually much more prone to the self-mutation that caused cancerous tumors, which was why cancer was so prevalent in his family, and Songa screened him for cancer, which she could easily cure, every three months. Jason could withstand doses

of radiation that were dangerous to most other living things, but his resistance to radiation ended when it reached the point where the particles started doing actual physical damage to him. Unlike the Kimdori, Jason couldn't just heal those microscopic wounds, so exposure to heavy radiation or excessively long exposure to light doses of certain kinds of radiation were still dangerous to him.

After the tour, he met the four Brood Princesses of the Urumi. They were all about Jason's height, smaller than their mother, and had the same effete, royal attitude. They had all been raised to rule, for every Urumi planet had a Brood Princess there to govern. These four were the same four princesses that had been here before the Imperium invaded, and were simply returning to their duties. Jason actually favored that, since that meant that he was dealing with four Urumi that already knew all about their planets, and already had a governing system in place that the Urumi on the planets would respect. The first thing he made them do was swear fealty to *him* and to obey the terms of their contract, which was thirty years of dutiful and honest allegiance to the House Karinne, at the end of which they would meet with the Brood Queen to discuss the return of the systems to the Collective. "I'm not here to assimilate you into the Imperium. And I'm not here to try to make you go against your mother," he told the four, speaking the guttural language of Urumi, which Miaari had imparted to him before the meeting. Jason wanted no chance of misunderstandings, so he was speaking their language. "All I ask for is what you agreed to, thirty years of service to Karinne. And I guarantee you, I will work to make your colonies thrive, and try to return them to the Collective *better* than they were when the Faey invaded you. You'll have access to the Academy and all the science and support it can offer. Just ask, and they'll send teams to your worlds to help you with any problem, and the Makati are only a call away to help you build. I seriously think you should contact the Makati master builders who teach at the Academy, Sk'Xhree," he told the governor of Bellar. "They can probably help you come up with a more efficient dome system that doesn't require so much repair. Probably some kind of energy shield system, I don't know, but the engineers of Makan are definitely the ones you want to see."

"But the cost," she protested.

"You're *Karinne* planets now, Sk'Xhree, for thirty years," he said bluntly. "And in Karinne, we don't separate costs. The cost to replace the dome comes out of the total budget, not only *yours*. You'll only have to pay for a portion of it, about one tenth the cost of the project, which I'm sure you can manage. So work it out with the Academy.

"Remember that. In Karinne, we work as *one*. The needs of one planet are the needs of the whole house, so the house attends the matter. You will not simply be put aside and forgotten, left to fend for yourself. As long as you can pay your share, think about what projects you'd like to undertake for the next thirty years. We'll help you upgrade your infrastructure, build, expand, increase your industry. Sk'Varra, I noticed that Immiran has no orbital base outside of that hundred-year-old hulk that looks half broken down. Have you needed a new one?"

"Yes, your Grace, I've been trying to get an orbital station to replace that rusted hulk we have for five years."

"Then we'll take care of it. I'm sure the master builders of the Academy would love to build one for you, they enjoy a challenge. I want your planets not just to subsist, but to grow and thrive. You have the resources of both House Karinne and the Academy at your disposal. I want the Brood Queen to be impressed with the worlds she gets back when the time comes, not planets that have been milked dry and then cast aside."

That one statement earned him their immediate and honest loyalty, for that was *exactly* what they were afraid would happen. When they sat down for conference, they saw that he *meant*

it, for he discussed the agreement in place in the Imperium that took a portion of their profits and split it equally with the houses of the *Siann*, but also ensured that each planet also turned a profit as well, which they could use to expand and improve, and would also earn the Brood Princesses a nice salary; that was how they earned their money, through the prosperity of the planets they governed. The system he described would allow each system to grow, expand, even thrive, at little actual cost to themselves. They had to surrender about half their food yields and were taxed by the Imperium for about half of their profits, but backing them up was House Karinne, offering them services at a fraction of the price it would usually take to get it done. Under the Karinne plan, each system would actually earn more than it had in the Collective, because the Grand Duke wanted to overhaul their entire planets with better infrastructure, more efficient factories, strong defenses, and the ability to do business cheaper and earn more profit at the same time. The Brood Princesses realized quickly that Jason was sincerely concerned about the well being and profitability of their planets, and he would not be a tyrant. “Also don’t forget, you’re not being isolated from the Collective, either,” he told them. “As soon as Empress Dahnai gets her ships out of our space, trade and contact with the Collective will reopen. You’re citizens of the Karinnes now, but you’re more than welcome to return to the Collective to visit, and have your family from the Collective come to you. Our border with the Collective will be *open*, because I trust your mother to keep her word and honor our contract. I just want your thirty years to be happy ones, and when it’s all said and done, I don’t want you to regret being under my flag.

“As far as things go, each of you will have a strong measure of autonomy,” he told them. “I want you to run things as you see fit. All I ask is that you meet the quotas, don’t try to cheat the Imperium, and take advantage of the services I’m offering you. You’ll have authority to make your own budgets, institute your own laws and mores, and even create independent trade agreements beyond the forced trade imposed on you by the contract. So, if some Imperium house approaches you and offers you a lucrative trade agreement for something not covered by the mandatory quotas, take it. I want the Karinnes to be as unobtrusive as possible when you govern your worlds, but be available for you when you need us. I’m sure you can see that this is a system that benefits *you* far more than *me*, and I’m aware of it. But what I want from you and your systems isn’t money or resources. All I want is *peace* between the Imperium and the Collective for so long as the Consortium threatens us all, and I’m willing to pay for it.

“Now, there is one thing that I will ask of you,” he said. “Brood Queen Sk’Vrae has given me permission to extend invitations for Urumi to permanently join House Karinne. These volunteers will be inducted into the house, and will stay with Karinne when the time comes for us to part when you fold back into the Collective. I’m going to organize some informational viddy shows and open information centers in your major cities, but I will tell you this right here, right now. House Karinne *does not* induct those who do not want to be in the house. We do not conscript, we do not kidnap. We are happy to take Urumi into the house, but only those who truly wish to join us. That’s what the information centers will be there for, and to let you know, being inducted into the house will be a year-long process where the Urumi are educated about Karinne, and given ample opportunities to withdraw. But, on the other side of that, the house also does not take those who have ulterior motives. After the year-long induction phase, the Urumi has to submit to telepathic verification to ensure he will give his loyalty to the house, and is not just attempting to enter the house to be a spy for someone else. Like I said, we *only* take those who truly wish to be part of the house.”

In all, it had been a very productive and promising meeting. The Brood Princesses would actually do most of the work for him, and all he had to do was help them with those things

they couldn’t do for themselves. If things worked out as he envisioned, the border systems would thrive, everyone would be happy, and peace would be maintained. It was more than worth the cost of helping build the border systems up.

The others were cleaning up from Sora’s passing party. His little cutie had expressed two days ago, and Zora was so proud that she could walk to Kosigi. Maya and Ilia were starting to look a tad bit annoyed, for their children with Jason had yet to express... but they shouldn’t be too uptight. Jason figured that all his children had strong telepaths for mothers, so Zachary and Aran would be expressing any time now. Maya and Ilia were just as strong as Zora, so it was just a matter of time before his two other sons were telepathically expressed.

Surin had outdone himself yet again. The party had been done to the theme of *The Imperial Rangers*, Sora’s favorite viddy show, which was actually an educational animated feature that taught Faey children math, science, critical thinking, music, and art appreciation. It surprised him quite a bit that the Faey had such a comprehensive approach to education, considering art and music just as important as math and science. There had been cake, and games, and rides on airsleds pulled by the Dukal guards, and Kyva had even come and given Sora a ride in her Gladiator, carrying her in the Gladiator’s hand. There was even a live performance by actors in *Imperial Ranger* outfits. Every child in the whole area, both in the strip and outside, among the Generations and others living nearby, had attended, and it had been quite a fun party, even for the parents.

Jason was almost dreamily content, with his little blond daughter sleeping on his chest, one of her cute little pointed ears poking up out of her hair. Sora had inherited her mother’s ears but had Jason’s eyes and skin color, and she was already looking like her mother. She was clutching one of her gifts, an action figure of the Math Ranger from the viddy, who taught both normal math and algebra in a way that made it like a game; in fact, that was how the Math Ranger called it. “Algebra is a game, it’s a puzzle where you have to find the hiding number!” he would say in his formula. Jason marveled at his darling little girl, seeing that she was going to be the more beautiful of his two daughters. It wasn’t that Kyri wasn’t cute, but Sora was going to be a absolute heartbreaker.

He did wonder how long it would be before Aran and Zachary expressed. Aran’s hair had darkened to a kind of leaf green, which looked a little strange but was also rather striking and didn’t look bad at all, and Zachary’s black hair was still black. Now that Jason thought of it, Zachary’s hair was the only child of his whose hair hadn’t changed color. Rann’s hair started orange but was now reddish blond. Kyri’s hair started out shocking white, but had darkened to the platinum blond it held now. Aran’s hair had started bright, almost neon green, but had darkened to the pleasing summer leaf green it held now. And Sora’s hair had been strawberry blond when she was born, but it had lightened to lovely golden blond, a blond not too different from Aura’s hair. Zachary’s coal black hair was the most unusual of his children, but also made him the most handsome to Faey girls. Among the Faey, the darker the hair, the more rare, and thus the more exotic and attractive. Where human men loved blonds, Faey men and women both went ga-ga over someone raven-haired. And there wasn’t a hair anywhere in Zachary’s head that wasn’t jet black. That black hair was going to make him *very* popular with the girls. Yana was proud because Kyri had been born expressed, Jyslin was proud that her son was the heir, Maya was proud that her son seemed much smarter than the others, Zora was proud that her daughter could already fly an airbike, and Ilia was proud that her son had black hair.

Damn Faey, having to make a competition out of *everything*.

Sora stirred and opened her eyes, then shifted and looked at him with her beautiful green eyes. She had already had three days of sending lessons, and Zora said she could already

send, that she had learned fast. Jason decided to test that. *Well, my little lady is awake*, he sent slowly and gently, letting his love for his daughter shine through his thoughts, which made her smile brightly at him. *Feeling okay?*

I'm happy, she sent, trying to focus it only on him, but not doing very well. She slid up and wrapped her little arms around his neck and kissed him on the nose, then put her forehead against his. *Mommy is happy too.*

It's very important for us to see our children's talent wake up, he told her seriously. *Because yours woke up so early, it means you'll be very strong. That makes your mother and I very, very proud of you, my little lady.*

Not as strong as Kyri and Rann, though.

You'll be stronger than Rann because he's a boy. You'll be stronger than me when you grow up, he admitted. *Girls are naturally stronger talents than boys.*

I won't tell anyone, she sent seriously, which made Jason chuckle.

We'll make it our little secret, he sent lightly in reply. *You send very well for only being able to for three days, little love.*

Mommy makes me practice from lunch til bedtime since I started hearing it, she told him. *She said it was how her mommy taught her.*

Well, don't let it make you hate it, he told her. *Once you learn how to send, you'll find it to be easy, and even fun. Truth be told, I'd much rather send than speak. It's faster, It's easier, and people can understand me better.*

Why do you talk then?

Because I want my children to understand me, he told her. *And not everyone can hear me send. When I talk with some of our human friends, I have to talk. When I talk with my Makati and Kizzik friends, I have to talk. I can send in a way that it lets them hear, but that is very hard to do, and never fails to give me a headache. But when I talk with Miss Miaari, I must speak. She can't hear sending, no matter how I try to do it. Her race is completely closed off from sending.*

Why is that?

I really couldn't tell you, he answered. *But her people have nobody with talent, and we can't touch their minds to send our thoughts to them.*

It was close enough for a child. The honest answer was, Jason *could* send to Miaari, but only if she allowed it. Kimdori had such powerful mental defenses that he couldn't even send to her, his thought couldn't penetrate her defense so she could hear it. And a Kimdori would rather bite off his own leg than lower his mental defenses. They saw telepathic communion as a threat to the secrets they carried, and absolutely would not permit any chance that a telepath would break into those parts of their minds and take what they didn't want to give. A *secret unspoken remains a secret* was more than just a saying with the Kimdori, it was a way of life.

I like Miss Miaari.

So do I. She's one of my best friends, he agreed. *So, did you enjoy your party, dove?*

Did I! she sent excitedly, and her excitement made her thought fuzzy and hard to comprehend, almost overwhelmed by her exuberance. *Did you see the airsled that Miss Temika bought me?*

Yes I did, he answered. *You should thank her a whole bunch of times, those aren't cheap, dove. She must really like you to give you a present like that.*

It was nice to have Temika home. She was sitting with Mike over at the picnic table, catching up with the girls. Temika was home now, since the fall semester just ended at the Academy, and she only had one more semester to go. But that semester would be done here, on

Karis, in Kumi's office. It was her internship, but in reality it was just Temika doing her transition from school to work. Temika had trained in business to help Kumi at her many schemes and business fronts, and now she would be trained in the dirty underside of business, where she'd been trained in the clean veneer business showed to the world. Temika was actually very good at business. She had a nose for it, and had been very successful back among the squatters. She seemed to have a knack for knowing what would be valuable where, and those instincts had proven to translate into the realm of galactic business.

Mike had already graduated from his plasma systems course, and was ready to join Myleena's staff as one of her technicians, but he'd waited for Temika to graduate. He spent that extra year learning the basics of plasma systems engineering working for the Makan Builder's School, the engineering college at the Academy, taught by seven living legends, Makati who had earned the titles of Master Builders. It had been quite a coup when Ayuma had lured those teachers from various engineering schools on Makan, seven of the most respected in various fields of engineering. Those seven collectively could, quite simply, design and build *anything*, from a house to a capital-class starship. Each one was a master of a different field of engineering, and together, they were comprehensively the best teaching staff anywhere. The students at the school would be the ones doing the building for the border systems, since the Makati would turn each project into an active learning experience for both the engineering academy and the business school. The engineering school would survey the sites, develop the plans, make the blueprints, and execute the instruction, while the business school would have to manage the operation. It wouldn't be the first major project undertaken by the Academy, for they had built a new orbital station for Terra using the same tactic, making it a school project where students drew up the plans, then the business school managed the actual build, which was done by a mixture of Academy students of various schools and Makati construction companies. In that way, the students got actual experience doing the real thing, not working up plans and using simulations.

It was just more reason for various races to send their students to the Academy, which had, in its short tenure, already earned a reputation for outstanding teachers, comprehensive and effective education, and was already considered to be one of the premier centers of learning and research. And when the Consortium technology started to be analyzed next week, then it would be *the* research center in the whole sector. They were almost ready to begin, getting their research methods and recording systems set up, and all the data loaded into the mainframe supplied to them just for the task. Kiaari had built them a situation room, but was not the one running it, and it was there where both technical information and strategic information would be disseminated out to the participating governments.

Their plan was to divide up the research into six main areas; energy generation and distribution, computer interpretation, weapons systems, propulsion systems, other systems, and metallurgy. *Other systems* would be the largest section with many sub-sections, where each one focused on a different system the Consortium used, including the very important section that would study the brain devices implanted into the insectoids to puzzle out their exact operation and maybe find some weakness to exploit. Jason knew that by spreading highly advanced plasma power generation, he was weakening Dahnai's advantage, but in the long run he saw that it was for the best. The Urumi had already been provided smaller plasma power plants to power the weapons that the Consortium gave them, as they demanded much more power than the Urumi's ships could provide, so it was just a matter of time for plasma power technology to filter down to the other governments. Most governments already used plasma as a primary power source, but they weren't even half as advanced as the Faey. Most still used hot plasma, and had not yet mastered the techniques of phasing plasma to make it safer

and make it more powerful. Parity was absolutely critical to keep the Faey from trying to conquer the rest of the sector, because at the moment, the Faey had a major advantage with their advanced plasma power systems and their fearsome MPAC technology.

Jason had plans that far exceeded the short term threat of the Consortium. His plans would take maybe a century to come to fruition, but in the end, it would be for the best. In a way, he could almost thank the Consortium for coming along and giving him a jump start on executing his plan, for they provided the perfect focus to get the ball rolling. If only they weren't such a terrible threat to Cybi and his house, he would almost be happy they were here. But the simple fact of the matter was, so long as the Consortium was out there, Karis and the Karinnes were in great danger, and he had to focus everything on keeping his house safe and Cybi untouched.

Sora raised up over him enough to look him in the eyes, and he felt his heart melt a little looking up at his beautiful daughter. *My little lady*, he sent tenderly, disengaging an arm and stroking her hair. *It seems like just yesterday you were so small you'd fit in my hands. You're growing up so fast*, he added, a touch wistfully. *I wonder how much you'll grow in the next year, how much more beautiful you'll be. I love you, my little Sora.*

I love you too, Papa, she sent, her affection for him bleeding through her thought as she hugged him around the neck. *Want to ride on my sled?*

"Papa's too big for your sled, Sora," Aran said sleepily.

Jason started, then laid his head back and laughed so loud that he startled all his kids awake. He sat up and kissed Sora affectionately on the cheek, then picked up his green-haired son and held him up at arm's length. "All my little ones are just growing up too fast!" he said with another laugh.

"Papa?" Sora asked.

What color is your hair, Aran? Jason sent, slowly and gently, and he held Aran out so he couldn't see Jason's mouth not moving.

"Mommy calls it forest green," he answered. Kyri's eyes widened, Rann grinned, and Sora gasped.

"Aran! Daddy was *sending!*" Rann said exuberantly. "You woke up!"

"I did?" Aran asked in confusion.

"Yes you did, my little man!" Jason beamed. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Aww, that means I'm gonna be last!" Zachary complained. "Now they're gonna tease me!"

"Then you need to wake up too," Kyri said imperiously. "Then we don't have reason to, and I don't have to jabber at you like a baby!"

Maya! Jason boomed, so much so that just about everyone looked in his direction. *C'mere quick!*

Maya was only a few feet away, so she hurried over with Vell and Yuri, her oldest daughter. "What is it, Jason?"

"Our son expressed!" he announced, holding Aran out to arm's length and swinging him back and forth, making him giggle.

"Really?" she gasped, then she giggled and snatched Aran up. "Oh, my son, I'm so proud of you!" she said with a happy laugh, hugging him tightly.

Vell gave him his own big hug. "Now that's our big boy!" he said with a smile, kissing Aran on the cheek. Jason could not be more grateful to Vell. Vell was unbelievably kind and giving, acting as a father to Aran in the house, but acceding to Jason. Aran had two fathers, and he called both of them *Daddy*. Vell loved Aran as much as his own daughters, showing just how wonderful and kind Vell was. Jason couldn't have asked for a better stepfather for Aran.

Everyone, Aran has expressed! Maya sent, at maximum power... which meant that Faey 20 miles away probably heard her, since Maya was deceptively powerful in her talent. It made both Sora and Aran flinch, and Rann put his hands over his ears, which made Jason laugh.

A flood of congratulations roared in, which made Sora wince as her undeveloped talent tried to make sense of everything assaulting her, so Jason put his hand on her shoulder and shielded her with his own talent, cutting off the voices. "Better?" he asked.

"Mmm, thank you, Daddy!" she said, hugging him again.

"Don't let Aran take away from *your* special day, though," Jason told her with a grin. "You're still the most important little lady on the strip today! Aran will get his day when it's his passing party."

It was even more reason to celebrate, and Jason made sure to pay extra attention to Sora so she didn't feel like anything was taken away from her with Aran's expression during *her* party. Jason saw that Maya had already pulled Surin aside, and was deep in sending with him, no doubt organizing Aran's party. *Remember I'll be off planet Wednesday night, Thursday and Friday morning*, Jason warned.

Then we'll have it on Wednesday morning, Surin answered calmly. *Is that good for your schedule?*

Nothing I can't postpone, he answered. *My kids are more important than Dukal business.*

The amusing part of it all was Zachary. Jason could empathize with him, for now he was the only child of Jason that hadn't expressed, and he looked both annoyed and uncertain. All his brothers and sisters were now in a world still denied him, and it was as if he felt like it was separating him from his siblings. When Kyri and Rann told Sora and Aran all about the lessons they did, Zachary was left out. All he could do was listen and feel like he wasn't part of the group anymore. He looked so mopey that as the party broke up, he took his son aside and sat with him at the picnic table. "Don't let them upset you, son," he told him gently, a hand on his back. "Just be patient. Your mother is just as strong as Maya, so it's just a matter of time before your talent wakes up too."

"It's not fair," he complained. "Why did I have to be last?"

"Why did Kyri have to be first?" he asked simply. "It's just the way things are. Don't ever think that there's something wrong with you, and don't let your brothers and sisters tease you over it. If they do, come tell me. I won't stand for that, it's totally rude."

"But then I'll be a tattle-tale," he said seriously. Zachary was the son of Ilia, and Ilia had very strong views which showed in her son through her teachings. Zachary was a very serious little boy, and already had a very strong sense of right and wrong, and he was definitely the most well-behaved of his children. Ilia didn't tolerate lying or disobedience. She raised Zachary with a firm hand, but it was also a loving one.

"Well then, I'll just have to ask you every day, because I know you won't lie to me if I ask you a direct question," he said simply. "And I'll warn your brothers and sisters that I'm going to, so they can't blame you when they get in trouble if they do it."

"No, I won't, Papa," he agreed, looking quite relieved that he could stop his siblings from teasing him without being accused of ratting them out.

Being politically savvy often had fringe benefits, such as dealing with his competitive and rather sneaky children.

"Now, just be patient, son, and you'll get your turn. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I'll make sure *your* passing party is much bigger than anyone else's," he said with a conspiratorial smile. "Since you got stuck with being last, it means it'll be the last passing party for a while... so we have to make it a *really good* one."

Zachary smiled at him and nodded enthusiastically.

“Now go have fun, and I’ll see you at dinner.”

Zachary ran off and joined Zeri and Jora, the daughters of Sheleese and Min, and the three of them ran down to the beach to fly a kite.

Ilia put her hand on Jason’s shoulder and looked down at him. *Thanks, babes, I’m glad you did that.*

I feel sorry for him, and for you, he replied. He’ll feel left out, and that’s a terrible feeling for a child. And I’m sure the others are gonna rag you ceaselessly til he expresses, he told her.

She laughed ruefully. *You know they will, she agreed. But I don’t think it’s going to take long. There are some times when I think he’s able to hear me send, but not when he actively tries. So I’m sure he’s right on the threshold.*

I don’t doubt it.

A little floating camera drifted up to him, which was Cybi’s remote camera that let her watch the party. She was very much interested in his children, because she considered them to be the first children of the 98th Generation. Even though the program was long gone, the fruits of that program were meticulously tracked by Cybi. *[How is the camera working, Cybi?]* he asked, communing with her.

[Very well, Jason,] she answered. *[It makes me wonder when they will be able to commune.]*

[I don’t think Kyri’s very far from it,] he answered. *[She has enough experience, she just hasn’t quite figured it out yet. I really should see if I can teach her how to do it.]*

[Please. I’d love to be able to talk to her.]

[She’ll need a real gestalt, and not just the interface she uses now. I’m not sure I want her to have a gestalt quite yet. There’s no telling how the computer linked to her mind will affect her development. For one, it would let her cheat like crazy in her lessons, she could just access her gestalt. She wouldn’t learn anything.]

[Precisely why we didn’t permit gestalts to the young,] she agreed. *[But we could design an interface that permits communion, or use the system the Karinnes used before their destruction, a remote commune sensor network. Before, there were enough remote sensors that allowed Generations to commune with the CBIM in command of Karga, Carra, without needing a gestalt. But you haven’t installed remote commune transceivers,]* she added, a bit tartly.

[Everyone who can commune with you has a gestalt, I didn’t see the need. But, I think you proved your point. I’ll have Myleena install a remote network through the area so all of us can commune without a gestalt if needed.]

[Thank you, that makes me content.]

[I do have a question to ask you.]

[Yes?]

[Myleena’s almost to the point where she believes we can build another CBIM. Would you want this?]

[Jason, that is a silly question. Do you know how vulnerable I feel knowing I am the last of the CBIMs? If I were to go offline, the loss of my data would be a tragedy to the entire universe. I have been pushing Myleena to build another CBIM, both to protect the Karinne secrets and also because CBIMs are needed. You need a CBIM to run Karga, and there should be a CBIM at the Academy.]

[No, there will be no CBIM off Karis,] Jason told her. *[If a CBIM were captured, it would be devastating to the Karinnes.]*

[Jason, no enemy could possibly capture us. We would self-terminate long before they man-

aged to get anything from us. We will not permit ourselves to be captured. That is what happened to the CBIM of Draena, the southern continent. She survived the initial attack, but self-terminated to prevent the Merranes from capturing her. That’s why that large crater is in the center of the continent is there. She triggered an explosion in her singularity power plant, which vaporized everything that the Merranes may have been able to use.]

[God, I hope you never have to come to that,] he told her earnestly.

[I would be unhappy to do it, but I would. The secrets of the house are more important than I. I will take them into oblivion with me before I surrender them to our enemies.]

[I’d rather not dwell on things like that. And you can forget trying to foist off running Karga on some other CBIM. I wouldn’t feel happy with anyone other than you.]

[I am not as adept at the task as a CBIM you build specifically for the task will be. My function is emergency response, not operations.]

[Well. I have another question for you.]

[Yes?]

[If we build everything you need, could you transfer yourself to the hardware of another CBIM? I mean, if we move your core memory to new hardware, would you be able to make the move?]

She was silent for a surprisingly long time. *[An... intriguing idea,]* she noted. *[My core isn’t designed to be moved out of this facility, but it is designed to be mobile, which is why I can withdraw myself into the mantle. I was the only CBIM built with such a feature, which makes my core more, ah, modular than other CBIM cores were. I believe that it just might be possible, if my entire core module, the part of me I withdraw into the mantle, is moved as one, I have extensive remote transceivers to maintain connection to my non-core systems during the move, and I do not lose power. If that can be done, then yes, I believe I could be moved to Karsa without harm. I’m not sure if such an engineering feat could be accomplished, though.]*

[But, if I find a way to do it, would you be amenable to being moved to Karsa and being placed in a more powerful system? I’m serious, Cybi, I won’t accept another CBIM. I want you.]

[Your loyalty to me is touching, Jason,] she communed with warmth. *[Yes, I would be willing to try, but not until there is another CBIM online. I will take no chances that an accident destroys me while I am the last CBIM in operation.]*

[Alright then, we build a CBIM in Kosigi first, then we move you to Karsa. Now, on to the other question, which I believe will make you see how this is possible. What if I said I wanted a CBIM installed in the Aegis? Could it be done?]

She was quiet a moment. *[Yes, I see where you’re going, Jason, and I’m impressed,]* she answered brightly. *[Yes, the Aegis would have enough power and is big enough to accommodate a CBIM. You’d have to install another singularity plant just for the CBIM, but a CBIM could definitely be installed in the Aegis. It could be installed in a battleship as well, a battleship would be able to hold one. But anything smaller than a battleship would not.]*

[You just answered my next question. So, get in touch with Myleena and distract her away from the Consortium ship long enough to think about that.]

[That will not be easy. She loves that captured ship nearly as much as Sevi adores the Abarax.]

[When she starts having sex with the ship, I’ll start to worry.]

Cybi laughed lightly. *[She has made much progress. She estimates that they’ll begin to dismantle the ship in four days.]*

[Good. Where is the interdictor at?]

[Still on schedule. It should be complete in six days. Myleena will want two to three days to test it, then it will be installed on Karis and activated.]

[Good. I still don't sleep well knowing that the Consortium can jump in on us by surprise. Any information from the Kimdori or the Alliance?]

[Nothing yet, Jason. They have found no Consortium bases thus far.]

[Damn. They have to be out there somewhere.]

[Given the great distances the Consortium traveled to get here, I would presume to guess that their bases are very far from here, exploiting their ability to withstand extensive hyperspace exposure. Songa already theorizes that that is one of the functions of the brain implants. A filter, if you will, to reduce the psychological strain of hyperspace travel.]

[That's possible, I suppose, but I don't think so. But I'm no medical specialist. Once we build a duplicate of the power broadcasting system in the destroyer and we can actually turn those things on, we're doing nothing but guessing.]

[Yes, that is Myleena's primary goal right now, to dismantle that broadcasting system and learn how it works. It is the one true advance the Consortium has achieved that we have not, so it is her main focus.]

[That's why she's such a smart girl,] Jason communed with a chuckle. [And I think that's the one thing we won't share through the Academy. I want us to thoroughly analyze it and find a way to counter it, maybe improve it, so what we pass on isn't a threat to us. I don't want some enterprising government to build a slough of attack ships powered by a central command ship and attack us with them without some way to shut them down.]

[Always wise,] Cybi agreed.

As soon as the party was over, Jason attended the matter of remotes. He figured that Myleena would be too busy to bother, and Jason *did* have experience with such things, so he and Jyslin sat down and designed a remote sensor network that provided full coverage for the entirety of Karsa and all suburbs. It was actually rather easy to design, since it was just a series of remote transceivers placed at set distances apart, all connected to a biogenic controller computer that linked to Cybi, that they'd place in the main communications complex at Karsa. Cybi would be the one to program the controller to her satisfaction, so all they had to do was provide her the hardware to handle it. It took them about six hours to plot the locations of the remote transceivers and set up the controller system which gave them total coverage with a minimum of resources, and when Cybi checked over their work, she found it to be viable. Jason put in the work order for it and put it on priority status, which meant that his Makati building unit would begin work on it the next day. Given the efficiency of the Makati, it would be built within a week.

Mama, Papa! We're ready for our bath! Rann sent through the house, his sending much sharper than it had been just days before. Rann was quickly learning the art of sending, and could now send with clarity and strength. He hadn't quite yet mastered private sending, but he could send clearly, and he was starting to develop speed. He could understand much more than he could before, could comprehend sending at normal speed most of the time. Just as Jason and Jyslin told him, he was learning sending quickly, and all he needed was practice. It would take him months, or even years, to approach the level of mastery of his parents or Kyri, but he would soon be proficient enough to be able to understand and participate in an adult-level telepathic conversation.

Alright, sweetie, we'll be right up, Jyslin answered him. *Go ahead and fill the tub, but do not get in it!*

Okay, Mommy.

They got up, and Ayama swept in and picked up their glasses as they went upstairs and to

the bathroom. Rann and Danelle were in the bathroom. Rann was filling the soaking tub, nude and with his towel around his shoulders, standing on his tiptoes looking inside, and he looked rather cute like that. Danelle had just finished pulling the seat in the shower out from under the water, and she too was nude. Jyslin sat on the bench near the toilet and started undressing, pulling off her shoes. "Okay, kids, go scrub," she told them. Rann put his towel the rack and went to the flat, low-walled washing shower as Danelle turned the water on. Danelle stood in front of the seat and started soaping herself as Rann stood under the shower and wet his hair as his parents undressed. Jyslin finished first, standing up and smiling lightly as Jason looked her up and down with an assessing expression, admiring his wife's lovely body. "Did you enjoy the party, Danelle?" she asked as she stood beside Rann and started soaking herself.

"It was fun!" she said excitedly. "I know how Zach feels, though, cause all his brothers and sisters' talent woke up. I hope it doesn't take me long to wake up. It makes me feel... left out."

"Well, judging by how strong your parents are, dear, it won't take long at all," she said. "Your mother is one of the strongest talents on Karis, and your father's almost as strong as Uncle Jason is."

"I wish my Daddy would come see me," she frowned.

"He's on Terra, dear, doing very important work. He loves you even if he can't come see you as much as he wants."

"I know, but I still wish he'd come see me."

Danelle's father was Kohnn Karinne, who Jason had brought into the house. He was a commoner under the Aralles, and had been one of her Black Ops team, one of three she'd stolen from the Imperium to lure into Karinne. She had chosen Jenn to father her first child because he was a powerful telepath for a male, and had minor telekinetic ability, able to lift about 200 grams. As telekinetics went among non-Karinne Faey, that was about mainstream. Jenn was about 55 years old, just into his middle age and older than Myleena, and was a doctorate in plasma systems engineering. He had been transferred to the Academy to work on the Consortium technology, and would be heading the power systems research team.

"Well, everyone's busy right now. I'm sure he wants to see you too, but it might be a little while before he can come home."

"I know," she sighed, stepping out of the water and accepting the soap bottle from Rann, then soaping herself down. Jason replaced her under the shower, running his hands through his hair to soak it. "Uncle Jason?"

"Yes, pippy?" he asked, using Myleena's favorite pet name for her daughter.

"Why does the Con-Con-Consortum want to fight with us?"

"They're called the Consortium, and I wish I could tell you exactly why," he told her. "But we think they want to take Cybi away from us. And we won't let them. This is Cybi's home, and she doesn't want to go."

"Good. I like Cybi," she said, lathering her hair. "And they must be really mean to try to take Cybi away from her home."

"We agree, Danelle," Jyslin said as she stepped up behind the kids, sat on the stool, and started to lather the skin on her arms.

In the typical manner of a child, her mind changed tracks quickly and mercurially. "I wonder what Aran's party will be like."

"I'm sure Surin will make it fun," Jason chuckled.

Jason? Jason, are you home?

Sure am, Songa. We're taking a bath.

Can I come up and talk to you?

Sure, come on up, he answered as he picked Rann up, who started giggling when put his son's head right under the shower head, soaking him thoroughly.

"Eww, the soap tastes awful!"

"Then why are you eating it, you silly boy?" Jason teased, putting him down. "Rinse up and into the tub with you!"

"It ran into my mouth. Yick!" he said, spitting, then holding his open mouth before the showering water, rinsing his mouth out.

Rann had climbed into the tub by the time Songa got there. She was wearing her lab coat and pants, and had her hair pulled back in a pony tail. "Doc Songa!" Rann said with a grin.

"Hello, Ranny," she smiled at him. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Did you come to the party?"

"Afraid I had to work, cutie," she said, shaking her head and coming over to sit on the small bench.

"How's Luke and little Jari?" Jyslin asked.

"Luke's already getting ready to return to the Academy," she sighed. "I wish he'd come home and just take the classes by remote, but he's so insistent. He says it's just not as good. After he goes back, I only get to touch him two days a week, which isn't nearly enough."

"When does he graduate?" Jyslin asked.

"Next semester. Jari's just fine. She's about to start school," she said with a proud smile. Jari was the daughter of Luke and Songa, and she was four now. At four, Faey children entered what they called grade 1, which actually lasted about three years. It was preschool, kindergarten, and 1st grade all rolled into one, but it taught a hell of a lot more than human schools. Faey kids entered grade 2 with exposure to algebra and the sciences, since the Faey taught math and algebra concurrently rather than introducing kids to math first, and then algebra. To the Faey, math and algebra were one in the same. Rann and the other kids in the strip didn't go to grade 1 because they were taught the basics by Aya and the guards, but they'd start attending public school at age 7, when they entered grade 2. "Anyway, I looked into the problem you asked me about, Jason."

"What problem?"

"Why Symone and everyone else seems strangely devoid of pregnancies," she answered.

"Oh. What did you find out?"

"I found out that there *is* a connection," she said, putting her elbows on her knees as Jyslin moved back to the shower and started rinsing off, and Danelle joined her. "I studied the records of pregnancies and births and came across a curious trend. It seems that the closer to the ocean, the more the curve drops. Pregnancy rates are much more normal inland, but here by the ocean, they're lower than normal. So, I took samples from several various women and found traces of Ditremazine, then scanned the ocean water and found even fainter traces. It's the compound I'm treating Symone for, the one that's interfering with her ability to conceive. It's something our scanners don't even look for when they scan, so we've been missing it all this time."

"Is it natural?" Jason asked.

She shook her head. "It's a usually harmless compound that's a byproduct of the radiation cleanup Cybi's robots did, which I guess built up in the ocean over the years with precipitation runoff. It's harmless by itself, but in sufficient amounts in a woman who has a potassium deficiency, it makes it more difficult for Faey women to conceive. The more the potassium deficiency, the worse the condition is, and Symone hadn't been eating a healthy diet and getting enough potassium, so the problem was pronounced in her to the point where she

couldn't conceive at all. Ditremazine coats the uterus walls and makes it hard for the fertilized egg to attach, and the more there is, the harder it becomes. That might explain why none of the women here on the strip have conceived since their initial pregnancy, because nobody here has been getting enough potassium to overcome the Ditremazine they're exposed to every time they go for a swim in the ocean, which we do almost every day."

"So you know what's wrong!" Jyslin said happily. "So, you can treat us?"

"Easily, but I won't have to do that for long. Ditremazine is broken down by two methods, exposure to ultraviolet radiation and also by potassium, which acts as a catalyst that breaks it down, and there's plenty of potassium salts in the ocean water. My calculations show it should be completely eradicated from the water in another seven years. All we really have to do to fix it is to have all the women take a potassium supplement. Potassium neutralizes Ditremazine in the body."

"That's a relief," Jason sighed as Danelle joined Jyslin in the shower. "I was wondering why nobody seemed to be getting pregnant, and I know a few of the girls were trying."

"I'm a little upset with myself," Songa said with a grunt. "I hadn't noticed the problem, because nobody had really brought it to my attention. But I should have realized that nobody, not even *me*, was getting pregnant, and started looking into the problem."

"We've all been busy with what seemed were more important things at the time," Jason told her. "And I've seen the birth records. We *are* reproducing, I guess we're just not reproducing as much around the coast."

She nodded. "There's a thirty-seven percent decrease in births around the coast. I think it affects us here at the strip the most because we're literally on the beach, and we all swim in the ocean much more than others. So it lets the Ditremazine build up in us faster."

"So, Doctor, what do I do to fix it?" Jyslin asked.

"I know you take vitamins, so I'm sure you're getting your daily requirement of potassium already. So for you, take one thousand milligrams of potassium every day for four days to purge the Ditremazine already in your body, then two hundred fifty milligrams a day after that to prevent buildup," she answered. "Just be careful, an overdose of potassium can be harmful, so follow those directions exactly. You can buy the supplement at any pharmacy or major store. The potassium will neutralize the Ditremazine, and you should be purged of it and back to a healthy chance to conceive in about four days."

"That's it?"

"That's it." She leaned back up on the stool. "Mind if I join you?" she asked. "I'm a little overdressed, and I could use a bath myself."

"Please," Jyslin smiled as she padded from the shower to the tub, making Rann giggle as she started tickling him. Danelle joined them soon after, and Jason started washing off the soap. Songa quickly disrobed and joined him under the shower, and it made Jason remember the brief few days that they had been lovers. Songa had needed comforting then, and he had been happy to provide her that comfort, and he'd been just as happy to step aside and allow Luke to take over. Luke and Songa were deeply in love, and helped fill the voids in each other's hearts caused by the deaths of their former spouses. Jason had known both of them, had known Mary and Rann. Mary had died in the attack on Chesapeake, and Rann had died in Scotland when Jason and Songa had been captured by the Imperium. Both of them had died because of him, and he was just glad that neither of them blamed him for it. They had found each other, and he was happy that they were happy. *Ayama*, Jyslin called.

Yes?

Can you do me a huge favor and run down the Demanne's and buy me a potassium supplement?

I can do that.

Make sure you buy a supplement that comes in pills with two hundred and fifty milligram doses per tablet, Songa warned her as she sat on the stool and started lathering her hair. It should say how much per tablet on the package.

I'll do that, Doctor Songa, she answered. Isn't this what Symone is taking?

Yes, it's the treatment for her pregnancy problem, Songa answered. I tracked down the problem, and it's rather widespread, linked to a trace chemical in seawater. Potassium is the cure.

Really? That's good to know, I've been wondering why I couldn't get pregnant! she said with more animation and emotion than Jason had ever heard out of her. *Will this work for me too?*

Yes, it should, she answered.

You should release a health bulletin to warn everyone, Ayama told her.

I already did. You just haven't seen it yet, Songa replied. Just make sure you follow the dosage carefully, Ayama, an overdose of potassium can be dangerous.

What's the dosage?

A thousand milligrams a day for four days, then two hundred fifty milligrams a day afterward to protect you from the chemical from then on. Now mind that that dosage is based on a balanced diet where you get all your required nutrients. If you're not getting enough potassium as it is, you might need more. Just drop by my office later, dear, and I'll give you a checkup to see.

Is tomorrow too soon?

That's just fine, it takes all of three minutes to screen you for potassium.

"You know the clinics will be swamped by women looking for a screening when that bulletin gets circulated," Jason noted.

"I don't mind work when it has a good result, and it's a very easy thing to check," she told him, standing up and joining him in the shower again to wash the shampoo from her hair.

Jason joined his family and Danelle in the soaking tub, and Danelle wasted no time climbing into his lap. Most humans would have found the idea of a naked man sitting with a naked child in his lap to be immoral, but they weren't Faey. Since Faey lacked human concepts of modesty, saw nudity as natural and beautiful, they attached no sexual overtones to such things whatsoever so long as the adult and child were related in some way. It was entirely proper for an adult to hold a child when neither were wearing clothes so long as the two were related or close, and Danelle was definitely close. Danelle wasn't their child, but she was as good as, since she spent so much time with them. That was why Jason didn't bat an eye over having Danelle in his lap, since she was virtually his adopted niece, the daughter of a woman he considered as close as a sister. She was also the child Rann saw the most, since Danelle slept over at their house almost half the time.

It was amazing sometimes how thoroughly he'd been assimilated into Faey culture given how much he had resisted it... but Jyslin had made sure to convert him in the years they were married.

Songa sat back down on the seat and started lathering soap in her hands, then started scrubbing her back with a handled louffah. "I guess I'll start seeing a boom of coastal babies in about seven months," she laughed.

"More like eight, since we're coming up on the end of the year," Jyslin amended. "And I certainly hope mine is one of them. I've been trying to get pregnant since Rann was born, and all this time, I thought it was just bad luck."

"Sounds like Jyslin is warning you, Jason," Songa chuckled as she started washing her

torso.

"I can handle it," Jason chuckled. "I'll have to stay clear of Symone for the next couple of weeks, so Tim can do his damn job, so that just gives Jyslin all my attention."

"True, true," she nodded. "Stop by my office tomorrow, Jys, I'll screen you so you know when you're fertile."

"I already know. I just had my period last week, so it'll be about two weeks from now."

"What's a period?" Rann asked.

"Something girls have when they're older," Jyslin answered him. "It's when a girl knows she's becoming a woman."

"Yeah, but what does that mean?"

"I could tell you, but it's icky," Jyslin told him, poking him in the belly and making him giggle.

"Really icky?"

"More or less, sweetie."

"It's when girls bleed down where they pee," Danelle told him fearlessly. "Mommy explained it. She said it happens every few weeks when girls get older."

"Does it hurt?" Rann asked in concern, looking at Jyslin.

"No, sweetie, not at all," she assured him.

"Rann, it's what happens when a girl doesn't get pregnant," Songa told him as she lathered her legs. "Her body spends a lot of time getting ready for the chance that she gets pregnant by preparing a little bed of soft tissue for the baby inside her. Well, when it doesn't happen, her body starts over and has to flush away the preparations. The girl's insides, her womb, wants a *new* bed for the baby, so it has to get rid of the old one. So, her womb takes the bed and breaks it up into tiny little pieces, and then flushes it out of herself. The girl doesn't *really* bleed, the broken-up unused bed just *looks* like blood. What she gets rid of has to come out, so it comes out the same place where the baby comes out."

"Why does she start over? Why not use the same bed?"

"For the same reason milk goes bad after a while," she answered. "The bed's only good for a little while, because the bed is like milk that nourishes the baby, and just like milk, it isn't good after so much time passes. So, when the girl's womb knows she's not pregnant, she gets rid of the bed before it spoils, and starts working on a new one. That happens over and over until she gets pregnant, because when she gets pregnant, there's a baby there for the bed to nourish, so the bed doesn't go bad. The baby drinks the milk, so the bed doesn't spoil."

Good explanation, Jason complemented.

I have practice.

"Oh. I guess that makes sense. Kinda."

"It's not exactly what *really* happens, love, but it's a good description of why it happens." Songa rinsed herself off quickly, then padded over and joined them in the tub. It was big enough for four, so she settled in across from Jyslin, leaning back and putting her arms out on the lip of the tub. "You have such a nice tub," she said, sighing as she settled in.

"I made sure to have them put in a *real* bathroom," Jyslin said with a wink at Jason. "Jason wanted a Terran bathroom, with just that combination shower and tub that only holds one and you can't really soak."

"I've never been happier to be overruled," Jason laughed.

There was a knock at the door. *Jayce?* Temika called.

"Come in!" Jason shouted.

Temika entered the bathroom, wearing a tee shirt and a pair of jeans. Temika was still stacked and still built, and having two children had done nothing to ruin her figure. Latoiya

had been born on Earth three years ago, in her first year at the Academy, and her son Mike Junior had been born last year. Mike had the kids over at their house, which they had finally come home to reclaim after years at the Academy. It had sat empty, down at the very end of the strip, ever since they left. “Jeezus, Jayce, you already got Symone and Dahnai, you takin’ up another woman?”

Jason laughed. “No, Songa’s just enjoying a bath.”

“Why don’t you join us, Temika? We have room for one more.”

She laughed. “Ah think you’d know mah answer bah now, Songa.”

“That answer is yes. Now join us.”

“Ah need to get home an’ help Mike get us settled in,” she protested. Years at the Academy had managed to dull her accent, at least a little bit. Anymore, the only real stress in her accent was converting -y sounds to -ah sounds. Her mangling of o sounds had improved considerably, since that particular accent made it very hard for people to understand her when she spoke Faey unless they knew her and knew about her bayou accent.

“He can wait a half hour,” she said. “We haven’t talked since I came to deliver your son, so come on!”

“Ah aint’ no Faey, Songa. Ah ain’t used to bein’ naked in company.”

“Oh, and I haven’t seen you sunbathing nude on the beach! We’ve all already seen you naked, silly woman! Stop being a timid little *skree* and join us!” she teased.

Temika gave Songa a hard look, then sighed and went over to the bench and sat down. “Ah’d better not hear *one word* of this outside this room,” she said seriously as she pulled her shoes off. Jason didn’t pay much attention as Temika undressed, but he did survey her when she came up to the tub. She was still muscular, and there was absolutely no sign of her that she’d already had to children. Her stomach was still flat and knotted with muscle, and she was both lean and curvaceous. Temika was *stacked*, with large breasts and wide hips that gave her a killer figure, and he noticed that she maintained a very narrow strip of tightly trimmed pubic hair contained within her tan lines between her chocolate untanned skin and her darker skin, what human girls called a bikini wax and what Faey women called a nose-burner, which was a rather crude term.

“Wanna stop staring at mah goods, Jayce?” she demanded as she sat down across from him in the water, though she made no attempt to cover her breasts, the bases of them lapped by the surface of the water.

“Well, I guess I should stand up and let you return the favor,” he winked at her.

“Puh-leeze,” she snorted. “As if Ah ain’t seen it a hundred times before.”

“Then stop bitchin’, you weenie,” Jason teased.

“Are you home for good, Auntie Mika?” Danelle asked, getting off Jason’s lap and climbing up onto hers.

“Yes Ah am, dahlin’,” she answered, bouncing the blue-skinned girl on her knee. “Ah go to work with Aunt Kumi next week. You stayin’ over with Ranny and Uncle Jayce tonight?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded. “I’ve been staying for a little while. Mommy’s up in Kosigi for a while doing real important stuff, and Uncle Jason’s letting me stay over so Nanna can go visit her mommy.”

“Well, that’s nice of him. Are you gonna help Uncle Jason put up the Christmas tree?”

“Yeah!” she said excitedly. Christmas was one of two human holidays that Jason celebrated and Jyslin rather liked, the other being Easter. In return, Jason celebrated Trelle’s Flower Festival and Faey New Year with her. “We’re putting it up next week! I wonder what Santa’s bringing me this year?”

“Who knows, dahlin’,” she smiled. “But if you haven’t been good, you know he’ll be

bringin’ you coal!”

“I wonder how he gets from Terra to here, all in one night,” Rann said seriously.

“Never underestimate Santa,” Jason said with a smile at his son. “He finds a way.”

They caught up with Temika, hearing about their move back to Karis two days ago and how they’d worked to get their house back in working order, which wasn’t easy with a two year old and a ten month old. “Ah swear, it seemed that Latoiya was buggin’ me for somethin’ every two minutes. And if it wasn’t her, it was Mikey gettin’ into freakin’ everythin’.”

“Children are both a trial and a joy,” Songa smiled. “I would be lost without my little Jari.”

“Where are Luke an’ Jari?”

“Home. I just stopped by to tell Jason some news, and they invited me to share a bath. And I think I’ll demand that Luke remodel our bathroom,” she said with a contented smile. “Our bathtub is entirely too small.”

Luke and Songa also lived within the strip, at the very end on the other side. Luke was at the Academy most of the time, and Songa spent almost every day off there so she and their daughter could visit Luke, to the point where she was on a first name basis with every ship captain that ferried goods between Karis and Earth, since she was endlessly begging rides off ship captains, and they were all more than happy to give her a ride. Because of that, they didn’t see Jari very often, but often enough for her to know everyone and be adored by most adults on the strip, for she was absolutely adorable.

“Well, what are you doin’ here, woman? You don’t get to see Luke often!” Temika told her.

“He and Jari are napping, so what better time to come handle a little business?” she smiled.

“He may have woke up.”

“Mika, you know I’ll know if he does,” she smiled. “I know *you* keep a touch on Mike. Think I don’t do the same with Luke?”

“Ah do it to make sure Mike don’t stray,” she said with a little smile. “Mah man is too popular with Faey girls, so Ah have to keep him honest.”

“Such a silly notion,” Songa teased. “Marriage isn’t about keeping a man all to yourself, it’s about making sure he always comes back to you!”

“Not among humans, it ain’t,” she answered. “When we marry, that’s a commitment.”

“Jason’s not quite so committed,” Songa grinned at him.

Well, Jason’s a perv, Temika sent cheekily, looking at him and giving him a wink.

What’s a perv? Rann asked.

Temika gaped, then laughed raucously. *Ah forgot you can do that, Ranny!* she admitted.

Well, what is one?

She’s teasing your father, sweetie, calling him something that’s not true, Jyslin told him.

Well, what is it? Rann persisted.

Something human women sometimes call men who live a Faey lifestyle, Jyslin sent delicately. *The best way to explain it is your father’s relationship with Aunt Symone. Among humans, when a man and woman marry, they don’t believe in having private time with other people. It’s something humans don’t really think is proper. It’s entirely wrong, but we tolerate their backwards customs.*

It’s not wrong for us, Temika protested.

Of course it is, Jyslin smiled at her. *Because you’re absolutely wrong about thinking sex has anything to do with love. Sex is a biological process and a physical sensation. Love is an emotion. Your human religion’s roots in your ancient past when people thought the father of the child mattered stigmatizes your whole race about something beautiful and natural and tries to make it dirty and wrong, when it’s nothing like that at all. How can sex be wrong when you have it before marriage or have it with another man after you marry, but be right*

after you marry and only have it with your husband? It just makes no sense!

Let's not start a holy war in the bathtub, Jason warned. *So drop it.* "I'm committed enough," he said, picking things up so Danelle didn't think they were ignoring her. Given the whole conversation took place in about half the time it would have taken while speaking made the pause brief enough for Danelle not to notice.

"Aunt Temika?" Danelle asked.

"Yeah, sugah?"

"Do boys *really* like you more than other girls because your boobs are so big?"

Temika gave her a startled look, then flushed even as she laughed nervously. "Whoever told you that, sugah?"

"Mommy. She said boys like girls with big boobs," she said critically. "Since yours are the biggest, I thought that made you the one the boys like the most."

"Well, Ah dunno if they do or not," she told her. "Ah don't pay much attention to boys other than mah husband."

Such a liar, Jyslin teased, sending in a way to preclude Rann, to avoid more questions.

Temika sent an image of herself flipping Jyslin off, which made Jason stifle a laugh.

"I hope my boobs are big when I grow up," she said clinically.

"Well, we'll just have to wait an' see, sugah," Temika told her, a touch carefully, afraid of what she might say next. "Ah think you're a little young to start worryin' about stuff like that."

"Well, I'm a boy, and I like her boobs," Jason said, giving Temika a playful grin.

"Ah think you like *any* woman's boobs, Jayce," she shot back.

"As long as she's topless, I surely do," he said honestly, which made Jyslin and Songa laugh. "We're going to go see Aura and the Exiled tomorrow, Mika. Wanna come?"

"Sure," she answered. "Have they moved in?"

He nodded. "They're finally all here, and they're still settling in. Aura's been keeping me up to date, but I've been keeping my distance because some of them aren't very happy with me."

"Ah remember you sayin' that we were gonna keep their planet."

"Yeah," he answered. "We have the whole sector there blanketed with hyperspace probes, watching for any sign of the Consortium coming back. They did show up again yesterday, a single scout. It approached the planet, then it jumped out. So I'm sure they know now that all the Exiled are gone. As soon as we get a pair of Stargates and an extra interdictor, we're going to set them up at the planet, and the Exiled can go home. I'm going to make contact with the indigenous race there, the *Gruug*, and try to convince them to allow us to farm there. I don't want to do to them what the Faey did to us, though. So I'm going to *ask* them rather than *force* them."

"What if they say no?"

"I'll allow colonization in areas where they don't live," he answered. "And leave them be. As long as they don't bother us, we won't bother them."

"That won't work forever."

"I know, but I hope it'll last long enough for them to accept us. Eventually, I'm sure we can convince them to join the house and allow them to live as they please with a minimum of interference from us."

"Primitive races are hard to predict, and this race has a history of hostility towards the Exiled," Songa noted.

"Yes, but hopefully we can smooth that over. How did the medical screenings go? I haven't seen the final report yet."

"The Exiled are in excellent health, and they suffer from no diseases they themselves have not managed to cure or control," she answered. "I've opted not to screen out their microbial colonies or sterilize their animals or the transplanted soils, and introduced vaccines to their diseases into the next round of health screenings for all residents. The interior department felt that the introduction of new microbes might help kindle the ecosystem."

"The shots you gave me before I went to Exile?"

She nodded. "The immunology and xenovirology departments refined the vaccines so they're delivered in one shot."

Jason just had to tease Temika when he got out of the tub with Rann and Danelle, sending *don't look at my butt!* over and over as he got out. Songa and Jyslin laughed, and Temika flipped him off when the children had their backs to her. Jason helped the children dry off, scrubbing them with towels, then swatted Danelle on the rump. "Get your robe on, pippy," he ordered, then started drying off Rann.

"Okay, Uncle Jason," she said as Songa, Jyslin, and Temika climbed out of the tub, coming over and picking up towels. Jason scrubbed Rann dry, and he joined Danelle at the bench. She handed him his robe, and he pulled it on but didn't belt it, leaving it open in front. Songa and Temika dressed, but Jason and Jyslin just pulled on thigh-length robes.

"Mike's lookin' for me, so Ah'd better go," Temika said. "Thanks for the bath."

"Thanks for getting naked for me, up close and personal," Jason teased, giving her a wink. "Step one of my nefarious plan to seduce you is complete."

"Ah'll show you step two, buster," she said, balling her fist, which made Jason laugh.

"God, I'm glad you're home, Mika."

"So am Ah," she answered with a sudden smile. She kissed him on the cheek, gave Songa and Jyslin kisses, then knelt down and hugged both Rann and Danelle. "Be good, you two," she said. "Ah'll see you in the morning', 'kay?"

"Night, Aunt Mika," Rann said.

"Night, Auntie Temika," Danelle mirrored.

"I should get home as well, Luke won't sleep much longer," Songa said, kissing Jyslin on the cheek, hugging Jason, then getting her own hug from the kids. "I won't see you tomorrow, I'm not going to see the Exiled, so I'll see you soon, sweetlings," she told them.

"Night, Doc Songa," Rann parroted.

"Have a good night, Doc Songa," Danelle added.

Jason and Jyslin herded the kids to Rann's room, then snuggled them into bed, Rann in his bed and Danelle in a second bed they'd brought in for her, since she didn't like to sleep alone when she wasn't at home. Jyslin stayed to read them a story, and Jason went downstairs and caught up on the reports. He saw that they moved the interdictor completion date up another 12 hours, and that the heavy cruiser *Jefferson* was back in service, as was the battleship *Trelle's Gift*. The *Aegis* repairs were still on schedule, and they'd have it back by the end of the week. Ayama put a mug of *oye* juice in front of him, and set down a large plastic bottle. "Her supplement," she noted, for which Jason thanked her and sent her to bed. The first reports from the border systems were good. The Brood Princesses were reassembling the government, and the Brood Queen had given the public decrees that told the Urumi about the deal that they would remain in the Imperium for a period of thirty years, that they would serve to act as a buffer between the Imperium and the Collective and maintain peace between the two empires, and they would serve Jason as they would serve her. Jason was glad to see that, for it made sure that the Urumi knew what was going on. With the Urumi cooperating, they'd get the systems back in order quickly, and soon there would be quite a bit of activity there as Makati engineering companies moved in to start upgrading the infrastructure of the

planets.

Jason wasn't kidding when he said he wanted those systems to return to Sk'Vrae better than when he got them. He wanted them to be thriving and prosperous.

The Academy would be beginning their analysis of the Consortium data in two days, according to the missive Kiaari sent to them. She also made note that the Kimdori still hadn't found any Consortium bases.

Jason moved on to some mundane reports from his ministers, but Tim and Symone intruded on him a little bit. They were at home next door, and from the feel of it, they were getting it on big-time. Symone had entered what she considered her fertile phase five days ago, and she and Tim had been having sex twice a day, and had remained exclusively to themselves, and would remain so all the way up until they left for Draconis on Wednesday, when Symone would have Songa check to see if she'd conceived. Symone wouldn't be coming to have sex with Jason for fear she would conceive by him, which would be a scandal for Tim not to be the father of their first child, and if Tim wanted sex, he'd go to Symone, to better the chance she'd conceive.

Either way, she'd know Wednesday morning. Technically, she was already out of her window of fertility, but she was taking no chances on being early or late. She had devoted eight days to it, and Jason figured that it should be enough.

Jason ignored them to finish going through the reports, signing several permits and applications, then he put his panel aside and went out onto the deck facing the ocean, leaning on the rail and watching the waves by moonlight. It was a nice warm night, and Kosigi was half full. The weather here at Karsa was what many would call perfect, for it rarely got colder than 60 degrees at night, and hotter than 90 degrees during the day, year round, though for a cold-loving Down Easter like Jason, that had been a bit too warm when he first arrived... but he'd acclimated over the years to where he rather enjoyed the climate, since it was never oppressively humid except during the height of summer, and that was what air conditioning was for. Wind patterns and their proximity to the equator kept Karsa in that warm weather pattern all year long, since they were within the planet's axis of tilt that would be "between the tropics" back on Earth, between what one would call the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. But here on Karis, they were the Tropic of Erra to the south and the Tropic of Mera to the north, which literally translated to "south tropic" and "north tropic" in English.

The ancient Karinnes had not been not overly poetic when it came to naming things. They preferred functionality.

Karsa was about two hundred miles below the north tropic, which meant that the sun would shine directly down on them twice a year, about 12 days before and after the summer solstice. The prevailing winds off the ocean kept Karsa cool during the summer, and since they were so close to the equator, the winters here were extremely mild, barely more than a 15 degree drop in average temperature. The result was being able to go outside any time of the day, any time of the year, wearing as little as one pleased. And that was totally true, for he saw Min down on the beach, taking an evening stroll wearing nothing at all, strolling along with her daughter Jora. *It's too late to get a tan, silly girl!* Jason teased her.

I'm drying off, we just got out of the pool! she answered. *Did you read that message from Songa?*

She came and told us, he answered. *You should get to the pharmacy early tomorrow, there's bound to be a line.*

Yeah, she agreed with amusement. *But it certainly explains our run of bad luck... it wasn't luck at all!*

Yup.

So, you gonna grace the rest of the Marines with a child, Jayce? she asked teasingly *Five was all I agreed to, and that's it,* he answered cheekily. *That was the deal!*

Oh, but you promised five by different mothers, and Rann shouldn't count, since Jyslin's your wife! So you owe us at least one more!

Oh, and you want the honor?

Sure, why not? Could a girl go wrong having your baby, Jayce?

Maybe.

Liar. And I'd certainly enjoy the conception, she sent with a lustful undercurrent.

Girl, there's a whole town full of willing men right on the other side of that fence. Go find one, he ordered.

But they're not you.

If they were, then I wouldn't really be needed, would I?

She laughed through her sending as they walked further away. *Damn you and your male logic,* she teased.

It keeps you irrational women from blowing up the universe, he answered blandly.

Jyslin came up beside him and leaned on the rail with him, looking down to where Min was.

Ah, so that's who you're bantering with. Min! Leave my husband alone!

Why? If I can steal a quickie out of him, I'm gonna! We non-mothers feel cheated, you know. Half the squad has wrapped their legs around him, and we're on the losing side!

Well, since he hasn't laid you yet, clearly you're not trying hard enough, she taunted. *That or you're not woman enough for him.*

Oh, you are sooo gonna eat those words when I get my legs around your husband, bitch! Min challenged.

Are you trying to start a war, Jys? he complained.

Nah, just giving you a couple of playmates, she winked.

I have enough at home.

Clearly you don't, which is why you've been fixating on your memory of seeing Aura naked, she grinned. *She really turns you on.*

Well, I guess I can't deny that. She reminds me of Dahnai, and you know I'm really attracted to Dahnai. It's attraction by association.

If she excites you, love, go for it, she told him. *You know I don't mind. Experience her, then come home and share the memory with me.*

I'm not sure it's a good idea to have a sexual relationship with her, since she's the leader of her people, and her people are a bit honked off at me right now. They might turn against her.

Well, that might be true, but they're also Faey. So you never know. But, either way, you know you have my blessing, because you always come home, she smiled, kissing him just under his ear.

Practicing what you preach, eh?

You know it, she grinned. *You could always go chase down Min and give her a turn,* she winked.

Such a bad wife, passing me around to all her friends.

What kind of friend would I be if I didn't? she asked impishly.

Well, you could take me upstairs and do it yourself.

I thought you'd never ask, she purred, taking his hand and leading him towards the door.

It was one of the most heated arguments he'd ever had.

Aya was furious with him, but he was not going to budge an inch in the matter. When they took off to go to the Exiled's island, he was not wearing armor, and Aya could not look at him with her teeth clenching, for she was absolutely opposed to it. She saw the Exiled as a

potential risk, and as such, she did not want him there without armor, without protection. But Jason felt that his showing up in armor among them on Karis was sending the message that he didn't trust them, so he decided not to wear it. Aya exploded when he told her, and the argument lasted nearly a half an hour. It only ended because Jason gave her a direct order to back off, and then they had another half hour of heated debate over just how many precautions Aya could take. With Jason arriving without armor, Aya wanted to all but round up the entire population of the island of Exile, as they were now calling it, strip them all naked, and then hold them in an open area to ensure that none of them were carrying weapons. They were having the equivalent of a sending shouting match over it, trying to drown out the other's sending with more power, and just about everyone within ten miles of them were privy to almost the entire thing. Jason was a man, but he was about equal in power to Aya with talent, so neither of them could really overpower the other.

After that, nobody near the strip would ever doubt Aya's devotion to her duty.

In the end, Jason had more or less won the argument, and Aya was seething. He wouldn't even allow the guards to move in first to sweep the Exiled and search for any threats, and she was both furious with his disregard for his own safety and his blind trust in people who were not happy with him, and stunned that he was subjecting his family and children to the same danger, for most of the residents of the strip were going, including 12 children. Aya's anger was shared by his entire Dukal guard, and they were all jerky and stone-faced when they boarded a dropship and flew out to Exile.

"Trust me, Aya," Jason told her as they approached the island. "The Exiled won't do anything. If they do, I'll be more than happy to let you spank me."

She gave him a cold look.

"Alright, you can spank me when we get home no matter what," he sighed. "Just don't bruise me, and you can't wear your armor when you do. I don't want to lay on that cold metal."

She glanced at him, and he saw Ryn, Shen, and Dera crack slight smiles.

I use my gauntlet, Aya declared.

"Fine, but no bruising."

I still object to this in the strongest possible terms.

"I know you do, but you have to trust me, Aya," he said. "If I don't show the Exiled trust, they won't show any to me. And if I show up wearing full armor and with my guards prowling all over the place, they'll believe I won't trust them, which will make them not trust me. And if they don't trust me, then I may as well just send them all back to Exile. This is a political matter, and sometimes you have to gamble in politics."

I still hate this.

"I know, you've made that abundantly clear to half of Karsa," he said blandly. "And if you were anyone but who you are, I'd have spanked you for showing me such disrespect. Be glad I trust you with my life, or I'd have beat you like a wayward *kree* for your impertinence."

You'd do no such thing.

"Probably not, but it always sounds like such a good threat, and I don't get to use it very often," he told her with a straight face.

That finally got her. She laughed voicelessly, then gave him an amused, wry look. *Peace?*

"For now. I'm sure you'll put me over your knee and spank me when we get home."

You did make the deal, your Grace, Ryn sent impishly.

"And I'm a man of my word," he said grandly as they maneuvered to land near the ocean, on a flat area.

Dera, Aya called, and the blond nodded and started listening for any trouble from the Exiled

as they started milling towards the dropship.

Jason, Jyslin, Temika, four Marines, and 12 children disembarked from the large dropship, loosely surrounded by the Dukal guard. There were about 100 Exiled gathering around the dropship, and they looked as he remembered. They wore the same clothes, some not wearing any clothes at all, but now everyone, from the oldest to the children, all wore interfaces. That was a symbol of their transition from Exile to Karis, for here, one couldn't even flush a toilet without an interface, and everyone wore one except for the Kizzik, Parri, and Kimdori. Seeing the Exiled with interfaces over their left ears, extending over their cheeks, was a sign to him that they were already starting to adapt to life on Karis.

Aura hurried down to them, and when she reached them, she bowed fluidly. "Your Grace, welcome, welcome!" she said happily. "Welcome to our island!"

I came to see how you're getting along, he sent, sending so even the children could understand him. Would you like to show me around?

Certainly, your Grace, Aura said, if you wish. Lady Jyslin, she bowed. Duke Rann, she sent with another bow. Might I know your other guests before we begin?

Jason nodded and introduced Aura to his friends, children, and his friends' children, and he saw the Exiled look on with slightly less hostility. His point seemed to sink in; he had come without armor, and he had brought his *children* to their island, and that was a show of trust if there ever was one. But there were still many dark looks from the Exiled, those who had not appreciated being forcibly removed from their home.

After the introductions, the Dukal guards did their best to stay ahead of the group as they toured the island. Aura seemed to understand that, and went on a wide circular route, around the edges first and then working in as she privately sent to Aya to tell her their intended route, and Aya seem ready to kiss Aura's feet for it. Jason saw the tract-style housing along plascrete streets that made up the housing of the town, and then they toured a couple of the warehouses where their machines had been stored.

As they walked, Jason overheard whispers and sending that amused him a little bit. They had never seen anyone like Temika before, and they were quite taken by her. To the men of Exile, Temika was very attractive, with her exotic skin color, her height, her build, her exceptional telepathic power, and her beauty. Several men approached her when they stopped for Aura to show them something, and she'd gotten quite a few proposals for dates, which she rejected summarily with the response *I'm married and my husband doesn't like me to date*. It was a diplomatic response, and though it disappointed the men of Exile, they didn't press the matter. Singular interest in a spouse wasn't unheard of among the Faey, and Temika wasn't Faey, so they weren't entirely sure how she saw such things.

They then went into Aura's assigned home, just her, her council, and Jason's family, and he toured a typical house. It was typical in that Aura hadn't demanded a grander house than the others, so she was in a nice three bedroom two story house with all the modern amenities, most of which Aura couldn't use because she had no idea how. *Your volunteers have been teaching us how the machines work, she explained. And they don't turn them on in a family's house until the family understands the machines. They didn't do that at first, until a child injured himself playing with the machine that washes dishes. After that, they decided to disable the machines until they were sure that the family understood them enough to avoid harm.*

Well, that's not a bad idea, Jason grunted, scratching his shoulder absently. Has the island been acceptable to your people?

So far, yes. The climate is similar to our home, we are by the sea, and little red men helped us replant all our crops and trees, and they seem to have survived the journey intact. How are they called again?

Makati, Jyslin answered. *They are called Makati.* “Makati,” she said aloud.

Thank you, my Lady, she sent with a little bob. *My people are a bit unhappy that there are no fish in the water, but they do enjoy the lack of insects. The month of the biting insects was about to start back home. That’s never a pleasant time. It’s very strange to look up and see a blue sun, but it’s not as startling as it was just a few days ago.*

Has there been much unrest?

Just some grumbling, she answered. *About a tenth of the Exiled didn’t want to leave, no matter that you were saving their lives. Some few don’t believe they were ever in danger, that it was a lie to force us from our home. Thus far, they are keeping their discontent to themselves. I warned that anyone spreading rumors and discord would be chastised.*

Has the food been alright? Jyslin asked.

Oh, yes, my Lady! she sent with a happy smile. *They have been bringing dishes from the mainland unlike any we’ve ever had! Spices and foodstuffs we didn’t have at home. Every evening, it is like a banquet at the main dining hall, where those who have not yet learned how the cooking machine works or those who don’t want to cook. They bring us many different kinds of foods and let us sample them. I am quite addicted to oye juice!*

Yes, that’s a staple favorite in the Imperium, Zora nodded. *I’ve never met a Faey that didn’t like oye fruit or juice.*

I noticed that everyone here is wearing an interface, Maya noted. *The machines are interface controlled, or are they both interface and manually controlled?*

They are interface controlled, she nodded, touching the interface on her left cheek and ear. *It does make operating the machines easier, but it takes a little getting used to. Many of us are quite overwhelmed, since the thought-controlled machines are out of our history. We are living our history, and it is quite a strange feeling.*

It’s your future as much as your past, Temika told her.

Truly, Aura nodded. *Would you like to stay for lunch, your Grace? The volunteers will be serving it at the dining hall soon.*

Sure.

The entire town of Exile joined them at the huge dining facility, capable of seating the entire town in two large, auditorium-sized dining rooms filled with long tables. The banquet of food was no exaggeration, for volunteers brought out large numbers of dishes, enough to feed the entire town, and there were dishes of three different races to choose from, Faey dishes, human dishes, and Makati dishes. *Has there been any trouble with people coming over from the mainland?* he asked.

No. We’ve seen a few boats come close, but nobody has landed.

Good, because I told them to keep their distance. I don’t want them upsetting your people, and they should not approach until you give permission. But once you feel comfortable allowing visitors, I’ll lift the ban.

I... would prefer you leave it in place, she answered. *There might be some among us that would see any visitors not escorted by guards to be unwelcome, and may show their unhappiness in ways I would prefer not to have happen.*

Then they’ll stay away, he assured her with a nod. *I’ll make another announcement making it very clear, and I’ll have the KMS watch the strait between here and the mainland from a discrete distance to prevent any unwelcome visitors.*

Thank you, your Grace.

Have there been any problems with friction between our volunteers and your people?

No. Your people have been very kind and courteous, so much so that the angry among us cannot find fault with them. Your Meya and Myra are well liked here, and with them acting

as the liaisons, it has kept the peace. Will they be back soon?

Tomorrow. They wanted a day off. They’re tending to a little... business.

You seem amused.

I am. Remember when we told you about Kumi, and the running war of pranks?

Yes.

That’s the business they’re tending today. They’re... relocating her house.

What?

They contracted a Makati company to pick up her house and move it, he said. The whole thing, including her yard.

Aura gave him a startled look, then laughed brightly. You are serious!

The twins will sink to any depths when it comes to a joke, he sent urbanely. Kumi filled their houses with something that ruined their furniture and most of their possessions, so they’re retaliating by stealing her entire house. And they’re going to make her beg to get it back.

That is almost being too serious!

Kumi deserves it for what she did, Jason sent with a chuckle. *She ruined almost all of the twins’ possessions, and they’re getting revenge for it.*

They stayed another couple of hours. Aya tried to keep them all herded together, but Jason allowed the kids to play at a playground with Exiled children in the town’s central square while they went to go survey the farms the Makati had helped replant and the animals that were now on ranches inland from the town. Aya left four guards with the children, and Maya and Ilia stayed with them to keep order. Jason saw that the farm fields had been neatly deposited on Karis so effectively that it was hard to see the border between native Exile soil and Karis soil. Their bitterfruit trees were planted in neat and orderly rows not far from their farmlands, and behind those were the strider ranches, where the birds seemed to have shaken off the trauma of hyperspace travel and were quickly acclimating to Karis. Striders were omnivorous, eating fruits, berries, seeds, nuts, certain tender grasses, and also insects and any small prey that wandered close to them. There were no insects or small game on the island, so they were bringing ground meat for them to eat to supplement their diets with protein. The vets had already proclaimed Karis grass safe and digestible for them to eat, so they were happily milling about the pastures, sampling the tender grass shoots they could find, visiting the water trough, and pecking at the meat in a trough near the barn that had been hastily built for the ones that had eggs, for striders preferred nests in enclosed areas for their eggs. Stalls in a barn seemed to make them very happy. Aura brought them back down to the town as he discussed their needs with her and the council, and found that they were more or less content. The volunteers that were with them were attending to all their needs, and her people were starting to experience the technology that their home planet had to offer. *That video device is almost addictive,* she sent with a hint of complaint. *Once someone learns how it works, they spend hours sampling the many entertainments it offers.*

You’re not the only ones that are like that, Jyslin sent with an audible chuckle. *The Faey who create those entertainment programs try very hard to make them so entertaining that you want to watch them.*

Truly. There was some initial displeasure about the programs, though.

Why?

She seemed to flush slightly. The video device shows sexual acts and acts of violence, which are things not often seen by my people in public. Sex is not so much a concern, since we don’t hide sex from our children, but we also consider it taboo to engage in sex in a public space, therefore those too young to partake often do not see it performed by any but their parents, if then. The violence is another matter. That distressed several people, who believed

that the images they saw on the video device were actually real, and that they had just witnessed someone's death.

There's a way to filter those things out of the program Jyslin told her.

Yes, your volunteers showed us how it was done after they explained that the images were just very elaborate acting using sophisticated props and make-up and machines that trick the eye into seeing what is not there. Despite knowing it isn't real, though, many of us find the images too disturbing, so your people showed us how to remove the images from the programs. Once we were able to remove those things, the programs were quite enjoyable. The program that brings news from all of the Imperium is especially fascinating, the, uh, "INN" program.

That stands for Imperial News Network, Jason explained.

Ah, that makes sense. Many of us truly enjoy that program. So many things to see, so many places, so much to learn! she sent with excitement. And we saw images of the Empress Dah-nai! And we saw you, your Grace! You were at court, standing beside her throne!

Ah, that was last week, Jason told her. During an official announcement that I had to attend.

It was a wonderful moment, to see our Grand Duke standing at the side of the Empress, she sent, nearly reverently. I'm sure the Empress was honored to be allowed to sit in your presence while you stood, she added, showing that even the Exiled had loyalty to Karinne first, and the Imperium second.

Yes, she was quite... excited that I was there, he replied dryly. I'm glad you enjoyed it, because I certainly didn't, Jason sent wryly. I hate going to court.

Why?

Court is both boring and dangerous, where if you're not listening to boring speeches, the nobles all plot against each other, and it's where a single misspoken word can lead to vendettas and war, he answered. It's a very stressful place, and I only attend because the Empress forces me to do so.

I didn't know it was like that.

What you see on the video device is the happy face that the nobles want people to see. In reality, court is a cesspool of intrigue, and I hate it.

I'm surprised.

Don't be. The Faey outside Karinne have not changed from the Imperium you studied before the Third Civil War, Aura. They're still the same. Faey houses are still more willing to fight each other than they are an outside enemy. The Imperium is fractured and balancing on a rope strung over an abyss, and it would take one small thing to cause the entire Imperium to disintegrate into civil war. Most of my efforts to protect Karis and the Karinnes, before the Consortium came, were designed to protect us from the Imperium, not anyone outside. What happened with the Collective demonstrates the Faey lack of unity. House Trillane basically committed treason against the Imperium by joining in the plot that allowed the Consortium to attack Karis.

What did the Empress do to them?

Came one whisker from declaring war on them, but she needs Trillane, and she can't afford a war within the Imperium right now. So she punished Trillane severely and made their duplicity public knowledge, which makes them a pariah in the Imperium. It'll be years before the Trillanes come out of the hole they're hiding in. Maeri Trillane was willing to risk plunging the Imperium into war just so her house could break away from the Imperium and become its own empire, but now she sees that she needs the Imperium to prevent her house from being conquered by an outside force. If not for my vows of neutrality and my abhorrence of war, I'd be tempted to go after Trillane myself, but fighting amongst ourselves is the

last thing we need right now.

That's very noble of you.

I wish it was, he chuckled. Aya is giving me the look, so I'd better get going. I enjoyed our visit.

Can you come again soon? I enjoy visiting with you.

I'll be busy for the next couple of weeks, and I had to all but wrestle Aya to come today, he told her. But you can always come visit me, if you have time. Aya would be quite willing to bring you to Foxwood rather than me come here. She doesn't trust your people. So just tell the twins you want to come see me, and they'll arrange it.

I will do that, she said with a nod, then she laughed. At least when they come back.

I wonder if they're done, he mused. I'll send you some pictures of the gaping hole where Kumi's house used to be.

She laughed again, then kissed him on the cheek. Let me walk you to your flying device.

Aya looked almost ready to cry in relief when all the kids were gathered up, everyone was assembled, and then put back on the dropship to return home. She brazenly took off her armor right in the cockpit, showing off her muscular frame before slipping on a soft robe... but she left on her right gauntlet as a stern warning of what would come when they got home.

Jason laughed at her demonstration. He wasn't too afraid of it, and the act of submitting to punishment helped deflect Aya's anger and would make the next confrontation less heated. He was showing her that he empathized with her situation even if he was ruling against it.

The other rank amusement came when they got home. There, a few slots down from his house, was a gaping hole. The sewer and water lines had been professionally capped, the power conduit professionally removed at the exchanger. The Makati had scooped the house, the gardens, and the lawn up and left a cubic hole about thirty feet deep, thirty yards wide, and about fifty yards across, the hole neatly covered with plascrete to prevent the sides from collapsing.

"Now that is how you get revenge," Jason chuckled as he circled around and prepared to land on the large communal landing pad in the center of the strip. "When Kumi gets back from Terra, she's gonna be pissed."

I wonder how they did it, Aya mused.

"Forcefields, an artificial gravity inducer, and a tractor beam," he answered. "They drive posts at the four corners, which use force fields to cut the earth on the sides and the bottom. Then they use a gravity inducer inside the prevent anything from moving as a tractor beam pulls it out. After that, they cap the lines and plascrete the walls to prevent the hole from collapsing, and they're done. I've seen them do relocations projects before on Terra, moving historical landmarks to do infrastructure work, and then putting them back when they're done. That way they didn't risk damaging historical buildings and landmarks."

Clever.

"The Makati invented the system, and they do it best," Jason noted.

Aya wasn't about to let him out of his promise. After they got home, she administered the punishment in the living room, attended by the majority of the 45 Dukal Guard, as many as would fit in his living room. He saw the whole thing as a game, and was rather irreverent when Aya sat down and demanded satisfaction. He found out, though, just how much being spanked could sting without leaving any bruises. It was still a game, though, and Jason still approached it in a cheeky manner that actually caused some of the anger the guards had with him fade.

Jason had learned to play the game, even with his own guards. He knew Faey, and he knew how to both stir them up, and calm them down. The guards felt as if their fears had been ad-

dressed, and Jason apologized in a manner that allowed them to save face and even laugh a little bit, even at his own expense, and all it cost him was a red bottom and a little wounded pride. But it also helped personalize the issue and remind them that they were protecting a person, not a title, and that Jason cared enough about them to give them a little of his own dignity to atone for wronging them.

After Aya sent him to his room like a wayward child, all he could do was laugh.

There was revenge, and then there was *revenge*.

It was like the music of a thousand angels in his ears when Kumi got home. Her sending blasted across the strip, a sending without words. It was nothing but *outrage*, pure, unarticulated outrage. Jason was home from going to the White House and conferring with the ambassadors of the Academy, organizing the summit that was taking place in two weeks, sitting on his deck facing the ocean and working on his panel, drawing up a speech he intended to give during the summit. Miaari and Jyslin were with him, and Rann, Danelle, Kyri, and Aran were sitting at the table eating lunch as Aya and Ryn stood nearby. All of them looked up when Kumi's sending ripped through the strip, and Jyslin snorted to suppress a giggle.

"Kumi's home," she said aloud, giving Miaari a bright smile, then Jyslin and Jason exploded into gales of helpless laughter.

"And she's hopping mad," Jason added, wheezing for breath. "I think she discovered the twins' remodeling."

Miaari gave a toothy grin, then laughed herself. "Maybe now friend Kumi will learn there are lines one does not cross," she said with a surprisingly playful smile. Miaari and Kumi were very close friends, and their friendship had not waned during the years they'd been on Karis. "Especially when battling scoundrels such as the twins."

"She should know better, she's known them a long time," Jason said, recovering his breath.

"I don't get it," Aran said aloud. "I don't hear any words."

"She's not sending words, sweetie, she's sending an emotion," Jyslin told him, still giggling.

Jason glanced at the kids, and he saw the strangest look on Danelle's face. Her rose-colored eyes were wide open, and her mouth was half open. "I... I can *hear* it," she said haltingly. "I can hear Aunt Kumi!" she said with an excited squeal.

What color are Sora's eyes, Danelle? Jason asked.

"They're green," she answered, then she all but vaulted to her feet and jumped up and down. "I heard you, I heard you, I heard you!" she screamed. "I woke up!"

"We may as well have poor Surin plan a passing party a day," Jason laughed as Danelle vaulted into his arms. "Congratulations, pippy! I'm proud of you!"

Danelle ran and hugged everyone in turns, even Miaari, as Kumi stormed down the walkway and stopped in front of their house. *I KNOW YOU LET THEM DO IT!* she thundered at him.

Why Kumi, whatever are you talking about?

WHERE IS MY HOUSE, YOU BASTARD?

What? Didn't you say the other day you were looking to remodel? I thought that was your idea for your new design. We dubbed it the inverted look.

YOU! she raged, pointing at him. *I am going to kill you, Jayce! If you don't get those despicable twins in front of me by the time I reach you, I'm going to strangle you with my bare hands!* She stomped up the walkway to the deck, her eyes blazing, and her fists clenched. When she got there, though, Jason swept her up in his arms and kissed her on the cheek... but it did little good. *Tell me where my house is right now, or I'll make sure you never have another child again!*

I honestly don't know. The twins had a Makati firm come relocate your house. I guess you'll have to talk to them about it.

You let them do it!

After ruining their houses with crash foam, did you really think they were going to let it go without doing something momentous? he asked simply.

She glared at him, then gave a slightly embarrassed look. *I didn't mean to ruin their clothes and furniture,* she admitted. *I thought the foam would decay cleanly.*

Well, they're still honked off about it, so you'd better go be real sorry if you want your house back, he told her. *Besides, it was funny,* he admitted, laughing in spite of himself.

Maybe a little, she admitted, then she laughed ruefully. *I about had a heart attack when I saw my whole house, just gone! Gone, just like that! Do you know what kind of a shock that is? I thought it was some kind of hologram until I nearly fell into the hole trying to get past it!*

I can imagine, Jason laughed. *I'm not sure where the twins are. You'd better start looking for them, and remember. Mean it.*

I'll be contrite until I get my house back, then I'm really gonna get them, she said, fire in her eyes. *But I'll make sure nothing gets damaged this time,* she added.

Always a good idea, Kumi girl, he chuckled, kissing her on the cheek. *If you need me to look the other way on something, just let me know.*

She gave him a wolfish smile. *We'll talk about that.*

She padded off, back towards her dropship, and Jyslin gave him a surprised look. "You're gonna double-deal the twins?" she asked, then she laughed. "Brave, love, brave!"

"Watching them fight with Kumi is fun. Think I'm ready to give over on one of my favorite forms of entertainment?" he asked, which made Jyslin and Miaari erupt into helpless laughter.

Chapter 4

Raista, 36 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 10 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 36 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar
Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis*

There had to be something in the water.

In just two days, *four* of the strip kids had expressed. Danelle had been first, and later that night, the strip rang with the joy coming from Min that Jora had expressed that same night. Yesterday, right about the time the Makati were putting Kumi's house back, Zachary secured himself from any teasing from the rest of his siblings by expressing at breakfast. Not two hours later, Lyn announced happily that her son, Jenn, had also expressed. Jason wasn't surprised, for the other members of the squad who had children by others all had children by Generation men. So, next week, they were going to have three passing parties, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, to give Surin and the mothers time to plan them.

There had been other good news. Rahne had finally been released by Cybi to join the rest of the Karinnes. She had re-educated Rahne by communion, and since she had no family or friends, Jason put her in his guest house until she decided where she wanted to live. Rahne was the same personality wise, but she was much more confident now, engaged, and was very personable. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do in the house, but the idea of going to the Academy intrigued her... and she actually needed to go, for knowledge gained via telepathy or communion would fade if it wasn't reinforced. So continuing her education was actually necessary or she'd slowly lose all the knowledge she gained from Cybi. She wasn't me-

chanically adept, but she was good at math. She was personable and friendly, and she was a good judge of a person. Jason rather thought she'd be good working with Kumi, that her qualities would make her good at business. But he'd leave it to her to decide

Last night, after the remote commune sensor network was activated, Jason took Kyri aside and tried to teach her how it was done. He had been honestly shocked in how fast Kyri picked it up. Just as Jason and Myleena had seemed to instinctually be able to grasp the aspect of communion and perform it almost perfectly, Kyri too had managed to embrace the idea of it within ten minutes. He had never tried to directly commune with her before, but when he did, and explained it was a different *texture* of sending, she was able to do it, and do it perfectly, on her very first try. Jason seriously thought, after that, that communion just *might* be an instinctive ability in Generations, since he had not met a single Generation that could not commune within ten minutes of being taught how it was done. Their race was engineered, and it was no stretch to consider that the ability to commune was a programmed instinctive ability.

That was unleashing a floodgate. After that, Kyri no longer talked or sent to her father, she always communed with him, because it was much faster and much purer than sending. She also was introduced to Cybi in a way she'd never been before, and she was absolutely fascinated by it. She also was introduced to the first major responsibility of a Generation, absolute secrecy. The only ones that knew about the ability to commune were the Generations and the women in the strip. Jason also explained what a gestalt was, and naturally, she wanted one. "Not until you're older," he told her firmly, "because a gestalt would allow you to cheat in your lessons, and we won't allow that."

[But I can cheat now if I want, Cybi can help me!]

[No, Cybi will not help you,] Cybi replied firmly. *[You will receive your first gestalt when you graduate from primary school, young lady, and not a moment before.]*

[Awww!] she protested, but she didn't try to wheedle. She knew that when her father said no, he meant it.

Unleashing Kyri on the Generations might not have been a good idea, because she was a virus. That morning, to Jason and Myleena's utter shock, Kyri taught Rann how to commune. All by herself, she explained what Jason had told her, and tried to commune with him. Rann was able to commune back within three tries, and that was because he was still learning the basics of sending where Kyri was already a master of sending at the tender age of five. Rann's ability to commune wasn't as good as the others, since he was still learning how to send. His communion was slower, and it lacked the same *bandwidth* as the adults and Kyri. But those were things he would learn with time and practice. Jason had to intervene when she tried to teach Sora how to commune, since Sora was still learning the basics of sending. She didn't need the additional burden of trying to learn how to commune at the same time. Jason was a bit irked at Kyri for teaching Rann, since Jason had to sit down with him for nearly an hour and explain the difference, and tell him to focus on learning sending first, and that learning sending would help him master communion as well.

It was then, Jason saw, that Rann realized that he was different from other humans and Faey, when he explained that Jyslin wouldn't be able to hear communion. *Your mommy wasn't born a Karinne, little man. I was. And only Karinnes born in a certain family are able to commune or be able to hear communion. So remember that you have to send to Mommy, but you can commune with me. But I'd rather you send when talking to both of us. We don't want your mommy to feel left out, do we?*

[No.] No, I don't, Daddy, he sent in correction. *Is our family really big?*

It's pretty big, but if you look at the whole planet, it's not really that big at all. Most all of

us are right here in Karsa. The family doesn't really live anywhere else.

So, which of Danny's parents is in our family?

Aunt Myleena, he answered.

Does that make Danny my cousin?

No, the relationship is much more distant than that. She's like a fifth cousin. The two of you could get married when you're older, if you weren't already going to be married to Shya.

I can't wait to see her! he sent excitedly.

You really like her, don't you?

Yeah, she's lots of fun! And she's smart, and she really likes me. I just hope you're right that I'll think private time isn't icky when I grow up, he sent seriously, which made Jason laugh.

Trust me. In about eight years, your opinion of private time will change completely.

Daddy, is it true that I'll be able to move things without my hands the way you and Kyri and Aunt Myli can?

You should be able to, he answered. *Have you ever tried?*

Not really. Can you teach me?

I might be able to, but you may not be ready yet, he answered, scratching his cheek in thought. *Doing that is different from sending. It wakes up on its own, and yours might not be awake yet. But, we can always try. You'll have to wait until we come back from Draconis, though. Are you all packed?*

Uh-huh, he nodded. *It's gonna be a little scary being there without you and Mommy.*

We'll be there, you're just going to stay with Shya, and remember, Shya lives with her nanna, not with her mommy. She'll live with her mommy when she turns ten. Then, when she's fifteen, she'll come to Karis and live with us until you two get married. Think of it like a sleepover, except instead of going to Aunt Maya or Aunt Zora or Aunt Sheleese's house, you're going to Empress Dahnai's house, and it'll just be you and Shya. And we'll be close enough for you to reach us with sending, so we're just a call away, he assured his son with a smile, tapping him lightly on the nose. *Now enough worrying, kidlet. We're gonna miss Danny's party!*

They attended Danelle's passing party, and had a great deal of fun. Danelle opted for a much less complicated party, without huge rides, but just as big as Sora's, and she too wanted Kyva to come with her Gladiator and give her a ride. Danelle got a huge number of presents, and Jason wasn't the only one feeling the pinch of having to buy so many passing party gifts so close together. And they all knew that there were three more parties coming next week, for Jora, Zachary, and Jenn. Jason and Kyva stood by the rail and watched the kids running around in a game on the beach, as Aya prepared for their trip to Draconis, and Symone was running late at Songa's for her checkup to see if she was pregnant, something he was anxious to find out. He rather missed Symone, and a week without her had been almost like forced abstinence in a way. "So, like the new patch?" he asked Kyva with a smile.

She laughed, looking at her right shoulder, where a patch with a silhouette of a nude Faey woman holding a sword in her hands was framed by the letters KBB, in a semicircle underneath her. The letters stood for *Karinne's Baddest Bitches*, or just the Bitches for short. Jason had carried through with his idea to build a squad of the six best Gladiator pilots and put them in a special elite squad commanded by Kyva. They were his delta force, his best fighters, the women who could get the job done. "Yes, I do, as a matter of fact," she answered. "And I told you that it was a bad idea."

"So, whose butt did you have to kick?"

She laughed. "All five of them," she answered. "At once. We had a free for all to see who's the best. I won."

“Ouch. Spanked,” he said, making a face.

“Just about,” she grinned. “But, after we got the pissing contest out of the way, we found out we actually like each other. So, we’re starting to get used to working together. I don’t really like command very much, but at least the girls I’m commanding know what the hell to do, so I don’t have to tell them much. I just decide which tactic to use, and we go do it without me having to hold their hands.”

“Sounds good. Oh, yeah. Mika! Mike!” he called. “Come meet someone!” When they came over, Mike holding his son and Latoiya chasing Jora clumsily near the table, he motioned to Kyva. “This is Lieutenant Kyva Karinne, my champion.”

“Champion?” Kyva laughed.

“You pilot *my* personal Gladiator, that makes you my champion,” he winked.

“Well, then I’m your champion, your Grace,” she winked back.

“Kyva, this is Temika and Mike Colbert. They’ve just come back from the Academy.”

“Oh, congratulations!” Kyva said, shaking their hands. “What courses did you take?”

“Business management,” Temika told her.

“Plasma systems,” Mike added. “Nice to meet the woman behind the face in the viddies.”

Kyva laughed ruefully. “I was so mad when they let that camera follow me around for a week!” she admitted. “They didn’t ask me about it at all, I was ordered to do it!”

“It’s good for morale, and you’re already famous,” Jason teased. “They just got to see the woman inside the machine. You *are* the only Karinne with these,” he said lightly, touching the gold crests outside each of her solid Lieutenant’s diamonds. “And that’s also why you’re my champion. Winners of the Dukal Medal of the Champion have that official title, you know,” he winked.

“Can I give it back?” she asked plaintively. “It’s been more trouble than it’s worth!”

Jason laughed. “No, you’re my poster girl now, no give-backs!”

“What’s it like to pilot that robot?”

“It’s not that hard,” she answered. “It’s like controlling your own body, because of the interface.”

“That’s my Gladiator pilots are the best in the galaxy,” Jason said proudly. “They can out-fight anyone, anywhere, any time.”

[Jason,] Cybi called, [Siyhaa needs to speak to you.]

“Give me a few minutes, guys, Cybi’s calling me.” [Can you patch me in?] he asked, putting a finger to his gestalt.

[Certainly. Go ahead, Mahja,] Cybi called, using Siyhaa’s title.

[Your Grace,] Siyhaa’s deep bass voice called. [I finished the computer analysis you ordered for the enemy ship.]

[Well done, Mahja. What did you find?]

[The computer itself is beyond any hope of reconstruction,] she began. [The damage to its components is too extensive. However, I believe we can build a replacement system using biogenic modules that can effectively control the vessel, and allow the ship to be converted to interface control. As to the software, we’ve managed to recover about twenty-six percent of the data contained in the computer. Much of it is fractured and disjointed, and it is encrypted, but there’s enough of it there for us to break their computer language and encryption and analyze the data we did recover. I have my team working on that now, and since I feel that is the most important thing to do, I’m working on it personally.]

[Outstanding, Mahja!] he replied with honest joy. [When they said you were the best in the business, it was no idle boast!]

[I do try, your Grace,] she said with a bad attempt at humility. [Breaking a computer lan-

guage and encryption is not an exact process, your Grace, so I cannot give you a timetable. I can just give you an estimate.]

[I know you loathe such inexactness, but give me your best estimate,] he told her seriously.

[My best estimate is three to five weeks to break their computer language and convert the data into a format our computers can understand. Their algorithms are surprisingly advanced for a lesser race. They impress me.]

[I think that’s a fair estimate, Mahja, for if they impress you, then they must be quite advanced indeed. I know I will receive your best effort. Send Miaari daily reports on your progress.]

[My best effort is yours, your Grace,] she pledged. [At our usual bonus.]

[You will earn an extra five percent bonus, Mahja,] he told her. [You have exceeded my expectations, and you deserve a bonus for having to deal with the Kimdori more than usual.]

[Thank Szhraa you understand, your Grace,] she told him seriously, which almost made him chuckle. Miaari and Siyhaa respected each other greatly, but there was an ancient rivalry between their races that made it hard for them to *like* each other. Miaari irritated Siyhaa, and Siyhaa was much too serious for Miaari... but that was what Moridon were like. Not a single Moridon on Karis had even the most remote sense of humor. [Again, you honor our decision to work for you.]

[Thank you. Now get to work, Mahja. Our success will depend on your success.]

[My will is your will. May your horns stay sharp and your hooves unsplit, your Grace.]

[Fire of Szhraa warm you, Mahja Siyhaa.]

The big grin on Jason’s face got their attention. “Whut?” Temika asked.

“Siyhaa said she can break the Consortium’s encryption and computer language,” he said with a gleeful expression. “She said it’ll take a while, but she can do it.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Mike said.

“That’s *fantastic* news,” Jason said happily. “She could only recover about a quarter of the data in the ship’s computer, but that means we’ll be able to *use* that information. And there might be base locations, long-term plans, recent orders, fleet sizes, all kinds of useful data in there that will help us.”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“We could use an advantage,” Kyva grunted. “I hate having an enemy we can’t find, but knows exactly where we are.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Temika said in English.

The kids all moved down to the beach as Jason had a quick conference with Miaari and Myri. They discussed Siyhaa’s information, and they adjusted their plans to take it into account. “With the interdicator being moved up to three days, that’ll let us hunker down in our bunker and take our time planning our response,” Myri said.

“Yes, at least a year, if they decide to launch a fleet at light speed and can circumvent the relativity principle,” Miaari agreed. “If they cannot, then we might have as much as three to four years to prepare for them.”

“Relativity? I thought that only applied to hyperspace,” Myri said.

She shook her head. “Anything that has mass that moves at light speed suffers from relativity, an alteration of time,” she explained. “To them, it would take but a year, but in reality, it would take them centuries, maybe even millennia to get here. The fastest a ship of large mass can go without suffering a large dichotomy of relativity is one third the speed of light. Any faster than that, and it will take it *longer* to get here. Since the interdicator will protect us out to a light year, then we will have three years if they cannot manipulate relativity. If they can manipulate relativity, then we have a year.”

“Can they manipulate time backwards to get here faster?”

“Nothing can make time go backwards,” Miaari said immediately. “It is something that has been tried for millennia, but no one, not a single race or scientist, has ever found a way without killing himself and dealing catastrophic damage to his world. The best any has ever accomplished is to *stop* time... and it is never done because of the dangers involved. Devices that cause the manipulation of time from the inside cannot stop time because of a principle called spatial torsion. The aggravated dissimilarity of time and space inside the effect and space outside torques the space inside the effect in such a way that matter within cannot follow its contours, which deals out physical damage and destroys the device. The Torsion Principle is the fundamental principle behind Consortium torsion weapons and our own torsion shockwave generators. These devices don’t manipulate *space* so much as they manipulate *time*, then they shape the area of effect into either an expanding sphere or a line of singularity that travels away from the devices. Both of them operate *externally*, creating the effect from outside of the area of effect. These devices that create the effect from the outside, however, are not exposed to the torsion effect themselves, but they cause an entirely different effect that is actually much more dangerous. When an external devices succeeds in stopping time in an area of space, that space *hardens*, to use a term, and becomes absolute. When that happens, the space loses all velocity and motion and stops, it becomes anchored to the fabric of reality itself. Now mind that at all times, everything is moving, Myri. Right now, this planet is rotating about an axis, and moves around the sun, and the sun itself moves in the galaxy, and the galaxy moves within the universe. When a device that causes the effect from the outside causes a piece of space to become absolute, that absolute space stops all motion, and therefore it is ripped away from the device that caused it to freeze because that device is within space that is *moving*. And naturally, since it is no longer affected by the device, it unsticks. The problem with that, though, is that the separation of the absolute space from normal space *rips* the fabric of space, since you have just caused a section of space to stop moving while all other space around it continues to move. These spatial rifts cause untold havoc, and thus the experiments that create them are banned by most sentient races.”

“I never *thought* of that,” Myri said in contemplation.

“The same fundamental principle that prevents anything from exceeding the speed of light also prevents time from moving backwards,” she explained. “Once you reach that critical point where time stops within your temporal frame, then nothing more can be done either forwards or backwards to either push you beyond the speed of light or backwards through time.”

“What happened to those who made things blow up?”

“They *succeeded*,” she said.

“Huh? You said it was impossible!”

“There is one principle that deals with space-time that seems theoretically possible to reverse time,” she explained. “It is theorized that instead of trying to reverse time with speed or direct manipulation, it might be possible to reverse time by manipulating *space*, manipulating it in a way that forces time to react to space rather than space reacting to time. It deals with causing space to become *backwards* yet still moving within the reference of normal space, reversing the polarity of space from positive to negative so to speak, which would mean that anything that moved through this negative space would actually move backwards in time rather than forwards, because its relative velocity would actually be *negative*, which is absolutely impossible within normal space. Now, many races, including the Faey, are quite adept at manipulating space, so this theory inevitably comes up, and some scientist attempts to either prove or disprove it. The problem with the theory and the experiment to prove it is that

when you reverse the *polarity* of space, when you create negative space, it also creates reverse forms of energy and matter within it. It creates anti-energy and antimatter, which *is not* contained within the inverted space, it is more than capable of leaving it and interacting with positive energy and matter. As positive force can enter the inverted space, so negative force can leave it. So, when you take a test vehicle composed of positive matter and using positive energy and send it into an area filled with anti-energy and antimatter, and if the experiment inverts enough space that creates enough negative force, it can create *apocalyptic* explosions, powerful enough to destroy entire star systems if the inverted space is big enough. So, those who have tried to prove the theory end up creating cataclysmic explosions when the negative force generated by the experiment makes contact with the positive force either within or surrounding the test area, destroying everything. An inverted area of space this big,” she said, holding her finger and thumb about an inch apart, “would create an explosion big enough to level Karsa. Now imagine creating an area of inverted space big enough for a test object to move a great enough distance to prove that it moved backwards in time.”

“Couldn’t they do it in a vacuum?”

“The problem is not what’s there, it is with what is created when space is inverted,” she said. “The anti-energy and antimatter are created as a matter of course within the area of inverted space. The amount created depends on the size of the area of space inverted; the more space inverted, the more negative force is created. Mind that any form of positive matter or energy can induce an explosion when it contacts either negative energy or matter. Solar wind passing through the inverted space can trigger an explosion. Even *light* can cause an explosion, for it is composed of positive energy. So, Myri, it might be *theoretically* possible to reverse time, but as yet, there has been no way to prove it without creating explosions that make a plasma torpedo look tame by comparison. The restrictions that would be in place to try to prove the theory are ridiculous and not worth the effort in light of the incredible danger such an experiment poses.”

“That fits with everything I know about spatial technologies,” Jason mused. “Time inside an area of manipulated space is different from time outside due to a change in relative velocity, but the difference is so infinitesimal that it doesn’t even matter. The time delay as plasma flows out of a PPG bubble is measured in a fraction of a picosecond, and the temporal shift caused by the change in relative velocity between the entry and exit points of a Stargate is measured in picoseconds, where the ship inherits the same relative velocity as the gate it leaves, violating the old human physical theory of conservation of energy. In each case, space is linked to time and velocity, but velocity can change independent of space, which also can alter time.”

“Yes. Time and space are linked, but it is *space* that is linked to *time*, which can be affected by *velocity*. Velocity itself is a relative variable and can be easily altered independently of both space and time. Time can be altered in a proportion based on relative velocity independently of space up until time and velocity become zero, which creates absolute space, but space cannot be manipulated outside of time aside from the unproved theory of inverting the polarity of space.”

“I feel like I’m back in school,” Myri chuckled. “I wonder if we could develop that idea into a weapon.”

“No. The amount of power and preparation required would be prohibitive,” she answered. “The spatial warping device that would create an inverted space the size of a marble would have to be the size of the engines on the *Aegis*. Space will allow itself to be folded and manipulated, but it strongly resists any attempt to invert it. If you want to create a device to destroy things, you could achieve the same result with a plasma torpedo or a pulse weapon,

which requires much less equipment and preparation. The idea has been tried, by races long before the Faey.”

“Where did you learn all this, Miaari?” Myri laughed. “You know more than most astro-physicists!”

“I am a Handmaiden,” she said simply. “It is my duty to learn everything I can, for there is no telling what I may be required to know in order to perform my duties to both my people and to Karinne.”

“If you really want to make your head explode, go ask Myleena why our ships move through hyperspace in real time,” Jason laughed. “It goes way beyond three dimensional space-time relativity and goes into an entirely different set of laws. It’s way beyond me. Myli’s much smarter than I am.”

“More of a smartass too,” Myri laughed.

“True,” he agreed, looking down at her as she helped the kids get a kite high into the air, no doubt explaining the physics of it to them. “So, we have a year?”

“At the least. Three years at the most.”

“I wonder how ready we can get in a year,” Jason grunted. “Given that cranking out interdictors will be our primary goal.”

“You might need to rely on us more for shipbuilding operations, or have us build interdictors,” Miaari told him. “Denmother is ready for either eventuality.”

“Actually, I think I’d rather have her build the cruisers and larger ships, and give us a chance to build something different.”

“What?”

“Kosigi,” Myri answered. “There’s so much open space in there. If we could focus on building docks and facilities instead of ships, and finish the new doors so we can build the big ships, we could increase our own ability to build.”

Jason nodded. It’s a short term loss for a long term gain. If we can just build ten more docks, we’ll be able to produce more ships in the long run.”

“I’m sure Denmother would be willing to help, if she forgives my arrogance to presume to think for her,” Miaari said.

“She’ll forgive you, Miaari,” Jason chuckled. “But that’s enough talk about business when we’re supposed to be having fun.”

“Flying kites isn’t my idea of fun,” Myri noted. “I’ll be engaging in my idea of fun as soon as this party is over.”

“And what is that?”

She just smiled. “I bought my potassium tablets, and I have a lunch date with Erinn.”

“Oh boy,” Jason sighed. “Dealing with one pregnant woman is bad enough, but when there’s like ten of them all having hormone attacks at the same time, it makes us guys want to move back to Terra for a while.”

“Isn’t he a bit young, Myri?” Miaari asked. “He’s not even out of the Academy yet!”

“That just means he has stamina,” she grinned.

“A Kimdori is berating someone else about age?” Jason laughed. “How old was your mate the last time your father gave you permission to have a child?”

“Kimdori are different,” she said primly.

“Humans have a saying, Miaari. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.”

“Yes, and it only applies to you humans,” she said haughtily, sauntering off with her tail swishing behind her, which made both Jason and Myri chuckle.

When the party wound down, another celebration began. Symone landed in a small hovercar and was sending riotously. *I’m pregnant, I’m pregnant!* she sent over and over and over as

they approached, and when they landed, Symone and Tim were swarmed over in hugs Jason gave her a huge hug and a kiss, then hugged Tim. *It’s a girl!* Symone sent happily.

I’m so happy for you, Symone! Jyslin sent, kissing her. *How long?*

Four days, and Songa said there’s almost no chance I’ll lose it. It’s already securely attached to my uterus, and both the egg and I am perfectly healthy. So, we’re back, babies, she grinned wolfishly at them. *And what a way to celebrate, going to Draconis and fucking the shit out of Dahnai and Kellin!*

That’s not why we’re going, Symone, Jason told her. *Officially, we’re bringing Rann to see Shya.*

It’s why I’m going, she answered with a huge grin.

We have got to find you a hobby, girl, Jyslin laughed.

Jason was honestly overjoyed that Symone was finally pregnant. In about nine months, she’d have a baby of her own, and she and Tim would know the joys of being a parent... and would probably be running to Jason and Jyslin every ten minutes for advice.

They returned to their houses and got ready to go. Myleena was going to take Danelle with her to Kosigi for the next couple of weeks so she could teach Danelle about closing her mind and sending, so they wouldn’t have to worry about her. They were only going to be there for two nights, so Jason packed two changes of clothes, his court robes, and his personal effects. Jyslin mirrored him, and they warned Tim and Symone to only bring what they needed, that they could wear borrowed court robes at the palace if they attended court. Aya, Ryn, Shen, and Suri would be accompanying them, leaving Dera in command of the Dukal Guard, and Shen and Suri would be attached personally to Rann.

Symone was all but dancing around when they met at the dropship that would take them up to the *Trelle’s Gift*, which was fully repaired and looking brand new, and would be the flagship of the task force of 14 ships bringing the Grand Duke Karinne to Draconis for an official visit between Heir Apparent Duke Rann Karinne and High Princess Shya Merrane. Jason was willing to risk himself in the *Scimitar*, but he’d be damned if he protected his wife, children, and *amu dozei* with anything less than overwhelming, unstoppable force. She could barely sit still as Jason piloted the dropship up to the massive battleship, surrounded by the heavy cruiser *Abarax*, 4 cruisers, and 8 destroyers, all completely repaired and formidable-looking. *Would you calm down? You’re making me dizzy!* he ordered as they prepared to land in the landing bay.

I can’t help it, I’m just too happy! she answered. *I’m pregnant, Jayce! Pregnant!*

Criminy, I need to unleash you on Dahnai and Kellin just to calm you down, he chided, which made Jyslin and Tim explode into laughter.

Unleash? Rann asked.

Don’t worry about it, kidlet, Symone told him with a grin. *It’s a private joke between your parents and me.*

Oh. Okay.

The captain of *Trelle’s Gift* was actually an admiral, Joint Admiral Jaiya Karinne, the lowest of the four admiral ranks, but she was still called *captain* on her ship. The captains of the three battleships and the *Aegis* were all at least Joint Admiral in rank. She was a tall and rather buxom Faey with her long, straw-straight blond hair tied back in a thick ponytail that dangled almost to her knees, knotted with rubber bands at regular intervals. She was wearing her dress uniform, as was the entire complement of crew that had been assembled in the landing bay for his arrival, both the ribbons she won in the Imperial Navy as an enlisted woman who had earned a commission and rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander before being lured to the Karinnes, and the ribbons representing the medals and awards she’d won

in the KMS decorating her left breast almost up to her collarbone. She saluted him sharply when he exited the dropship, then laughed and gave him a fond hug when he smiled and opened his arms to her. “Hey there, Miss I Just Had to Have One More Medal,” he teased. “You look good as new!”

“Nothing two weeks in the hospital couldn’t fix, your Grace,” she told him with a laugh. Jaiya had been one of the captains that had been wounded during the battle. She had had a small shard of bulkhead actually penetrate her armor when a torsion blast went right through the bridge, which had miraculously went right between the captain’s chair and the navigation console without hitting either crewman. It impaled her low in the left side, hitting in the only real vulnerable part of the Crusader armor, the mesh-like series of overlapping plates on the lower torso that allowed the torso to bend. A redesign was already on the board to thicken the armor in that area, for most of the injuries had been suffered in breaches of the armor in the lower stomach, lower back, and joints, where the need to allow movement required thinner or pieces of flexible armor rather than solid plates. “I’m good as new and ready to go, and happy to be back on my ship!” she said, patting her left lower stomach. “We were both released from our respective hospitals nearly on the same day,” she winked.

“Is he fully repaired?”

“As good as the day he was christened,” she said confidently. “Would you like to inspect the crew before we go?”

“Well, real quick,” he said.

Jason’s inspections weren’t really all that serious. He walked up and down the rows, and instead of looking for anything out of place, he spent most of his time shaking hands and talking with the crew. He didn’t shake every hand or talk to every one, he’d just stop randomly and do so, often at crewmen or women that caught his attention. The Makati wearing the double-diamond of a Lieutenant Commander caught his attention, and remembered that this was the head of engineering on the ship, though he couldn’t remember the Makati’s name. They even had a Kizzik on board, a Kizzik noble wearing KMS rank, whom he had to stop to meet. “I’m surprised to see you serving on a ship,” he said, looking up at her compound eyes. She was nearly a foot taller than he was, and she was nearly seven feet long. She was very large, even for a Kizzik.

“Temporarily, revered Hive-Leader,” the Kizzik replied, her interface unit resting on her shoulder translating her scent language into mechanical-sounding Faey, and Jason knew that her interface also translated his words into her scent-language, which was why it was located on her shoulder rather than her head. Kizzik didn’t have windpipes, they instead had small aspiration holes along their backs and thoraxes that led to a series of many small lungs, each one acting independently and also each capable of detecting odors. Her interface was most likely affixed directly over a few of her aspiration holes, which gave her an almost direct connection to the device’s ability to transmit scents to her. “I am learning about ship operations with the engineers, so we might test bringing drones aboard ship.”

“Have you been able to move about the ship without trouble?”

“Yes. The crew has been patient with me, and I fit in most of the elevators. Thank you for your concern, revered Hive-Leader.”

“No need to thank me, your well being is my responsibility as the Hive-Leader,” he answered.

“Wow, a Kizzik!” Rann said excitedly, coming up to him.

“Rann, introduce yourself,” Jason told him.

He was quiet a moment, thinking, then he put his feet together, crossed his arms before himself, and bowed to her. “I am Rann Karinne, humble son of the Hive-Leader,” he said, re-

peating what he’d been taught to say. “I greet an honored daughter of the Hive.”

She mirrored his movement, crossing her blade-arms as her hand-arms rested at her sides, bending at her waist since everything below that was a four-legged thorax with small chitinous wings folded on top. Kizzik were like insectoid centaurs in that regard. “I am Kt’Thr’Kxt, humble daughter of the Karinne-Hive. I greet the son-Prince of the revered Hive-Leader,” she returned.

Did I do it right, Papa?

Exactly right, well done, little man, he smiled in reply.

Why didn’t you greet her?

I’m higher rank. I don’t have to, he answered simply. *And I spoke to her before she could greet me, which released her from the responsibility of a formal greeting.*

Oh. Do I really have to learn all this stuff? he complained.

Afraid so, little man. It’s part of what being the Grand Duke is all about.

Nuts.

After the inspection, Jaiya settled them into a guest cabin. Aya helped them strap in as the task force headed out away from the planet, to reach space not warped by the planet’s gravity well so they could make their hyperspace jump. Symone was giddy, and Rann was a little nervous. “I don’t like hyperspace,” he said as Aya secured him.

“Me either, kidlet,” Symone agreed as Ryn helped her strap in. “I just close my eyes and recite Trelle’s poem until it’s over.”

Jumping to Draconis wasn’t bad as jumps go. It was a very short jump, and his travel to Exile and back had toughened him up a little bit. He wasn’t as bothered as usual with the wild sensory input, and then it was over. Draconis loomed through the forward window, and the sections were already reporting in that jump checks were commencing. *Jaiya, when will we get there?* Jason asked.

In about thirty minutes, she answered.

Call ahead and warn Empress Dahnai we’re on our way.

They already called us, as soon as we jumped in, she answered.

Well, I guess that works.

Thirty minutes wasn’t long, really. By the time they unstrapped and had something to drink, and they went down to the landing bay, they were nearly in orbit. There would be ten Raptor fighters escorting them down, ten of his best fighter pilots... and one of them wasn’t typical for a Faey military outfit. His tenth pilot was a human male, one of the telepathic Karinne humans, who had been a fighter pilot in the Navy before the subjugation. He was 34 years old, had been a Lieutenant Commander back in the Navy, and had had quite a fight on his hands when a man entered what most Faey women considered to be no place for a man. Jason didn’t permit discrimination, so Commander Justin Taggart had passed the tests and earned his position as a fighter pilot, especially since he was a telepath and was capable of the telepathic attacks required of a Faey fighter pilot. He was unusually strong for a man, but where women were able to eclipse him in talent, he generally whooped their asses in dog-fighting. Taggart had adapted to vector-based zero-G combat quickly, and he had one of the most impressive run of scores for fighter pilots in the KMS because he was very consistent in either atmosphere or space combat.

Faey women were generally easy to get along with, but the one button most of them had was for a man to be in combat. Thousands of years of tradition were at war with Karinne policy there. They had accepted men on Naval vessels because there was some measure of safety in a ship, that they had a better chance of survival. But a male fighter pilot was alone and at high risk, and the women absolutely hated it, because they saw it as their duty to pro-

tect him from harm. Taggart's main problem hadn't been proving he could fight, or dealing with rampant sexism, it had been making the women stop trying to protect him, which often put them at great personal risk. The fact that he was an *amazing* fighter pilot certainly helped. He had more experience than most of his fighter pilots, was a squadron commander that commanded the 76th Carrier Squadron currently attached to the battleship *Dreamer*. Taggart was one of 18 squadron commanders of fighters and Gladiator squadrons on the battleship, but he was one of only 38 male fighter pilots in the KMS, one of only four human male pilots, and was the only male in a command position.

In the KMS, being a squadron commander was not a desk job. Taggart flew combat sorties right along with the rest of the squadron.

It was a problem he had the most issues with in the Marines and Army rather than the Navy. Jason employed infantry and Gladiator riggers of both sexes and of every race in Karinne; he even had Makati infantry, and had a special division of them who called themselves the Hammers, who specialized in tunnel and subterranean combat. The Faey women who constituted 72% of his infantry and ground units had not been too willing to integrate, because of traditional views that men should not fight, and men should be protected. They were most objectionable to men serving as line infantry, and their objections lessened the higher one went, where the women felt the men had more protection. They had fewer problems with them in support roles like medics, even if those were on the battlefield, and were a bit more accepting of the male Gladiator riggers, since they were in the mecha and surrounded by heavy armor. Generally, the "safer" the combat position, the less resistant the women had been to men serving in it.

But, after 4 years, the women had finally come to accept men in combat, and Jason found it amusing that they didn't mind having men in the unit at *all* after a couple of weeks of exercises. So long as there wasn't any actual fighting going on, the women *loved* having men around, especially since there was no division of sexes in the KMS, a fact that Jason had to be talked into by Myri and the generals. Men and women could and did share rooms, they shared bathrooms, they shared everything. There were no "men's rooms and women's rooms" out in the field or on KMS ships, so they weren't trained any differently than how they would have to operate. It had caused some problems at first, mainly from the human men and women who had joined the KMS who had been raised to believe in division of sexes in some regards, but they'd had four years to adapt to it. He could imagine some humans having issues using the bathroom in a unisex latrine, or showering in a public shower with both sexes, but that was something they were fully warned about before they signed up.

As soon as they were in stable orbit, they launched. A squadron of Imperial Raptors joined the 10 Raptors escorting the Dukal dropship, with Jason himself piloting the dropship, and they made a slow, easy descent to the planet. Jason flew over Dracora with Jyslin in the copilot's seat and Rann on her lap, looking out the window excitedly, and they landed lightly on the main landing pad, where Jason saw the entire Imperial Family along with half the *Siann*, waiting for them. It was almost unheard of to see the entire Imperial family together in one place at one time, and it was a reminder that Dahnai had three children, not just Shya. Dahnai and Kellin stood with Dahnai's three children with them, and thankfully, none of them were wearing official court robes. They, like the Karinnes, were wearing nice "casual attire." Dahnai was wearing a simple sleeveless vest and a pair of sleek trousers, almost looking like workout clothes, and Kellin was wearing a simple wrap that had no sleeves and ended at his thighs, which showed off his muscular legs.

The Crown Princess Sirri Merrane stood at her mother's right hand, wearing a simple red pair of pants that ended at her knees, which were a little scabbed, and nothing else, leaving

her topless, which actually was not unusual for little girls in Faey society. Young girls were much more apt to go topless than boys, but boys were much more apt to go bottomless, which was reflected in Kellin's choice of clothing. Girls liked to show off above the waist, boys below. She was 8 now, and had inherited both her mother's bronze hair and her handsome face. She still lived away from her mother, for it was tradition that she enter her mother's household at the age of ten. She was very tall and serious-looking, the picture of a proper Crown Princess, the heir to the Imperial throne.

High Prince Maer Merrane Doyalle, her oldest child and ten year old son, stood in front of Kellin, Kellin's hands on his shoulders, wearing a soft brown robe with the right sleeve so long and baggy it completely hid his hand and the left ending at his elbow. Maer was tall for a boy, tall and gangly, and he had dark chestnut brown hair that marked him as very attractive among the Faey. He was rarely seen outside the palace, and was by far the child of the Empress the press and the people had the least interest in. Not only was he a boy, he was also already betrothed, betrothed before birth, so there was little news about him on INN or *Courtwatch*. They wouldn't really care about Maer until he was 15 years old. He was betrothed to the fourth daughter of the Grand Duchess, a 10 year old girl named Alii Doyalle. Maer had been living with Dahnai for about two months, and Dahnai was very excited about it, because she knew she would only have him for five years. Noble men in Faey society were surrendered to the bride's house at the age of 15, and they would raise him and prepare him for marriage to Alii, which would take place as soon as Alii was declared fit for marriage. To be declared fit for marriage, she had to be sexually mature and physically capable of giving birth, which was usually around the age of 17, and her talent had to be trained to the level of an adult, which was usually done long before a noble girl reached sexual maturity because telepathic skill was much more important for nobles than for commoners. This was much different from commoner marriage, which wasn't permitted until both spouses were at least 20 years of age, had parental consent if they were under 25, and graduated from primary school, which was the Faey equivalent of high school. Most Faey didn't graduate from primary school until the age of 23 and weren't considered adults with full legal privileges until age 25, so marriages before then were extremely rare.

High Princess Duchess Consort Shya Merrane Karinne was being held by her mother, wearing only a pair of black shorts, leaving her topless as well, not even wearing shoes. Her light hair had been pulled back from her face and held there with a pair of combs, and she looked *extremely* excited, fidgeting and squirming in her mother's arms. Dahnai held her firmly until the dropship and the fighters had landed, and only then did she put Shya down... probably to keep her from charging the dropship and getting crushed when it landed on her. She did hurry forward once the dropship was down, well in front of her family, and Jason called for Aya to open the hatch so the poor girl didn't have to wait outside like a punished puppy, which no doubt would have been played for many laughs on INN in the evening broadcast. Shya climbed in just in time to meet Rann, who had climbed down from Jyslin's lap, and they hugged each happily other right at the hatch opening, and no doubt in full view of the cameras behind the Imperial family. "Ranny, Ranny, Ranny! I'm so happy to see you!" she said jubilantly.

"Shya!" he said with equal joy, kissing her on the cheek. "I told you we'd come!"

"That was never in doubt, you silly boy," Jyslin laughed, kneeling down and hugging Shya and Rann both, since Shya refused to let go of Rann. "Now go take Rann to see your mother, Shya," she smiled.

"Okay!" she said with an exuberant nod, and led him down the stairs of the dropship by the hand. Shen and Suri went out with them, and Jason joined Jyslin at the hatch, took his wife's

hand, and led her out into the shark-infested waters of public court, with Tim and Symone right behind them. Aya and Ryn escorted Jason and Jyslin out, and they watched Dahnai pick up Rann and hold him high over her head, laughing as Rann sent to Dahnai in excitement. *Empress Dahnai! I missed you!*

“Speak, honey, speak! It’s custom to speak to the Empress unless I tell you to send or send to you first,” she told him with a bright smile. “But I must say, you send very well, little spunky! You’ve been practicing!”

That sent a few twitters through the *Siann*. They had no idea that the Grand Duke Karinne’s five year old son had expressed.

“Mommy and Daddy make me practice every day,” he answered as Dahnai passed Rann to Kellin, who kissed him on the cheek. “Hi Prince Kellin! You been okay?”

“I’ve been very good, little spunky,” he said, kissing Rann on the cheek before setting him down, where Shya took custody of him again. She introduced him to her brother and sister as her husband, who had never met Rann before.

“Maer, Sirri, this is my hubby Ranny,” she said, wrapping her arms around him.

“You have funny colored skin, like the Terrans, but you have nice ears,” Sirri told him, looking at Rann’s pointed ears.

“Daddy says I’ll turn blue if I stay outside here,” Rann answered.

“Good! Then you’ll look proper!” Maer told him.

Dahnai gave Jason a warm hug when they reached them, and Jyslin embraced Kellin. “We early or late?” Jason asked her.

She laughed. “Right on time,” she answered, then she hugged Jyslin. Tim and Symone reached them, and Dahnai reached out her hands to them. Symone took her hands, and the Tim, as she greeted them in turn, as Kellin did the same. “I’m glad Jason brought his whole family,” she smiled. “Finally, Jason’s *amu dozei* is introduced to court.”

“Jason always says they’re not ready for me,” Symone said with a wicked smile.

“I’m inclined to agree, which is why I’ve canceled court during your visit,” Dahnai said dryly, which made Symone laugh. “But, you can’t ever get out of it completely, so let’s at least do the introductions now, while my servants take your bags.”

As cameras rolled, Dahnai first introduced her older children to Jason’s family, which only Jason had met. Dahnai did not as a matter of custom introduce her children to outsiders until they were ten or unless they were relatives, and Jyslin had not been to court since Rann was betrothed to Shya, which made them relatives of the Imperial family by marriage; a betrothal was considered an official tie of marriage despite the marriage having yet to take place, and this was the first official meeting between the full families of both betrothed children. Had Dahnai been greeting some other Dukal family, she would not have brought her children. Maer had been officially introduced to court on his tenth birthday, and had vanished from the public eye since then, for he was not the heir. It would be Sirri that would attend court with her mother starting on her tenth birthday, standing at the right hand of the throne, but wearing a robe with no left sleeve to give her mother ample room to touch her and thereby send privately to her. After the two older children met Jason, Jyslin, Tim, and Symone, the three of them were introduced around the present members of the *Siann* in a receiving line right there on the landing pad. This told Jason much about Dahnai’s intent to get the public niceties out of the way so the private visit could begin. Jason was blessedly exempt from the introductions, so he spent most of his time with the children. Rann was more than comfortable talking with Maer and Sirri as Shya clung to him, as Jason knelt among them and listened with amusement as Sirri tried to be regal without being smarmy. She didn’t do a very good job of it. She knew she was the Crown Princess, but she was still an 8 year old girl who liked

to play, and the scabbed condition of her knees proved it. “Can you *really* send?” Sirri asked Rann in curiosity.

“Uh-huh,” he nodded. “And someday I’ll do te-kisis like Daddy too!”

“Telekinesis, little man,” Jason chuckled.

“Wow, I’ve never heard of being able to send so young,” Sirri said, a little jealously. “You must have really walked through Trelle’s hair.”

“My sister Kyri could do it when she was born,” Rann said with a slight frown. “She makes fun of me and says I send like a baby. All of my brothers and sisters can do it now, though. My brother Zach just woke up yesterday!”

Jason would have preferred him not to say that. *Rann, remember your lessons about speaking to strangers. Remember, Empress Dahnai’s family are still outsiders, even if you’re gonna marry Shya*, he cautioned.

Sorry, Papa, he answered contritely. Since he was still learning the trick of private sending, his sending was open, but very low power, barely going five feet.

“You can really do telekinesis?” Maer asked.

“Daddy says I will someday,” Rann told him, a bit more carefully. “It runs in the family, he says.”

Rann made no more mistakes, but he also managed to befriend Sirri and Maer in short order. That was good, because Rann was going to be staying with Shya’s foster family during their stay, and they were in guest quarters in the palace.

After about an hour, the introductions were coming to a close, and Jason noticed that Rann’s skin was already taking on a slightly bluish hue from exposure to the blue sun of the Draconis system. He held up his own hand and saw that he too was starting to take on a dusky undertone that he knew was the herald of himself turning blue. Rann seemed more vulnerable to the effect than Jason, probably because his mother was Faey. Maer noticed it too. “Look at your arm, Ranny! You really are turning blue!” he declared.

“I am? Wow!” he said, then he laughed.

“I think it looks funny,” Shya complained.

“It fades over time, Shya,” Jason assured her with a chuckle. “So if you don’t like him blue, just keep him out of the sun here on Draconis, and it’ll fade away.”

“Good,” she declared. “I like my Ranny just the way he is.”

After the introductions and smalltalk, Dahnai took possession of them. She separated them from the *Siann* and from the cameras by taking them back to her private apartments. She had a second couch brought in to accommodate the extra people, and the guards and servants helped them settle in. Dahnai’s apartment hadn’t changed much since Maer had come to live with Dahnai, but some of her habits had. She still refused to engage in sex with her guards in the apartment, but didn’t make Maer leave. But he knew that when his mother ordered the guards out, he needed to stay in his room. He knew she and Kellin were having sex, be it in their bedroom or in the living room, and she *really* didn’t like to be interrupted or disturbed while doing so. Maer was fully aware what sex was, like any ten year old Faey child would, and while Dahnai didn’t hide sex from her son, she did maintain her desire not to have sex in front of those not engaged in it. In many Faey households, parents would have no qualms about having sex with their children in the same room, maybe even in the same bed, but Dahnai was much more conservative in her views because of her Imperial upbringing. Dahnai’s entire life was watched by others. She couldn’t even go to the bathroom without a guard there watching her wipe herself. She kept her sex life as the one thing she had to herself, her one true privacy, and she defended it like a wolverine.

Maer dragged all the kids into his room to show them around, allowing the adults to sit

down. “So,” Symone said, looking around. “Are there any doors at all in here?”

“None,” Dahnai answered. “My guards think doors are obstacles. The only doors in my apartment are safety doors that shut in case of an attack. This apartment is probably the most heavily armored part of the palace,” she noted, waving her arm towards the wall.

“I kinda like that idea,” she noted, looking at Tim.

“Since when do we ever close the doors at home?” he asked.

“I’m surprised you didn’t come in that command ship you have, Jayce,” Dahnai told him.

“It’s doing something else right now,” he answered.

“Being repaired?”

He nodded. “The Consortium focused on it during the battle. It’ll be back in service by Maista.”

“Well, that’s good news. Now, let’s talk about this summit you’re calling. I don’t want any surprises.”

“It’s pretty straightforward, Dahnai,” he answered. Symone, who wasn’t usually interested in politics, got up and wandered into Maer’s room. “I’m going to propose an agreement of sorts that has us all share our information about the Consortium. So, for example, if the Alliance gets intelligence about a base they discover, they warn everyone else. I’m not going to ask for any military alliances or anything official, just what you might call an informal agreement to pool our information. They’ll know I mean it because tomorrow, the cooperative research unit is opening at the Academy, and they start going over the Consortium data. My main goal of the summit is to get everyone to agree that the Consortium is a threat to all of us, because I seriously doubt that the Alliance or the Skaa are going to enter into any agreements with them, not after what they did to the Urumi.”

“Well, that’s not too bad,” Dahnai noted, tapping her chin lightly.

“The High Staff has already agreed to help,” he said. “He promised to pass any sensor intelligence his government finds to the Academy. That’s what I’m looking for. I want to know what the Consortium are doing, and it’s easiest if everyone is keeping their eyes open. They’ll help me find them and keep an eye on them, and that’ll let me and Sk’Vrae deal with them,” he said in a grating voice.

“And me,” Dahnai said. “They attacked a house of my Imperium and tried to get another house to betray us, and I will not let that go unpunished. Even if it wasn’t you, Jayce, the Consortium is just too dangerous to us to leave alone. They’ve attacked the Imperium, and the Imperium will respond. When it comes to war, the Imperium will be there.”

“Since when did you say no to a war, Dahnai?” he challenged.

“Hmm... never,” she winked.

“That’s really all I’m trying to get,” Jason said. “And I think it’s important for the *leaders* to be there rather than just ambassadors, so they can listen and see the recordings and understand what happened personally. I was going to ask you to host the summit.”

“Me? Why not you? It’s your summit.”

“I’m not a ruler,” he said simply. “I’ve asked for the summit, and I’m providing the location for it, but since you’re my Empress, you’re the one that should be the official host. It would disrespect you not to be hosting a summit being held on one of the planets in your own empire.”

“I’m so glad you remember that when it suits you,” she said archly.

“When it suits me,” Jason said with a straight face. “I had enough clout to ask for the summit and invite the rulers because of my neutral status, but I shouldn’t be the one hosting it. They’ll listen to me as a Karinne, but they won’t respect me as a host. After all, they all out-rank me, and that matters in a summit where emperors, kings, and leaders of governments are

rubbing shoulders.”

Dahnai gave him a critical look. “You really have learned how to play the game,” she told him. “I can smell Zaa all over you.”

“She does give me advice from time to time,” he admitted blandly.

“So, your ultimate goal is cooperation?”

“Don’t you think it’s a good idea?” he asked simply. “If we’re going to war with the Consortium, doesn’t it behoove us to have our neighbors helping us find them and keeping us informed about them?”

“I think it’s a great idea, but I’m surprised you didn’t try to get allies.”

“I hope that they will eventually, but I’m not going to push,” Jason said. “Once I get the interdictors up and running, I’ll feel more secure, and we’ll have more time to get ready for them.”

“Where’s that contract you promised me?”

“You’ll get it as soon as I’m sure the interdictor works,” he answered. “But, I’m also here to talk to you about a little bit of business.”

“Oh? What business is that?”

“How would 2M like to lease and operate Stargates outside of the Imperium?”

She gave him a hard look. “Let our greatest advantage outside our borders? Are you fucking nuts? The Stargates are the main reason why the other governments leave us alone! They know I can deploy my entire fleet to any system inside an hour, so they won’t dare attack us!”

“Think about this, then, Dahnai,” he said, leaning back. “The other governments might be so afraid of the Imperium that they’ll see the interdictors and *beg* for them. I might be inclined to *lease* interdictors out, but how will they move their goods in and out of those interdicted systems? No other government has Stargate technology but us, and I won’t supply them without your permission because it’s not Karinne technology, it’s proprietary Imperium technology. So, the government has a quandary, the only way they can protect themselves is to isolate their systems from interstellar travel. Well, you and me make a deal about that. I *lease* a Stargate to them, with ironclad clauses about allowing Karinne ships and automated defenses to guard them and whatnot, and offer them a very small fee per ship to use them, much cheaper than the standard fees for using Stargates inside the Imperium, *which I give to you*. We link that Stargate to a central hub *inside the Imperium*, like, say, a recognized neutral planet like Terra, and not only does that allow you to profit from all traffic outside the Imperium that uses your Stargates, it also sends all ships to Terra, which becomes *the* trading hub of the sector. Since that’s where everyone’s going to be, that’s where the businessmen are going to flock. And I’m sure I could be persuaded to give you some sweetheart deals to let Merrane companies move in and corner those new markets. 2M, MAS, Merrane Consolidated, they could make a killing off ship repair services... and that’s just one aspect of the new business opportunities.”

Dahnai gave him a long, narrow-eyed look, then she laughed suddenly. “Good Trelle, Jayce, you are just *too* fuckin’ cunning! And let me guess, you earn a little too because Terra is a Karinne planet?”

“I’m not too proud to admit that it’ll earn Karinne some money,” he shrugged. “I just think it’s a good idea to shut down the *entire sector* to the Consortium, and we can do that by making it impossible for them to jump hyperspace through friendly territory. Every interdictor up and running in the sector is another obstacle the Consortium has to overcome. We can build a system that majorly disrupts any attempt to jump hyperspace within our sector, and that gives us an inside track to earning some money in addition to increasing overall security. And most

importantly to me, it brings us all together in one place and lets us get to know each other a little better, so maybe we don't get into stupid wars." He leaned back and put his arm around Jyslin. "It won't happen immediately, though," he said. "The other governments won't trust the Imperium to gain total control over their trade, because no matter how neutral I am, they know that Karinne is still part of the Imperium. So we'll have to build trust first, and then, when they trust us enough, we offer them that deal. I think they'll take it. They'll definitely take it if the Consortium comes back in force. And when they do, we profit."

Kellin looked at her. "It seems to have some merit, love," he said.

"Some," she nodded. "But there's something hiding in there. I know there is, Jayce, you're too smart and this is a little too obvious. The profit's just there to lure me into taking it. I can't see what it is, but I'm sure there's some secret objective this fulfills."

He just smiled slightly.

"I knew it!" she said victoriously, pointing at him. "But, I can't see anything wrong with it on its face, and it does do everything you say it does."

"Well, from the way I see it," Tim said, his eyes thoughtful, "it really benefits *everyone*. Think about it. Other governments have access to Stargates all over the sector. They can move trade goods from the back end of the Alliance to the Nine Colonies in one day, hell, in two hours, when it would take weeks of going through trade customs of the Imperium and the Collective to get their goods from one side to the other. Trade would *explode* in the sector. The Imperium's revenue would skyrocket because the governments will see the benefit and start using the Stargates as trade portals. Each government would probably leave one system without an interdicator so they could explore or do secret things, but the main thing would be that it would seriously increase trade revenue for every government, not just us."

"The problem is Terra in that case," Jyslin said. "If it becomes the transport hub of the sector, it becomes the first target. Take out Terra, and you force everyone to shut down their interditors."

"Yes... unless it's *also* protected by an interdicator," Jason smiled. "Which would spur governments to take our offer, else they have to rely on an outside government just to get to Terra and the Academy, where all the action is. I'm within my rights to defend Terra, and that's something I'm going to impress upon the leaders at the summit, that I'm worried about Terra because it's vulnerable to Consortium attack, but take no action and make no declarations. It's my planet, and the Consortium attacked House Karinne, so I have to take reasonable steps to defend Karinne holdings."

"Devious!" Kellin laughed. "You're going to force them!"

"No, not force. Not force at all," Jason said. "When I put up the interdicator, I'm going to open a Stargate out in the neutral space just past Terra, about halfway between Sol and Alpha Centauri, and defend the holy fuck out of it. I'll allow everyone to jump to that gate and then use it to get to Terra. I'm not going to rob anyone of access to Terra, but I'm hoping that after they see the neutral gate in action, they start seeing how much of an advantage it could be to have an interdicator and Stargate of their own. They'll see that the only way into *their* territory is through the most heavily defended system in the sector, which gives them one *hell* of a front door to their house. They just have to trust someone with the key, and that's going to take time."

"I have to admit, that's not a bad idea," Dahnai said after a moment. "It solves the problem of how to defend Terra, and it gives them a taste of what we're offering. I'll really have to think about that, babe. I think it has some potential."

"That's all I can really ask," he said. "Symone! We're finished with politics!" he shouted, which made the others laugh.

"Thank Trelle! Turn on the vidy, and let's watch *Bounty Hunter*!" she answered, coming in carrying a giggling Sirri and Rann, with Maer and Shya hanging off her legs.

It was a nice couple of hours. Dahnai's older children and the Karinnes got to know each other, and Dahnai and Kellin got to know Tim and Symone maybe a little better than they had during their visit. After watching the vidy, Dahnai had a very nice dinner sent to her apartment, and they all sat on couches and chair enjoying warm cheese-tasting vegetables in a buttery sauce, white pork-like meat in a tangy gravy, and sliced *oye* fruit. After dinner, the kids sat in the middle of the floor playing Seven Circles while the adults enjoyed glasses of Terran wine. But, Symone being Symone, she also wasn't forgetting her ultimate motive for coming along. After the wine, when they returned to conversation as the kids played, she sat by Kellin and she took some pretty outrageous liberties with him. She put her hands all over him, made sure to press her breasts against his side, made a suggestive comment about every fifteen seconds, and Jason counted six times he could see that she slid her hand up under his short robe. Kellin certainly didn't seem to mind at all, for he stole several feels of Symone's breasts, and when he commented that Symone looked like she'd gotten a tan since the last time he saw her, he dared to muse if she had any tan lines.

She made sure to show him. She slid back a bit and pulled her shirt off, and proudly proclaimed that she was line free. She then stood up and pulled her shorts down, letting him stare at her blond pubic hair for a moment before bending down to step out of them. She then sat back down beside him, slid a hand under his robe to slide along his chest, and whispered something in his ear just before licking the outside edge, from lobe to tip.

Jason could see where this was going. Symone had found a reason to get naked, and she wasn't going to stop. And from the look of it, Kellin wasn't going to either, for he slid his hand down her stomach and fondled her genitals. *Dahnai*, he warned.

Bria, why don't you take the kids on a tour of the palace, and then take them to the entertainment arcade? And I think all the guards in the room can go with you, she sent meaningfully.

Bria gave her a slight smile and nodded. "Kids, do you want to go tour the palace and go to the entertainment arcade before dinner?"

"Sure!" Maer and Sirri said in unison.

"What's the arcade?" Rann asked.

"A play place for us!" Maer said happily. "There's rides and games and climbing maze and all sorts of neat things to do!"

"Oooh, can I go, please?" he asked his parents.

"Surely you can, my little man," Jyslin smiled, kissing him on the cheek when he came over to her. "Now, after you go have fun, the guards are going to take you to Shya's foster parents' house for the night. So, you be good for them and behave, okay?"

"I will, I promise," he nodded.

"Maer, dove, did you pack your bag for your sleepover?" Dahnai told him.

"Yes, Mother," he answered. "It'll be weird being back with Nanna and Panna, but it'll be like a slumber party this time!"

"Nanna and Panna invited some other children over too, so it *will* be a slumber party," Dahnai told him, holding her arms out. Maer came up to her, and she kissed him on the cheek. "Now you be good."

"I will," he promised.

Dahnai and Kellin said goodnight to their kids, as did everyone else, and they watched the eight guards in the room file out with them, leaving them alone. When the door shut and the red light noting it was locked winked on, Symone blew out her breath and immediately

started untying Kellin's robe. "Thank Trelle!" she said, almost trembling with excitement. "Now we get to have that orgy Dahnai promised us! And I've been wanting a shot at this monster since I saw it swinging on the beach back home!" she declared, pulling Kellin's robe open and yanking his shorts down, exposing his penis. Symone wasted no time grabbing it and fondling it, giving Kellin a huge grin. "Now we see who wins the bet about how big you are hard," she said with an eager glow in her eyes. "And I hope you have good stamina, Kellin. Me and Jys are gonna take turns with you."

"I hope he's agreed to it," Tim laughed.

"What? You think I'd pass up an invitation from ladies as sexy as Symone and Jyslin? Please," he laughed. "I've been looking forward to this."

"Trelle, has he," Dahnai chuckled, standing up and crossing over to Tim's couch, then pulling her shirt off in front of him to free her impressive breasts. "And so have I," she said, looking right in Tim's eyes. "I've been looking forward to wrapping my legs around you, Tim."

"I'm honored, Dahnai," Tim smiled, sitting up, reaching over, and grabbing the waist of her sleek trousers, and pulling them down.

"I'd rather you be horny."

"That's not a problem," he chuckled, running his hands up her sides before cupping her breasts.

That was about everything he expected it could be.

It was intense. It was highly erotic. It was both new and familiar, but above all, it had been satisfying.

Tim was much braver than Jason, and always had been, so he had absolutely no hesitation about having sex with Dahnai in front of the other four, and Symone about defined fearlessness. Jason and Jyslin, however, had to kind of work themselves into the idea of it. They had no trouble having sex with Tim and Symone, and Jason was a long-time partner with Dahnai, but Kellin was a new and different presence, one to which Jason and Jyslin had to grow accustomed. Once they did, however, it became a night of shared pleasure. It wasn't the deep and intimate sessions Jason and Jyslin enjoyed with Tim and Symone. It was compartmentalized, with defined couples or trios, not interacting with each other. But despite the lack of interaction, they also managed about every combination of lovers, so that everyone there had managed to experience all the options available.

Jason had enjoyed sex with each of his loves by herself, and then shared them with each of the other men. He had had two of them at a time in all three combinations, and he had, at one point, had brief fun with all three women at once. But Tim and Kellin got the same treatment he did, and Symone had also been something of a wild card. Where Jyslin and Symone were lovers—and indeed, they drove Kellin wild at one point because he had never threesomed with women who were lovers—Symone was willing to engage in sex with Dahnai where Jyslin was not. Dahnai still wouldn't return the favor, but it created a couple of scenarios of couples and partners that kept things very interesting. It was truly a group experience that lasted all night.

Before he had deepened his bond with Tim and Symone to where they shared the same bed, he would have been way too nervous to be part of three couples having sex in the same room, but he figured that his conversion to a Faey mentality was complete. After he and Jyslin got over their initial inhibitions, they had been just as eager and enthusiastic as Symone. He had shared his wife with the husband of his *amu dorai*, and had done so willingly, because she was sexually curious about him, and for no other reason. He had handed his wife off to someone other than Tim, and done it happily, just as she had often told him she was

more than willing to let him experience other women. And he did it without blinking, because he *knew* she loved him, and he *knew* she would come home to him. So, he was more than happy to give her his blessing and send her to Kellin, because it would make her happy, and she would come home to him and share her experience with him in a way that only a telepath could accomplish.

When he woke up, he was in bed with Dahnai. From what he recalled, Tim was in bed with Jyslin, and he was certain that Kellin was again with Symone, because they were having sex in the living room, Symone's panting and low moans audible to him.

"Trelle, does she *ever* get tired?" Dahnai complained blearily, pushing herself up on her hands and looking towards the living room, where Symone's legs were visible over the back of the couch where she and Kellin were entertaining themselves.

"She's a morning girl, and she's been so excited about this little idea of yours, I'm sure she'll spend all day today with her legs wrapped around someone," he answered her. "And if you don't like it, remember, that's *your* fault," he noted, pointing at the living room.

She laughed ruefully. "I guess it was," she admitted. "But *fuck*, that was a very fun night. My mother used to like group sex, she'd bring like ten people into her apartment every Brista, but I never quite understood why until last night. I had a man handy whenever I wanted one, I could just sit and watch my husband and *amu dorai* fuck the shit out of another woman, and if all you boys were busy or I was in the mood for it, Symone was always there and ready to give me head."

Jason laughed. "I thought Kellin was going to swallow his tongue when Jyslin and Symone started on each other."

"Symone's a lot better at eating pussy now," she said with a little chuckle. "Jys has given her plenty of practice."

"She does," Jason chuckled. "Jys is completely into Symone now, there's no hesitation or inhibition like there was when you were on Karis."

"I noticed," Dahnai said lightly, watching Symone's legs sway rhythmically. "No wonder she's so addicted to sex, with you and Tim around. Trelle's garland, can that man fuck," she said with a satisfied little sigh. "He's almost as good as you and Kel. I'll get a better measure of him tonight, he's spending tonight with me."

"What? Not another orgy in the living room?" he asked with a wink.

"Well, we might play around a little bit tonight, but I'm planning a little less crowded night with Tim. The group thing was fun, new, and exciting, but tonight I want to experience Tim the same way I have you and Kel, one on one, right here in this bed," she said, patting the bed. "Tim satisfied my every expectation out there on the couch, but I want to experience him without anyone competing with me or him for attention."

"Well, Symone will be disappointed, but she'll get over it," he chuckled. "I just hope she gets this out of her system," Jason noted, returning to watching Symone's legs wave in the air with Dahnai. "I'd like to bring her to Draconis and not have to deal with a one-track mind."

"She seems to have nothing *but* a one track mind," Dahnai said.

"Not usually," he defended. "She's usually not quite so obsessed with sex. She just doesn't have much to do at home, and she has lots of playmates in Tim, me, and Jys, well, that and her collection of porn she loves to watch, and you sure as hell didn't help by putting this idea in her head," he accused. "Usually, she's a sweet, charming, charismatic, lovely girl who's got a wicked sense of humor and a big heart."

"But she loves sex."

"So do you," he pointed out.

“True,” she admitted with a rueful smile. “And I can’t deny I that I have my own porn collection, I think every Faey woman does. I’m sure as hell not sorry we did this, though. Tim was *awesome*, and I got so turned on with you and Tim, knowing that Kel was watching us, that I almost creamed myself before we even got started.”

“Don’t feel bad. The first time I had sex with Jys and Symone when they’d touch each other, I barely managed to get it into Symone before coming. And you’re lucky, if you come early, you don’t have to wait before you can go again. That just means you get an extra orgasm.”

“That’s a woman’s payment for having to carry the baby,” she grinned at him. “We get multiple orgasms.”

“It’s so unfair,” he teased lightly, slapping her on the hip.

“What’s unfair is that you’re on Karis,” she told him. “And I had to threaten you to get you to come see me.”

“It was necessary. And I’m here now,” he said, running a hand up her side, the cupping her breast.

“You know you shouldn’t do that unless you’re prepared to deal with the consequences,” she teased.

“I should when I want the consequences,” he purred, leaning over and kissing her neck. “Want to give Kellin and Symone something to watch?”

“Let’s put them to shame,” she said breathlessly, pushing him back down onto the bed.

In honestly, that night did do a great deal to get it out of Symone’s system... somewhat. Symone didn’t want to spend the entire day in the apartment reveling in her day of total debauchery, but she was also quite demanding. Symone wasn’t usually a nymphomaniac, but Dahnai had done much to instill the idea of this “sex holiday” into her head, and she meant to enjoy every minute of it, both in and out of bed. Symone calmed down quite a bit when they collected up their kids around 10:00, which was 10 hours into the 30 hour day, and Dahnai had some full family entertainments planned for them. They went to a bachi game first, which was about two hours in the late morning, which Jason found to be very fun. He’d never attended a live bachi game before, and it was high energy and fast-paced. The Dracora Avengers, the home town professional bachi team, beat the Jovara Swords 21-19 in a very competitive and physical game that included two players being carted off on flying platforms and an ejection when the Jovara striker broke her bachi stick over the head of the Dracora center defender. The presence of the Empress seemed to spur both sides on and play with a focus and aggression not usually seen in bachi.

Symone revved back up, though, when they got back to the palace, though she also realized that she couldn’t do anything about it, because Dahnai had planned more public activities for them. So, she decided to take a page out of her playbook way back when she first met Jason and Tim, and she tormented Kellin *mercilessly*. She couldn’t touch him or act in an improper manner because they were in public and cameras were watching them, but she could send without the cameras catching it, and that was how she tormented him. She sent dirty thoughts, images, observations, memories of sensations, she made all kinds of comparisons, she even asked how he gave oral sex to Dahnai so she could improve her technique. Kellin had never experienced that kind of badgering before, and Symone got to him... and the more she got to him, the more gleefully she dug her claws in deeper. Kellin had trouble sitting still on the rides at the entertainment arcade, which was literally an amusement park *only* for the children of the Empress and their guests. Despite that, the park was often filled with the children of the *Siann* who used it to keep their young ones entertained when they were brought to court, and the Empress often opened it to commoner children for school field trips and on

certain days of the year. There were 24 rides, a small zoo, games and other activities, a pool with water slides, an extensive hands-on learning museum, and even a performing arts/hologram center where the children could see opera, concerts, plays, and holographic movies. Symone attached herself to Kellin so that she might more easily torture him, and the poor man probably had a continual erection for about four hours, which mercifully was hidden under his rather baggy pants. Dahnai had found it rather amusing for a while, at least until she realized that she could do her own torturing on Jason in her own special way. She demanded they go for a swim at the park’s pool, and she demanded Karis rules.

They actually weren’t much out of place as far as that went. Jason wasn’t too happy about the idea of having to expose himself to the Draconis sun, but the smug look on Dahnai’s face told him exactly why she wanted it. She *liked* seeing him blue, so she was going to do everything she could to expose as much of him as possible to the sun of Draconis. When they reached the pool, they found that the majority of Faey there, of all ages, had forgone bathing suits. Most nobles didn’t bring a suit from their personal houses in Dracora because it was a long standing custom that nobles could bring only what they personally carried to the palace, which came into being to prevent servants from carrying bombs or weapons into the palace grounds for their employers. So when the nobles wanted to partake of the arcade’s pool when they didn’t plan for it, they simply removed their robes and swam or sunbathed nude.

Jason glared at Dahnai the entire time they undressed in the changing room, as servants took their clothes and carefully hung them up, and she pulled him out onto the pool’s elaborate deck by the hands, dragging him into the sun. Rann, Maer, and Sirri jumped right into the pool, but Shya sat on the edge. Because they lived in an area where every house had its own pool and the ocean was barely 100 feet from the back deck, Rann already knew how to swim. But Shya hadn’t learned yet, so she was reluctant to get into the water where Rann and her siblings were, over her head, but not wanting to be alone in the shallow end either. And Jason was sure that every camera zooming in on them from far beyond the grounds was catching Rann urge Shya into the pool at the shallow end, offering to teach her how to swim. Jason figured Dahnai was going to make him bask on the sunning chairs and turn himself blue, but she had another thing coming. He sought the protective solace of the pool, where the water would greatly dilute the sun’s radiation and dramatically slow down the process. He played with the kids for a while, getting Maer and Sirri to the point that they jabbered at him with the same smiles and enthusiasm they did their mother and foster parents, then he braved the sun to take the kids to the smaller of the two slides, the kiddie slide, standing in a shaded area by the slide created by the bigger slide above to cheer them as they slid down, then ran laughing back up to get back in line. Dahnai and Tim joined him at the slide after a while, as Tim looked nervously at his own arm, which was taking a decidedly bluish undertone to it.

“See?” Jason chuckled. “Why do you think I’ve been avoiding the sun, Tim?”

Tim laughed, looking down at his penis. “I almost look like I have some kind of venereal disease,” he said. “Leprosy!” he said in English.

“What is this *leprosy*?” Dahnai asked.

“A disease cured long ago that makes body parts fall off,” Jason chuckled.

“I don’t think you want to lose that, Tim. You’re going to be using it tonight,” she told him calmly.

Tim laughed again, then waved as Rann came down the slide. “I’m glad I got a second audition,” he told her.

Dahnai chuckled, leaning against the rail herself. “I hope you’ll forgive me for getting Symone so hyper.”

“Eh, I like her hyper, and it’s not all you. I don’t know if Jason told you, but Symone found

out she's pregnant yesterday morning. So she's been bouncing off the walls for two reasons.”
 “Really? Congratulations!” she said with an honest smile, patting him on the shoulder. “Jason didn't tell me, as a matter of fact,” she added, giving him a cool look.

“It wasn't my news to give,” he shrugged. “I'm shocked Symone didn't blurt it out last night on the landing pad. I guess she had something else on her mind,” he said with a rueful chuckle.

“We're gonna have a daughter,” Tim said. “My first child, and hers too.”

“You'll find a child will complete your lives, Tim,” Dahnai told him. “I'd feel like my life wasn't worth living if I didn't have my babies.” She waved to Maer as he came hurtling down the slide, then stopped Rann as he hurried towards the steps of the slide, dropping down on one knee to look at him. “You're looking a bit blue there, little Rann,” she said with a laugh.

“I know, isn't it cool?” he said brightly. “I wanna go home as blue as Danny!”

“You need to convince your dad to do the same,” Dahnai said with a little smile. “He looks much more handsome with blue skin.”

“That's your opinion,” he said archly.

“I'm not turning blue everywhere, though,” he said, holding up the bottom of his foot to show them.

“After you finish swimming, just lay down on a deck chair for a while, then turn over, and you'll turn a nice shade of blue,” Dahnai instructed.

“But then I can't swim,” he protested.

“We're here as long as you want to stay, Ranny, so don't worry,” she winked. “Now go before Maer gets in front of you!” she urged, then she sent him on his way with a fond smack to his bare bottom. Maer almost did, running by them, but Rann just barely beat him to the stairs, nearly running into the seven or eight year old girl in front of them.

Shya came up to them and patted her mother on the thigh, which made her bend down again. “Yes, sweetling?” she asked.

“I can't swim yet,” she complained. “Can you take me on the slide, Mommy?”

“Of course I can!” she said with a bright smile, standing up and taking her daughter's hand. “Come on, before we lose our place!”

It was nice to see Dahnai like that. She was the Empress, and had to show her royal, noble side to the world, which often had to be the appearance of ruthless strength and implacable resolve. But she was also a mother, and she loved her children very much, so it was a joy to see her acting the role of the tender, loving mother, there for her children, making the most of the cruelty of her people's tradition that separated her from her own children for the first ten years of their lives. She absolutely adored all of her children, but she only got to keep them for one day in ten, and it was considered beyond the bounds of tradition for her to see them outside of that except for exceptional circumstances. He knew she talked to them on the vidlink every day, but seeing your child on a video screen was a pale imitation of being able to hold and kiss her children. If Jason was separated from Rann like that, he'd go insane with worry. So it was an honest smile and hearty wave that graced Dahnai and Shya as they came down the water slide together moments later, Shya wrapped in her mother's arms.

She really is something special, isn't she? Tim noted as the two of them splashed into the shallow pool at the foot of the slide, Shya laughing as Dahnai picked her up and swung her around in a circle.

She's everything I said she was, isn't she?

Oh yes, both in and out of bed, he noted with a sly smile.

Well, she certainly liked you. She said you met her every expectation, he sent with an audi-

ble chuckle. *And she's claiming you for her bedroom tonight. Jyslin is going to spend tonight with Kellin, and I guess I get Symone.*

That's such a chore, Tim teased.

Everyone else gets something new and exciting except for me. You get Dahnai. Jyslin gets Kellin. I just get same old, same old, he said with an insincere sigh, which made Tim burst into laughter.

Don't ever let her catch you saying that, he warned with a bright-eyed grin.

I'm not that stupid, Jason laughed. *Besides, she's too busy right now,* Jason chuckled, pointing to the pool. Kellin and Symone were in the pool, water up to their waists, and she was hanging off of him with one hand while the other was suspiciously under the water. Judging from Kellin's expression, Jason had a pretty good idea where she had her hand.

She's being shameless, Jyslin noted with an amused tilt to her thoughts as she joined them in the shadow. *But she's also having fun, so who are we to take her chaba pod?*

Poor Kellin, Tim laughed. *She's going to drive him crazy before dinnertime.*

If she were human, I'd be nervous, Jason noted.

Well, she only gets her shot at Kellin and Dahnai while we're here, so it's pretty clear where she's focusing her effort, Tim said dismissively.

Jyslin looked down. *You're looking a little... gray, Tim. Your dick looks like a week old steak.*

Guess all us human telepaths have the same vulnerability to the Draconis sun, Tim laughed. *I guess I should lay down and flip it over so it can tan evenly on both sides.*

Jyslin laughed, reached down, and checked the underside of his penis. *Yup, nice and pink. I think you're right.*

Such a flirt, Tim accused with a laugh.

No, that's flirting, she said, pointing at Kellin and Symone. Symone was now sitting on the edge of the pool, and she had her legs spread wide enough to give Kellin an unrestricted view without being overt about it. One thing Jason had learned over the years was that Symone was a *master* of Faey flirting, and what she was doing was a tried and true flirtation among a species that considered nudity a proper thing. She was displaying her charms in a seductive, sexual manner without being blatantly sexual about it. Kellin waded up to stand inside her spread legs, his hands on her thighs as he looked up at her, and she laughed delightedly at something he said before sliding off the pool and into his arms. *But I'm not here to watch my amu dozei flirt with a guy. I'm here to see if your balls are as big as my ovaries,* she sent teasingly, pointing up at the top slide.

I accept your challenge, wench! Tim sent in reply as Sirri ran by them, giggling.

The top slide was a twisty, curvy, very high-speed slide that was restricted only to those tall enough to be able to use it safely. They climbed up nearly a hundred feet to get to the entry, where a nude male lifeguard who was generously endowed, wearing nothing but a comm microphone and earpiece, smiled and helped them get ready. He explained the rules of the slide to them in about ten seconds. “Just keep your feet forward and stay on your back, my Lady, my Lords, if you please,” he said, offering his hand to Jyslin. “May I help you into the slide, my Lady?”

“Such a polite young man,” she smiled at him. “I hope you two are paying attention!” she barked teasingly at them as he helped her sit in the water jets at the top of the slide that sent water splashing down the length. He gave her a gentle urging push on her shoulders to let her know she could go, and she let go of the handles and picked up amazing speed before disappearing around a curve, her scream of delight chasing back up to them.

Jason went next. The guard helped him to sit in the water, which was warm, and he held the

grips. The slide was made of a plastic-like material that felt cool and smooth under his backside, which alleviated the worry of getting a friction burn in a few very sensitive spots. The guard pushed gently on his shoulder, and Jason obligingly released the grips and let the water carry him out onto the slide. Almost immediately, he felt like he was free-falling. His stomach dropped out as he rocketed down the slide at amazing speed, sliding high up on the sides with the curves, even doing a barrel roll and sliding over the ceiling of the slide in one particularly twisty section. He found the slide to be exhilarating, and he was laughing with delight as he hurtled down to the bottom. He saw the frothy boundary where the slide emptied into the deeper side of the receiving pool, and he almost skidded over the surface of the water before sinking down. He got his feet under him and rose up out of the water, shaking the water out as Jyslin pulled her wet hair back and over her shoulders, and she was still laughing. “Demir’s sword, that was fun!” she proclaimed. “We have to build one of these, Jayce! Let’s do it again!”

Jason waded over to her as Tim raced out of the mouth of the slide, turning sideways, then sinking into the water with a splash that cascaded over both of them. He rose up out of the water and spat a stream of water out, which made Jason and Jyslin laugh brightly. “Damn, that rocks!” Tim agreed. “Let’s go again!”

“We were saying the same thing,” Jyslin grinned brightly. *Symone! Kellin! Come on the slide with us!* she called.

Sure! Be right there! Symone answered.

Aww, no fair! I wanna go on the big slide! Rann protested, who had just come down the small slide and was in the wading pool, wading into the deeper water towards them.

You aren’t tall enough, sweetie, I’m sorry, Jyslin told him with empathy in her thoughts, comforting him even as she broke the bad news to him.

Why does that matter?

It has a twist in it that would hurt you if you’re too small, Jason told him. *Just be patient, Rann, you’ll get to slide on the big slide when you’re older.*

It’s always when I’m older! he protested, which made the three of them laugh.

You’d better get back to the side before you lose your place in line, Jyslin warned, which spurred their son to half swim, half run to the steps, then run around the side of the splash pool towards the stairs.

Symone and Kellin joined them as they went up the slide, then they sent Symone down first. She made a wonderful scream as she started down the slide, that went on for about ten seconds before she finally took a breath. Kellin had ridden the slide before, so he was more than eager to go next, and he made no sound at all. Jason went after Kellin, and again thoroughly enjoyed the twisting, turning slide, navigating the splash pool with much more grace the second time, able to skim the surface and sink down without going completely under this time, making a controlled entry. He got his feet under him easily, and saw Symone laughing richly between coughs just a bit ahead of him with Kellin slapping her lightly on the back. “I was so busy screaming I didn’t see the bottom, and tried to inhale the pool!” she admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. “I think you’d get better results if you slapped my front, Kel,” she winked, thrusting her wet, bare breasts out at him.

“No, you make different sounds when I do that,” he said urbanely, which made her laugh and wink at him.

“If you feel like pounding something else, let me know,” she said, giving him a sultry look. “I’d be happy to go into the bathroom with you and bend over.”

“Not in public, Symone, or there’ll be pictures of me coming out of the pool with an erection running in every magazine on Draconis for a month,” he said lightly, which made her

laugh.

Jason was about to urge them to the stairs again, but a communion brought him up short.

[Jason,] Cybi’s voice touched him. [Jason.]

[Yes, Cybi?]

[There has been an... incident back home,] she told him. [It involves the Exiled.]

[What? What happened?]

[Some of them used one of their ships to cross to the mainland. There, they damaged several homes, assaulted some people, and attacked a Kizzik drone.]

[Oh, no,] he communed, fear rising up in him. [How many did it kill?]

[One, and severely injured four others,] she answered. [The drone was injured, but survived. The Exiled are in a state of extreme agitation because of the death. Aura requests you return to Karis to settle things down. The Exiled are on the verge of open rebellion.]

[Fuck,] Jason growled. [I’m on my way,] he sighed.

[I am sorry, Jason. I know you were much looking forward to your trip.]

[It’s not your fault, my friend. Tell the twins I’ll be there as soon as I can.]

[I will. I will also inform Admiral Jaiya you are returning to Karis, so she is ready to jump back as soon as you arrive.]

[Thanks.] Aya, he called, a powerful sending that rippled across the palace, but also private.

Yes, your Grace?

There’s big trouble back home. I have to get back to Karis fast. Meet me at the dropship, but only bring enough to guard me. I don’t want my family here without protection. But stop by Dahnai’s apartment and pick up my court robes. I’m going to need them.

I’ll take care of it, your Grace.

[Rann. Answer me this way.]

[Yes, Papa?]

[There’s something very, very important I have to do back home. There’s a problem with the Exiled so big that I have to go take care of it myself. Tell your mommy that I should be back as soon as I can. Do not send when you tell her this. Speak to her, and only do it when you’re alone. Can you do that for me, little man?]

[I can, Papa. Do you really have to go?]

[Afraid so, kidlet. Miss Aura said it’s really important that I come back, and she wouldn’t ask me to do it if she didn’t really need me there.]

Jason hurriedly waded out of the pool, as the others looked at him in curiosity in Kellin’s case, concern on the others. Dahnai, he called openly, *I have to go home. There’s an emergency.*

No! she protested suddenly and heatedly. *No, you can’t leave now! You’ve not even been here a full day!*

Would you keep playing when your people needed you, Dahnai? he sent, a bit chidingly. *And only I am going back. Everyone else is staying, and if things go well, I might make it back here by tonight.*

Well... in that case, I guess I can permit it, she sent, but she was bitterly disappointed, and it bled into her thought.

I’ll be back as soon as I can, he promised, breaking into a run as soon as he was out of the pool.

He didn’t have time to dress. He just grabbed his clothes, wrapped a towel around himself, and startled quite a few Faey as he barreled across the grounds, running around the side of the palace grounds in a rarely-traveled area to get to the main landing pad, where his dropship would be waiting. Aya was waiting for him on the pad, with his court robe garment bag

over her armored shoulder. *Let's go*, he told her urgently, hurrying up the steps. *Is it just you and me?*

I'm all you'll need until we get wherever we're going. I've already called back to Karis and I have a dropship with a full squad of Dukal Guard ready to escort us wherever we're going.

We're going to talk about that once we're out of range of Dahnai's listeners.

Wise.

Jason explained it to her on the way up to the *Trelle's Gift* with four fighter escorts, and Aya frowned when she heard what happened. *What insanity would possess Exiled to sail to Embraiyn and commit acts of violence?*

I have no idea, but they were utter idiots to attack a Kizzik drone, he sent darkly. *They should know what Kizzik are, they had information on all the races of the Imperium from their history!*

I think the Kizzik joined the Imperium after the Third Civil War, Aya sent speculatively. *But still, I would be a fool to attack a nine shakra tall insect with razor-sharp blades for arms. Would they not think that the insect would fight back if they attacked it?*

I have no idea, but I'm gonna be so busy deciding whose ass to kick first that I'll probably stand there like an idiot for a good minute, he sent with a growl.

Jaiya had been prepared, and the ship left orbit with two escort ships as soon as the dropship and Raptors were in the bay and a second dropship took off to replace it on the ground. The ships set out at flank speed, 120% maximum engine output, which would get them to jump distance in about 9 minutes because of the exponential acceleration aspect of gravometric engines when they were shifted out of space translation mode and into a mode of operation similar to Imperium gravometric engines. Ships had to scramble out of their way as they raced away from the planet, gaining velocity at a frightening rate, and then starting to decelerate so they could be at jump speed the instant they were far enough away to jump safely. Jason allowed Aya to help dry him as he downloaded video of the attack in Embraiyn, and he was disgusted. The Exiled had sailed off to the south on their ship, circled very wide of the island, then came back and landed at the marina of Embraiyn. Marina workers came out to help them, and were pelted with rocks. About 14 youths, 9 girls and 5 boys, then flooded into Embraiyn carrying shoulder-slung pouches filled with rocks. They threw them at pedestrians. They threw them through windows. They tore down plas-pole signs. One young woman hit a child in the head with a rock, and the child had to be taken to the hospital. Then, came the attack. A group of 7 Exiled came around a corner and encountered a lone Kizzik drone helping two Makati at an unearthed trench, where they were installing a new spur line for the water system. The 7 Exiled assaulted the three of them with rocks, and where the Makati dove into the trench, the Kizzik turned and attacked. It all but tore the lone fatality in half with its sword arms, and inflicted multiple wounds on the terrified teens before the KMS finally responded. They held off the Kizzik using their armor, not attacking it, and it had injured itself trying to attack the armored soldiers. The noble finally came to calm it down.

There was some blame on both sides, he saw. The youths certainly carried the majority of the blame for doing something so stupid, but the KMS had failed to respond quickly. Jason counted a 5 minute delay from the initial contact at the marina until the KMS finally got on the scene, and that had been just long enough to get one of the Exiled killed.

After they jumped back, he scrambled into his court robes as they raced towards Karis, not having enough time to dress properly. He forewent the underclothes and just had Aya help him get the outer robe on, which looked a little baggy on him without the inner robe to go with it. Jaiya relayed his instructions to Karis as they approached, and there were quite a few of them. He didn't fly down in a dropship, he flew down in a two-seater Raptor trainer they

sent up for him when they reached orbit. The dropship holding the other Dukal guards joined him about ten miles out from Exile, and they landed to an ugly scene. KMS infantry and two Gladiators were on the island, facing a shouting, angry crowd of Exiled that were gathered in the open square area just by the docks where their sailing vessels were tied up. He saw one young male Exiled rush forward and throw something at an armored KMS infantry soldier, which bounced harmlessly off her armor.

ENOUGH! Jason's savage sending rocked across the island, making several Exiled almost fall to their knees. Jason used his absolute, gestalt-boosted power, and with the gestalt, Jason had tremendous power. *I want the Council, the Chieftess, Meya, Myra, and the Exiled who sailed to the mainland in front of my ship the instant I land!* he thundered as the Raptor made a slow descent behind another dropship. He saw in his mind's eye the smaller dropship that would be carrying the Kizzik noble to which the drone from Embraiyn was attached.

He landed and opened the canopy, then swung over and dropped to the ground. Without his armor, it was quite a jump, and the robe billowed up to show the whole town of Exiled that he wasn't wearing anything underneath it. Aura, the Council, the twins, and six young Exiled women padded hesitantly towards him, and he marched resolutely towards them. They stopped, he stopped, and he cast a scathing glare across the entire host. *Now, someone explain to me what the hell happened.*

One of your monsters killed Hayr Zevarre! one of the young women sent angrily. *It killed a young man!*

Really? And exactly why was he on the mainland? Jason asked, giving the woman who sent a withering stare.

She was guiltily silent.

Thought you'd jaunt over to the mainland, terrorize a few locals, deface a few signs, and make a nuisance of yourself so you could impress the boys you took with you, did you? Jason asked scathingly. *Strike a blow for the Exiled and their unjust imprisonment on this god-forsaken rock?*

The teenager flushed and looked away awkwardly. No doubt, Jason had nailed exactly why they did it.

But then you had the utter lack of sense to harass a nine shakra tall insect with SWORD BLADES ON ITS ARMS? he raged, which made her shrink back from him fearfully.

It attacked us! one of the others sent in defense.

Of course it did! If someone threw a rock at me, I'd do something about it too!

It tried to kill us! another sent in outrage.

Yes, it did, Jason sent bluntly. *What you decided to annoy is called a Kizzik.* "Kizzik," he said aloud. *Kizzik come in two varieties, nobles and drones. You encountered a drone. Drones are stupid and react on instinct when faced with a situation they can't understand. You acted in a way it construed to be an attack, and it attacked back. The difference is, a Kizzik attacks for one reason and one reason only.*

To kill, Meya sent gravely.

So, your merry little excursion to strike a blow for the Exiled against your evil captors GOT SOMEONE KILLED! he blasted. *You cost a young man his life!*

It wasn't our fault, it tried to kill us!

It wouldn't have touched you if you'd HAVE STAYED ON THE ISLAND! he raged immediately in response. *Did you think I put you here because I wanted you to feel trapped? Did you think I put you here to make this a prison? No! I put you here because there are things out there you do not understand, and on this planet, what you do not understand CAN KILL YOU!* he sent savagely, glaring at the young women. *I thought that you, my own people,*

would have the sense to not do something so stupid! And for such a childish reason! I saw the reports, and I watched the recording of your little stunt over in Embraiyn. Breaking windows? Throwing rocks at residents and tearing down signs? You sailed across the strait to act like common vandals and thugs! What explanation do you have for such outrageous behavior?

You keep us as prisoners! the tallest of the young women challenged. *You tore us from our homes without justification, and now you imprison us on this island! It's a captive's right to try to escape!*

Escape? Escape? Jason sent incredulously. *If you were trying to escape, why did you make sure to terrorize the village across the strait and attract so much attention to yourselves?* he asked scathingly. *Why didn't you sneak off into the mainland? As I recall, we have a forest reclamation project just beyond the town.* He looked out over the strait pointedly. *Yup, I can see the trees from here. Why didn't you land on the coast by the trees and slink off into the forest? No, you didn't do that. I have some interesting video of you mooring at a dock at Embraiyn, and when a couple of people came out to see what you needed, you threw rocks at them! I should give you some points for preparedness, since you brought your own rocks!* he snapped. *Then there's this lovely footage of you running down the street with your pouches of rocks, throwing them at anything that moved, breaking windows, and hurting people. Did you have fun? And which of you mighty warriors was the one that hit the four year old boy in the head with a rock and sent him to the hospital? Huh?* he demanded hotly.

You did this? Aura demanded with sudden anger. *You attacked a child?*

The young women were very silent, and fear was just starting to creep into their expressions.

The other dropship landed, and the young women, Aura, the council, and many of the Exiled gasped and shrank back when a Kizzik noble. She scrambled up to him, crossed her blade arms before her, and bowed at the waist to him. "I am Sk'Kr'Skt, humble daughter of the Karinne-Hive. I greet the revered Hive-Leader," the interface on her shoulder translated monotonously into Faey.

"I greet the honored daughter of the Hive," Jason returned. The Grand Duke, or Hive-Leader in this case, did not bow or make any motion of humility to one of lower rank. "I will speak so she may understand, since she cannot send, nor hear our sending," Jason said, using archaic Faey that they would comprehend. "What you have done is absolutely inexcusable!" he said hotly. "If I could throw you in prison for causing the death of Hayr, I would! But unfortunately, stupidity is not a criminal offense, and I follow the rule of law, not the rule of my own whim!" he said, looking scathingly at them. "I will instead leave this matter in the hands of the council and your Chieftess, and allow them to dispense judgment upon you by the rules of justice of your own people. But from this point on, nobody will leave this island without permission, and you will *not* be so childish! If you have a problem with the rules I have set and the place I have given you, then take it up with *me*. Do not sail to the mainland and throw rocks at innocent Karinnes who had nothing to do with your situation! You talk to the Chieftess, and she will summon me. Then you can throw rocks at *me* rather than being stupid infants!" He glared at them a moment. "Aura, remove them. They are yours to judge and punish by the laws and customs of your people."

Aura, a bit pale, nodded and had the council remove the young women.

"Honored daughter, I have summoned you here to help me with a different matter," he said. "I think it is wise to introduce the Exiled to the Kizzik."

"I am honored to be of assistance, Hive-Leader. What of my drone?"

"Was he badly injured?"

"No."

"Then we will tend his needs and return him to you well and whole."

"That is satisfactory."

"What name do the Karinnes use to address you, honored daughter?"

"They refer to me as Skrit," she answered.

"May I use this name for you?"

"As it pleases you, revered Hive-Leader."

Jason marched up to face the angry crowd, moving past the KMS guards, standing there in his ill-fitting court robe, and his face was filled with grim resolve. "People of Exile," he boomed, "I bring before you a creature of the same species as the one whom your teens attacked, so you may hear from *her* why her drone reacted as it did. I offer this in no way as any form of defense. I only wish you to understand the full truth of this matter, and then judge for yourself. Skrit," he urged, motioning behind himself to her.

Skrit ambled up past Jason on her four legs, then took a place in front of him, addressing the crowd of Exiled.

"As you might notice, I do not speak. I use this device of the Karinnes to translate the intent of my words in a way you can understand. Nor do I have the sense that you call *hearing*. I cannot hear the words you speak, instead this device hears your words for me and then translates it into what I may comprehend. So understand that I will speak to you with this device standing between the truth of my intent and what you might here. There may be... incorrectness in this translation, for this machine cannot understand the intent of the words I speak, it can only struggle to try to shape my intent into words you can understand," she began, looking at the crowd, then she turned and beckoned towards the dropship. Jason looked, and saw two Kizzik drones amble out, their chitinous legs clacking on the ramp of the dropship as they clattered up to the noble. The Exiled shrank back a little as the two hulking brutes took up positions behind the noble. "*These* are my drones," she explained. "They are my workers and my protectors. They are the hands and swords of the hive, where I am the mind of the hive. This is what your pupae attacked."

Her word pupae means teenagers, adolescents. She has no corresponding word in our language, and the device she wears translates her words literally, he sent quickly to explain.

"Among my species, there are two branches of Kizzik. There are the drones, and then there are we nobles. My drones are not very intelligent," she told them. "They are workers and defenders. They allow us to do their thinking for them, and in return, we work with them to make the hive prosper. When left alone, my drones will do as I told them to do, but if they encounter something which they do not understand, they will react on instinct. If your pupae threatened them, then they would react by meeting that threat. And my drones do not understand the concept of a fight where they do not battle to kill. They do not understand your ways. Most Karinnes understand this about our drones, and treat them with peace and kindness. When you treat them with respect and kindness, they are gentle and helpful. But when you threaten them with violence, they respond with violence. A drone will treat you as you treat it. Your pupae reacted to them with violence, and they responded in kind. I would admit that part of the blame for this lies with me, for I should not have left my drone unattended at his task. But I did not foresee the possibility that Exiled would cross the water in a boat against the wishes of the Hive-Leader and accost my drone."

"Thank you, Skrit. You may return to your duties. The gratitude of the Hive-Leader goes with you."

She crossed her sword-arms in front of herself and bowed, then ambled back towards the dropship with her drones following her.

So, now you know both sides of it, Jason sent to the Exiled. Remember that you're here for your own safety as much as to give you a place of your own while you either work to integrate into House Karinne or await the opportunity to return to your planet. I didn't think I'd need to do something as simple as tell you not to go to the mainland, but I see I was in grave error. So, from this point on, no Exiled ship will be allowed to come within two kathra of the mainland. You will stay on the island, where you may feel more safe, and where you can't get into any more trouble, he sent, with a bit of a dangerous tone. You will stay on the island until you prove that you will not allow another instance like this to happen again.

What of my son? An angry, mourning sending sizzled through the air accusingly. What of my Hayr! What will bring that monster to justice for killing my son?

Your son died not because of the Kizzik, but because he allowed himself to be talked into doing something foolish, Jason sent in reply, using a gentle and reasonable tone. He was firm, but his sending also conveyed his feeling of responsibility and the sense of loss, with a hint of anger that this had happened. You do not blame the well when a child ignores the rope around it and climbs over it, then promptly falls down into it. The Kizzik was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and your son's friends made a costly mistake in throwing rocks at it, which it interpreted as an attack. If you do not believe my words, I will make available a vidy recording of your youths running amok in Embraijn, the attack on the Kizzik, and the Kizzik's retaliation, which were also recorded. This, though, will not be available for the entire village to view, for it captured the death of Hayr, and I would not subject the Exiled to that image. That somber recording will only be made available to the Chieftess, the council, and to the family of Hayr should they wish to view it, so they may see the truth of what happened.

The Chieftess and your council have the authority to mete out whatever justice they feel is necessary in the matter, and so I will allow them to do so. But I implore you, in the strongest possible terms, to listen to the decision of the Chieftess and view the evidence I present before you before you condemn me or the house for this incident. As I said, I will not accuse or pass judgment here, I will leave that to you. But I want you to understand that I'm not trying to keep you prisoner here. I'm not trying to be a tyrant. I need to keep you here where you're safe from the things you haven't yet had the opportunity to learn about and understand. Had you time to learn of Karis, then you would have been taught about the Kizzik and introduced to them in an entirely different way, for the Kizzik are actually a peaceful and intelligent race, who fight only when they feel threatened. Had your youths learned about the other races on Karis, they would have known better than to attack a Kizzik drone. That is why I see this as a tragic and foolish accident, and not an act of aggression. Because I do understand the Kizzik, and I know that a drone would never attack without provocation. I provided you this island so you might feel comfortable and safe while you either learn about Karis or wait to return to Exile, not feel violated upon by Karinnes. I did not place you here so you would feel like I have imprisoned you.

He plucked at his robes. This is how important I felt it was to address you. I was on Draconis, at court, when word reached me of this, and I rushed home to straighten this out. I didn't exactly have enough time to look the part of the Grand Duke for you, he sent ruefully, lifting the robe enough to expose his bare legs, which produced a few twitters of laughter. I was attending a party the Empress was hosting honoring my son Rann's first visit to court and his first official state visit to his betrothed wife, Shya Merrane, the Empress' younger daughter. Empress Dahnai was holding the party at her swimming facility, to provide entertainment to the children present. And we don't exactly wear court robes to swim. So, next time I come to Exile, please make it a pleasant visit where I might come among you and

learn about you, celebrate with you, and come to feel closer to you, not when I get summoned back to deal with a tragedy that could have been prevented.

He turned without another word and stalked back towards his dropship, but he pointed at the twins. *Come with me,* he sent darkly. They followed along behind him in trepidation, and as soon as they got back to the Raptor, he turned and gave them both a hard look. "How the fuck did this happen?" he demanded. "Five minutes! Five minutes the Exiled were running wild in Embraijn!"

"We never thought to put military units in the town," Myra said contritely. "They don't really have the facilities. And when it happened, when the surveillance warned us that they were approaching the town, we didn't have any dropships on the island. The one we usually keep here was ferrying a child with a compound fracture he suffered in a fall to Karsa, we didn't have the facilities to repair that kind of damage."

"We also don't keep any KMS here on the island, Jayce, you know that," Meya said defensively. "You made the order yourself, to prevent the Exiled from feeling they're under military occupation. So there was no one here who had armor or any antigrav that could cross the strait quickly to head it off. All we had was a single Raptor pilot with armor in the area, and when she tried to stop the gang, it just split up on her and made it impossible for her to stop them all. They had to scramble a response team from Treya, and that's fifty kathra away. We called it in as soon as we saw the Exiled sloop approaching Embraijn, and it took them nearly fifteen minutes to get troops here. They didn't think it was very important until the Exiled landed at the marina and started assaulting citizens."

Jason frowned, but he could see that it wasn't really their fault. If anything, it was his. He should have put a garrison in Embraijn, and he remembered thinking about doing just that. But he'd never got around to making the order. "Alright," he sighed. "I'll make sure that never happens again."

"So, you don't blame us?" Myra asked.

"I guess not," he told them. "As far as the lack of response goes, I think it's my fault more than anyone else's. I never dreamed they'd do something like that. I've been trying to see them as *us* so hard, I blinded myself to the truth that they are *not* us. At least not all of them, and not yet. I promise I'll fix that. From now on, you'll be two minutes from armed intervention if it's needed." He glanced to where the council and Aura were, dressing down the seven young ladies. Jason noted that the young men weren't there. "Cybi," he said aloud, accessing his gestalt and communing in unison with his words.

"Yes, Jason?" came an audible reply, as he put Cybi's communion on the speaker of his gestalt so the twins could hear.

"Relay this command to Central. I want a temporary garrison of fifty infantry in Embraijn set up by the end of the day. I want them armed with gear to subdue a possible riot without any harm to the rioters."

"I will relay the order," she promised. "Shall I make it a direct command, or a guideline from which they can alter the order as they see fit?"

"They can adjust the order as they see fit, but remind them that we're not *imprisoning* the Exiled on the island. So I don't want to see any armed patrols, no force fields, no Raptors or Gladiators hovering threateningly over the island. If they want to station some mecha here, that's fine, but they don't make an issue out of being visible as some kind of threat to the Exiled. Just make the preparations and keep them low-key."

"Very well."

"There, problem solved," Jason sighed. "But I see another couple of hours here coming," he added when Aura hurried up to him.

Your Grace, we wish you to attend our discussion about this incident, before we take up the matter with the children.

That's fine. But I can't stay here for days, the Empress is expecting me to return to Draconis.

We only wish you attend the initial conference so we might understand the full truth of the matter. After we know, then we would not wish to delay you any longer.

Good. So, let's get this going.

They retreated to a council chamber, and Jason spent nearly two hours with them. He showed them the video surveillance of Embraijn, and after warning them of the graphic and disturbing nature of the attack on the Kizzik, he showed that to them as well. After that, they discussed the attack, the repercussions, and the unrest the death had caused on the island. The council was worried, but not because the Exiled might rebel. They were more worried about bad feelings festering, and that it would cause most of the Exiled to return to their planet when Jason claimed it.

He couldn't refute that... and maybe, he started to realize, that was best. He had falsely embraced the idea that the Exiled would want to come home, would happily return to Karis... and many of them would. But the circumstances of having to move and the restriction of being put here were too much for them, and they were angry and resentful.

Perhaps it would be best to keep the peace on Karis to get them off the planet as soon as possible.

Jason took a moment as one of the council debated how to keep order and accessed his gestalt and had it check the schedules. The interdicator would be finished in three days. And what was more important, the *next* interdicator would be finished in about ten days. As they completed the first interdicator, all the workers just didn't have the room to work on it, so those who no longer had room to work on the first interdicator had started a second. And the second and subsequent interditors had the advantage of now having a system of construction in place. They had available parts, they had assembly protocols, and they had the experience of having done it before. Myleena estimated that they'd be able to build an interdicator every 10 days once they got into full production. So, that put reclaiming Exile two weeks out. There was still the need to put a Stargate there, but he could manage that. He was the *amu dorai* of the Empress, and it was about time to abuse that relationship. He would beg a Stargate from Dahnai, then claim Exile... and in so doing, he would send the Exiled that wanted to go home back.

Jason stood up abruptly. *Tell your people that in two takirs, we can start taking them back to Exile, he announced. By then, I should have the interdicator and Stargate we need to defend the system from the Consortium. The interdicator needed for Exile will be finished in a takir and four days. We have to take it to Exile and turn it on, and it will take it two days to fully activate. This incident reminds me that there are people on Karis who do not want to be here, and that goes against the entire ideal of this planet. I will allow all who wish to leave to return to Exile, and return to the original plan of opening ties to Exile for those who wish to remain, so they enjoy our assistance without having to live on Karis. Those who wish to stay on Karis will be welcomed, with the understanding that those who remain here must stay here until such time that I am absolutely sure that we can hold Exile from the Consortium. I will not release those with intimate knowledge of the house into a position where they can be captured.*

Aura stood up, her face somber. *I intend to stay here, she announced. So those who wish to return need to declare themselves and choose a new council and a new Chieftess to lead them.*

Leave that to your own devices, Jason warned. I was hoping that by bringing you home, you might at least enjoy all we had to offer, but I see that some are so bitter over taking them from Exile that they will refuse any kindness we offer. So, I'm changing our plans and securing Exile early, and then I'll send those who wish to return back to the planet. Those that wish to stay, may stay. Those that wish to go, may go. Now, if there's nothing else you need me for, I'll excuse myself and return to Draconis.

Your Grace, please, remain, Aura sent to him privately. I need to talk to you after this conference.

Only if it won't take too long.

Our tradition is to hold councils of trial three days after the complaint is brought forth, so that everyone may prepare. So after this council is done, we will adjourn. You may wait in my home if you wish.

Alright, but I'll only wait an hour, he warned, then he sent openly. Good day to you, he said in farewell, then Aya escorted him from the room. "What a mess," he sighed as they left the building.

Is it wise to waste resources on Exile when we need them for the Imperium?

I wanted the planet anyway, he answered her. And since it's already verdant, we could get to work farming there quickly. I meant to go secure it after getting some defenses in place in the Imperium, but I also have a duty to my people. A duty more important than a duty to the Imperium. They've made it clear that they're not happy here, and so I will allow them to go back to Exile if they want. Dahnai will just have to wait a couple of extra weeks.

A risk.

No more than losing another innocent life here, he answered her. And I won't allow that.

Jason waited in Aura's living room with Aya and four other Dukal Guard standing silent guard with him. He had them bring him some clothes from home, and Aya helped him remove his robe without tearing the cords. Jason had wanted to *look* like he had been rushed to get here to create just that image, that he had dropped everything and came running when he heard what happened... which was the truth. But seeing it was much different than them just hearing him say it. But now that it was over, he wanted to get out of his court robe before he tore it or stained it. It hadn't been cheap, it had been personally tailored just for him, and a good court robe was hard to make. Jason was so used to Aya, and had become so used to Faey customs, that he really didn't even think twice about standing naked in front his guards.

Aura naturally chose that moment to enter, and he saw her eyes take him in from across the room, lingering on his lower half brazenly... or at least brazenly to a human. Despite a thousand years of isolation, the Exiled had the same basic Faey concepts of propriety when it came to such things. They too saw the nude form as beauty, saw nothing wrong with admiring a nude body, and her admiration of him was an entirely proper thing. To pretend not to admire him could be construed as insulting.

Enjoying the view? he asked idly as Aya carefully folded his robe for him, and Maena offered him a pair of underwear.

You are very handsome, your Grace, she answered, and to Jason's surprise, there was a hint of sexual desire lurking under her thoughts, almost unconsciously. He had seen her admiring him before, but he'd never detected any amorous currents in her thought before. Since he had an attraction to her because she reminded him of Dahnai, it seemed to catch his attention in a manner that wasn't entirely proper. She was interested in him, and interested sexually. And Jyslin had already given him permission to sample Aura if the opportunity ever showed itself...

He blinked and looked away from her, then took his briefs from Maena with a nod of

thanks. Not now. He was expected back on Draconis, and he didn't really have time. He knew she was attracted to him now. If he invited her to his bed, she very well may accept. But when he came back, he was of a mind to summon Aura to some neutral location, take those clothes off of her, and find out just how much like Dahnai she really was.

If you can't wait to get back, you may use my house, your Grace.

Huh?

Her eyes drifted down, and he looked down to see that his penis was erect. His musing of Aura had caused his body to respond.

Oh, he sent, flushing slightly as Aya smiled at him. Sorry about that.

No need to apologize to me, your Grace, Aura told him. You have honored me by giving me insight into your private life, and I understand you are going to return to your wife and both your amu dorai. No doubt you're anxious to return to the arms of a lover, as any virile young man would be. If you can't wait that long, though, you may take whichever guard who serves as your consort up to my room.

Jason accessed the time on his gestalt. It was 1917 hours on Draconis, and that was about midafternoon on Draconis, since days there were 30.04 hours long, and days on Karis were 28.92 hours long. That was about five hours before sunset, and since Dahnai usually retired to her apartment for personal time with her family at 2300 hours and started court at around 0900 hours, that left a sizable window.

He had an hour or so before time really pressed on him to return to Draconis. And he already had permission to pursue Aura if he so wished.

I think I will use your bedroom, Aura, Jason sent, pushing the briefs back at Maena. He stepped up to Aura and grabbed her hand. Interested?

She gave him a surprised look, then her cheeks stained a lovely shade of violet. *I would be honored, your Grace.*

I'd rather you be willing.

Oh, yes, I am most willing! she agreed with an excited smile.

Then let's go. I don't have much time, so I apologize in advance that this must be quick. If that doesn't bother you, that is.

Aura almost dislocated his shoulder as she rushed towards the stairs.

Wow.

Aura had been very satisfying, and he did not regret having sex with her in the slightest. She was almost as enthusiastic about sex with him as his loves, and since they didn't have time to really enjoy it the way Jason was used to, she made up for it with vigor and passion. She gave him a wild, hot, highly erotic ride, even when she was on her back and with her legs high in the air. She too was a prolific sender during sex, but she wasn't as invasive as Dahnai, more content to broadcast her pleasure to him without trying to push herself into the private domain reserved for Jyslin and Symone. She was much more demure, and despite her strong body and tall frame, she was submissive, letting him do whatever he wanted, which was diametrically different from Dahnai, who liked to dominate even during sex. Her body was sweet and erotic to him, but that was Dahnai's fault, since her body had made him attracted to women with a little muscle on them, and Aura was certainly well built with both strong muscle and feminine curves. That was what had caused his initial attraction to Aura in the first place, her muscular, tight little body.

It took him a few minutes to regain his breath after they had shared an intense climax together, and Aura lay under him, her hands stroking his sides, shoulders and chest sensually, looking up at him with her striking golden eyes. *Did I please you, your Grace?*

Aura. We just had sex. I think that gives you the right to call me Jason now.

She laughed delightfully and pulled him down into a kiss. *Did I please you, Jason?* she asked even as she kissed him.

Didn't I just pump about a gallon of come into you?

I believe you did, she sent impishly. I thought it was wonderful, she sent in satisfaction. Ever since my husband and child died, I've not shared in the joys of sex as much as others, nor as much as it has been offered to me. It reminded me too much of my beloved Trannan. But I'm glad I gave myself to you. You were both gentle and strong, and you reminded me of the ecstasy I can find in the arms of a man I find beautiful. She laughed. I just hope your wife and amu dorai aren't angry with me. I'm not the consort they usually entrust to satisfy your appetite when they're not with you.

Jyslin gave me permission, he assured her. I've been attracted to you since I went to Exile and we bathed together. Your body reminded me of Dahnai, and I'm very attracted to Dahnai, so I became physically attracted to you. I hide nothing from my wife, and I told her about it. She already gave me permission to have sex with you if I had the opportunity. And she's the only one that really matters. Symone wouldn't care either way, and Dahnai doesn't really have the right to tell me who I can sleep with. When I sensed your desire when you were staring at my dick, I decided to act on it.

I've never been happier to make a mistake, she laughed. I was trying very hard to keep that out of my thoughts.

I'm glad too. You're the equal of any of my women in bed, Aura.

The result of months of abstinence, she admitted with a smile. You took a woman to bed who hasn't had an orgasm in months.

Well, your hunger made it very intense, he sent with a teasing smile. But now I have to get back to Draconis. My wife and amu are waiting for me, and I'm sure I'll be spending a while tonight telling them all about my sexual adventure with you. They love to hear it when I'm acting naughty. They actually encourage me to sleep around, because they love the idea that I'm embracing Faey values more and more.

If you ever wish to be naughty again, I am always available, your Grace, she told him with a bright-eyed smile, taking one of his hands and placing it on her full breast, urging him to fondle her. He did so, enjoying the feel of her full, responsive breast, then he leaned down and kissed her nipple, which made her sigh in pleasure and slide the inside of her thigh along his hip and leg.

"Sneaky girl, you're not baiting me into another session when I'm going to be scolded for being late as it is," he teased aloud, bending down and kissing her nipple, then rising up off of her, which caused their genitals to separate from their sexual joining. But there will be other opportunities, he promised, patting her on her lower belly, then running his fingers through her trimmed golden pubic hair. I can't offer you a relationship or regularity. Our sexual relationship will be a casual one, Aura, but there will be one. I do have a wife and an amu dozei, and they keep me satisfied. But, on those days when you're in the mood and I'm available, I'll be happy to pay you a little visit, he told her, sliding his fingers below her golden pubic hair to grope her in a most intimate manner. I found you to be a vigorous and exceptionally passionate lover, and I'll happily kneel between your open legs and fuck this gorgeous pussy, he finished, assaulting her with graphic thoughts, images, and impulses as he stared right at her vulva

You mean man, telling me there's no time, yet fondling me in such an intimate manner while sending such erotic thoughts! she accused with a lovely smile. I should demand satisfaction for that!

Now that's what I want, he sent. I'm not just the Grand Duke, Aura, I'm also a man. So if

you start thinking of me as an institution instead of a person again, I'm gonna spank you... and not the fun way. The next time you call me your Grace when we're in private, I'll do much worse to you, and then leave you hanging. And trust me, I know how to leave you hanging in a way that makes you run out and rape the first man you come across. I have practice in it.

She laughed helplessly, then sat up and gave him a lingering kiss. *It's not easy, but I'll try, she told him. And you owe me for that!*

Then you'll have to come collect some day, he smiled, leaning down and kissing her. But I have to get dressed and get back to Draconis now.

Jason, if you had interest in me, why did you wait until now to act on it? she asked as they both got out of her bed, and Aya came in with a smug little smile, holding his clothes. Surely you know that I would have submitted to you no matter what. You are my Grand Duke, it would have been a matchless honor for you to be sexually attracted to me. I would never deny your advances.

That's one reason why, he told her, taking his clothes from Aya with a nod of thanks. I don't have sex with women who consider it a duty, only those who come to my bed because they're sexually attracted to me. I never use my position to browbeat women into sex. If I want sex, I have a wife and an amu dozei to give me all the sex I want, he declared. I also gave you space because I wasn't sure how your people would react to finding out you were having sex with me. It might have undermined your position of authority. But now that I've made it public that your people may return to Exile if they want, that's a moot point.

I doubt that would have mattered to my people, Jason. Sex is not something one does in public space, but that doesn't mean we don't enjoy it and celebrate the beauty of it. One sign of friendship between a man and a woman is them exploring their sexual attraction to each other. They would probably have seen it in a positive light, she told him. If we had a sexual liaison, then they'd feel that you were closer to us because you found one of us attractive and desirable. Your alien nature puts many of my people off, Jason. But now, when I go out there and reveal we've had sex because we share a mutual attraction, it will faezye you in their eyes. They will see that I am your friend now, and that might make them more at ease.

I didn't think of that, Jason admitted as he pulled his shirt on. I'm still feeling out just how similar the Exiled are to other Faey. Pretty similar, I'm coming to discover.

I'm happy to hear that, she said, her eyes locked on his body as he dressed, watching him. I'll do what I can to prepare both those staying and those returning to be ready when the time comes, Jason.

Good. Work with Meya and Myra, they'll help you in any way they can, he said as he sat on the bed and slipped on a pair of soft moccasin-like shoes he preferred to wear without socks. He put his arms around her and gave her another kiss, making sure to grab her backside with both hands while doing so. Thanks for a fantastic hour, Aura, he sent impishly. It was worth the scolding I'll get when I get back.

I'm happy to have made you happy, Jason, she answered. And as soon as we both have the time, we must meet again when we have more time to enjoy it.

That we will, he promised. Oh.

What?

What was it you wanted to talk to me about? I don't think I let you get that far.

She laughed. *Well, I wanted to offer a personal apology to you.*

Well, I'd say I've forgiven you, and you've forgiven me, he sent dryly.

I'd have to agree, she laughed audibly in reply.

He left her in the bedroom, as Aya and Maena walked with him out of the house. Meya and

Myra were standing in the square nearby, and they hurried up to him. "Whatever were you doing in there for so long, Jayce?" Meya asked, her eyes dancing.

"And what were those sounds I heard? It sounded like 'Oh! Oh! Ohhhhh, Trelle, yes!'" Myra called, doing a good job at really hamming up her moaning.

"Me and Aura had a private conference," Jason said dryly as they fell into step with him, heading for the ships.

"Private, eh? I didn't know that all of your private conferences involved banging the dignitary. I guess those private conferences you had with the Urumi Brood Princesses had to be... bony," Meya noted.

"Stop being nasty," Jason chided.

"May as well ask the sun to go out, Jayce," Myra teased with a wink. "So, was she good?"

"Was she worth the hell you'll catch when you have to explain to the Empress why you were here so long?" Meya added.

"She's better than either of you," he retorted.

"We've never had sex before," Myra protested.

"Thus she's better than you," he told them. "At least *she* got me horny enough to do her. What have you two done for me lately?"

They laughed. "Why Jason, are you propositioning us?" Myra grinned.

"No. I'll forever leave you two untouched, so I can always tease you about how much better other women are compared to you without ever having to prove it."

They exploded into laughter.

He knew Symone and Jyslin wouldn't mind if he was a couple of hours late because he was fucking Aura, something they actively encouraged, but there was no telling how Dahnai was going to react. She was very jealous of the rare time she got to spend with him, and he wasn't sure how she was going to see it when he admitted he was an hour late because he was screwing some unknown woman back on Karis. But there wasn't much he could do about it other than offer to give her time in compensation. He'd just have to be honest about it.

Aya was almost insufferable, and he had no idea why. She just kept smiling and grinning at him, so much so that he started blushing every time he looked at her. "What?" he finally asked, a bit testily, as they approached Draconis in *Trelle's Gift*, already in the dropship and waiting to be given permission to launch.

My, my, my, are you in trouble, she sent with a sly smile. The Empress is going to skin you, your Grace.

I know, I'm already working out how to make it up to her, he replied. I guess I'll plead temporary insanity and throw myself at the mercy of the court.

Empress Dahnai isn't known for mercy, Aya sent teasingly.

I have an advantage over most others. I can offer sex as an apology and have a moderate chance of it being accepted.

Aya laughed soundlessly.

When he got back to the palace at 2437, he was directed back to Dahnai's apartment. Aya escorted him back, and then gave him a teasing smile when they reached the door, which opened for him. *Good luck, she sent lightly as she sent him into the apartment, and then the doors were closed behind him. Everyone was in the living room, he saw. Dahnai was sitting with her legs draped over Tim's lap, sitting sideways on the couch. Symone and Jyslin were sitting on the floor with Kellin and the four children, playing a Terran board game, Monopoly, with Maer and Sirri, while Rann and Shya played with several dolls just past them. "It's about time," Dahnai said sharply, looking up from her handpanel. "What happened?"*

"We had a... problem," he said, blowing out his breath. "I'm afraid I can't really explain it

to you unless you swear yourself to secrecy. Actually,” he frowned. “I need to tell you anyway, because I’m going to be asking you for a *huge* favor.”

“Oh really?” she asked, putting the panel aside as he came and sat on the other couch.

“It’s your turn, Aunt Jyslin,” Sirri prompted.

“Oh? Fine,” she smiled, picking up the dice and rolling them.

“Well, you know I’m not going to tell anyone, babe,” Dahnai told him. “So what happened?”

“Remember when I told you I was gathering all the Karinnes? Well, I found some descendants of the *original* house,” he began. “They call themselves the Exiled, and they fled the Imperium and hid out on a planet halfway across the galaxy.”

“Woah!” Dahnai gasped.

He nodded. “To make a long story short, the Consortium must have followed us when we went to go see them, so I had to collect them up and bring them back to Karis. But they’re not... happy,” he sighed. “I had to go back because there was a fatality among the Exiled. Some of their disgruntled youths went to a neighboring town and were harassing people by throwing rocks. Well, one of them threw a rock at a Kizzik drone.”

Dahnai winced. “Not smart.”

“They had no idea what it was, and naturally it attacked them. You just don’t do that to a drone.”

“No doubt.”

“So, I had to run back and put out the fire when the Exiled threatened to form a mob over the death of one of their own. They’ve proven to be a headache to me, so I’m going to do something about it.” He looked at her. “I want to buy two Stargates from you, Dahnai, but I can’t pay for them right now. I have to get them on credit. Would you lean on 2M for me?”

“You’re going to put them back on the planet where you found them?”

He nodded. “The ones that want to go. Oh, I’m not going to abandon them, I’ll use them to establish a Karinne colony on the planet. I was actually planning to claim the planet from the start. It’s *arable*, Dahnai, and since Karinne literally has to buy its own food, since Karis is still mostly barren and we leased out Terra to the Surrales, we need a farming planet of our own. I could really turn it into a farming powerhouse, but it’s literally halfway across the galaxy. That’s too far away for me to defend, and since the Consortium already knows about it, I can’t very well just put them back or claim the planet without defending it. They’re my people. So, I’m going to put an interdictor there. But, to do that, I need a Stargate. Once I get it set up, I’ll allow the Exiled to return to their home planet, and I’ll also move in and claim the planet. But I need Stargates, and I can’t pay for them right now.”

“Well, it seems that I have something you need,” she said with a growing smile. “And that means you have to give me something I want.”

“Dahnai,” he warned.

“I want a piece of that planet, Jayce,” she told him bluntly. “Merrane needs *house* farming reserves. We’re actually in the same fix you are the house consumes more food that it produces. We need a secure and stable source of food. So, you have a planet you can’t defend or reach, I need a food supply exclusive to the house. Agree to share the planet, and we can reach an agreement over your Stargates.”

“Unacceptable,” Jason said immediately. “There’s a primitive indigenous race on the planet, and I’m not going to let the Merranes do to them what the Trillanes did to us. I’m going to *claim* the planet, but I’m not going to *conquer* it. I’ll make contact with that race and try to bargain an agreement with them, and if they refuse, I’ll move in and set up farming colonies in areas where they don’t live, respecting their territory. If I give you access to the planet,

you’ll just move in and enslave them.”

“Well then, I guess you don’t want those Stargates, babes,” she said bluntly. “This isn’t an offer up for negotiation.”

“Yes it is,” he said. “If you just want a secure source of food, then I’d be happy to arrange an exclusive deal with you for food we produce on that planet. But the planet is *mine*.”

She glared at him a moment, then she took on a thoughtful look. “Exclusive?”

“Exclusive. And I’ll make it very cheap. Basically just pay what it costs to produce the food, and it’s yours.”

“Half the output?”

“Half sounds fair to me,” he said immediately.

“One more thing,” she said. “I want access to the planet.”

“No. You—”

“I said *access*,” she cut him off. “If it’s halfway across the galaxy, then that means there might be some expansion opportunities,” she told him. “I want permission to put up a second Stargate there at a later time that will let us use it as a base to explore.”

“That might be hard, with the interdictor up,” he said. “You won’t be able to jump out to set up a second Stargate.”

“Well, we’ll find a solution to that problem when the times comes. If worse comes to worst, I’ll have it sent out sub-light and it just takes it a couple of years to get out to where we can use it. But I want passage rights through the system, and the opportunity to colonize any other planets in the system for Merrane.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Then it’s a deal!” she said quickly. “You’ll have your two Stargates in two days. That’s a promise. Now, when am I going to sign that agreement for interdictors?”

“As soon as I know they work,” he answered. “The first one will be finished and tested in two days. If it works, then we’re in business. The second one goes to Exile, and after that, I set up to mass produce them and we start making the Imperium impenetrable to the Consortium.”

“The sooner the better,” she said in agreement.

“Now, is it too late for me to buy into this game?” Jason asked with a smile, sliding down to sit with the others at the game board.

They spent about two hours together with the kids, playing the game out, then watching the viddy until Shya and Rann were both asleep on one of the couches. Dahnai had servants carry the children off to Shya’s foster parents to go to bed, and Dahnai and the others said goodnight to Maer and Sirri, sending them off as well, all the guards in the apartment filing out with them. And as soon as the last guard was out and the door was closed and locked, Symone immediately started stripping off her clothes. “Now the *real* fun begins,” she said, giving Kellin a leer. She was only wearing a haltar and a pair of shorts, so she managed to shed them in about two seconds, and knelt on the couch by Kellin and reached for the waistband of his shorts.

“Hold it,” Jyslin said, “he’s *mine* tonight. You had him last night.”

“We both had him last night,” Symone grinned.

“You also hogged him this morning, so find someone else,” she said, standing up and pulling her shorts down, basically sticking her shapely backside in Jason and Dahnai’s faces while she bent down to step out of them, then she walked over to the other couch, where Kellin and Symone were.

“Ladies, ladies, I’m more than willing to share,” Kellin said with a bright smile as Symone pulled his shorts down to expose his penis, and Jyslin wasted no time sinking her head into

his lap.

“Bitch, that was *mine!*” Symone protested.

Too late, Jyslin taunted as Kellin put a hand on Jyslin’s head, lacing her red hair between his fingers.

“Don’t you dare make him come!” Symone warned as she got on her knees on the floor in front of the couch, sliding her hand down and masturbating Jyslin expertly, which was in full view of the three on the other couch.

Tim, who was sitting on the far side of Dahnai, reached over and pulled her tank top up to reveal her breasts, then bent down to kiss and suck on them. *Mind a little company tonight, Dahnai?* he asked.

So kind of you to remember to ask after you start sucking on my tits there, Tim. I’ll make sure to ask you if you’re in the mood after I already start fucking you next time.

He laughed against her breasts. *Well, I kinda thought I already knew the answer*, he admitted.

Well, looks like Kellin’s going to play with your lesbo wives, so I guess I’ll solace myself by getting rocked between my human boytoys, Dahnai sent naughtily, pulling her tank top off. *After we have a little fun together, we can split up and spend the night alone. I want to experience you the same way I’ve experienced Jason and Kellin, Tim. Alone, in bed, and all night.*

I’m at your service, Dahnai.

You’d better be. I’m the Empress.

I would be even if you weren’t, Tim sent lightly.

Jason realized that he hadn’t made his confession, and it might be a little too late to do it. Jyslin, Symone, and Kellin were already hot and heavy into it, and Tim had Dahnai pretty much distracted with his mouth on her impressive breasts and a hand moving rhythmically in her shorts as it explored her nether regions. But, he also knew that if he didn’t come clean, he might have hell to pay later, when Dahnai finally found out.

Dahnai.

Mmm? she sent absently, the pleasure that Tim’s mouth and hand were giving her already bleeding into her thought.

I was later than I had to be, he admitted. *I got a little sidetracked back home.*

What possible difference does that make right now?

Well... he sent, then trailed off. *I was obeying one of Jyslin’s prior orders.*

Stop being roundabout and get to the fucking point, she told him, a bit tartly as she squirmed out of her shorts and opened her legs to give Tim’s hand total access to what he was exploring.

Jyslin told me that if I had an opportunity with someone back home, I should take it.

Jyslin looked back at him from Kellin’s lap, then laughed brightly. *You fucked Aura, didn’t you?* she sent impishly, then she had to push Symone off to keep her from taking Jyslin’s place in Kellin’s lap.

What? You were late getting back here because you were busy plowing some nameless woman’s pussy? Dahnai demanded, giving him a hot stare. *When you have three women here waiting for you?*

It wasn’t planned. It was something of a moment of passion, he sent, a bit contritely.

Aura. Is that the gold-haired bitch I’ve been seeing flitting through your thoughts? The one that’s built like me?

Well, you’re the reason I’m attracted to her, he sent, a bit defensively. *Thanks to you, I’m attracted to buff girls with big tits. After I had to straighten out the Exiled she was there, and,*

well, it happened. He relayed a memory of the scene in her house. *I was standing there with a fuckin’ hard-on, I had a little extra time, and she wanted it. So I spent an hour with her.*

Was she good? Symone asked, giving him a lascivious smile.

Pretty good, he admitted. *It was a fun hour, I can’t lie about that.*

About time, Jyslin sent in satisfaction. *I thought I was going to have to lock you in a room with her or something. I knew she had the hots for you, I could tell just by how she looks at you.*

Well, I guess I can forgive you for it, Dahnai told him, looking him in the eye. *You did restrict it to an hour, and you made a lucrative deal with me.*

Too bad I didn’t plan it that way, he admitted with a laugh as Tim slid down, settled himself between Dahnai’s spread legs, and lowered his head down to her give her oral sex. It made Dahnai hum in pleasure and put a gentle hand in his hair.

You’re gonna have to make it up to me, though... and you can start by giving me something to kiss.

He smiled, leaned over, and kissed her, making sure to get a healthy handful of her breast while doing so.

That’s not what I want to kiss, you silly boy, she told him with hungry eyes.

He laughed and stood up, then pulled his pants down to show her what she’d seen many times before.

That’s more like it. Now get naked and come stand over here on the couch so I don’t have to disturb Tim’s excellent job of giving me head.

Sleeping in Dahnai’s guest room, the future room of Sirri, was a weird experience.

Jason woke up early, and he had to push Symone off his back enough to get out from under her to go to the bathroom, nearly turning the wrong way and walking into a wall because he was so used to going from Dahnai’s room. He passed through the living room, where Jyslin and Kellin had slept on a gel mattress they’d brought out, never making it to the guest room that would eventually be Shya’s room, having fallen asleep on one of the three “fun beds” that Dahnai had had brought into the apartment so they had soft mattresses to lay on to have sex in the large living room... though they’d spent most of their time on the couches before splitting up to spend the night as three couples. They were awake now, though, and Jyslin was proving that she was also a morning girl. She was straddling Kellin, sitting on top of him as she had sex with him, and she smiled and blew him a kiss as he padded through the living room and returned to the guest room. Kellin certainly seemed to be enjoying it, from the grip he had on Jyslin’s breasts, kneading them roughly as she bounced up and down atop him. She was closed off to him, giving Kellin the “personal” experience of just him and her, what Dahnai had wanted from Tim, and what Kellin had had with Symone the night before.

Symone grunted as he slipped back into bed with her, then she sat up. “What time is it?” she asked blearily.

“Does it matter?” he asked simply as he laid back down.

“Guess not,” she said with a chuckle as she slid a leg over him and settled on top of him, looking down with a smile. “It’s morning,” she purred.

“It might be. It might just be an hour after we went to sleep,” he answered. “Don’t you ever get tired?”

She laughed. “Would you want me to?” she winked.

“Well, when you put it that way,” he said, which made her giggle like a little girl. “You need to learn to share, young lady. You could have really pissed Dahnai off.”

She laughed ruefully. “I didn’t draw blood,” she said quickly.

“Kellin certainly didn’t find it very pleasant. I know *I* wouldn’t if you bit my dick. That is

not the way you keep Jyslin from giving him head.”

“Well, I’ll apologize later,” she said with a hungry smile. “I am *so* getting my mouth on Dahnai’s pussy at least one more time before we leave. And what about you, you horny slut?” she grinned. “Banging Aura like a Barkan whore and making us wait for you!”

“It was a moment of weakness,” he said dryly, which made her laugh.

“How was it? I want to full description, not just *she was good*. Is she a squealer? How tight is she? Is she a kinkmistress? What does she taste like?”

“No, pretty tight, no, and I didn’t have time to go down on her,” he answered.

“Men who don’t go down on girls get friction burn,” she winked.

“She was pretty much well ready to go, so no friction burn here,” he replied lightly.

She rose upon her knees, scooted back a little, and inspected him carefully with both her eyes and hands. “I do believe you’re right,” she grinned.

He laughed. “Such a tease,” he accused, reaching out and putting his hands on her belly, rubbing it gently. “Gotten used to the idea of it yet?”

“No, I still get a little thrill down my spine every time I think about it,” she answered, putting her hands over his on her flat stomach. “I have a *baby* in here,” she said with a dreamy smile. “Me and Tim are going to have a baby. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s absolutely fantastic,” he told her with a gentle smile. “Soon Rann’s gonna have another playmate. And if we’re lucky, Jyslin will give your daughter someone her own age to play with too.”

“I think she will,” Symone smiled. “The potassium worked like Aris’ breath for me, it’ll work for Jys too. We’ll be pregnant together. I hope we have the same cravings,” she laughed.

“I just hope you don’t lose your sex drive like Jyslin did,” he grinned. “I’ll be hurting if my *amu dozei* and my wife both don’t feel like it when I’m looking for a playmate.”

“There’s always Tim,” she winked.

“No thanks,” Jason said simply. “I love him like a brother, but there’s just no fire there, love. I’ll just have to move in with Dahnai,” he smiled. “She has a couple of spare bedrooms in here, after all.”

“Oh no, you belong at home,” she giggled, pushing at his chest with both hands. “You’ll just have to live with blowjobs til we get over it. I don’t have to be in the mood to blow you.”

“Yeah, I got a lot of those when Jyslin went through that phase,” he recalled. “Did you enjoy your sex vacation?”

She laughed. “That’s about what it was,” she winked down at him. “And yes, I loved it. Kellin is a very sexy man, and he’s more than attracted to both of us. He’ll be a wonderful playmate for us when you come to see Dahnai. He even gets along very well with you and Tim. He’s more than worthy of being *our amu dorai*,” she told him. “Who knows, maybe after we really get to know Kellin and Dahnai, maybe we can all be *amu dozei*,” she mused. “The orgy Dahnai promised was more than worth it, but that’s not what we were really here to do. We were here to scope out Kellin,” she winked.

“And?”

“Big dick, lots of stamina, well trained by Dahnai,” she grinned. “He can make me come inside five minutes when he’s serious about it. He passes my *hot guy* test.”

“And Jys?”

“Can’t you hear her moaning?” Symone said with a wolfish smile. “But sex aside, he’s a kind, compassionate, very intelligent man. If he got me pregnant, I’d be honored to carry his child.”

“So he passes.”

“Oh yes he does,” she nodded. “Jys likes him too.”

“I hope this doesn’t mean I’m about to be divorced.”

Symone laughed. “Don’t be a goof,” she teased. “We think we could have him be an *amu dorai*. You can’t have *all* the fun, you know,” she winked. “You fuck Dahnai, it’s only fair we get to fuck Kellin.”

“That’s fair,” he said seriously, but he was smiling. “But I love Dahnai. That’s why she’s my *amu dorai*, and not just some friend I’m bed buddies with.”

“I think I could come to love Kellin,” she grinned. “We’ll see. For now, he’s just buddy sex. But maybe later, we’ll be something more.”

“Fair enough,” he told her, then he sighed. “Enjoy it while you can, love,” he told her. “When we go back, there’s going to be a lot of work to do. This is just the calm before our storm of activity. This really has been a vacation for me, a couple of days to relax, have fun, renew my passion for Dahnai, and introduce my girls to a new man whom they seem to really like,” he grinned. “We have interdictor tests tomorrow, then the summit next week, then we bust our asses claiming Exile, mass producing interdictors, and gearing up for the return of the Consortium.”

“You really believe they’re coming back?” she asked, a little fearfully.

“I know so,” he said grimly. “They didn’t come all the way from Andromeda to run away after one battle. They’ve just pulled back to lick their wounds and come up with a new strategy, and we have to be ready for them. The interdictors will really screw them up, and that’ll give us plenty of time to get ready. If we’re lucky, and I mean miraculously lucky, we’ll always be so well prepared for them that they’re too afraid to attack. But I don’t really believe that’s going to happen. There’s going to be a war, Symone. It’s going to get ugly, but in the end, we’ll beat them back.”

“Of course we will, we’re the Karinnes. We’re the meanest, baddest, roughest, toughest house on the block,” she said with an impish smile.

“I’d rather be the smartest and strongest house on the block,” he told her.

“That too,” she smiled, leaning down and kissing him. “Jayce.”

“Yes, love?”

“I think it’s morning,” she said, licking the tip of his nose playfully.

He laughed, wrapping her in his arms. “Well, little miss morning girl, let’s give you what you want,” he purred as he rolled her over on her back so he could make love to her. “entertainment?” he asked, which made Jyslin and Miaari erupt into helpless laughter.

Chapter 5

Vesta, 3 Oraa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 13 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 3 Oraa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Kosigi Lunar Base, Karis

Everything hinged on this.

Just about anyone who was anyone among the Karinnes was present on Kosigi today, for this was one of the most important days in the history of the House Karinne. Jason was there with his entire extended family, and nearly all the Generations were there as well. Cybi was among them too, her little camera flitting and hovering about. All the residents of the strip were there, the command staff was there, virtually anyone with a rank higher than Major was there.

They were all there to see this. They were all there to see the hyperspace interdictor get

towed out of a deep drydock bay by a pair of hauler ships. Skimmers, flying platforms, workers in E-suits and wearing gravometric engine backpacks, they all flitted around out there as the two tugs pulled the interdicator out. It was a sleek, gleaming device encased in a compressed Neutronium carapace. It was about a two hundred feet long and was shaped like a narrow oval, tapering at each end and thicker through the middle, looking very plain and nondescript. But inside that heavily armored shell was a tremendous amount of biogenic and moleculartronic circuitry powered by a singularity power plant, which powered two of six Terynium antennas. Terynium was the metal that all hyperspace communications used to broadcast into hyperspace, for the metal was *hyperdimensional*, it was a substance that existed as a real object in hyperspace, yet also existed in a rational form in three-dimensional space. Terynium wasn't rare, but it was very hard to refine, for it existed in its natural form only in hyperspace, and had to be brought into normal space where it was subjected to a two month long refinement process. It took months to collect and refine enough of it to form the antenna in the interdicator, and it was just lucky for them that the Karinnes of old had collected Terynium for *millennia* before they were destroyed, and it was all stored here in Kosigi, enough to build a thousand interditors. It too was named in honor of Tery Karinne, who had discovered Teryon energy. The interdicator had its two antenna parallel to each other, but only one would be in use at a time. The device would alternate using the antenna in a blinking pattern, which was actually critical to forming the hyperspace distortion that would prevent jumps into space affected by it. It was not only heavily armored, it was also actively shielded. It had the most powerful Teryon shield generator in it that Myleena could fit in it, and was equipped with one of the advances the Karinnes had not implemented in any other technology, nanite damage control systems. The ancient Karinnes used robotic damage control, but their repair drones ranged from the size of a human to about the size of an inchworm. These were even smaller, almost microscopic, which were tasked to maintain and repair the delicate circuitry inside, eliminating the need to dismantle the entire device to repair something inside. The damage control robots could effect repairs while the device was in operation, where they couldn't. They needed only to put a replacement part in an access hatch, and the robots would carry it in, replace the damaged part, and then put the broken part in the hatch when they were done. Because the device needed to be in operation at all times, it was built with three redundant systems that were independent of one another, including two extra sets of antennas, and it had an internal stockpile of enough replacement parts to literally build a fourth redundant system.

And what was most important, the device was fitted with something new, something that was untested, but something that looked to be very hopeful as a defense against Consortium Torsion weapons. It was outfitted with a special spatial damper, a device that was designed like something of a shock absorber for spatial manipulation. Up to a certain point, it did nothing to prevent spatial manipulation, mainly so it didn't interfere with the operation of its own engines. But when a *spike* of spatial distortion entered its protection area, the dampers kicked in to reduce that distortion, smooth it out. The device was an adaptation of something they already had, standard equipment on every starship to contain spatial warping around the engine, but this specific design was built around cancelling the Torsion effect. From the simulations Myleena had run, it wouldn't totally nullify a Torsion strike, but it *did* reduce the Torsion effect, which weakened the strike and reduced its penetrating power and range. It would force the Consortium to close to range to use their dark matter weapons, and at that range, they were vulnerable to both particle beams and Teryon weaponry, which gave the KMS a decisive advantage. Karinne ships had stronger weaponry and better shields and armor than Consortium ships. They were refitting all Karinne ships with the new dampers. They had to

be deactivated if ships wanted to use a Torsion shockwave generator to destroy fighters or missiles threatening it, but that was a more than fair tradeoff to take some of the bite off Consortium Torsion weapons.

The interdicator had no weaponry, but it was designed to withstand a ferocious pounding and still operate. It didn't need weaponry, since it was going to be at the center of a network of defenses and orbital platforms that would orbit over the north pole of Karis, inside the boundary of the planetary shield. They intended to place another interdicator at the south pole and sync it with the north interdicator so both could operate in unison, giving them even more redundancy in case some kind of catastrophe befell the first interdicator and it went offline. They couldn't risk two days of vulnerability.

If it worked.

Jason was in his armor, watching at a rail from the destroyer *Verivenne*, an observation deck filled with friends and family. His was not the only face filled with worry. Jyslin stood beside him, also in armor, and Rann was between them, hovering above the rail while wearing a tiny version of Crusader armor, which had been made just for him and delivered yesterday. Rann still couldn't get over having his very own armor, and armor that had an engine in it that let him float, even fly around. Since it was interface controlled, it hadn't taken him long to get the hang of using the engine. All he had to do was think about where he wanted to go, and the armor took him there. Since he and all of the children of Karis were so used to using interfaces to operate their daily household appliances, even some toys, it was very easy for them to adapt to the idea of using something like a backpack engine. Myleena was out literally standing on the interdicator with several of her team, all of them armored up, literally riding on it as the tugs towed it out and towards the doors. They were going to put it in orbit before they started it up and tested it, if only to prevent a catastrophe if the thing blew up. They didn't want that happening in Kosigi.

The *Verivenne* followed the interdicator as it was towed down the two mile long tunnel, two miles of rock backed by nearly six feet of Neutronium armor backing ten feet of alloyed Vanidrium/Adamantium and then nearly five hundred feet of diamond-crystallized Titanium on the inside, enough Neutronium, Neutronium, and Adamantium to make nearly any government faint at the astounding cost the Karinnes had incurred to build Kosigi. There was enough Neutronium armor alone to armor fifty fleets built into the walls of Kosigi. There was enough Vanidrium and Adamantium to build armored suits for five armies of Gladiators, but the Faey wouldn't have blinked much at the staggering amount of Titanium in the walls, for that was a metal that they themselves could replicate. But they couldn't replicate the particular molecular structure used here, for it was beyond an Imperium replicator. This particular form of Titanium was almost as hard as Vanidrium, creating an *awesome* armored shell defending the hollow base within.

Sometimes it was easy to see why the Karinnes of old had planned to take 350 years to build Kosigi. And sometimes it was easy to see why others thought the Karinnes were so poor. In actuality, they had been one of the richest houses of the Imperium, they just chose to invest their money in things that the rest of the universe couldn't see.

What's going to happen now, Papa? Rann asked excitedly as they exited Kosigi.

"Now? They're going to tow the interdicator to the place where it's going to stay, then Myleena's going to make sure everything looks good. If it does, then we turn it on and see what happens."

"Then what?"

"Then a test drone is going to try to jump into the system," he answered. "If Aunt Myleena is right, it will get knocked out of hyperspace before it reaches the place where it was *sup-*

posed to come out. Remember when I told you the interdicator worked like ripples in the pool?”

He nodded.

“The drone should hit the first of those ripples, and get knocked out of hyperspace, probably somewhere between our home planet and the morning star planet, the one we call Geya. It’ll take those ripples two days to reach the edge of the interdicator’s range. When they get out to the very edge, then we’ll be completely safe. No bad ships can sneak up on us. The only way in and out of our home will be that Stargate right there,” he said, pointing at the Stargate in the distance, which was already activated and linked to the Stargate out by the quasar, an area already heavily defended with ships and weapon platforms. Anyone trying to reach the gate would have to run a gauntlet of astronomical proportions, especially since the Kimdori had put the gate itself in an area of intense radiation. The way they had set up the shielding and the pathways meant that one had to know *exactly* where to jump in in order to arrive in a protected area. There was no margin for error, and that was intentional, for it made it lethal for anyone who discovered the gate and tried to jump in to reach Karis without an invitation. If one missed by even ten miles in either direction, they appeared in an unshielded area and death would be more or less instantaneous. Not even Karinne ships had the armor to withstand that kind of radiation, and ships could not jump with their shields turned on. If a ship missed, the radiation would superheat the hull instantly, like sticking the ship in the universe’s biggest microwave oven, and kill anything inside, if the radiation itself didn’t all but disintegrate the ship before it was reduced to a superheated blob of radioactive slag first. Radiation that powerful would both heat the ship and also tear through it, meaning if the radiation didn’t kill the crew one way, being broiled by a few thousand degrees of heat would kill them the other. The area was so irradiated that only Kimdori or Jakkans sensors could penetrate it to see the gate, and the quasar’s unique properties masked the gate’s mass. The Kimdori had also went the extra mile to install anti-surveillance probes, threading them through hyperspace to prevent any kind of visual or sensory surveillance either, stopping the Jakkans from finding the gate with their superior sensor technology. The combination of protections made sure that anyone who did somehow find out about the gate would have absolutely no idea where to jump in in order to do so safely; they would have to jump blind into an area that was instant death. The Kimdori had set it up so that anyone who tried to jump in had to literally jump off a cliff and land on a penny, and do it blindly.

It was just a good thing that some kind of spatial anomaly contained the quasar’s radiation, reduced it, else its radiation would have killed all life in the sector. The quasar was long a subject of scientific curiosity, for it seemed to exist within an area of naturally stretched space, a giant “bubble” that allowed something like that to exist, a bubble that had fooled human telescopes all of Jason’s life. They hadn’t even known it was there, for it couldn’t be seen by the naked eye due to light refracting around the edges of the bubble, and the bubble diffused the radiation escaping it to the point where the quasar simply looked like a dwarf or neutron star. The same principle of a PPG containing the fusion of its core and making it safe also contained the quasar, but on an astronomical level. And since the bubble was stable and so huge that its boundaries were very gradual, gradual enough that they could jump hyperspace both into and out of it, and a Stargate would function inside it.

“Good!” Rann said happily. *Then we take Miss Aura’s people back home?*

Well, that’ll take a little more time, but yes, that’s the plan, little man, Jason answered. There were two other gates sitting at the quasar in a protected shipyard of sorts, inactive, that Dahnai had delivered that morning and his battleships had towed back to Karis before sending them through the gate. When they had the second interdicator up and running, they would

jump their entire fleet to Exile, link the stargates, then turn on the interdicator. Once that was all done, they’d start ferrying the Exiled that wished to go home back to their island, but instead of returning the crops, they were going to instead send them back with enough supplies to hold them over until they could get new crops planted. All their machines would be mothballed and his engineers would build them a modern infrastructure, converting Exile into a Karinne colony. They would get the best of both worlds. They would maintain their traditions, but also have access to modern technology and want for nothing.

Aura had met with him at his house last night and told him of their preparations so far. Of the 1,037 Exiled, a surprising 475 intended to return, nearly half. Jason figured that between his removal of them from Exile and the death of Hayr had dampened their desire to stay on Karis, and now they wanted to go home. He could respect that. He screwed up with the Exiled, he handled them all wrong, and he was man enough to admit it. He was just happy that all of them didn’t want to go back. He’d do his best to own up to his mistake and do what he could to make them happy. Even though he’d screwed up, they were still his people, and he wanted to do right by them. Aura and the others that remained didn’t want to be separated from the rest of Karinne, though. They wanted to be placed *in* the house, not on an island at the edges. Jason could agree to that, and he arranged to have them all moved into a suburb of Karsa itself, right at the heart of Karinne society. There, they would begin classes to integrate them completely into Karinne, teach them about the multicultural nature of the house, the technology, and begin their education. He reminded Aura that those who stayed on Karis could not return to Exile for anything longer than a short visit to see old friends, but she didn’t seem to mind at all, and assured him that those who remained wouldn’t mind either. They didn’t *want* to return to their old lives. They wanted to live the life described by their ancestors, they wanted to *be* Karinnes, not just pretend to be Karinnes. And Aura had told him that the only way to do that was to be here, on Karis, and to embrace the ways and technology of both their ancient ancestors and the new Karinnes that had risen from the ashes of the old. “We are the *old* Karinne, Jason,” she had told him. “I want to be part of the *new* Karinne.”

The bringing of Aura into the house was very smooth, and showed him just how *unenvious* his wife and *amu dozei* were about Aura. Aura was much like a Faey woman in that she considered their sexual encounter to be a casual affair between friends with no strings, and enjoyed engaging in that age-old female Faey custom of *comparison*, but she showed that she was unlike modern Faey women in that she considered their tryst personal, and only discussed it with those who had a personal stake in Jason’s sexual behavior, Jyslin and Symone. She was open with them, because they were the women he loved, but she wouldn’t discuss the matter with Kumi or the twins, no matter how they badgered her. But, she held nothing back from Jyslin and Symone, giving them what basically amounted to a thrust by thrust description of their tryst, then nearly an hour of sly-smiled, giggling comparison between the three of them of Jason’s habits, likes, dislikes, and such, comparing him among themselves and the other two having Aura rate Jason compared to her past lovers. Jason hadn’t been of a mind to sit around and talk sex, and he had never particularly enjoyed being assessed like so much meat sitting in a grocery market, so he left them to their amusements.

It was just one of the quirks one had to deal with when one was married to a Faey. Living with Faey wasn’t for the modest, that was for sure. He couldn’t really remember the time when they’d finally converted him to the point where he’d feel not one whit embarrassed to strip off his clothes and waltz down the street, naked as the day he was born, and Aura had proved that even his human morals and concept of saving himself only for Jyslin had been torn down... torn down by Jyslin herself. He would happily screw a woman he found sexu-

ally attractive, so long as Jyslin gave her blessing and she was also attracted to him. Then he'd invite her to his house and let his wife and *amu dozei* gossip about it with her like teenage girls, all giggly and smiling.

He had to admit it. Jyslin's remaking of him had been to her satisfaction, making him Faey enough for her, but leaving him human enough to still be the man he had been when they met. She was the one force in his life against which he could not stand, and from the moment they met, she had started working to make him like her. Well, she had succeeded. He had resisted her, but in the end, she had won.

The destroyer turned to show the interdictor as they approached the pole, show the platforms that were arrayed around it defensively, but weapon platforms and scientific monitoring stations, to study the interdictor and carefully monitor its operation. The master control for the interdictor wasn't there, however. It was on Kosiningi, in the emergency response center, the most hardened and heavily defended bunker on Karis. Jason turned on a monitor to the side with his gestalt which displayed an image of the interdictor and three graphic displays. One would be for the power output, one for the waveform pattern, and the third would measure hyperspace distortion that might interfere with Teryon-based hyperspace communications. If the interdictor was going to interrupt their communications, they wanted to know quickly so they could work up a fix for it. The models showed that it wouldn't, but when one was dealing with new technologies, one had to be ready.

Jason *still* had no idea why his rail gun had stopped producing a sonic boom when fired. Anytime he thought about how things were going to go smoothly, he always remembered that stark reminder that new technologies were often fraught with pitfalls they never considered when it was developed.

The tugs put the interdictor in orbit, then they and all other maintenance and research dropships and workers backed off, including Myleena. "Alright, control, let's get this bachi game going," Myleena's voice called over a speaker. "Bring up the singularity power plant and activate the engines. Lock the interdictor in its orbit."

"Roger. Singularity power plant startup commencing." Jason was almost holding his breath as a power spike appeared on the display, as the power plant started up. Lights on the carapace came on, then they started blinking at regular intervals, warning lights. "Engines are staring up." The interdictor seemed to shift a little as the power spiked on the display, as the gravometric engines came online, turning the interdictor and seating it securely in its planned orbit, which was a stationary position over the north pole. "The interdictor's secure in orbit, Duchess," the controller answered.

"Good. Now we see if we just wasted a month of work," she said nervously. "Boot the master computer and commence interdictor startup sequence."

"Roger. Starting master computer." Jason watched the power output graph carefully, and his heartbeat was audible in his ears as he watched, all but helpless, nothing but a spectator. "Master computer is up and operating normally. Beginning interdictor startup sequence."

For nearly thirty seconds, nothing happened. But then, on the hyperspace graph, a tiny little bump appeared, then appeared again, then appeared again. It looked like an EKG for a minute as the pulses grew in strength, about two per second, but then they began to get faster, and faster, and faster. The bumps merged to form a ridged line above the baseline, and once they reached the desired frequency of pulses, the pulses began to increase in power. The hyperspace distortion readout was showing a little "background noise," but nothing that would overwhelm the filters in most Teryon communicators.

"All readouts are showing nominal," the controller called. "The pulse is building exactly as models predicted. I think it's working, Duchess."

A cheer erupted from the observation deck, but Myleena's voice cut them off. "What we're seeing may not be reality, Ensign," she warned. "How long until the pulse is at the projected power to stop a jump?"

"Two minutes."

"Then in two minutes, launch the drone," she ordered.

It was two minutes that lasted two years. There was tense silence on the observation deck, even the children being silent, as they all looked either out at the interdictor with its blinking lights or up at the monitor to watch the waveform readout increase in power. Hyperspace was a realm of mysteries, but there were a few things that the Karinnes understood, and one was that hyperspace followed some of the same rules as normal space in some respects. The interdictor would have to slowly build in power to create the desired distortion in hyperspace to stop jumps, as that waveform increased in power. That "power" wasn't power inasmuch as it was a representation of the amount of hyperspace the interdictor was affecting. The pulses that left the interdictor weakened as they traveled away from it, weakened by the resistance hyperspace offered to attempts to alter it, so the interdictor had to broadcast a pulse strong enough to reach a light year out. It couldn't do that *immediately*, though, because if it tried to just broadcast at full power, hyperspace would resist with an effect similar to the Torsion effect, and that would shatter the antenna. Hyperspace did *not* like to be manipulated, so any manipulations had to be done gradually. Instead of the swimmer diving into the pool, he had to wade in slowly until he was at the desired depth.

"Ninety seconds," the controller called.

"Get the drone ready to launch," Myleena ordered.

"One hundred seconds."

"All ships begin sensor sweeps of the entire projected flight path of the drone, focus on where the math says the ship should appear."

"One hundred ten seconds."

"Start countdown on probe launch."

"Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Threshold achieved."

"Launch the drone!" Myleena barked.

Jason knew that they would only have to wait maybe five seconds before they knew. The probe wasn't manned, so it was able to jump immediately, and was programmed to enter normal space at the edge of Karis. Jason held his breath as they waited for any word, and absolute silence descended over the observation deck.

"Probe detected, six hundred thousand kathra from Geya. Right where it should be!" Myleena said with something approaching ecstasy in her voice. "The interdictor works! FUCK YEAH, IT WORKS!" she screamed in delight.

Pandemonium ensued, not just on the *Verivenne*, but all over the entire navy, in Kosigi, and on the surface of Karis. Everyone now knew that the interdictor *worked*, and in just two days, it would be protecting the entirety of the Karis system and everything around it from unwanted ships jumping hyperspace. They were now *safe*. They were safe!

Jason kissed just about every Faey and human that got within reach of his arms. He hugged his son so hard his armor squealed against Jason's. He grabbed Rahne and gave her a dip, then kissed her noisily. He picked up Kyri and spun her in circles so fast that she got dizzy. Myleena was still barking orders for her team to observe the power build-up carefully, but Jason didn't hear them. Everything he had planned hinged on this, had absolutely depended on the interdictors working, and working properly. Now that he knew the interdictors worked, and so far worked exactly as Myleena expected them to work, then he could move forward with the plans that had both been revealed, and those that had not been revealed.

[Myleena. I want to see Kosigi focus only on interdictors outside of the plans to build more bays. In two takirs, I want to see a finished interdictor being towed out of Kosigi every day.]

[Not a problem, babes,] she answered him giddily. [Now that we can mass produce the components and we have a building plan, we can crank out one of these babies in twelve days with a full crew on it, the only sticking point will be the carapaces, building those stresses our foundry. If we put enough resources on it to build in twenty bays at twelve days per unit, you'll see one or two coming out a day. I could build even more, but we can't abandon our other work. There are half-finished destroyers and cruisers to build, we need to finish the second set of doors, and the expansion of our drydocks is important. Even more important than that, though is the enemy ship we captured. I've been splitting time to get the interdictor going, but now that it works, I'm going back to working on that. So, you want one a day, I'll give you more than one a day, but you need to let the rest of the base work on other things.]

[Alright, Myli, I'll leave it up to you.]

[Don't you always? And do I ever let you down?]

[You haven't yet, and God willing, you never will,] he returned lightly.

What happens now, Papa? Rann asked.

Now? Now, we watch the interdictor very closely to make sure it works exactly the way it's supposed to. It looks like it will, but you never take anything for granted, little man. You always make sure. Then, next week, I have to go to Terra and meet with all the important people so we can talk about the bad people and decide what we're going to do about them. After that, our next step is to go back to Miss Aura's planet and claim it for the house, and take her people back home. Then after that, well, we just work very hard to get ready for when the bad people try to come back, so we can chase them away. We have to build lots of new ships, we have to strengthen our home so it's so tough and so scary that the bad people are afraid to come back and fight with us.

Okay. When can I go see Shya again? I miss her.

He smiled down at his son, then picked him up. How about if we ask Empress Dahnai to let Shya come here for a while? And not just a couple of days. Would you like to have Shya stay with us for a week or two?

Yes yes yes yes yes! he sent excitedly. Can she stay in my room?

Doesn't anyone who comes to see you stay in your room with you?

Goodie! he beamed. I had Kyri with me, then Danny with me, I kinda don't like sleeping alone now. I like having a sister or friend in the room with me.

Well then, little man, I think you should be the one to ask. It's what you want, so you have to ask Empress Dahnai.

Okay. Can we ask now?

He laughed. Why not?

He took his son through the throng of celebrants and to a guest cabin, then he had them get Dahnai on the comm. Dahnai usually answered the call herself when she knew it was him, and today was no different. She was naked, a towel thrown over her shoulder and her hair nearly dripping wet, with little beads of water sliding down between her breasts and along the flat cleft of her abdominal muscles, draining towards her bronze triangle of pubic hair. The radiant smile on her face seemed to dim just slightly when she saw Rann with him. Clearly she thought it was a personal call, and had probably taken the towel off just to tease him a little bit by stepping back far enough for him to see her from the thighs up. She stepped up so she was closer to the camera, smiling at them. "Hey babe, and hey Ranny," she said with a bright smile. "Is this business or personal?"

"My son has something to ask you," Jason said, urging Rann forward.

He actually gave her a little bow. "Miss Empress Dahnai, would you let Shya come visit with me for a couple of weeks? Since she's going to marry me, shouldn't we spend lots of time together?"

Clever little boy, Jason had to admit. He not only asked what he wanted, he was trying to rationalize it to make Dahnai more amenable to his wishes.

Dahnai laughed brightly. "Of course she can come, Rann!" she told him. "How long do you want her to visit?"

"Umm, I dunno, how long can she stay?"

"As long as you want."

"Then can she stay til we marry?"

Dahnai laughed again. "I'm afraid not quite *that* long, spunky, I'd miss her terribly if she was gone for years. How does two takirs sound?"

"Takir? Two weeks?"

"Twenty days, little man," Jason reminded him. "Remember, Empress Dahnai uses the Faey calendar. It's different from ours."

"That's longer than two weeks, right?"

"Yes, it's almost three weeks," Jason chuckled.

"Okay!" he said brightly.

"Fine, then," Dahnai said as Kellin wandered into the room behind her, having just got out of the shower himself. "I tell you what, love. When we meet for the summit, I'll bring Shya, and you can take her home with you afterward. Then you can bring her back two takirs later when you come to court."

"That works for me," Jason nodded. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all!" she said. "I'm actually overjoyed that Rann misses Shya so much he wants her to come to Karis. And I can always grill her when she gets home about what she's learned on Karis," she winked.

"You try to steal another interface, and I'll ban you from here, woman," he teased.

She laughed. "I have to try, you know that."

"Too bad for you I'm ready for you."

Kellin came up behind her and put his arm around Dahnai, looking at the monitor. "Jason! Ranny! How are you?"

"I'm okay, Prince Kellin," Rann said. "Empress Dahnai is letting Shya come visit me!"

"Oh, she is, is she? Does that mean I can come too?"

"Well, you can come if you want, Prince Kellin, but I don't have room in my room for both of you," he said uncertainly. "Do you mind sleeping in the guest room?"

Kellin laughed. "I think I'd actually prefer it, spunky," he grinned. "I think your bed might be a little too small for me."

"I think so too."

"If you and Kellin want to come for another visit, I'm fine with that, Dahnai, but I'm not going to have much time for you. I'm going to be *unbelievably* busy for the next couple of months."

"I won't have time either," Dahnai answered, swatting Kellin when his hand slid off her shoulder, and she jumped slightly. Odds were, he goosed her. "I'll need to go over what happens at the summit, and I'll have to rearrange all our trade routes when the interdictors start coming in and going up. I've already set up a pair of stargates so visitors can reach Draconis, and I'm kicking 2M in the ass to get another pair we can use for Terra. They're pretty pissed off that I've basically ordered them to hand over six Stargates, and they only get deferred

payments for four of them. The other two I claimed using Imperial privilege, since they deal directly with the security of Draconis itself.”

Miaari rushed in, using her security code to defeat the door lock. “Jason, I have urgent news,” she said almost breathlessly. “Empress, this concerns you too, so please stay on the line.”

“What’s going on? Did the Kimdori find something?”

“The Alliance did,” she answered. “I just received word from sister Kiaari at the Academy. They found a Consortium base.”

“Fuck yeah!” Dahnai said with eager eyes. “Where? And how long til we can organize a task force to take it?”

“It’s somewhat distant, but there will be no strike force, Empress,” Miaari said. “It has been abandoned and destroyed. It was a station in interstellar space, which fits with the gravity tolerance needs we have discovered about the insectoids that man the ships. The Alliance detected the explosion, and we looked back using light to survey the base’s history. They failed to scatter the light,” she said, a bit smugly. “A critical security lapse, for we will have the entire seventeen years of the base’s life cycle recorded by tomorrow morning.”

“How the hell will you do that?” Dahnai asked curiously.

“Logistics, Empress,” Miaari said simply. “Several thousand sensors staged one light day apart, all recording at the same time. Each recorder will capture one day in the life of the base. After we gather the recordings, we simply merge them together so we might analyze them. The difference in angles are so miniscule that they make virtually no difference.”

“Shit, that’s fuckin’ clever,” Dahnai said respectfully.

“I am pleased that you find us clever, your Majesty,” Miaari said with a slight little smile. “By this time tomorrow, I will have more detailed intelligence to pass along to you. Observing this base will give us an idea of ship fleet strength they have in the sector, and the abandonment and destruction of the base will have to be researched. They had to have a reason to do such a thing. We must find out why.”

“Maybe they’re pulling out of the sector,” Dahnai said hopefully.

“Maybe they’re just pulling back because their plan failed and they’re expecting a counter-attack, pulling back to where it takes too long to jump a fleet to them, yet they can jump a fleet to attack us,” Jason noted. “We already know they believe in scorched earth. They won’t allow anything get captured. If they can’t hold it, they destroy it.”

“An odd thing for them to do when they gave the Urumi all that tech, but didn’t try to destroy *them*,” Dahnai noted as Kellin left the monitor.

“Perhaps it is not their technology they protect, but something else,” Miaari mused. “They already know that they are not superior to the Karinnes in technology. They could be described as being equal to the Imperium, perhaps just slightly ahead in some areas, but behind in others. What they surrendered to the Urumi may not be seen as something so vital that it must be protected. But it is clear that when it comes to their ships, the technology that is purely their own, they will not allow it to be captured. So it is only logical that there is something else they are protecting, something they do not want us to capture.”

“Most people consider weapon tech to be worth protecting,” Dahnai protested, glancing to her side irritably.

“Yes, *most* do, but clearly the Consortium does not,” she said simply. “They gave away the technology to their strongest weapons, and we know that they are their strongest weapons, for those were the weapons that the Consortium ships themselves employed. Clearly, they felt that giving away those secrets was worth it in what they gained through the bargain. That too must have a reasoning behind it. I will have to ponder the matter.”

Dahnai looked thoughtful, scratching at the blue skin between her ample breasts absently as more water trickled between them. Kellin took her towel and started drying her, scrubbing at her shoulders and breasts. “I’m not sure, but I’ll definitely want a copy of that recording when you have it.”

“Everyone will have it. Denmother is cooperating with the Grand Duke’s Academy department on the Consortium. It will be available for all to analyze as soon as it is done.”

“Sounds good to me. Kellin, stop being a prick,” Dahnai said testily to her left as Kellin started kneading her breasts, which wasn’t drying her off so much as fondling her through the towel, clearly trying to disrupt her train of thought. Jason had seen Kellin playful, but he didn’t often do it except when in complete privacy or only among close friends. He wasn’t afraid of his wife at all, and was quite playful with her. But he *did* act with a certain amount of decorum when they weren’t alone, and Miaari should have made him consider that they weren’t in intimate circumstances.

“I’m just helping you dry off, my love.”

“You’re being obnoxious. Now stop,” she ordered, slapping his hands away from her chest. “Kellin!” she barked, turning to face him.

“I just did what you wanted,” he protested with utter insincerity.

She reached out and dragged him into view, literally putting him in a headlock.

“Aiy! Aiyaa!” Kellin hissed in pain as Dahnai took charge of him, and both the adults and Rann watching through the monitor laughed.

“I’ll go ahead and go,” Dahnai told them, shimmying in a strange fashion, as if she were trying to evade Kellin’s hands. “Unless you have something else to talk about.”

“Not particularly, your Majesty,” Miaari said with a slight smile.

“Good. I’m going to take this comedian here and teach him what happens when he annoys me while I’m conducting business,” she said, jerking on Kellin, which made him both gasp and laugh.

“What was he doing?”

“Teasing,” she answered. “He was doing some things he shouldn’t off camera, then he started groping me. And ever since I did this,” she pointing down at where she had him in a headlock, “he’s been grabbing my pussy,” she said bluntly, despite the fact that Rann was there. But then again, Rann was being raised Faey, and they didn’t hide such things from their children. Rann knew just about ever word there was for a woman’s genitals, both the clinical ones and the vulgar ones. “He’s been entirely too giddy and silly since you came to visit, and I see now I need to smack some sense back into him,” she stated flatly.

“Have fun,” Jason laughed.

“I will. I enjoy disciplining bad boys. I’m not so sure about him,” she said, leaning down and loudly slapping him under the camera, slapping him on the butt, making him yelp.

When the connection was terminated, Miaari laughed lightly. “It is good to see that Kellin keeps her grounded,” she noted.

“That he does,” Jason agreed. “He’s actually very jealous of her when they’re in their apartment, so he’s quick to recapture her attention once whatever business she’s handling is finished. The poor guy, he already has to compete with the entire freakin’ Imperium to get attention from his wife. Notice that he didn’t get really silly until after he was sure we were done.”

“Yes.”

“I hope she doesn’t hurt Prince Kellin,” Rann said worriedly.

Jason chuckled. “It’s a game they play, little man. He was just being silly, and she’s going to be silly back.”

The next two days, Jason didn't get much sleep.

He rode almost constant vigil on the interdicator, often watching its output screen for an hour at a time, almost neurotic about making sure that it was powering up properly, coming up as expected. Even the slightest variation, and Jason was communing with Myleena, who was now in heaven, because she was ripping the Consortium ship apart, and almost horny for the chance to put it back together and make it work again. She got so annoyed with him constantly bothering her, she blocked him for about four hours.

When not worrying about the interdicator, he was working on next week's summit. There was a lot to do there, though he would only speak in public once, and that speech was already written. He was more interested in the back room dealing that inevitably went on when leaders gathered in any numbers, and since it was his planet, ensuring the safety and comfort of all visitors was his responsibility. Kiaari was working around the clock to secure the Academy for the summit, and there were so many warships there of many different civilizations, all coming to help secure the planet in a cooperative manner, that Terra looked like the staging area for some huge imminent war. Kiaari sent him hourly updates as to the preparations, from ensuring each leader had a palatial place to stay for the two days they would be there to the steps taken to ensure the security and safety of the leaders and their staffs. Classes would be cancelled on the two days the summit would take place, and the itinerary was already set. The leaders would arrive on the first day, and then they would hold a one day conference on the next. Dahnai was the official host, and would guide the conference in the morning. There would be speeches from everyone, then they would have lunch, then they would conduct an informal conference session where they'd do the real business. Dahnai planned for the day's activities to last about 12 hours, and after it was over, the leaders would all go home. When Jason came home, he'd be bringing Shya with him for her 20-day long visit to Rann.

Rann had been spending those days up at Kosigi. Jyslin was working with Myleena on the Consortium ship, and he and Danelle had been keeping each other company while their mothers were hard at work.

Jason was also working with Myri and Aura in preparation to return the Exiled to their planet. The Exiled had something of a disagreement over exactly what was going back, for the ones returning wanted it all, but those staying did want *some* parts of what they brought with them. Jason also worked with the engineers that had volunteered to go back to Exile, looking over their plans, learning what they had planned.

Jason didn't pass up another chance at Aura, though, thoroughly availing himself of a little personal debauchery. Yesterday, when she came to discuss the return, he offered her more than what they'd had before, and she accepted. That evening, Jason and Aura had *proper* sex, as Symone might say. It was much better than a quick hour in her bed like a pair of teenagers, that was for sure, though Symone was bitterly disappointed when he banned her from joining in. Aura was *his* guilty pleasure, and he wasn't sharing her with a horny *amu dozei*. He even went so far as to take her out of the house, taking her to the second two-room guest cottage that was considered part of Tim and Symone's property, the *other* pool house that stood beside the guest cottage Rahne was using. There, Jason experienced Aura thoroughly, enjoying all the pleasures of the flesh Aura was willing to surrender to him... which was just about everything.

When the sun rose and streamed through the window, casting bluish light over the bedspread and into his eyes, Jason yawned and buried his head behind Aura's. They were both laying on their sides, and Jason had an arm draped over her, his hand resting lightly against her silky breast. She was still asleep, and Jason took a moment to ponder her, and recall the very pleasurable night they'd shared. It reminded Jason about the fundamental difference be-

tween human and Faey, the *division*, the separation of sex and love, of physical pleasure and romantic involvement. Jason had had sex with Aura. It was the second time they'd had sex, and it had been about as involved as sex could get. Aura was actually *very* adventurous, as brave as Tim, willing to do virtually anything he wanted to try. Jason had had every part of Aura there was to have, but it was all *physical*. Here, the morning after, there was... friendship. That was it. There was no love. There was no affection outside of his affection for her as a friend. There was just memory of a fun night that didn't change. He remembered the casual sex he'd engaged in with Symone long ago, and how it had led to her becoming *amu dozei*, but he also saw that that had been different. Symone was the wife of his best friend, had a much more intimate understanding of him because of it. The constant exposure and interaction with Symone over *years*, and because of the reciprocal relationship Jyslin had with Tim, had worn down the barriers between them, had caused their relationship to bloom into actual love. But the sex had had nothing to do with that. As far as the sex went, Symone was just a girl Jason liked to bang on the side, kind of like a mistress, a mistress of which his wife heartily approved.

Jason had been a little curious to see how he would feel this morning, for he really didn't engage in casual sex with friends. He knew Tim did. Tim had, over the years, spread the legs of every woman on the strip except for Temika, who shared Jason's aversion to casual sex but for her it was because of her religious view, and Maya, who had no real sexual attraction to him. He had even partaken of Kumi, Meya, and Myra, and Kumi even had a viddy of the two of them fucking like wild rabbits, which she proudly showed to anyone who wanted to see it. They were all his friends, and like a true friend, Tim was not afraid to bend a girl over when she wanted or needed it. The last of his little trysts had been just before that insane mess with the Trillanes began, when he caught Tim and Sheleese humping in the hot tub like a couple of horny teenagers. But Jason had been different. Yes, he'd had sex with four of the Marines, but that had been for a specific reason, to get them pregnant. Since then, the only women he'd had sex with were Jyslin, Symone, he'd had sex just once with Kumi, and Dahnai.

And now there was Aura.

All these years, he'd avoided casual sex with the women on the strip, both for personal and practical reasons. He hadn't felt comfortable with the idea of casual sex with friends, still clinging to one last shred of his human morality, and still feeling that there was some *physical* part of him that should only belong to Jyslin and Symone. But he'd also been afraid that engaging in sex with the girls on the strip would alter their relationships, would, at least in his mind, jeopardize the very strong and very satisfying friendships he had with the Marines, Kumi, Temika, Songa, and the twins, that what happened with Symone and Dahnai, who were the only women with which he'd had casual sex, would happen with every woman on the strip, so he abstained to prevent it, to maintain his friendships just as they were. It was why it took Kumi virtually threatening to leave the house to finally submit and have sex with her, and his abstinence from all the *other* women on the strip was one of the biggest reasons why she hadn't pressed him for more... and it had been the main reason she had had a virtual meltdown over the fake sex tape stunt, for she felt very left out. Kumi was still *seriously* attracted to him sexually, and the years had done nothing to squelch that in her. It had been why he had never succumbed to the twins' many attempts to seduce him. And there *had* been attempts. None of them had been very serious, but those teasing, joking comments and actions had had a very real offer hiding inside them. The women of the strip knew that Jason just didn't seem too interested in engaging in casual sex, and it had been a part of his personality ever since they'd known him, so they just accepted it as one of his personal quirks. And

for that reason, thankfully, they didn't hold it against him. They knew his lack of interest had nothing to do with them, it was because of *him*. *He* was the one that had the problem, in their eyes, not them. But that didn't mean that they didn't still offer, continuing to offer to be the kind of a friend a Faey felt she should be. They loved to tease him, and they would often proposition him, but he always declined with a smile and a joke.

And now there was Aura.

He could feel it slip away, that last tiny little piece of what used to be his human morality, that last little fear. He could see it blowing away on the wind. He had had sex with a friend. Hot sex. Deep sex. Sex that would make a porn star blush sex. And here it was, the morning after, and what did he feel?

Friendship. He felt *no* different. He was not falling in love with Aura.

All these years. All that teasing, and all his forced abstinence, which Jyslin certainly didn't mind when some girl teased him and made him drag her upstairs and bang her to relieve his sexual ardor. And Aura had just proved that all of it had been sort of pointless. His friendships *wouldn't* change, as long as he didn't want them to. Them teasing him and offering him didn't change his friendship, he realized, so why would actually taking them up on it change their friendship? After all, they were *Faey*. They didn't care.

Why had Aura been different, he wondered? He'd gotten boners from the antics of the girls on the strip many times. He wasn't dead, for Pete's sake, no healthy straight man could not get horny when some beautiful girl wiggled her naked ass in his face, and he *knew* that if he grabbed that ass, she'd be more than happy to let him do whatever he wanted. There was no shortage of beautiful women on the strip that had caught his eye, that had sincerely offered sex to him, but he had never accepted. Why Aura?

He knew the answer. It was because she *was not* from the strip. She was a friend, yes, but there was no sense of threat there, no fear that he would be jeopardizing a five year old friendship if something went wrong. There was less history, and therefore less risk. If he messed up with Aura and made her hate him, it was a new friendship and thus little would be lost. But if he did something to anger one of the mothers of his children or women he'd known since living on Earth, it would hurt. He would lose a strong friendship, and it would drastically alter the society of the strip.

But Aura showed him that those were *stupid* assumptions. How could he live among Faey for so long, understand them so well, and still cling to a ridiculous human conception? Simple. Knowing the truth wasn't the same as *understanding* the truth, and Aura had made him *understand*.

All the proof he needed for that was *Tim*, for crying out loud! Tim was notorious for being available among the girls on the strip, a fact of which Symone was *proud*, not angry! He'd banged every woman up and down the beach except for Temika and Maya, and he was still wonderful friends with all of them. Maybe even better friends than Jason was, because *he would be all that they wanted him to be*. He'd said it many times before that Tim was much more integrated into Faey culture than he was, his fearlessness and curiosity that made him such a good intelligence analyst and his willingness to try new things. Tim was the kind of man the girls expected him to be, and it had not damaged his friendship with *any* of the women on the strip. It also didn't damage his marriage to Symone in the slightest, for she enjoyed letting her husband tomcat around, she liked it when he slaked the lust of one of the girls on the strip, because *they were friends*. That was what friends *did* in Faey society. Why? Because Tim *kept it separate*. Having sex with the girls did not change his view of them, he wasn't falling in love with every woman on the strip.

So... what now?

He knew that when he walked out that door, it would be different. The inhibition was gone. The fear was gone. If Min or Sheleese or Lyn or Bryn made some kind of teasing invitation, he'd take her up on it in a *heartbeat* if he was so inclined. Now he *knew* that they would see him no differently afterwards. Hell, they might even find their friendship deepen, since they would feel that he was finally, after *years*, opening up to them. He knew that he could sleep his across the strip, up one side and down the other, and it wouldn't change a damn thing. The only way it may change was with those women who had husbands who would need to approve, such as Maya, Temika, and Songa. Married Faey needed the blessing of the spouse to have sex outside of marriage.

And it was because of Aura.

"Mmm," she hummed, shifting against him. She reached up and put her hand over his. *Good morning. Happy?*

Still a little weak-kneed, he answered honestly.

She laughed. *So am I. I think I'm not going to be able to walk straight for a while. But it was worth it.*

That it was, he agreed sincerely. *Aura, I want to thank you.*

You are most welcome, she sent lightly. *I should be thanking you.*

No, not for the sex. Well, not just the sex. The sex was fantastic, and I never dreamed you were so kinky.

She laughed. *What is this kinky? It's not translating. All I'm getting is a word I can't understand.*

Willing to be, ah, unorthodox in bed.

Oh. We have no word for that. Don't the women here allow men to have anal sex? I've always found it very pleasurable, and men certainly seem to love it.

Well, yeah, some men do, and... bleh, never mind, he grunted, which made her laugh in delight. *What I'm trying to say is thank you for showing me more than a fun night in bed. I've had sex with you, Aura, twice now. And despite that, I feel no different towards you.*

I would hope that you'd at least like me a little more, she sent timidly.

I do! he protested. *That's not what I meant, Aura! Let me finish. For years, I've abstained from casual sex with my women friends despite my wife's blessing because I always feared that it would damage my friendships with them. I was afraid to get too close, because the two Faey women I have had casual sex with, Symone and Empress Dahnai, have ended up becoming my amu dorai and amu dozei. I was afraid that that would keep happening, and that eventually, one of those relationships would fall apart and it would destroy my friendship with the woman, which would irreparably damage the entire society we enjoy here on the strip, where everyone is friends with everyone else. I didn't want to risk what I already have to consummate long, sincere friendships. But then you come along. I think I see why Jyslin pushed me at you now, to show me what my head knew but my heart wouldn't accept. I see now that Symone and Dahnai became something more because I wanted them to be something more. But if I don't want it to be something more, then it won't be. You've shown me that I can be a friend without becoming a lover. Does that make sense?*

She rolled on her back and looked over at him. *Yes. It makes perfect sense.*

Does it bother you that I think of you as only a friend, and not something more?

Bother me? It makes me relieved, she laughed. *If every man I brought to my bed went and fell in love with me, Trelle's garland, I'd be afraid to have sex! It's a flattering idea, to be honest, that I could be such a powerful lover, so feminine, that no man I had sex with could resist me. But that's just an old myth, and women know it. If it were true, it would be a damn inconvenience, having all these lovesick men bothering me endlessly.*

Jason laughed helplessly.

Love is love, and sex is sex, Jason. They are two different things. It sounds to me that your own experience, falling in love with two casual partners, has skewed your view of things. After all, you weren't born Faey. What we are raised understanding about our culture, you had to learn. It sounds to me that you finally have comprehended the lesson, that's all. It just took a while for it to sink in.

Just about, he chuckled, leaning down and kissing her. Thank you for a wonderful evening, Aura. And thank you for showing me how silly I've been.

I do hope this means I haven't served my purpose, she smiled at him.

We have I can barely walk afterward sex, and you think I'm gonna just turn my back on that? he laughed. Same offer as before, babe. When you're here and I have time, I'm yours if you're horny. But, I have to warn you about one thing.

What?

Symone is not entirely straight, and she's deeply imprinted on me. My attraction to you will bleed into her. She will be very grabby with you, almost shamefully forward, and she may even ask you to have sex with her.

After I get to know her, I'll gladly accept. I've found pleasure in a woman before, Jason. I enjoy both men and women. I had a woman for a lover before I met my husband, and we maintained our liaison for years afterward. It used to drive my husband wild with lust to watch us, she laughed. Symone is a very attractive woman. I'll gladly let her taste me, and taste her in return. And if you're there, I'll finally be able to know sex with a woman who will let a man touch her.

Your friend didn't like men?

She shook her head. She only liked women. She would have sex with me and allow my husband to watch, but she would not let him touch her. She was the only woman I ever knew that was afraid of the sight of an erect penis. My husband had to keep himself covered when he watched us, for if he grew hard, Yaega would become afraid and stop.

It sounds like she had some issues, Jason noted.

Yes, but we accepted her quirks. Among my people, acceptance matters most of all, despite things like that.

He sat up and stretched, and she sat up with him. I guess I should get back. There's much to do yet.

I know. I have a lot of work to do myself. We're both kinda playing hooky here.

Another term I don't understand.

A human youth's game of intentionally not going to school. It was called hooky.

Ah.

Despite the joking about not being able to walk straight, both of them were quite stable when they got up, showered, got dressed, and then walked across the compound to his house. Jyslin and Rahne were sitting at the table with Rann and Kyri, and Yana was helping Ayama bring a platter of blueberry waffles to the table. He only had to take one look at the tightness, the *hurt* in Yana's eyes to see that in his attempts to avoid damaging his relationships with the girls by abstaining, he had done just that by succumbing.

He didn't give her the chance to leave. He knew Yana, knew her probably better than anyone, and he knew what that look meant. She was about to flee back to her house, and if she got away from him, he may never get her to open up to him enough to explain it to her. She trusted Jason far more than she had ever trusted another man, because he had given her a special trust when they conceived Kyri, had let her into his mind when no other man would. But she felt as if that trust had been betrayed, because he had given to another woman, whom

he barely knew, what he had denied to her, her best friend, since Kyri was conceived. That special relationship between them was very much at risk, and he knew it. And he couldn't let it happen. He got up and chased her down, catching up to her in the kitchen, grabbing her by the shoulders and stopping her. *Yana, stop, he said. Let me explain.*

Explain? Explain? she demanded, putting a sarcasm into her thoughts that no spoken word could ever justify, so absolute was her outrage and indignance, indignance that Jason had refused to be a proper friend to her, to all the girls of the strip, but had the *nerve* to bring some *new girl* into their domain and rut her like a stag, and do it right in front of them! At least the first time could have been explained as a moment of passion. Jason was a man, after all, and he had desires. But this time was deliberate, and was like a slap in the face! She felt insulted, offended, rejected, belittled, and scorned, and she was furious. Absolutely furious.

*That's right, explain, he sent in a way that showed that he had no defenses. That he would not hide his thoughts from her. He reinforced that by reaching down and grabbing her hand, making skin to skin contact, which vastly increased Yana's ability to focus her power on him. Yana was the second most powerful telepath on Karis, eclipsed only by their daughter Kyri. She was probably the second most powerful in the entire Imperium. When a telepath of Yana's power was making direct contact, Jason couldn't even resist her if he wanted to. But he offered no defense against her, allowing her to look directly into his mind, anywhere she wanted to look, because mere words were not going to explain the truth, and he knew he only had one chance to tell her before she hardened herself to him. Without sending, he showed her his thoughts, allowed her to experience his discovery through his eyes, through his mind. He showed her how he had felt before, the fear that he would harm the wonderful relationships he had with the girls if he changed them. He showed her how he'd come to feel that way, because of Symone and Dahnai, how every woman he'd engaged in consistent casual sex had become a love, and his fear that it would keep happening and cause damage to the treasured friendships he held with the women on the strip, friendships he treasured as much as his children, and much as life itself. Then he showed her Aura. He showed her the epiphany, the realization that he finally understood that those two exceptions had caused him to incorrectly interpret the rule. He showed her that he realized now what Jyslin had done, bringing a woman he would see as *safe* to engage in casual sex to show him that he was completely wrong. He showed her that he knew now that he would *not* change his friendships with the girls if he gave them what they wanted, and that wasn't sex, it was the feeling of *intimacy* to know that Jason *would* if they wanted it. They wanted the closeness that Tim was willing to give them. The *friendship*. That was what they wanted. That was what he was now willing to give.*

I've been stupid, Yana, he admitted. I was trying so hard not to damage what I have, I damaged it by not doing anything, and I'm sorry. I should have seen that the same thing that happened between me and Kumi might happen between you and me. It was never about you. Never about you, Yana. It was about me. But I understand a little better now, as you saw. The next time you ask, I won't say no. Not because you're angry with me, and not because of this fight, but because I understand now. I will be the friend you want me to be. Can you forgive me?

Her answer was to give him a passionate kiss. *I forgive you, Jayce, she sent. I'm sorry I got so angry. I didn't realize you felt that way. Why didn't you tell us? We could have explained it to you, we thought you understood! We thought you still felt that you owed Jyslin some kind of allegiance based on your human upbringing, like how you acted when we had you give us our children.*

When Jyslin wore that out of me, all that was left was the fear, and I guess I never really

thought to explain it. Nobody really asked, he told her, holding her hands and looking down into her eyes. *I hope the others aren't angry too.*

I don't think so. Myri told us last night, and she was laughing about it. A few were a little mad. Some were happy, thinking that you were finally coming around.

I guess they were right, he chuckled. But I don't blame you for being furious, Yana. Me and you aren't quite like me and the others. There's a little more there between us, he said, smoothing her hair from her face gently. It's not love, but it is trust. I saw it in your eyes, saw your trust in me fade away. I'd have been miserable if that would have happened. Of all the girls on the strip, you're my best friend, Yana. If there's any friendship I don't want to lose, it's yours.

That's so sweet to say, Jayce, she said with a glowing smile. So... are we going to take numbers, or is this going to be first come, first serve?

He almost fell over in laughter.

All was forgiven.

The funny part of the whole thing was, now that he'd seen that he'd been dumb, nothing really changed. He had gone around after breakfast and talked to every single girl on the strip except for the twins, who were on the island and already knew anyway, and Kumi, who left very early to go take care of some business in Karsa. He apologized to each and every one of them, and promised them that things would be different, that he'd try to be the friend they wanted him to be. He was honest, telling them that he'd been too afraid of losing them as friends to risk changing his relationships with them, that Jyslin had ground away his notion that he had to save himself for her, and that he knew now he'd been wrong, that *not* being willing to treat them as friends had been damaging his relationships with them.

To a woman, they all forgave him.

Aura wasn't only forgiven, she was accepted among the girls like some kind of hero, the ray of light that had finally shone down on Jason and set him straight.

He could tell, he could see it. When they talked to him now, they were the same as usual, still laughing, still teasing, still joking, but they felt *closer* to him now. They knew now that if they invited, he wouldn't say no, but they didn't invite. They were just content with the knowledge that they *could* invite. That was what they wanted more than anything else. The act wasn't as important as the security of knowing they would not be denied the act if that was what they wanted.

Jyslin and Symone were utterly smug about it. They'd been telling him that for years, but finally, finally, he got it through his thick skull. *I worked very hard to get you here, you silly man, Jyslin laughed over breakfast. So did Symone. It's just not proper, what you were doing to the girls. I gave up trying to tell you long ago. When Aura came along and you finally started showing some interest in a woman and not hiding it or suppressing it, it wasn't hard at all to make you understand. I knew that eventually you'd realize it yourself, all you had to do was keep fucking Aura. And thankfully you're smart enough to see the truth quickly, she winked. So, from now on, if one of the girls asks, you have my blessing to say yes... not that I really expect them to line up or anything. But don't you dare roam around out there and come home too tired for us, or I'll kick your ass.*

I hope you're right. I'd kinda expect them to do something.

Jason, they do think you're sexy, but it's not about sex with them, it's about willingness. Eventually they'll start approaching you, when they're truly in need and you're available, but it won't be any time soon. If they lined up, like you're saying, they'd find it to be incredibly rude.

Rude?

Rude. They know now that you'll be a true friend if they need it, and to chase you down and demand sack time without really needing it is extremely rude. It's boorish. When they truly feel like they want or need buddy sex, they'll ask. Until then, they'll go on being just the same. They loved you as a friend before, they'll love you as a friend now. Nothing will really change.

That didn't happen exactly as Jyslin predicted, though. It turned out that there was one woman who was bound and determined to exploit Jason's change of view despite being considered rude. But, she was a rude kind of girl.

Kumi.

Jason had figured that if there was anyone on the strip that would jump all over him, it would be Kumi, and he was not wrong. She'd learned about him and Aura the night before from Myri and had not been there when he went to apologize, and she wasted no time hunting him down after she got back, which was after Zora took Aura back to the island. Kumi made no pretenses about why she was there, and she didn't hide the fact that she'd come for her piece from Jyslin and Symone, either. She stepped into his office wearing nothing at all, and she shut the door behind her with her eyes all but blazing with both lust and anger.

"If you can fuck Aura, you can fuck me," she told him in a voice that brooked no defiance. "Now strip."

"I'm kinda busy, but if you don't mind a quickie bent over the desk, I can find the time for that," he answered without batting an eye. "We can have some hot sex some other time."

She had come expecting a fight, and his sudden and complete surrender to her demands threw her off her prepared arguments. All she could do was nod dumbly and allow him to pull her over to the desk and bend her over, almost disbelieving he was actually going to do it. She kept looking back at him in disbelief, and she didn't believe he was actually going to do it, that it was just another prank, even when she saw that he had an erection. She still had doubt in her eyes when he settled in behind her, and she even sent her disbelief when she felt him press himself between her legs. She wasn't going to believe that he'd do it until he actually did it, that this was the same kind of elaborate prank he'd pulled on her long ago, and that nothing short of penetration would make it abundantly and unmistakably clear that it was no joke.

Her eyes widened in honest shock when he began to do just that, and his offer to have sex with her again later finally hit her, almost like a hammer. When she finally understood that he was doing more than just giving in, that he was *offering*, she gave a delighted laugh. "Oh, yeah baby, I *finally* get banged without having to threaten to leave the house! Do me like a Barkan whore!"

He gave her what she wanted. He banged her like a Barkan whore.

And he didn't *have* to apologize to her. His actions spoke louder than any words or sending. Kumi forgave him too. In her own special way.

After Kumi was dealt with, figuratively speaking, things settled back down. Jason got quite a bit of work done that day, catching up on the mountain of paperwork that had piled up on him ever since the trip to the planet Exile weeks ago, stuff he had to get done before the summit, so nothing was hanging over his head.

They had also extensively tested the interdictor, which was now at full power. Jason watched from his study as the destroyer *Dauntless* made multiple attempts to jump into the system. It tried every possible trajectory angle. It tried overpowering the resistance with its engines in every possible configuration. Myleena tried everything she could possibly think of, but nothing allowed the ship to jump more than two hundred feet closer to Karis than when it started.

That was such a relief that Jason almost felt like a Skaa had just gotten off his chest.

The experimentation did prove a few things, and surprise them a little bit. The distortion field *did* deflect hyperspace ships, knocking them off course, if they tried to pass through the field at a very shallow angle or tangent to the field. They also found out that a ship *could* jump in the area, but only jump *away* from the system, but not very far. The ship would only stay in hyperspace for about a two microseconds before it was knocked out again, but that split second let a ship travel about .317283 light years. And there was a curious additional effect, as well; the ship should have *only* traveled .3068182 light years in that time. The ship got some kind of boost out of jumping with the flow of the distortion, but then it overtook the next distortion wave and was knocked back into real space.

That sent Myleena flying to her note panel, vowing to try to come up with some kind of external hyperspace “catapult” device that would let a ship mimic this effect and get a boost when jumping hyperspace, which would let them travel even faster in hyperspace. And that was good. Even one second shaved off a hyperspace jump was one second the crew was not subjected to the stress of hyperspace.

Myleena also saw a potential to exploit the “troughs” in the hyperspace pulses, and made note to try to come up with some kind of engine modification that would sync the ship with the distortion wave pattern and let it jump *out*, but still prevent ships from jumping *in*... when she found the time in the middle of the other fifty thousand things she was doing. From what Jason could see, it was possible, but the ship would still have to stop at the edge of the distortion field, where the border caused anything not approaching at a tangent to drop back into normal space. But still, the ability to jump a fleet to the edge of the distortion field in order to attack a fleet sitting there wondering what the fuck just knocked them out of hyperspace could be quite useful.

The *Dauntless* spent nearly six hours trying to breach the interdicator and jump into the system, but it was thwarted at every turn. No matter what it did, it got no closer than .9999987375 light years from the planet.

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, the interdicator was an absolute and *smashing* success. It worked exactly as Jason had prayed it would, and so far, it seemed like an impassable barrier. But then again, the Consortium might have scientists that thought differently from they did, and they’d find a hole. But still, they’d have to find it, and that could take *years*.

Jason knew then that he was in business. And business was about to *boom*.

After dinner, he and Jyslin took Rann to the beach, and Myleena decided to take a well deserved break and join them with Danelle. They lazed about the beach on beach lounge chairs, nude bodies warming in the sun, while Rann and Danelle built a sand castle near the surf. “Trelle, I needed this,” Myleena said with a long, contented sigh, wiggling a bit in her lounge chair.

“That’s why I made you come down,” he told her. “You’ve gone way too long without a little rest. You certainly didn’t get any at Danelle’s passing party.”

I don’t think so either, she agreed. *I’m still trying to wrap my head around that*, she sent with absolute pride in her voice. *My daughter expressed at five. Now that bitch Yana can just shut the fuck up.*

Jason laughed. *Such total hate for Yana*, he teased with a grin. *Not that I want to bring up work, but anything you haven’t put in the reports and Jys hasn’t told me?*

A little. We’re taking apart their power broadcasting system now. It’s not easy to understand because we don’t have the computers to control it, but we’re studying the transmitter array now. I’m going to try to find some way to jam it. We know for a fact that the brain implants in the insectoids run on that power, so if we can jam it, we’ll mess up their control

over the things. Maybe they’ll go nuts or stop fighting or even turn on each other if we can disrupt their little mind network.

Always a good thing. How does it work?

Not sure yet, but it broadcasts a very low-energy kind of plasma that’s almost like a modulated signal, attached in some manner to the microwave band of the EM spectrum. The plasma rides the microwave carrier and the receiver demodulates it.

So instead of transmitting signals, they’re transmitting energy, Jason mused. *That’s pretty clever.*

It’s fairly sophisticated, she agreed. *I’ve never thought of anything like it, that’s for sure. If there’s anything we can learn from them, it’s this. This is a branch of plasma physics we’ve never encountered before, and trust me, babes, we’ve thought of a lot of branches of plasma physics. I already have plans to adapt it to our nanotechnology. If we don’t have to put batteries in the robots, we can make them fuckin’ microscopic. I could design robots that we could inject into a body and do surgery from the inside, for example.*

Hmm. It sounds like this plasma power system doesn’t have much range, if it runs on microwave bands. They don’t penetrate magnetic fields well at all, and they can be blocked by ferrite metals.

You’re right, but for the wrong reasons. I’d guess it doesn’t have much more than a five thousand kathra range. The microwave carrier breaks down quickly because of the plasma riding on it, so the receiver can’t be too far away.

You learned all that without even turning it on? Jason asked in surprise.

You can learn tons by not turning something on, Jayce, she sent teasingly. *Especially when you rip it apart. Carefully, of course, since I want to put it back together, but I have that transmission unit in exactly seven hundred and ninety-two pieces on the floor of my lab, all lovingly labeled and waiting for me to put it all back together.*

And thus your true motive to take a break is revealed, because you can’t walk around in your lab, Jason teased.

She laughed. *Nah, I needed a break. And I’ve been hearing some rumors*, she said, looking over at him. *A little vulgar told me that you’ve broken your vow of celibacy.*

Jason laughed helplessly. *If you could call it that. I just realized I was holding onto it for the wrong reason. I almost permanently damaged a couple of very close friendships.*

I could see that coming, she told him calmly. *The girls put up with it because it’s one of your little human quirks, the same as Mika, Mike, and Luke, but the instant you spread that Exiled woman’s legs, you opened up a whole pod of kaba nuts. When you did that, you were saying you will have buddy sex, and all these years you’ve had the girls here offering, and you wouldn’t touch them. That probably pissed a couple of them off.*

Yes, it did, and I apologized, he agreed. *But, having casual sex with someone outside the strip made me realize I was rejecting the girls for the wrong reason. Aura opened my eyes.*

Well, good for you, she sent, looking over at him with a smile. *But don’t get any ideas, buster.*

I know. Me and you?

Ewwwww!!!! they sent in perfect unison, complete with synchronized shuddering, which made Jyslin nearly fall out of her lounge chair laughing.

The light moment faded quickly, though, when Cybi communed with him. *[Jason, Miaari needs you in your study, right now,]* she told him urgently.

He quickly swung out of the chair. *[Tell her I’m on my way.]*

He didn’t bother to dress, he just rushed back home. He bounded into his study, where Miaari was waiting for him, and she closed the door and activated the security. “I got here as

soon as Cybi called, Miaari,” he told her, reaching for the robe he kept on the door to the little bathroom off his study. “What’s up?”

“We managed to extract more intelligence from that destroyed Consortium outpost, Jason,” she told him, her eyes grim.

He frowned. “Don’t beat around the bush, just tell me,” he sighed wearily.

She did so. She brought up something on the wall monitor, a start chart. “The base was here. When they destroyed it, we used trajectory analysis to discern the destination of the ships that destroyed the base. Here, Star XJ-783, in the Beta Quadrant, halfway across the galaxy and on the *far* side of Exile. Where we would be least likely to look for them,” she concluded darkly. “We sent a probe, Jason. It was destroyed, but it took this footage of real space before they discovered it.”

She waved her furry hand before the screen, and it showed grainy video of an orbital station the size of a small moon. Surrounding that station was an absolute *armada* of Consortium warships.

There were not dozens. There were not hundreds. There were *thousands*.

She saw the realization dawn in his eyes. “We counted three thousand four hundred and twenty-two ships, my friend,” she said curtly. “And while we watched, we saw sixty more jump into the system. They are not quite so decimated as we believed. But for some reason, despite this overwhelming force of numbers, they still do not make a move. That means that they could be engaged in clandestine action, or...”

“Or they’re waiting for something,” Jason finished, his eyes almost disbelieving, his hand clutching the edges of the robe. Over 3,400 of them! That was over three hundred times larger than his own fleet! How would they fight a force that large? His ships were better than theirs, but there were so many... so many!

“My God,” he said, putting a hand on the pit of his stomach. He almost felt sick. “If they reach us, can we stop them?”

She nodded calmly. “Do not forget, Jason, the GRAF cannon has no range limitation,” she told him. “If they try to sail that fleet into Karis space, then we can pick them off at our leisure. They will not be able to see the shots coming as the weapon gives no energy signature to detect, and we will have an entire year to destroy them. They will be, how do you say, *shooting barrel fish*,” she said in English.

“Like shooting fish in a barrel,” he corrected in English, a language he rarely used anymore. Miaari’s assertion made him feel a little better, but he’d been taught too much about tactics not to appreciate what a fleet that size could do. “We have to get the interdictors set up as fast as possible,” he said.

She nodded. “The Denmother hates the idea of the interdictors, but even she will not balk at *this*,” she said, waving at the still image of the enemy fleet. “Their fleet is larger than *ours*. But, it is smaller than the average fleet of the major powers in this sector, the combined forces of the Imperium of both house and Imperial navies, the Skaa, the Alliance. A fleet that size could attack the entire Imperium simultaneously, if they so wished, but the size of the Imperium fleet would make it dangerous to try. That is why I believe they wait, Jason. We saw sixty ships arrive before our probe was destroyed.”

“They’re calling in ships,” Jason grunted.

She nodded. “I do not know where they are coming from,” she admitted. “They could not be from Andromeda. We calculated the hyperspace jump distance and concluded that it would take nearly five years of continuous hyperspace travel, with *no* stops, to get from Andromeda to here. So, if these ships here are from Andromeda, then they have to have been sent five years ago. So, these ships must have been within our galaxy, gathered together, or they must

have been dispatched five years ago.”

“Them being here doesn’t make much sense,” Jason grunted. “But five years ago *does*. Remember what happened five years ago?”

“The restoration of Karinne,” she nodded, and her voice changed as it often did when she was *thinking out loud*, which was often when she made her most astute observations. “So, their spies here see the Karinnes return, they investigate Karis and determine that the planet is not radiated, and they launch a fleet from Andromeda. But they attack us *before* the fleet arrives, taking a calculated risk, because their spying probes show that the Karinnes are building up, building far faster than seemed possible thanks to our assistance, and between their numerical superiority and their Urumi allies preventing the Imperium from assisting, they believed they had enough to take Karis and *hold it* long enough for their huge fleet to arrive and reinforce them, prevent the Imperium from driving them back out. That was why they attacked anyway, even after they were found out and the Trillanes and the Urumi began rejecting their bargain,” she realized. “They knew that fleet was coming, and they wanted to take Karis *before* that fleet was revealed to the sector. If they succeeded, the fleet could move in and hold it. If they failed, then they weakened us for this second attack, which would be much larger. Or, it is entirely possible that the first attack was nothing but a probing action,” she pondered. “A test to see our defenses, so that this larger fleet would know our tactics and be ready. If the first attack succeeded, all and good. If it failed, then the second wave would have detailed analysis of our ships, defenses, and battle tactics. It is also possible they did this because of the balance of power in the sector. If the fleet showed up before Karis was taken, it would incite the entire sector to rise against an outside threat and fight the Consortium. But if they revealed their fleet *after* they took Karis, then they would have what they want, and it would take the rest of the sector too long to organize and attack. They had little intelligence on Karinne ships and felt that a three to one tactical superiority combined with the Urumi assistance would be enough to take Karis. They were in no way prepared for Karinne ships to be superior, or that you would be capable of crippling the Urumi fleet literally on your own and allow the defenses to concentrate on the Consortium. Had they succeeded, they would strip Karis of our technology, they would capture the Generations and the humans and Faey on the planet, they would take Cybi, and then they would willingly withdraw. They would have everything they wanted.” She frowned. “Very clever. These Consortium adversaries know the races of this sector very well. They knew that an overwhelming show of force would incite strong resistance, so they do exactly what they must do in order to accomplish their goals, without causing all races to oppose them. No more, no less. It is almost Kimdori in approach and execution.”

“Not any longer. The whole sector knows about them now, and if they attack, odds are the whole sector will resist.”

“Yes, and they don’t have enough ships to fight everyone,” Miaari mused. “And they still wait. For something, they wait. Are they waiting for more ships? Are they waiting for some critical piece of information? Are they waiting for the completion of some clandestine mission? Or are they waiting for something else? The waiting, that is the key. What are they waiting for? If we answer that question, then we will unravel the entire mystery.” She looked at him, speculative and thoughtful. “Perhaps they wait because of *you*.”

“Me?”

“You. The one thing they must have learned from the first attack is that the prize they seek, Cybi, had defenses against which they cannot stand. In order to get to her, they have to go through *you*. And you proved that that would be extremely difficult. If any attack on Karis is to succeed, the Consortium must find some way to neutralize the Generations, prevent them

from joining to Cybi and using the power of a biogenic mainframe to repel the assault. Remember, my friend, that you all but single-handedly crushed the Urumi attack, and it was you who prevented their burrower units from reaching the bunker. They know now that you are the most powerful defense they must circumvent, and they cannot move until they can get around you. There is no machine or technology that can stop psychic powers, Jason. None. The only race to have *ever* created a machine that can change, alter, or augment psionic abilities is the Karinnes. The Consortium has no defense against you. The only defense against a telepath is from another telepathic being, and we do not know if they have any telepathic beings among them. Shields and armor will not stop you from reaching inside a Consortium ship and tearing it apart from the inside out with your telekinetic powers, or finding some way around the defense the insectoids have and destroying their minds. And when you are linked to Cybi, you have that power. You are the greatest weapon on Karis, Jason, and I will bet my white bar that you are the reason they wait. Until they can counter the threat you and Cybi pose, they cannot attack us. The prize they seek is like fire, and they must find some way to pick it up with their bare hands without being burned.”

“Well, if we can interdict the entire sector, it won’t matter.”

“The issue with the interdictors is this. When we start installing interdictors, the Consortium will hear of it. I have no doubts that they have spies among the Imperium. If they truly comprehend the danger those devices pose them, they will attack regardless of what they are waiting for. Their ability to jump in real time is one of their greatest advantages, just as it is ours. If that is taken away, the Imperium’s Stargate technology reverses the advantage to us. And I have little doubt that the Consortium will not also attack the Imperium in hopes of capturing a Stargate. Every race and government in the sector would do war upon the Imperium for that secret, if they only knew they could win. But the Faey telepathy makes war against them in their home territory a very dangerous proposition, as does the simple fact that anyone who boards a Stargate must subdue the *telepathic* workers and soldiers inside it. There are few things in this universe a general fears more than the thought of having to assault a heavily defended objective protected by Faey. They must invade to capture the objective, and that means they have no choice but to come within range of Faey defenders and subject themselves to telepathic attack.”

Jason scratched his chin. “So we do it all at once,” he said. “We build seventy-seven interdictors, then we move them out and put them in place all at once, and *nobody* but Dahnai knows about it,” he said. “By the time the word gets back to the Consortium and they make a decision, it’ll be too late. I’ll mount a GRAF cannon on the *Aegis* and gallivant it all over the Imperium and wipe out their attackers, one group at a time.”

She nodded gravely. “That is the best course of action. The Consortium’s main focus is us and the Imperium, so we must deny them their immediate goal. Dahnai will be furious with your decision, Jason. She will demand an interdictor for Draconis, at the very least.”

He groaned. “She will,” he realized. “God, I hoped I’d never have to do this. We can’t tell her, Miaari. We can’t tell *anyone* about this. They may know that we know about this fleet, because they’ll think that probe came from the Karinnes, but so long as they don’t think that Dahnai knows about them, if she makes no obvious preparations like concentrating her fleet, then they won’t be rushed. They’re waiting for something, like you said, as we want them to *keep* waiting. We need the time. We just let them keep on waiting, and then spring it on them all at once. And when Dahnai finds out I hid something like this from her, she may never speak to me again,” he said with sincere regret.

“No, Jason. I think Dahnai *does* need to be told. She is a realist. We will explain this to her, and explain why it must be done. She can quietly prepare her fleet but *not* take any action.”

“But she’ll demand an interdictor.”

“We must make her see a truth, Jason. She can protect Draconis and lose her empire, or she can do nothing and perhaps save it all. But one way or another, she needs to be told. In person.”

He gave her a bleak look. “Call Jinaami, Miaari. This has to be done in absolute secrecy.”

She nodded simply. “I must get Denmother’s approval before we allow this.”

“That’s fine.”

Jason sat at the kitchen table a long time, while Miaari made the calls to get Dahnai through the Kimdori protocols. This was scary news, but only scary in how it would affect next week’s summit. Thankfully, and with not a moment to spare, Karis was safe... for now. The interdictor put them a year away from any attempt to attack, and the Consortium could not jump into the quasar and use the gate. If they missed the safe zone, they were dead. Even if they hit the safe zone, the Kimdori would just turn off the radiation shielding, and they were still dead. Karis was untouchable. That meant that their only recourse now was to lure the Karinnes away from Karis, and that could be done by attacking the Imperium. Jason and the Karinnes weren’t a true part of the Imperium, but they *did* care, and they would help if the rest of the Imperium was attacked. Jason was loyal to his Empress, but not out of political motivation, out of personal affection. He loved Dahnai, and he would fight tooth and claw to protect her... but never to conquer in her name.

This had implications for the sector more than Karinne, at least for now. If they tried to jump their 3,000 ships to Karis, they’d be in for a year long trip, at least, and they’d have that much time to destroy their fleet. If Myleena’s idea about syncing jump engines worked, they could launch hyperspace missiles at any fleet sailing at sublight speed, subjecting any attacker to the equivalent of storming the beach on D-Day that would last a whole year. A whole year of being open to attack. And Miaari was right about one thing... when they got here, then they’d have to deal with Jason and Cybi if they wanted to take Karis. Cybi’s biogenic mainframe amplified Jason’s powers exponentially. With them buried deep in the planet, they were all but untouchable while they could attack the Consortium fleet. The real question was what the four major empires of the sector would do about this, the Imperium, the Skaa, the Alliance, and the Collective. When they found out that the Consortium was massing a huge fleet out in the Beta Quadrant, how they reacted to it would dictate the history of the sector.

This was confirmation, though... justification. Everything he had done up until this point was now justified. He had been right. The Consortium had *not* left for good. They were just pulling back to reorganize. They were coming back. This was proof, they were coming back. Oh, he was sure some would say that them destroying their bases near this sector was them retreating, but no, it wasn’t a retreat. They had simply pulled back and denied anyone a chance to capture their technology. They wanted no bases within easy strike range of the Imperium, not with their advantage of being able to jump hyperspace in real time. It behooved them to keep their bases *far* from the Imperium, to make it a dreadful risk to jump an attack fleet to take the Consortium on in their own back yard. Jason didn’t see them as destroying that base as a retreat, he saw it as a preparation for a protracted war.

Jason was making all of his plans based on the threat the Consortium posed not just to Karinne, but to everyone. Seeing this fleet, knowing that he had been right about the Consortium, showed him that he had done the right thing. The Consortium was a threat to everyone, and the threat they posed would cause the plan behind the plan to fall into place.

And it was a good plan... if he lived to see it through.

The first steps of it were complete. The interdictor worked. Dahnai would be pretty easy to sway to lease Stargates, mainly because all she could see was the revenue it would generate

for her house. Once that step was complete, then would come the work outside the Imperium. He would start with the Alliance first. Yes, that was the best place to go. They were the most “civilized” of the four empires, the least warlike, the most multicultural and the most willing to adopt a new idea, so long as the idea was a good one. They were the only empire where the lesser species had joined willingly and not been conquered, as they had in the Imperium.

Miaari’s hand touched his neck, and he felt that moment of *expansion*. She knew about his plan. She couldn’t help but know. And since she knew about it, Zaa knew about it. But that was no problem, since Miaari thought that it was actually rather clever, and Zaa thought it was a good idea. They would help, when the time came, even if what he intended to do seemed crazy.

But sometimes crazy works.

“I have Dahnai,” she told him. “Come.”

“Thanks, Miaari,” he said, taking her hand and holding at a moment. She smiled at him earnestly, and patted his hand.

“Any time, my old friend,” she told him.

Dahnai looked quite curious, looking around Jinaami’s private office. She only entered the office to confer privately with Zaa, and she was quite interested in everything she saw around her. Since the Karinnes had returned, memory bands and biogenic computers had been made available to the Kimdori, who used them off planet. Draconis was one of three places where the Kimdori employed that technology, and Dahnai was observant enough to catch it. She’d seen those bands around the wrists of Miaari and Kiaari, had seen it on the wrist of Zaa when she conferenced with her, and she wouldn’t miss the significance that Jinaami also wore one, but *only within the confines of her own office*. Jinaami never wore it in public. She was doubly surprised not to be looking at Zaa, but looking at Jason and Miaari. “What’s going on, baby?” she asked in confusion. “You could have called me using the usual channels. They’re secure.”

“Well, this is even more secure,” Jason said simply, sitting at his desk with Miaari standing beside him. “What I’m about to tell you cannot leave that office, Dahnai. You and Jinaami can be the only ones to know. Don’t even tell Kellin.”

“I’m not sure if I want to hear this news,” she said.

“Probably not. Show her, Miaari.”

“The Kimdori tracked the Consortium from their destroyed base, your Majesty,” she told Dahnai. “We tracked them to a second base in the Beta Quadrant, some five months of jump distance from here for the Imperium. We dispatched a surveillance drone to the system, and this is what it found.” She waved her hand at the computer, using her memory band to access the computer and give it orders.

On a second window on the monitor, Jason and Dahnai saw the same footage, 22 seconds of footage as the drone panned across the fleet, including the arrival of more ships. Then it ended abruptly.

“Three thousand, four hundred, and twenty-two ships, your Majesty,” she said simply. “They have pulled back beyond your ability to jump out and attack them, but within their range to jump to attack us. We do not know how long they have been there, but it is clear that they are waiting for something. That is enough ships to attack any empire in our sector with a reasonable chance of success, yet they do nothing but wait.”

Dahnai was silent a long, long time, as small, honey-colored Jinaami stood silently behind her, her face grave. “Fuck,” she finally said, leaning back in her chair. “I’m sure you didn’t bring this to me if you didn’t have a plan.”

“We have a plan, Dahnai, but you’re not going to like it,” Jason answered.

“Well, let’s hear it.”

Miaari laid it out in simple terms. “We know the Consortium knows what goes on in the Imperium and the sector,” she said after she explained the background. “If they know what the interdictors are and what kind of danger they pose, they will be spurred to attack despite what they are waiting for. The interdictors rob them of their greatest advantage, the ability to jump hyperspace in real time and attack at will and whim. So, the best chance we see, your Majesty, is to install *all* of them at once.”

“Which leaves us vulnerable until you have enough built to do it,” she concluded. “How long?”

“We can build a minimum of twenty every twelve days, provided nothing goes wrong,” he told her. “Since it’s apparent now that this is very important, I’ll see if I can’t step up production, but for now let’s go with that. So, five takirs or so.”

“So long,” she groaned, leaning back and looking at the ceiling. “But if I demand they go up as I get them, I risk losing every system not protected if the Consortium catches word of it. Fuck, why did I get out of bed today!” she growled. “Alright, what’s your clever plan to handle this, Jayce?”

“We keep quiet,” Jason answered. “We don’t even mention this during the summit. They know I know because they destroyed the probe, but if they don’t see anyone making any preparations, they’ll hopefully think that the probe never got the information back to us, nobody believes me, or they don’t care. Meanwhile you *very quietly* find some reason to make sure your fleet is ready to move fast, but nothing overt. It might not be a bad idea to very quietly get the house fleets mobilized.”

“But they’ll see that as preparation.”

“Not if they think it’s just some kind of internal Imperium tension. Go to the Dorrans and Shovalles and ask them to pretend to have some kind of spat, then mobilize their fleets and make all sorts of noise that there’s about to be a house war. Make sure everyone knows about it, make sure it’s all over INN. All the other houses are going to mobilize, and you’ll have all the justification you need to redeploy your fleet, to stop an internal war between the two largest houses in the Imperium in a time of crisis.”

Dahnai gave him a look, then laughed richly. “Oh my, that’s brilliant! Using one of our greatest flaws as a tactical advantage, fuckin’ *brilliant*, babes!”

“Do you think Semoya and Emae would do it?”

“I’m sure they will,” she said, tapping her jaw rhythmically. “They’re not stupid. I’ll have to tell them the truth, but I’m also sure they won’t tell anyone else, so their navies will think it’s real. They can handle the real tensions so long as they keep their fleets on opposite sides of the Imperium. Then, after we get the interdictors, they miraculously kiss and make up.”

“Sounds good to me,” she said.

“A suggestion?” Jinaami said hesitantly. Jinaami had long been intimidated by Miaari.

“I’m always open to suggestions, Ambassador,” Dahnai said.

“The Empress should not be vulnerable in this, and the most vulnerable time will be the time immediately after the summit. It would reinforce the illusion of tension if her Majesty was not on Draconis as this fake confrontation develops. She is well known to be sensitive to the inner machinations of the *Siann* and has stepped in to crush these kinds of things preemptively in the past. Well, it’s now common knowledge that the High Princess is going to spend two takirs on Karis with her betrothed. It would be best if the entire Imperial family went with her. That puts Empress Dahnai under the protection of Karis, yet also ensures she is not here to prevent the internal tension from erupting, it will give Semoya and Emae the space to develop their fake feud. After all, most in the Imperium believe that Karis is cut off

from the Imperium, so it would look quite natural to them to see two major houses making noise while the Empress is away, and where they believe she cannot keep track of their activities. After, say, fifteen days, Dahnai seems to finally find out what is going on, but by then the fleets all mobilize, and it appears that she is returning to put a stop to it. By then, the fleets will be in a position to all move swiftly to counter any Consortium invasion, and during this time when the Empress must remain on Draconis, she leaves her family on Karis where they are safe and the Grand Duke dispatches a sizable portion of his fleet to Draconis under the pretense of being summoned by the Empress, but in actuality they are there to protect her and Draconis from Consortium attack. It both continues the illusion presented to the outside and ensures the protection of the Imperial family. To perpetrate the deception, the Empress will need utterly secure communications to coordinate with Emae and Semoya. I believe that Denmother would be willing to arrange that communication, since this is so important. That way the Empress does not have to rely on uncertain communication channels that the Consortium may have tapped.”

Miaari smiled broadly. “Jinaami, that is devious. I am most pleased with your suggestion, and will speak highly of you to Denmother.”

Jinaami absolutely *beamed*.

“I have to admit, it’s fuckin’ clever,” Dahnai said with a nod. “It moves my family to safety and gives Semoya and Emae a takir to stage the feud. Then I come back with the Karinne fleet at my back and make all kinds of ugly threats, but it will take me *a little time*,” she said, wiggling her hand in a Faey manner that mimicked the human gesture of “air quotes,” “to get things calmed down. The tension should last until, say, the interdictors are ready.”

“I don’t object, with the interdictor up here at Karis, I can afford to deploy the fleet to Draconis,” Jason mused. “And I’d be overjoyed to protect your family, Dahnai.”

“I have one demand, though.”

“What?”

“You will *not* put us in that hovel!” she said hotly. “I demand accommodations suitable for an Empress!”

“Well, there are none near the strip,” he told her, thinking. “You could stay in a hotel in Karsa, I suppose.”

“I don’t demand a palace, but isn’t there at least *one* empty house near your beach?”

“Empty? Miaari?”

“There is not an empty house, but there is the empty land at the fence border on the north side,” she said. “Part of the buffer. We could annex enough of it to build a house that many could use after Dahnai, a guest quarters of sorts for the Grand Duke’s guests. That, or we could host them in the *Scimitar* and leave it at the dock.”

“How about a yacht or something?” Jason asked. “I’m sure we can find *something* pretty big we can moor at the dock for them.”

“I’m not staying in a *boat*,” she said indignantly. “You have space and Makati there. Build me a house!”

“How big could we make it?”

“It’s nearly two square *varta* of land that we could spare and maintain the fence. At least a four bedroom, three story abode with a pool, garden, and deck, but many will see it as insulting for the Grand Duke to have a guest house grander than his own.”

“Nah, everyone knows I hate pomp and circumstance, and I love my colonial,” he said dismissively. “Okay, that’s what we’ll do. I’ll put my Makati on it, Dahnai. There’ll be a nice house here waiting for you when we finish at the summit, but nothing outrageous, so be ready to rough it compared to what you’re used to. And just think, you’ll get to keep your

kids with you while you’re here, a whole takir or more of being a *family*.”

“That’s true,” she said with a dreamy smile. Dahnai loved her children tremendously, and Jason again felt so sorry for her that a stupid tradition separated her from her own children. “I’ll inform Harae so she can work out the logistics and pick the guard detachment coming out. I’ll only tell Kellin what I’ll tell the public, that you’ve invited all of us to Karis for an extended visit, and I’ve accepted.”

“It sounds like a plan,” Jason nodded in agreement.

“Actually, many will see it as sense. Nobody will doubt my reasoning for going to Karis. You’re my most powerful ally, and it would only look natural for the two of us to sequester ourselves away after the summit to talk about the results and make plans. And while I’m away, my treacherous nobles go and start a feud that requires me to roar out of Karis dragging along half the Karinne fleet to try to settle things down,” she mused. “Everything about this plan just fits all together with what we need. You’re pretty damn clever, Jinaami.”

“I can only serve, your Majesty,” she said modestly in reply.

“The Denmother does not post a fool in one of the most important Ambassadorial posts in the sector, Empress,” Miaari said simply. “Jinaami is a clever and capable Kimdori, and she honors her post every day.”

“I am humbled by praise from you, Handmaiden,” Jinaami said, her cheeks ruffling and looking down. It was a reminder of Miaari’s position of awesome power within the Kimdori. As a Handmaiden, she literally stood at the right hand of the Denmother, and was allowed to speak on her behalf. For Jinaami to hear praise from Miaari was the same as hearing it from Zaa, as far as she was concerned.

“I think this will work,” Jason agreed. “Just as Jinaami laid it out. It fits together almost perfectly. I’ll get that house built and kick some asses in my factories to get those interdictors built quickly.”

“And I’ll get everything ready over here for us to pay an extended visit to Karis, and pull Semoya and Emae aside and give them some private orders,” Dahnai returned. “Actually, I think those two will enjoy this. They’re rivals, but they’re also friends... not that their friendship wouldn’t stop them from stabbing each other in the back,” she laughed. “But, I doubt that they’ll take it personally once the insults and threats start to fly. They’ll keep their heads, because I’ll make sure they understand how important it is to posture and threaten, but *prevent* any actual fighting. They’ll probably enjoy stirring things up and pretending to be at each other’s throats, though. They’ll see it as a grand game, to see just how stirred up they can get things without having things erupt into actual war. Their enthusiasm should sell it.”

“And the Consortium should never see the truth,” Miaari concluded. “They will see the dissent as the reason the fleets mobilize, and continue to wait for whatever it is they are awaiting. Everything Empress Dahnai does will make sense to them given the information they have on her and the Imperium, and nothing will seem amiss. They should not see the mobilization as a threat or any kind of preparation for Consortium attack.”

“Then we’re all in agreement,” Jason said, clapping his hands. “I’m looking forward to having you here for a while, Dahnai, even if I’ll be a little too busy to spend much time with you. I’ll have a lot on my plate while you’re here.”

“I’ll have my children with me, babes, I’m sure I’ll be quite content,” she smiled.

“I’ll build a pool and a couple of big slides, just for them,” he winked.

“They’ll love it,” she laughed. “Let me go, before too many people start wondering why I’m in Jinaami’s office for so long.”

“Alright. We’ll be ready for you.”

“And I’ll have everything all set up on my side. See ya later, love,” she said, blowing him a

kiss.

“Good luck, hon.”

When the transmission died, Jason leaned back in the chair and chuckled. “Miaari.”

“Yes?”

“Tell Zaa that putting Jinaami on Draconis was one of the best ideas she ever had.”

“Yes, if I were of her clan, I would be incredibly proud of her,” she agreed. “I will speak highly of her to Denmother tonight, when I give her my report.”

“She deserves every word of praise.”

When someone asked the Makati to do something, it got done fast, it got done right, and it got done well.

There were several Makati contractors on Karis, but Jason had one favorite, Red Horn Construction. They had been the ones that had built the fence, and had built several of the buildings in the White House complex. When Jason called them and told them he wanted a spacious, handsome five bedroom, three story house with a pool, a garden, and attached to the strip, to be built specifically to house Empress Dahnai as a guest house when she visited Karis, the owner, Krabbad Gratikar, dropped everything and came to his house. For three hours, they talked about designs, floor plans, amenities. What kind of pool he wanted. What kind of garden style. How he wanted the fence rebuilt, which required input from Aya.

They debated for quite a while, until Jason finally settled on a three story colonial in the same architectural style as his own house, six bedrooms, four baths including a hot tub in master bedroom on the second floor, a study, a secure communication room so she could conduct her business, a hardened bunker in the basement to serve as protection in case of an attack, a large pool with a separate spa built beside it, a small guest cottage, and a floral garden along the fence side of the house. They talked with Erinn, who owned the house on the other side of the fence, and he agreed to give up a little bit of his yard so they could rebuild the fence, and in return the Makati would expand his pool and install a hot tub in his back deck.

By midnight, they had the plans and a contract. Krabbad swore to him on his family’s rune slate that the house would be built in five days, because a project like this would not be very hard for his contracting team. And when a Makati made that kind of an oath, that was a guarantee that it would happen.

Of course, Krabbad also pissed off a few people, because he brought in his entire workforce that very night and happily started demolishing the fence at four in the morning. Jason got dragged out of bed to straighten it all out, and worked out a schedule that prevented Krabbad from doing any heavy work for 9 hours every night, to let people sleep.

But, once daybreak came, Jason saw that Krabbad was hell-bent to honor his word. The fence was already torn down, and he’d already surveyed the land and made his engineering plans for his team to follow. By ten that morning, they had dug the foundation pit, had laid out the sewage, water, and power lines, and were already working on the hardened bunker for the protection of the house’s occupants. By two that afternoon, the bunker was complete. By four that afternoon, Krabbad had set the basement and foundation, and was preparing to set up the plascrete frame of the house. By nine that evening, the frame was up, the pool had been laid out but not started, and the land had been surveyed for the two room guest cottage that would be on the far side of the pool from the main house. Krabbad knocked off at 13:27 that evening, and by then, the interior plascrete walls of the house were up, the floors were installed, and it was ready for the internal preparations. He kept a team there that night installing the datalines, conduit, pipes, and equipment that the Empress would need, from the house’s control computer to her secure room for private communications.

At daybreak, they started up again. Jason again wandered down from time to time to check their progress and he continued to work on knocking out all the paperwork that had backed up on him. By nine, all internals for the house were installed, and it was ready for internal finishing. By 13:00 in the morning, all the internal drywall type material was up, and the outside siding was starting to be put up. By two that afternoon, the exterior of the house was complete, they began digging the pool, they were laying the foundation of the guest house, and the designers had stormed into the finished interior to begin planning out the furniture, paint, drapes, and other things the house needed. By sunset, the pool was dug and the plascrete had been set, they were installing the pumps and filters to keep the pool clean, and the guest house’s bones were erected and waiting for the walls to be put up.

By sunset the next day, the guest house was built, the lawns installed, the walkways laid, the beach pathway extended to the house, all utilities were on, all internal sensors and computers had been tested, and Krabbad declared the project complete. It took Red Horn Construction three days to build something that would have taken a human contractor three weeks. The result was a lovely brown colonial with Terran 19th century European style furniture inside, done in dark, rich woods, soft silks, satins, and brocades, and subdued colors. It was tasteful and elegant, but not so luxuriant that it looked garish or overdone. Jason had wanted something suitable for Dahnai but not *Imperial*, and Krabbad had given him exactly what he wanted.

Jason’s side of the preparations for the summit was complete, and he was actually ready for it. He had cleared his backlog of paperwork and studied the leaders coming to the summit. He had gone over his speech with Miaari and Zaa, he had carefully planned out what he hoped to accomplish, and he got the strip ready for the arrival of Dahnai and her family. He also got back the last of his ships, and the KMS was fully operational with what it had.

Another task he had for himself was to go visit Cybi personally. There, in her core room, they communed for nearly eight straight hours. Jason had ideas, he had notions, and he also had to discuss the plan more with her, so he did it all at once. Cybi saw the value in his idea, an idea inspired by Miaari, so she agreed to bend herself to the task of making the necessary designs for the equipment he wanted.

He had also leaned on Myleena a little. He impressed on her the urgency to get interdictors, that the Imperium depended on it, and she agreed to divert some resources to increase interdictor production. He needed 76 interdictors plus one extra one for Karis, and she promised him 76 interdictors in 40 days by opening up ten more bays to interdictor production and diverting dock workers that could have been working elsewhere to work on them. She put Jyslin in charge of the interdictor production, which wasn’t unusual, for Jyslin was a senior member of her engineering team. This... did not make the human and Faey dock workers happy, but overjoyed the Makati and Kizzik workers. Jyslin was a former Marine, and she was a wonderful woman and loving mother, but she was a hard-ass when it came to keeping order and following the schedule. She was not afraid to take command and enforce strict discipline. With Jyslin up there, there would be no slacking, no jawing, no dallying about. People would do their jobs, work hard, and earn their pay. The Imperium depended on them, and she was there to remind them of that fact every other second.

Jyslin had taken Rann and a contingent of Dukal Guard with her, and Ayama had went with them to nanny for Rann when Jyslin was at work, so Jason was left more or less by himself in the house, with only Surin, Rahne, and the five guards that commonly guarded him, Aya, Ryn, Shen, Suri, and Dera. They took guarding him and the house in shifts, but he didn’t notice it too much because he was so busy. Miaari brought him hourly updates on any possible Consortium movement. The four Brood Princesses sent him daily reports about their activi-

ties, and he saw that they had everything well in hand and were quickly going to have their systems running smoothly. Aura kept him well informed about the Exiled's preparations to split up and what preparations had been completed for both those returning to Exiled and those preparing to move to Karsa. Dahnai was sending him messages about the summit, coming up early next week, and their preparations to come for a protracted visit. He sent her a recorded tour of the house he'd built for her, and she was quite pleased with it. "I love that furniture, hon!" she said excitedly after seeing it. "Is that a Terran style?"

He nodded. "Nineteenth century. It's not authentic, but the furniture makers did a good job with the imitations."

And Jyslin's prediction held true. The girls on the strip did not bother or harass him. They were just the same as they always were, stopping by and chatting, smiling, laughing with him, and there was a little teasing, but there were no invitations. He was sure that Kumi would come prowling again soon, and he also knew the twins were going to give him a hard time, but everything else was calm and normal.

It was nice to see Rahne finally coming out from her little cottage and getting more involved with life on the strip. Ever since he'd moved her in, she'd kept more or less to herself, and didn't come over to the main house very often. He rather liked here. She was friendly and a little shy, since she had knowledge of things without any practical experience, so that made her a bit hesitant and quiet. She would watch before doing, and she didn't speak or send very often, more content to observe. Oddly enough, it wasn't Temika that seemed to be the person she got along with best on the strip, it was Maya. Maya was such a dear, and Rahne felt lonely, so it was only natural, he saw, that Rahne would gravitate towards her. Maya was the mother of the strip, the woman with the most experience because she had three children, and Rahne, who had no one, was drawn to the nurturing nature of Maya.

It was also curious in how utterly *Faey* Rahne was. She had been educated by Cybi, and Cybi had taught her to be a proper *Karinne*, making absolutely no mention of human customs, culture, or history. Jason didn't much agree with that. Rahne was a Generation, but she was also human, and she deserved to know the other side of her heritage. But, in some ways, it worked. Cybi had prepared Rahne for the unique aspects of life on the strip, and if she didn't feel like she fit in with the people, she at least understood the culture and the customs unique to the Grand Duke and the area in which he lived. This, naturally, annoyed Temika, who thought she was going to have a human friend that would share her views. Outside of that, Rahne was a shy young lady in some regards, but had *Faey* brazenness in others. That was why she was laying unclothed in a chair by the pool in the morning sun, reading a hand panel and letting the blue sun try to darken her pale Scottish skin a little bit... without much success. Rahne was very fair, and she tended to freckle rather than tan, but he could give her points for trying. Cybi had educated her with *Karinne* morality and modesty, which allowed her to fit in on the strip very well. She was slender, having gained weight to a healthy level after getting her from the Urumi underfed and underweight, but she was still looked not entirely good. Her ribs still stuck out just a little, and her hipbones were pronounced. She needed to gain about five more pounds before she looked robustly healthy. Jason had come out to do some laps, since he'd not had any exercise lately and Kumi had gotten him into the habit of swimming for exercise, wearing a baggy pair of swim trunks. When it came to swimming for exercise, he didn't like to do it nude, it was... distracting. Kumi was much the same way, for she always wore a suit when she swam for exercise, but would happily shed that suit when it came to swimming for fun.

"That's a lost cause," he chuckled, looking down at her.

"What do ye mean?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Use the tanning bed down in my basement," he told her, pointing up. "The atmosphere here filters out almost all the UV light, so you can stay outside almost all day and never tan. Handy when you're out on the beach, but damn inconvenient when you're trying to tan a little."

"Och, I dinna like the tanning bed," she complained. "It's narrow and uncomfortable, and I feel like I'm being baked in an oven."

"I can't argue with that," he said, throwing his towel on the chair beside hers.

"No work today?"

"Plenty of work today, but it can wait a little bit," he answered as he went over to the pool and sat down on the edge, putting his goggles on. "I haven't done any swimming in a while." *Ye were out on the beach yesterday afternoon, swimmin' in the ocean*, she noted as he slipped into the water and started swimming for the far side.

That's not exercise, that's fun, he answered. *Have you been thinking about what you want to study at the Academy?*

Aye, she answered. *I think, since I dinna know my own past, that I'd like to study history. But, since history willna serve the house very well, I'll also study business. Miss Kumi always whines that she doesna have enough people on her staff to do all the work, and Maya said she thought I'd do well workin' in the business field.*

Maya's right, Jason agreed, turning and swimming back the other way. *Just do what interests you, Rahne. If you don't want to study business, don't. The house could use a historian just as much as it could use another worker in Kumi's office.*

But I can do both, she assured him.

You should be able to, he agreed. *When do you want to start?*

Well, with all this craziness goin' on right now, I think it might be best to wait a while, she answered. *I think I'll start takin' the remote courses they offer down in Karsa, and once things settle down, I'll go to the Academy like Temika and Mike did.*

Sounds good to me. Been looking for a house?

Aye. I think I found a nice one, about eight blocks from here, down near the city line. Next door to a fine and handsome young man named Abrams. He's in the navy, I think.

Pete? Jason sent with a mental laugh, since his face was underwater. *Yeah, he's in the navy, he's the captain of a destroyer. Fine man, Rahne, fine man. Intelligent, witty, charming, and pretty funny.*

Aye, I talked to him a bit when I went to see the house. Said that the last owner moved to Herann to get in on the land grants, wasn't happy with the size of his lot.

Do you like the house?

Aye, it's fine, fine indeed. Much too big for me, but it's Dukal property, so I'll have to go through the Land Grant Authority.

Yah, you can only have one land grant property, Jason told her. *When the owner moved to get in on the bigger land grants inland, he had to surrender that grant back to the house. If you want it, it's yours, hon.*

Aye, I think I might like that, Jason, she agreed. *It's a fine house. It even has a small pool in the back.*

Then consider it yours. I'll have the deed in your hands by lunch. Consider it your land grant. [Cybi, do me a favor. Jump into the land grant computer and take the house by Commander Abrams off the list. It's Rahne's grant.]

[I will do it happily, Jason. I will have the authority deliver the deed to your house immediately.]

[Thanks, hon, you're a lifesaver.]

[Naturally.]

There, all taken care of, he told Rahne, turning again.

Thanky kindly, Jason. When can I move in?

In a few days, he answered. I'd like you to stay here at least until Dahnai returns, so you can meet her and her family, and it'll give me enough time to make sure you're going to be okay. I'll worry about you when you move out and on your own.

That's sweet of ye, Jason, but I can take care of meself.

I know you can. Cybi taught you everything you need to know to be your own woman, Rahne, but if you didn't notice, I'm a worrier at heart and I put my nose in other people's business. You're like my very own little sister, and I worry about you because you deserve to have someone worry about you. I know you are ready to live on your own, but I am not ready yet. Just humor me.

She laughed. Aye, I guess I can do that, Jason. It'll give me time to decide how I want to furnish and decorate the house, I guess. She was quiet a moment. I had a question.

I may have an answer, you never know.

Be nice, she sent teasingly.

[Cybi told me of the plans ye've made with her. Are ye truly intendin' to go through with it?]

[Yes.]

[But... Cybi told me that we've always kept our secrets. Isn't this compromising the house?]

[Yes and no, he answered. What you have to understand, Rahne, is that the secret isn't so secret. The Consortium knows about the Generations, about Cybi, about everything. We don't know exactly how much they know about biogenics, but they know about Cybi, and after the battle, they damn well now just what the Karinnes are capable of. Miaari thinks that's why they're afraid to attack us now, because of Cybi and because they'll never take her so long as there is even one Generation here to defend her. It would defeat the purpose of why they want Karis so badly. Cybi is the ultimate prize, and there's no reason to attack if they know there's no chance of success. There's no telling how much they told the Collective, there's no telling if they approach some other government and reveal that secret trying to enlist allies against us, there's no way to know how much everyone else knows. Sk'Vrae's made no mention of any of it, nor has her Brood Princesses, but that doesn't mean that she doesn't know. Given I gave her such a favorable deal with her border systems, she has no reason to piss me off right now and she knows it. And if she knows, there's no reason that the Alliance doesn't know, or the Skaa, or anyone that has contact with the Collective. One of the realities we have to face is that our secret is out, and since it is out, then there's no reason to hide it. We don't have to declare it from every rooftop, but we're in a war here, and we have to use every weapon available us.

[We are a weapon, Rahne. Miaari was right about that. That's why I went to see Cybi and we discussed it. That's why she's generating the plans for the biogenic tactical unit.]

[What is that?]

[A much larger version of the gestalt, he answered. Remember our one great advantage, Rahne.]

[We can commune with biogenic computers.]

[No. That's not it. Our one great advantage is those biogenic devices can augment our own power. That's what a gestalt does, remember, it's not just a computer we can commune with. Well, what Cybi's designing is a portable unit that will boost the power of any Generation that's linked to it. By myself, with just my gestalt, I can maybe lift about four hundred pounds with my telekinesis. Linked to that unit, I'll be able to lift four or five tons, and I'd be able to

shred an enemy fighter from far outside its weapon range. I want her to design one into every ship I fly, to give me extra protection, and also a new Gladiator just for me. It's also the other reason why I want a CBIM installed in the Aegis. That gives whoever is linked to the CBIM tremendous power, and that power will be mobile. Instead of being locked at Karis and only able to defend, the CBIM in the Aegis will be able to attack. That kind of power could turn that one ship into a bulldozer, Rahne, because there's no defense against our telekinesis except distance, and that won't be much help. Cybi says that a CBIM specifically designed for combat would give the Generation enough range to destroy ships with telekinesis without getting in range of a Consortium ship's Torsion weapons. If I was linked to a CBIM in the Aegis, I could crush every ship in my way. There's no telling how long the secret of biogenics will stay secret, Rahne, so we have to exploit that advantage while we have it. Our technology gives us an edge, but the Generations are our strongest weapon. We have to be ready to use them if necessary, and that means building biogenic systems and new CBIMs that will give us mobility and versatility. We never explain how we do it, that secret must never be revealed, but we have to be willing to use the weapon the Consortium is so desperate to capture. Ourselves.

[I know that if we use them in open battle, then we're revealing the true power of the Karinnes, but we have to have that option open. And then we have to protect ourselves from fuckin' everyone,] he communed with a disgusted tilt in his thoughts. [This is why we keep the secret, but we may have to reveal it to save ourselves from the Consortium. We have to have that option open, and just deal with that mess when the time comes. Survival is only single goal. We must protect Karis at all costs, even if it means revealing that secret.]

She was silent as he swam five more laps, then she finally responded. [I guess I can ken,] she told him. [But it's an awful risk.]

[Tell me about it. But we're looking at fighting a defensive war against an enemy we can't reach who can more or less attack us at their leisure. We have to put every weapon we can use on the table. Oh, I'm not going to trot the Aegis out and give everyone a tour of it, that's for sure. And I'm going to do my best to keep the secret, try to only use that weapon when nobody can see us. But, I have to have the option. I have to have that alternative, then deal with the consequences afterwards.]

[Aye. I think I ken what ye be sayin' now, Jayce. We have to have the tool in the box, even if we never take it out.]

[Exactly. Needless to say, I'd never really use the Aegis like that except here, in defense of Karis, but with luck, by then there will be at least five CBIMs on the planet to scare the piss out of the Consortium. As soon as we get those interdictors built, that's our next major focus. Cybi is terrified something will happen to her without another CBIM being online. Before they fell, the Karinnes had seven CBIMs. One on each continent, one on Kosiningi, and one at the Academy. I intend to eventually build ten. Two on Karga, one on each of the other continents, and four on ships. And with Cybi already being here, that'll give us eleven. But in the short term, I'm going to focus on two. One in Karsa, and one on the Aegis. After those are built, then we'll worry about the others.]

[A sound plan.]

[I hope so. Building a CBIM is beastly. That's why there were only seven. It will take the entire focus of most of the resources of the house, and a hell of a lot of help from the Kimdori, to build a new CBIM. Zaa estimates it'll take about a year.]

Your Grace, I have a communication from Empress Dahnai, Aya sent from the house. She needs to talk to you.

Alright, I'm on my way up, he answered, swimming to the edge and climbing out. Remem-

ber, tanning bed, he teased as he grabbed his towel.

Oh, go on with ye, she answered, shooing him with her hand.

Jason scrubbed his hair with his towel as he went up to his study, where Aya and Dera were waiting for him. Dahnai's face was already on the screen, and she was smiling brightly. "Hey hon," he said as he came in. "What's up?"

"I got some interesting news today, Jason, and we need to talk about it when I come visit you."

"No problem. What is it?"

She looked him right in the eyes. "I'm pregnant. I'm having twins. Two girls."

"Really? Congratulations!" he said happily. "This is really unexpected!"

"Oh, boy, is it," she told him. "Jason, the twins are fraternal, and one of them is yours."

His smile dropped right off his face. "What?"

"It's yours. I conceived last month when you came to court and threesomed with me and Kellin. My doctor's already confirmed it. One of them is Kellin's, and the other is yours."

"No fucking way!"

"It's a bit of a shock to all of us," she said ruefully. "I wasn't *supposed* to be fertile. I don't closet up with the Merrane sire now that I have two daughters and I'm married, but I *did* want Kellin to be the father of my first child in marriage, so I was going to sequester myself when I entered what the docs said was going to be my fertile phase. Well, I guess my body ignored the doctors," she said with a rueful chuckle. "Thank Trelle that it's twins. If I had a baby by you first while married to Kellin, the tabloids would have *never* let me live it down. But since it's twins, they won't say too much. *One* of the babies is his. I'll just have to make sure that Kellin's daughter is *officially* born first, then your daughter."

Jason, however, wasn't *entirely* happy about it. True, he saw the child as a blessing, as a gift, and he would love her as he loved his other children. But it was the *mother* that was going to be the problem.

That daughter would be a *Generation*... and she was going to be the daughter of the Empress!

Fuck. Dahnai as the mother—he'd have to tell her! Holy God, how was he going to teach his daughter her heritage without sharing the Karinnes' greatest secrets with Dahnai and Kellin? Every mother of his children knew the truth, they *had* to know the truth because of the children. He would have to hand over the greatest secret of the Karinnes to someone he *would not trust* with those secrets. But what choice did he have? Dahnai would have to know, would have to understand, or she wouldn't understand why he would so adamant, so vociferous about forcing her to abandon tradition over his daughter. But to make her understand, he would have to reveal the secret of the Generations. And then they'd both have to face an angry *Siann*, who would be outraged that Jason would demand a breach of ancient traditions and customs over the dispensation of his daughter. What a fucking dilemma!

"Jason? What's wrong?" Dahnai asked seriously.

He looked up at the ceiling. How the *hell* was he going to handle this mess? That child could *not* be placed in a Merrane foster family. She had to stay here, or stay with Dahnai. There was no choice in the matter. That child was not only a *Generation*, she was also a *target*. True, kidnapping a daughter of the Empress would be virtually impossible, but she would be the only known *Generation* living off Karis.

Shit! This was going to be a *fucking* mess! He was going to have to fight Imperial tradition and infuriate the *Siann* over his daughter, because he absolutely *could not* allow her to be raised as a Merrane. She was a *Karinne*, she was a *Generation*! She had to be kept safe, taught her powers and her heritage, and he could already see the wrestling match he was go-

ing to have with Dahnai over her.

He looked at Aya, and saw her grim expression. She was starting to see the problem here. He bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think his way through, but already feeling a migraine coming on. What a total *mess*.

"Jason!" Dahnai said urgently. "What in Trelle's name is the matter? Aren't you *happy* about this?" she said in a *very* dangerous tone. Their entire relationship hinged on his answer, and he knew it.

"Of course I'm happy that you're pregnant, and I'm delighted I'm gonna be a father, but... God, Dahnai. You have *no idea* what this means. No idea how much trouble it's going to cause." Aya nodded gravely as he blew out his breath. "Is it public?"

"Not yet," she answered. "I just found out and told Kellin about an hour ago. I haven't given my doctors permission to release the news yet."

"Then for the love of God, don't do it yet," he said. "We have to talk about this first."

"Why?"

"Because it's going to make the *Siann* blow a plasma exchanger," he said darkly. "You have to be ready for it, Dahnai."

"I've produced *two* heirs to the throne. Why the fuck would they care?"

"Because my child will *not* be raised by the Merranes," he said bluntly, looking her in the eyes.

"What? Just wait one fuckin' minute, babes," she said with sudden heat, then she laughed suddenly. "Okay, I think I see where this is going to go," she said, brushing her gorgeous bronze hair from her eyes. "Alright. How's this. I announce my pregnancy at the *summit*, and then we talk about it when I come to Karis. That gives us time to work this out, it doesn't raise too many alarms, and it also even fits in with Jinaami's plan. After all, I'm an Empress pregnant by a Grand Duke and with my daughter betrothed to his son. There are some political issues here that would need to be sorted out."

He mulled it over, then blew out his breath and nodded. "Alright, I can agree with that. "But... *fuck*," he said grimly. "I'm sorry if I'm worrying you, but you'll understand when you get here, and we talk. Because now we have a *hell* of a lot to talk about." He looked up at her and gave her an honest smile. "But for what it's worth, Dahnai, I'm very happy for both of us."

"Thank you, love," she said with a gentle look. "I've already named her."

"Oh? And where was consulting me?"

She laughed. "The Empress always has the right to name the child," she teased. "Kellin's daughter is named Miyai. Our daughter is named Raisha."

"Both of them are lovely names."

"I thought so too," she smiled, touching her stomach. "I'm so happy to be pregnant," she said impulsively. "A woman truly feels *whole* when she knows she's bearing new life into the world," she told him in a musing voice.

"You take care of yourself, hon, you're carrying *my* daughter now," he told her with a gentle smile.

"I will. I'm such a lucky girl," she said with a wondrous smile, putting her hand over her stomach. "I'm carrying the daughters of *both* the men I love, at the same time. All the love I have, all the love you and Kellin give me, it's all right here, and I'll feel it every second while I carry our daughters inside me. Trelle has truly blessed me."

"That's poetic, Dahnai. And beautiful."

She smiled gently. "I'll be busy until the summit, love, so I'll talk to you next then. Four days," she reminded him.

“I’ll be there in two. I want to be on hand to oversee the last of the preparations.”

“Then I’ll see you in three, we’re arriving a day early,” she told him.

When she cut the communication, Jason staggered over to the chair and sat down hard. His mind was whirling. Dahnai... he was having a daughter with *Dahnai*. God, if there was only one thing that could happen that could turn his entire life on its ear, that was it. Yes, he was happy, very happy to be an expectant father, and he was joyful that Dahnai was so happy to be carrying their daughter.

But oh, God, the complications it was going to cause.

He blew out his breath. “Aya, shoot me. Please.”

She laughed silently. *It looks ugly, but things will work out, your Grace. The Empress will understand.*

“I’ll have to tell her. I’ll have to tell her *everything*. She has to know, she can’t be a mother to Raisha and honor her Karinne heritage if she doesn’t. And that’s why this is going to get ugly. I’ll be giving the secrets of the Karinnes to the *last* woman in the Imperium that should know them,” he groaned. “But what else can I do? Steal Raisha and start a civil war? Deny Raisha her rights and heritage? She’s a *Generation!*”

Things will not look quite so bad after you talk them out, Jason, she sent, very informally, which was rare for her. Call Jyslin. Call Tim and Symone. And call Miaari. You’ll need all of them to work out just what needs to happen here.

He nodded. “You’re right. You’re always right, Aya. What would I do without you?”

Suffer terribly, I imagine, she sent with a smile.

“I’m not inclined to argue with that,” he said, and he started making calls.

They had a *lot* to talk about.

Chapter 6

Daira, 9 Oraa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 19 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Daira, 9 Oraa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The Karinne Academy, Norfolk, Virginia, the United States of America, Terra

He really didn’t feel like being here.

Jason sat at a desk in a conference room, in a converted Academy lecture auditorium, their largest such room. It had six tiers, and each tier would host two leaders, with a gallery shielded off from the main auditorium for spectators and those ambassadors and politicians not allowed in the main area. Jason had Kiaari to carefully arrange the tiers so governments at odds with each other didn’t sit next to each other, nor did one leader pass the other on the way down to the lectern. There would be eleven leaders here for this summit. The Imperium and Alliance would be on the first tier, and the Skaa and Collective would be represented on the second tier. The Zyagya and the leader of the Nine Colonies would be on the third tier. A small government of four worlds on the far side of the Alliance known as the Federation of Shiovan, peopled by a remarkably humanoid species called the Shio, shared the fourth tier with the Moridon. The fifth tier was where an arctic yeti-looking race called the Jobodi would sit, who owned only three systems but populated planets within them, making them formidable enough not to be conquered... and they were near the Alliance who wasn’t expansionist anyway. Beside the Jobodi would be a government of twelve systems on the far side of the Skaa that was also peopled by the Skaa. It was a breakaway government that came into being a thousand years ago, a compromise to prevent the entire empire from erupting into war between two clutchmates who both claimed the throne. One brother became Em-

peror, the other was exiled with all of his followers beyond the boundaries of the Empire with the solemn vow that neither he nor his descendents would be bothered by the Skaa. That brother forged his own empire out of uninhabited systems around his exiled home, and the Skaa Republic had been formed. The sixth and final tier was where Zaa would sit, alone, and by her own choice. Jason tried to put her closer, give her a more honored place, but she refused, preferring to stay in the background. Jason himself was afforded no place in this company, but he would be permitted to sit in an audience box to the side, among several other high-ranking officials that were too important to ignore, but denied a seat on those tiers because they were restricted to just the leader and one secretary. The other members of the Alliance Council, the advisors of Sk’Vrae, and other powerful dignitaries would be sharing that side box with Jason.

Jason was sitting at the desk rather than in the box because he was checking the acoustics of the room personally. He was sitting in Zaa’s seat, the furthest, and Secretary Kim was standing at the podium reading off a paper in Korean, not using any microphones, so they could make sure that voices would carry. The rotund leader of the United Nations had been only too happy to do a little personal work on this summit, “to feel like I had a hand in history,” he laughed in Faey when Jason talked to him this morning. The entire summit would be conducted in Faey, being the language of the host government, as was the long-standing tradition where inter-governmental summits of this kind were held. Were they holding this in the Alliance, they’d be speaking Alliance Common, the language used among the five races of their government.

His mind wasn’t really here. Ever since the bomb Dahnai dropped on him, he’d been quite distracted. The debate they had afterwards among his family, Miaari, and Cybi, who attended using her little hovering camera, was long and thorough. The most important thing they did all agree on was that Dahnai, being the mother of a Generation, had to know. She had to know the truth, no matter what it might cost them in the long run, because if she did not understand, if they tried to control Raisha’s upbringing without her understanding *why*, it would cause a rift between Jason and Dahnai, and the Karinnes and the Imperium, that may never be healed, that might even lead to war with the Imperium. There was also the fact that the Consortium already knew some of those secrets, so there wasn’t as much damage here as there might have been a year ago. Dahnai may find out somehow from the Consortium, either directly or indirectly, and so he was willing to give her at least that much knowledge. So, the underlying, fundamental decision was that Dahnai had to be told at least part of the truth, enough truth to understand why Raisha was so important, and why she was going to be different. Jason would tell her, tell her what he had hoped never to tell her.

They also agreed that Raisha must be taught her heritage. She had to be trained as a Karinne, and as a Generation. She had to know her past, she had to understand her powers, and she had to know the responsibility that came with that bloodline, the most important of which was the absolute secrecy which must be maintained. She was very safe being the daughter of the Empress, but the *political* dangers of the *Siann* and the Imperium also made them agree that Raisha had to be protected not only by the Imperial Guard and Dahnai, but also by the Karinnes. Dahnai would keep her safe, but her Karinne guardian would protect her from the rest of the Imperium. She could not be allowed to be conditioned to be a threat to her own house.

It was after that where things broke down, not into argument, but into debate. Jason and Jyslin wanted Raisha, to raise her as the foster parents. If Imperial tradition was to foster the children until the age of ten, then why not foster the child with her birth father? Jyslin was more than happy to raise Raisha as her own, and Jason was certain that Raisha would never

know anything but love with Jason and Jyslin. But Miaari saw value in *Dahnai* raising Raisha, for her to break tradition... for she'd be breaking tradition no matter what. She could also break the rest of tradition and just gather up all her children and live with them as a proper family. That argument was to woo Dahnai, for she loved her children and would love nothing better but to find some excuse to take them from their foster family and keep them herself. She argued that no matter how much Raisha was a Karinne, she was *also* a High Princess of the Imperium, and she had duties and responsibilities to her mother's side. Miaari saw Raisha as a Karinne in the ruling family, where she could directly influence Imperial policy and actions in the future, as their hold over Dahnai and Sirri as much as Shya and Rann were Dahnai's hold over Jason. With proper education, Raisha could be invaluable to the Karinnes for her presence in the Imperial family. Tim agreed with Miaari, but also saw value in something of a shared custody agreement, where Raisha spent half the year with Dahnai, and half the year with Jason and Jyslin. Cybi was strangely wishy-washy about the whole thing. She agreed with everyone and didn't offer any strong arguments one way or the other outside of the already agreed to stipulation that Raisha be taught her heritage and trained as a Karinne and a Generation.

He hated the idea of it. He was terrified of the idea of showing Dahnai the secret of the Karinnes, because no matter how much he loved her, she was still the Empress, and she was still Faey. He had no doubt she would try to use what she learned somehow to gain more power for the Imperium. He loved Dahnai, but he wasn't sure he could *trust* her.

Their reasoning for telling her at least part of the truth was simple. Dahnai would be armed with no more knowledge than the Consortium had, just enough for her to understand what was really going on between the Karinnes and the Consortium. She would know what a Generation was, but would have no access to the other half of what made a Generation so dangerous, the biogenic computers. A Generation was just an unusually strong telepath with telekinetic ability without a gestalt, without some biogenic device to augment those powers. That was the distinction they would most heavily ram into Dahnai's head, that they would explain *why*, but show her that any attempt to use Raisha, to use the Karinnes, to use the Generations, for her own ends would be futile. Jason was the one that controlled the biogenics, and that gave him the biggest trump card in the deck.

They had already decided that Dahnai would fully understand that if *anything* ever happened to Raisha, if Generations started mysteriously appearing in the Imperium, and if she *ever* tried to procure biogenic technology, then the Karinnes would declare war on the Imperium.

They had the viability to back up that threat. Dahnai already knew that he had went through the Imperium and found every single Karinne descendent, so she believed he had some ability to detect Karinnes from great distances, picking them out of the general population. He would foment that belief, tell her that he knew where every single Generation was at all times, so if he *ever* saw a Generation where there wasn't supposed to be one, he wouldn't even bother making any official announcement, he'd just jump his fleet to Draconis and lay waste to it. He would tell her he had similar control of biogenic technology, which actually wasn't a lie. Biogenic systems had a presence to both Kimdori and Generations, and it was detectable by sensors. The sensors on any KMS ship would detect a biogenic device on a planet it orbited, because the sensors were biogenic themselves and were able to sense other biogenic systems. He would make it clear to her that he would destroy any planet where he saw biogenic technology where it wasn't supposed to be.

He was going to make it abundantly clear to her that the Karinnes were willing to fight to the death over Karinne secrets.

Despite all that, he also hated the idea of his daughter being apart from him. Even though he had children with women other than Jyslin, his other sons and daughters were always near him, always just a minute from him. They were with him, and Raisha... she'd be halfway across the Imperium. He already felt *exactly* the way Dahnai had to feel about being separated from her own children, and it was a horrible feeling. That was why he wanted to raise Raisha, so she was with him, so she was *there*. He didn't want to be separated from her. But, that might be exactly what might happen, and he had to accept the fact. This is how Dahnai felt. She dealt with it, so could he.

But, he didn't doubt that Raisha would be well tended with Dahnai. She loved her children, and he knew Kellin would love Raisha as his own, just as a man would when his wife conceived outside of marriage. The child belonged to the mother, and the father was expected to treat all children as his own, whether it was his or not. That was what Vell did raising Aran, and Vell loved that boy like his own, the son he and Maya had never had themselves.

That fact was actually going to work against him here. By custom and by law, the child was the mother's child, and fathers had virtually no rights in Imperial law, not even nobles. Not even a noble father impregnating a commoner woman had any rights to the baby, though the child *would* be considered noble by Imperial law, and in such situations the woman was usually inducted into the house as a *maderine*, a noble in title only with no real benefits, almost a ceremonial position. By Imperial law, Raisha was a *Merrane*, not a *Karinne*. That was what was going to cause the *Siann* to have a meltdown, that a man was not only interfering in the rights a woman had to her baby, but he was interfering with the *Empress*, the paragon of Faey womanhood. Jason was interfering with a core tenet of Faey society, and it would be seen as an absolute scandal by the tabloids. That was why Jason, Jyslin, Dahnai, and Kellin had to sit down and talk. Dahnai would face tremendous backlash if she acted outside of tradition, and might even face challenges from the *Siann* if she allowed Jason and Jyslin to foster her. Faey were very open-minded and sociable in some ways, but when someone started threatening their fundamental beliefs, they became as conservative as one could get. And he hated to say it, but their sexist views were one of the strongest of those beliefs. Faey women respected men, revered men for their wisdom and education, and often put them on a pedestal, but men had strictly defined roles in society and women were adamantly opposed to them acting outside of those boundaries.

Jason would be fighting Faey prejudice both against humans and also against men in fighting for rights to have a say in the life of his daughter. If Dahnai decided to shut him out, he would be helpless. All he could do was threaten her at a personal level, threaten to break off their relationship, or threaten to declare war on her to get his daughter.

But, Dahnai was intelligent. When she knew the truth, he just prayed she'd see that Jason was right, and be accommodating. Raisha was a very special child, the product of two very unique families, and both her mother and her father were going to have to cooperate for her to be what both her parents wanted her to be. Dahnai would no doubt want a High Princess, a Merrane daughter, and there was a chance she was already considering which house had a son she could betroth to her in order to secure an alliance. Jason wanted Raisha to understand her heritage and be trained to appreciate it, and when she was of age, take her place in the *Karinne* noble house as a Generation, one of the rarest beings in the universe, one of only 283 Faey and humans who could commune with biogenic devices.

Jason was willing to compromise a little with Dahnai over Raisha in that regard. He didn't want to deny her her rights and privileges as an Imperial High Princess, which was as much her heritage as being a Karinne was. She would be the daughter of the Empress, for crying out loud. He didn't intrinsically object to her being an Imperial Princess, but he wouldn't

budge in that she had to be a Karinne as well. She was *his daughter*, and he deserved as much right to teach her her heritage as Dahnai did.

He sighed as Kim finished and looked to him, and he waved his hand to assure him he had heard every word. There were just too many things here, too many questions, and nothing could be solved until he talked to Dahnai and Kellin. They were due tomorrow morning local time, the entire Imperial family, and would spend the day before the summit touring the Academy. Jason, however, was here alone, here only with his five usual guards. Jyslin and Rann were back home, Tim and Symone were home, to further maintain their story. They had no real reason to come, and they also didn't want to be tempted to talk about Raisha until after it was announced. But, and somewhat suspiciously, Kumi had just *happened* to have business here on Terra today. She was in London right now, and he had little doubt that she was going to wander over to Norfolk before the day was over and be rude and demanding again.

He'd welcome it. It would give him something else to think about, and Kumi could certainly wear him out to the point where he'd sleep tonight... because he certainly hadn't had much sleep the last couple of days.

"This is all so exciting, your Grace," Kim was saying happily as Jason came back down. "Our home in such a spotlight!"

"You've done magnificently given how little time I gave you, Mister Secretary," Jason told him honestly, and he had. The leaders of the sector would be in luxurious hotels, they would be treated like the royalty they were, and Kim had pulled out all the stops, even arranging greeting and departing ceremonies. Virtually the entire U.N. was down in Norfolk for the conference, eager to meet leaders and dignitaries beyond the Imperium and make such a good impression on the outside universe that tourists flocked to Terra and spent their money here.

And tourism was *big* here. Terra was now just as much a tourist destination as Menos, and Faey from all over the Imperium vacationed here in *hordes*, so much so that Terra was now the most popular tourist destination in the Imperium. Faey was now the common language all over the planet, taught in every school, not only to foster communication among the many peoples of Earth to serve as a common language, but also because there were so many Faey here now, far more than there had been during the Trillane occupation. And most of them were tourists. Traditional tourist destinations like New Orleans, Hawaii, Rio de Janeiro, the Mediterranean, and Thailand were absolutely awash in money now, money brought in by Faey tourists, but they didn't just visit there. There were Faey tourists *everywhere*, even in places where one would never expect tourists such as Iceland, Antarctica, and the high desert areas of the Sahara and Gobi.

There was even tourism based on the Legion. The charred forests of eastern America were covered with temporary grass and saplings as the Surreales reclaimed the burn areas with native trees, restoring the forest to its original dimensions and condition. The crater that had once been Chesapeake was a tourist attraction now, as was Norad at Cheyenne Mountain. Charleston, Chesapeake, and Cheyenne Mountain had been declared historical sites and were left as the Legion left them, and there was even a museum in the nearby city of Denver about the Legion and the guerilla war it fought against House Trillane. Foxwood was also a tourist attraction, but only from the outside, as Jason had given the manor to Secretary Kim to serve as a retreat, much like the old Camp David had served the American President.

Amusing, but Jason had no home here on Earth now, since he'd officially given Foxwood to the U.N. He was staying at a hotel.

The integration of humans and Faey hadn't been entirely smooth, though. Faey women

mixed with human men was something of an explosive combination, because neither of them would say no. Faey women on the average were attracted to human men, and most men had no qualms about taking a Faey up on any offers she made to him. Just as Thailand was once known as the "sex tourism" capitol of the world, Los Angeles had taken that title. It had started innocuously enough, since L.A. was already a huge tourist destination, and it started with Hollywood. Terran TV and movies were big hits in the Imperium, and that gave Hollywood status in the Imperium as much as it did on Earth. Large numbers of Faey moved to the L.A. area permanently to work in the film industry, both in front of and behind the camera, in Hollywood, in TV, and in the huge numbers of porn studios out in the San Fernando valley.

Porn was considered mainstream entertainment in the Imperium, available on public networks at any part of the day, and the big studios did not overlook this fact. Within two years, most of the little porn studios out in the valley were being bankrolled by the big moviemaking industries, flushed with cash backed from the studios to produce higher quality movies and videos, and each major studio opened divisions dedicated to what they called "Faey-Oriented" movies. In other words, big-budget movies either with porn in them, or just totally porn. The shift of Hollywood into multicultural production attracted even more Faey tourists, which attracted young men looking to have a little fun with the tourists, which attracted more and more money to the area, until the whole thing snowballed. The sex trade exploded in the city over three years, from hourly rate hotels to illegal prostitution to adult shops to sex clubs. The city, looking to cash in on the money pouring into the city, changed the city's laws so nudity was legal to mirror the hugely successful beaches in Europe, and they convinced the state of California to allow cities and counties the ability to legalize prostitution on a local basis, just as it was in Nevada. They succeeded, and not even a day later, prostitution was legalized in Los Angeles, making it a city-controlled industry, mirroring the legal prostitution systems in place on many planets in the Imperium. That made the money *flood* into city coffers. L.A. became known not only as Tinsel Town, but as the new Sin City, where the major movie studios were producing big-budget porn movies to market in the Imperium, and one couldn't go down any street near the beach or Hollywood without seeing a billboard of a naked man or woman.

The most controversial and dramatic action, though, was the city's changing of obscenity laws. Wanting to further enable the large studios in the production of Faey-oriented movies, and also wanting to increase the already huge revenues from the new sex trade in the city, they changed the city's obscenity laws in two ways. First, they made it legal for a studio to shoot sex scenes in the open, even in public areas, and their other action was to establish "red light" districts of the city where all obscenity laws within those districts were suspended, which would allow sex shops to display graphic materials in their public windows and visible to the public.

The backlash was quick and severe. The city's new nudity and obscenity laws were immediately challenged in court, going all the way to the Supreme Court. The results were mixed. The public nudity laws were upheld as legal, but the obscenity laws were shot down. There was nearly a fast track from City Hall to the Supreme Court for over a year, as the city passed rewrite after rewrite to get around it, and the Supreme Court shot it down again and again. Finally, the city got a referendum on the state ballot, the famous Proposition 4, that would alter California's constitution to give the city of L.A. the legal right to set its own laws concerning obscenity within its borders. The referendum caused massive electioneering both for and against, and miraculously, despite huge resistance from religious and conservative organizations, the proposition *passed*. The legality of it was immediately challenged in the Supreme Court, but the court upheld the referendum, calling it a matter of state's rights. So

long as all activity was contained *within* the legal boundaries of Los Angeles and those counties who had applied for inclusion, and their local TV and radio stations did not violate federal obscenity laws on open airwaves, the federal government had its hands tied. They couldn't even threaten to withhold federal funds to coerce, since the city of L.A. was earning massive amounts of money through the sex trade and didn't *need* any federal funding. With that, the city of L.A. passed a new obscenity law that legalized public sex acts for the purpose of art or film, provided they gave 24 hour warning of the intent to film at a certain location, and established seven "red light" districts in the city where the public display of graphic sexual images or objects was legal.

Thus came the Second Exodus. Humans who refused to live in such a permissive environment, and those who were prejudiced against the large influx of permanent Faey residents, left the Los Angeles area in a great wave, settling in San Francisco, Arizona, and Nevada. The empty houses they left behind, though, were quickly filled, mainly with Faey who had immigrated to Earth looking for a fresh start, looking to break into the film industry, looking to start a new business on Earth, or wanting to live in a place more accepting of Faey culture. Little Dracora had bloomed in the San Fernando valley, and not too surprisingly, one of the six official red light districts was inside it. About one quarter of them were aspiring actors, working in the prodigious small-studio porn industry and hoping for that big break that would put them in one of the big studios, their names in lights and their faces famous across the entire Imperium.

Now, Los Angeles had the largest permanent Faey population on Earth, nearly 1,200,000 residents, and the city was often a hotbed of protest when religious and opposition organizations conducted "anti-sin" rallies in the city. There wasn't a weekend that went by that some protest group got arrested for civil disobedience or disturbing the peace in one of the red light districts, which seemed to amuse the Faey residents and tourists to no end.

It was a symbol of change on Earth, change wrought by the Imperium, but not forced on Earth. Change humans were making in response to an outside force of their own volition. Humans and Faey were starting to interact, and their differences in their cultures were starting to show... with a little friction.

"Would you like to take lunch with me, your Grace?" Kim asked. "It's been a long time since we sat and talked of trivial matters."

"It has indeed," Jason chuckled. "Let's shock the hell out of the students and eat at the north cafeteria. It's just a block from here."

Kim laughed. "I hope they make good food."

They didn't dine alone, though. Ayuma and Kiaari joined them in the cafeteria, where silent, nervous students watched on from their tables as the Grand Duke, the leader of Earth, and the dean of the Academy all sat having lunch, with five black-armored Imperial Guard watching over them. Many of them jumped when Ayuma used her telekinetic powers to fetch a napkin holder and the pepper shaker off a nearby table. "So, did my workers set it up to your satisfaction, Jason?" Ayuma asked before taking a bite of her cheese steak.

"It's perfect, Ayuma," Jason told her. "Is the Academy ready for their tour?"

"All ready," she answered. "As long as the furball did her job."

"Don't I always do my job, midget?" she retorted lightly, taking a bite of salad and swallowing it without really chewing. Kimdori biology was much different from anyone else's in that she really didn't have to *eat* her food. She could absorb it by touch, albeit much more slowly if she didn't want anyone to notice, she could consume virtually any carbon-based organism for food, and her body didn't digest food so much as it attacked it virally and broke it down. They could even cannibalize their own flesh as a food source, and could feed off the

organic matter they expelled to change their mass during a shapechange. "There's not so much as a microbe in that auditorium that I don't know about, and our security forces have the Academy covered."

"So, we're all ready to go."

"Yup, we are," Kiaari nodded. "And tomorrow, sister Miaari comes and tells me everything I'm doing wrong."

Jason laughed. "She does it with love," he assured her.

"Yes, her love to nose in on my business," she said archly. "Is friend Jyslin and Rann coming?"

He shook his head. "You know she doesn't like official business, Kiaari. She's back home."

"I would have liked to see them."

"Come visit us after the summit," he offered. "I'm sure the Academy won't fall apart if you come spend a day with us."

"I think I will," she said with a toothy smile. "Want to come, friend Ayuma?"

"I think I could manage it," she said with a nod. "I haven't seen Rann since he was a baby."

Jason had little to do after lunch, if he didn't want to annoy everyone, so he went back to his hotel and brooded over Dahnai, the Consortium, Dahnai, the work they had to do, Dahnai, and, well, Dahnai. He wasn't sure how she was going to react to what he had to show her, what he had to tell her, and wasn't sure how much she'd bend for him. All he could do was wait, and he didn't like waiting. He tried to distract himself with television, then he surfed CivNet using his gestalt, his little *Matrix* game where he was *in* the network, surfing across CivNet with nothing but his mind, but his mind just wasn't there. He just wasn't sure what was going to happen with Dahnai. Would she reject Jason's arguments? Would she fight over Raisha? And how would she react when she learned what part of the truth he, Miaari, and Cybi had decided to tell her? Would she become an enemy as great as the Consortium when she realized just what the Karinnes were, and tried to use her position as the Empress to make them do what she wanted?

It was no use worrying. There was nothing he could do.

He couldn't concentrate. He couldn't really unwind. Where was his wife or Symone when he needed them, to take his mind off it, to wear him out like Jyslin did the night before he left? Some mindless sex would do him just fine right now. Or some mindless *anything*, really.

"You know how to play racquetball, Aya?" he asked spontaneously.

I'm sure you'll teach me, she told him.

"Hell, I've never played it either," he told her. "I just need something to do. *Anything* to do."

She gave him a sympathetic look. *Dera.*

Yes, Captain?

Go find Jason a piano and have it delivered to the room.

Yes ma'am, she responded.

Jason gave her a smile so grateful that it made Aya flush slightly.

Bliss. For hours, Jason sat at the piano and played, anything that crossed his mind, anything that touched his fancy. It occupied his mind, occupied his hands, and brought that special peace to him he often felt when at the piano. Memories of his gentle mother washed over him, speaking in musical French to him as she taught him her passion, putting her mark on him just as much as his father had with his love of flying and his passion for Aikido. His mother had been nothing like a Faey woman. She was *feminine*, modest, demure, and gentle. It made him wonder why he was so attracted to aggressive, blunt, demanding Faey women

when his mother was nothing like them. He kept playing, reliving old memories always kindled by the sound, by the feel of the piano under his hands. The smell of Patty O's always seemed to fill his nose when he played at home, and it touched his nose for just a moment before being drowned out by the smell of his mother's perfume, and then the spicy smell of Jyslin's hair as it dried after a shower. The sound of his father's laugh seemed to echo through the music, then the sound of his mother singing in her beautiful voice blended with the notes of Chopin.

It was almost heartbreaking in a way to remember those things, and for a moment, he wondered why he was bringing up such old memories. He slowed and then stopped, looking down at the piano for a long moment, lost in thought, lost in reverie. He just didn't feel... right. Something was off. There was something wrong. He didn't know what it was. He didn't know why he felt that way. But he did.

Was he just still upset over Dahnai's bombshell and getting more and more nervous as the hours rolled by, and she arrived tomorrow? Or was this something different?

[Cybi,] he communed, using the orbiting *Dreamer* to relay his call back to her.

[Yes, Jason?]

[Is... everything alright?] he asked. [I don't feel right. I feel...] he trailed off.

[I will conduct a thorough scan for you, Jason,] she told him. [I will make sure that everything here is just fine.]

[Thank you, Cybi,] he told her gratefully.

He only had to wait about fifteen seconds. *[I have conducted a complete scan, Jason. It is two seventeen in the afternoon in Karsa. Jyslin is with Rann back on the pool deck. She is giving him a lesson in sending. Tim is at work with Maaari in Kosigi, working on recording the written language within the ship. Symone is at the Karsa Barracks with Kyva. The Lieutenant is training Symone on the function of a Gladiator. Myri and the generals are at Central Command. Min, Sheleese, Lyn, Bryn, Ilia, and Yana are in Karsa, shopping. They all have their children with them except for Yana and Ilia. Maya and Vell are at school. They have Kyri, Aran, and Zachary with them, attending a piano recital given by Yuri. Zora is on the beach, giving Sora a lesson in sending. Kumi is currently off planet. Meya and Myra are helping Aura calculate food tonnage requirements for those who are returning to Exile. And Rahne is measuring her new house for curtains.]*

That soothed him tremendously. Just hearing that, knowing what everyone was doing, it calmed him quickly and made him feel much better. He could imagine Jyslin and Rann sitting at the picnic table near the barbecue grill, a smile on Rann's face as Jyslin trained him in the art of sending, using her gentle manner to teach, a manner she almost never showed to anyone else. It was proof that maybe Jyslin was more like his mother than he thought, he supposed, for she was exquisitely tender and loving with her son, so gentle with him that it was so easy to forget that she was once a soldier, she had been trained to fight.

Symone... playing with Gladiators? Eh, why not? She needed something to do, and if she wanted to learn how to pilot a Gladiator, more power to her.

But, he was quite content. He took his hands from the keys of the piano, then put them back and started playing *The Entertainer*, which was one of Rann's favorites. He played it at double speed, which never failed to make Rann laugh even as his eyes watched Jason's fingers in wonder, then he was startled to hear a *tamshan*. He glanced back and saw Ryn standing there with the five-stringed, twangy instrument, which sounded like a cross between a banjo and an autoharp. Aya produced a *kirta* flute, Suri had produced a *kiyo*, which was a woodwind that sounded like a cross between a soprano oboe and a Japanese *shakuhachi*, Shen had a small pair of *kera* drums, and Dera had somehow scrounged up an acoustic Terran guitar,

which she could play *masterfully*. Clearly, it was going to be another night of jazz music in the Karinne household, Faey jazz where four radically different-sounding instruments came together to create some rather interesting music.

"Alright, ladies, you asked for it," Jason laughed, playing the dramatic bar of the old *Drag-net* show.

God, he loved his guards.

They entertained him for the rest of the night, until he was able to go to sleep with a smile on his face and feeling very secure knowing that Ryn was in the next room, drawing the short straw for night duty. Several times during the night, he felt her mind brush over his lightly, as the guards liked to do in the night, assessing the location and condition of those they were charged to protect. Jason had found that sensation comforting over the years, knowing that the Imperial Guard was watching out for his family. Aya had been wise to assign the same four guards to his personal protection, for he had grown used to them, and they had grown used to him. Aya herself also spent most of her time with him, but as Captain of the Guard, her main duty was actually to Rann. But, since Rann was safely on Karis and Jason was often in far more danger than him, Aya spent most of her time with him. But as Rann aged, her focus would shift to him, and he would be left with Ryn, Shen, Dera, and Suri... and maybe not even Dera. Dera's power as a listener might cause Aya to pull her from Jason and assign her to Rann, but for now, just as Aya did, Dera went where she was needed most.

They also knew when to be discreet. They were in the other room, because Kumi was sprawled halfway over him in bed, respecting their privacy in case anything happened. And the amazing thing was, to him, that nothing had. She had not *touched* him. She got in late, came to see him, stayed a while to listen to them jam, and was too sleepy to go find her own room. So she slept over with him. She stirred as he sat up on his elbows, then she gave a protesting groan when he threw the covers off of them, revealing Kumi's white panties with a red heart on the backside and her slim, slender, shapely bare back. *No*, she protested. *I wanna sleep more!*

Then sleep, he told her mildly, *but I gotta go pee. So either let me up or you're gonna get a warm feeling across your tits.*

She laughed and rolled off of him, and he quickly slid out of bed and padded to the bathroom. *What were you doing in London?*

Securing a couple new clients for KMC, she answered. *The Nine Colonies are in dire need of tungsten. I got a good deal out of them. And the Zyagya finally stopped being pricks and accepted my offer for laminated titanium. I undercut TrefCorp by two points. I'll bet Yila's peeling the paint of the walls with her teeth*, she sent smugly. *Trelle, I love selling things to others we can replicate.* After he finished relieving himself, he wandered back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. Kumi sidled up to him, threw her arms around him, and kissed him on the cheek. *Thanks for a wonderful night, babes.*

We didn't do anything.

Sure we did. We slept. You let me sleep in your bed, which is more than you've ever given me before. Thank you.

If I could have trusted you, you could have had that.

But it's more fun knowing that I can than it woulda been to be in bed with you and know I couldn't, she sent teasingly, reaching down and cupping his genitals as if to make her point. Unlike her, Jason had slept nude, mainly because he had halfway expected her to want to have sex. *I'm gonna kiss Aura when we get back home for setting you free.*

I'm not that free, he protested.

Sure you are. Jyslin already gave you permission to stuff the pussy of any girl on the strip,

and I live on the strip, she cooed mentally. But that's not what I meant. You're not being a stuck-up little prick, thinking your cock's too shiny to slide in my honey hole. Really, Jayce, five years with us and it took you that long to realize that we're your friends?

It took me five years to understand that you'd be my friends no matter what, Kumi, he answered her honestly. At first, it was because I was loyal to Jys, but she broke me of that. After that, there was nothing but the fear. I guess I got so used to the way things were, it didn't change even after I did. But I guess it was inevitable. Eventually, an Aura was gonna come along and show me that I was holding onto to a habit long after I should have discarded it. And not for me, but for those around me who love me.

Damn right, she agreed, pulling him with a giggle down onto the bed, leaning over him, and giving him a hard yet playful kiss on the lips. That was for coming to your senses, and this is for being one of my best friends over the years, you pain in the ass, she said with a grin, kissing him on the nose. Trelle, how far we've come.

From the forests of Beech Fork to a luxury hotel on the Academy grounds, Jason agreed, putting an arm around her waist. When Meya and Myra always outsmarted me, and you used to cheat me like a son of a bitch.

She laughed. We should really get those two, she winked.

Later. They're really busy right now, and we need to let them focus on helping the Exiled split up and return. But after that's all settled, well, we'll have to come up with something good, he sent conspiratorially.

I'm in. I owe those bitches for stealing my house.

You deserved it for ruining their stuff.

They deserved it for that fake sex vidy, she fumed.

You deserved it for annealing their armor together.

Well, they deserved it for putting my personal diary up on CivNet!

You deserved that just for not keeping it password protected.

I did! They guessed it!

Well, there's only so many ways to say sex before you stumble on the right word.

She flushed, then laughed. I guess that's what I get for being predictable, she winked. Thanks for letting me sleep over, babes.

Thanks for not being a demanding bitch, he answered. It was nice to just be with you, Kumi, without you going all grabby on me.

Well, now that I know I can have it whenever I want, there's not as much fun in it, she admitted with a wink. Girls have the most fun chasing the guys that are hardest to get. It makes victory that much sweeter. You're a has-been now, babes, she teased. I'll only come looking for you when I can't find anything better.

He laughed. Always the bitch.

Always, she winked, standing up. Now I gotta pee, she added, scurrying off to the bathroom. He could hear her doing her business in the bathroom, her legs visible around the sink cabinet and her panties around her knees, and he turned on the radio after first trying to use his gestalt, then realizing he wasn't at home and using his telekinesis, not bothering to get off the bed. Dahnai was supposed to arrive at 1:30pm local time, and it was 10:42am. That gave him about two hours to get ready, since they'd probably want him there early so they could rehearse the greeting. She was getting the same fanfare all the other leaders would get; a band, an honor guard, a company of Imperial Marines in their dress uniforms, and both Jason and Secretary Kim there to greet her. Jason hated ceremony, but it was going to be a short one, for Dahnai would be leaving Draconis late at night there, so she'd be tired and need to rest before the summit tomorrow.

Such were the pitfalls of ruling an empire of what was now 77 systems with the addition of Karis and the 4 Urumi systems, the fact that times were always different on every planet. Dahnai and the Grand Duchesses of many systems suffered from perpetual jet lag when they were on the move.

He leaned back on the bed, putting his hands down, and pondered the rest of the day. After greeting Dahnai, he was sure she'd retire to her room, and he may or may not be invited. This was the public area, the *diplomatic* zone, and she may not want to entertain her *amu dorai* outside of the palace. She might invite him to a semi-official dinner, but he was fairly sure that she'd maintain Imperial decorum.

Kumi flitted back in and stood in front of him. *You okay?*

Fine, he answered, looking her up and down thoroughly. Jason had to admit, Kumi had matured nicely from the young woman he'd first met. She was still thin and had smallish, almost teenager-like breasts, a little bigger than they were when they first met but not very much so, but on her they looked just right. Besides, it was Kumi's belly and legs that were her most attractive body features. She noticed his admiration and preened just a little bit, being typical Kumi. Wanna see more? she asked with a wink.

He gestured at her skimpy white silk panties lazily, and she gasped when they were pulled down by his telekinetic ability, revealing her very tightly trimmed strip of platinum blond pubic hair. *There, that's better, he sent with a sly smile.*

That is so cheating! she protested with a laugh.

Cheating? When were there rules? he asked in reply, twirling his finger imperiously.

She laughed, but obediently turned around for him, striking a model's pose as he admired her sexy back, backside, and her svelte legs. *You are still a knockout, Kumi, he told her honestly. You just get sexier and sexier as you get older.*

She beamed at him over her shoulder. *You trying to talk me into bed or something?*

Pft, he sounded mentally. I'm a has-been, remember? I'm just getting my look, since you had your hand all over my dick. Now bend over.

She laughed even as she flipped him off, but she *did* comply, showing him everything she had to offer. He unabashedly studied her charms for a long moment, then nodded and stood up. *Okay, I'm done, he told her cheekily.*

She turned and looked down, frowning slightly. *You stare right up my butt and your dick didn't even wiggle? she sent, slightly disappointed.*

I've had five years to learn control, Kumi, he told her blandly, which made her laugh.

Yeah, but, you shoulda had the common decency to give me at least semi hard, she protested. Come on, I'm sexy, right? Show me I'm sexy, you tease!

Jason grabbed her by the waist, turned and pushed her down onto the bed. She looked up at him with startled eyes as he pulled her butt up to the edge of the bed and spread her legs graphically, in what would usually be a sexual position, then pressed his hips against her, pressing his limp penis against her vulva, then gyrated his hips against her. *Oh baby, he sent in a bland monotone. Oh. Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. Was it good for you, Kumi? he asked, letting go of her leg and slapping her butt.*

Kumi glared murderously up at him, but then she burst out in helpless laughter. *Trelle's garland, sometimes I forget about that quirky sense of humor you have, babes, she admitted. But I demand a kiss after I've been punished in your own special way for being grabby, she sent commandingly, crooking a finger at him.*

He chuckled and gave her the kiss she wanted, then helped her up from the bed, slapping her fondly on the rump as she bent to pick up her panties. *Such a cute ass, he complemented.*

She wiggled it for him before coming back up with her panties.

After dressing, they had breakfast in the living room of the suite, chatting idly over scrambled eggs, *oye* fruit, some bitterfruit from Karis that Aya had brought with them, and wheat toast. Sometimes he was so grateful to Kumi. She could be a pain in the ass, but she was never boring, and it was hard not to have fun around her. She was so much like Symone in that regard. The two of them were like partners in crime sometimes. She kept him entertained and informed simultaneously as they caught up on her business ventures and the financial health of the house, which was good. Kumi was a pirate, and she was feared by other business leaders and business agents of other houses. The young spoiled noble he had first met who had a nose for business had matured into a savvy, intelligent, dangerous young woman who could make money no matter what was put in front of her, be it legal or illegal.

He could sense a change, though. She was much, well, *happier* now, it seemed. She smiled maybe a touch more, the hand she reached out and put on his forearm lingered maybe a half second longer than it used to. There was no unconscious awareness that Jason had a line they couldn't cross, but that line was gone now, as was the tension that line created. Yes, there were changes from his decision to be more open with the girls, and he saw that the girls were responding by being more intimate, but not more demanding. Any other night, there would have been a tension between him and Kumi sharing the same bed, would have not appreciated it when Kumi would be *very* forward and demanding, but now it was just Kumi being Kumi.

And he rather liked it.

Kumi headed home after helping Jason dress in court robes, his most formal set, blue brocade with the Karinne crest embroidered on the front in red thread, displaying the house colors of red and blue as well as the crest. He always felt like a peacock in court robes, and he was maybe just a little self-conscious as his guards walked with him through the Academy, heading for the landing pad so he could attend a rehearsal for Dahnai's arrival. Reporters were already gathering, and he had quite a few cameras on him when he arrived not in a luxury hovercar, but on foot, and looking decidedly uncomfortable in the cool December air. He met Secretary Kim and assorted dignitaries and members of the U.N. councils, shaking hands for a good half hour before they had their first and only rehearsal, where Jason basically just stood in one place as a band played and stand-ins for the Empress and her retinue walked down a red carpet.

By the time the rehearsal was done, Dahnai's ship had already come through the gate, and was approaching the planet. Jason and Secretary Kim just stayed in place as the reporters took footage of them, waiting as a bank of clouds rolled in from the west. CivNet weather radar showed that there was rain out in West Virginia, but they'd be done long before it got to them.

They only had to wait about twenty more minutes for Dahnai's large dropship, flanked by fighters, landed on the large pad, lining up the hatch so it would open to the carpet. When the hatch opened and Dahnai's guards, the band started playing... and Dahnai didn't send to him in greeting. That made him a little disconcerted, and it got even more disconcerting when she appeared in the hatchway, the Marines snapped to attention and saluted, and Jason saw the frosty, haughty look on her face.

She was angry... and she was angry with *him*. He could tell. What the hell did he do?

She swept regally down the carpet, and Jason did not miss the fact that she was alone. She had not brought Kellin and her children, or they had not come with her to the surface. When she reached them, Jason and Secretary Kim bowed to her, and as was custom, Jason offered his left hand to her, his bare hand. She didn't take it, which was a clear indicator to the reporters that Dahnai was unhappy with the Grand Duke Karinne... if her flashing eyes wasn't

enough. He was sincerely confused by her display of anger, and was left dumbfounded as she swept past them with barely a word of greeting, pausing only to greet Secretary Kim with kind words before gliding off in a full display of Imperial authority and aloofness.

What the hell was her problem?

"I think the Empress is... distracted," Kim said hesitantly to him.

"She's righteously honked off about something," he said indelicately in reply. "And I'm why. But I have not the slightest idea why she would be angry with me. I haven't done anything!"

"Well, I would suggest you speak to her so you might discover the reason for her irksomeness," he said sagely.

He nodded, watching as Dahnai was helped into her hovercar by a guard. *Dahnai, what's the matter?* He asked, sending to her privately.

Come to my apartment, came a very terse and *heated* response. She was *seething*.

He decided to walk. She was being quartered in a luxury apartment in a high-security building on Academy grounds designed just for her, her private apartment for those rare times she came to the Academy. It was only a mile or so away, and he felt like he might want the time to think. So, with his guards, he walked along a pathway that led to her building, consumed in hesitancy and confusion. Why was she so angry? What did he do to earn that kind of anger? He racked his brain for anything that might have angered her, but he couldn't think of anything at all. His house really had no dealings with Merrane companies, so there wasn't any chance it was over them cheating them out of some contract. He had done everything she'd asked of him, so it couldn't be over some treaty or agreement. He was going to take in her family, for Pete's sake, so they wouldn't be in any danger! So what could she possibly be angry with him for?

The guards allowed him into the building and up to Dahnai's apartment, and then two grim-faced Imperial guards allowed him inside. Once in her parlor, with Faey furnishings that he didn't really notice, she kept him waiting for nearly five minutes before marching out of the bedroom, still in her formal robes. "Make yourself at home, love," she said in an entirely normal, even warm and welcoming, manner, which confused him to no end.

"Dahnai?" he asked uncertainly.

She gave him a look, then laughed delightedly. "I'm not *really* mad at you," she assured him with a wink. "But I want the *Siann* to *think* I am."

"Why?" he could only ask.

"It's very simple," she said with a light smile, urging him to sit, which he did, and then she took his hand so they could send, only between each other, so that not even Dera could hear them. It was totally internal, conveyed by touch, the most secure form of sending. *I'm going to take a bath with the Siann over this, love. I'm having a child by another species, and if that's not bad enough, it's a daughter and that puts her in line for the throne. There's any number of Highborn Grand Duchesses that are gonna see that as some kind of betrayal of my paragon of Faeyness. The idea of a half-Faey on the throne if something disastrous happens to Sirri, Shya, and Miyai will make half the Siann go up in flames. It won't matter that she's fourth in line, they'll all immediately start seeing Karinne assassins around every corner trying to put the daughter of their Grand Duke on the throne. And I'm sure the tabloids will feel like I've handed them their new year's present early,* she sent ruefully. *I'm the first Empress in the entire history of my people to be pregnant with twins who have separate fathers, and one of them isn't Faey. That by itself is a scandal, but think of how much they're gonna get wet over the idea of Kellin's daughter sharing my womb with her half-breed sister,* she sent sourly. *I can imagine the headlines for the first couple of takirs after I make the an-*

nouncement. So, instead of being all indignant about it, or defend it, I'm going to pretend to be pissed myself. I'll rage against the embarrassment of it, look suitably humiliated for a couple of days, then accept it and move on. But I'll adhere to sacred traditions and reject even a hint that I should do away with the baby. That's not only against our religion, it would be a scandal even worse than the scandal that would touch off to even suggest it, so I can muzzle at least a couple of Highborns by leaking it out that one of them privately demanded I terminate the pregnancy. Looking angry is about the only way I'm going to save face, and since you got me into this mess, I'd naturally be pissed off at you. So, one of the reasons I'll be visiting you for so long on Karis is to give you lots of time to soothe my fury... which will give Semoya and Emae all the time they need to start their war that never happens.

How are you going to handle Raisha? I mean, about her being in line?

I'm not entirely sure, she admitted. I don't want to deny her the title of Princess, but with that title comes the very real fact that she will be in line for the throne. And with that comes the meltdown from the Siann. It's entirely possible that I might be forced to remove Raisha from the line of progression by decree, but I don't want to do that. That would make my daughter less than what she is. I have to think about it, and thankfully, I'll have until the birth to really think it over. So, I'm sorry I upset you, love, but there's no telling who out among the reporters is a listener. The press, and specifically the tabloids, are famous for employing secret listeners that hide themselves from us, so I couldn't warn you. And if I took your hand, it wouldn't appear that I was angry. Did my sending summoning you here have enough anger in it? she winked.

He laughed. I thought you were going to shoot me on the tarmac.

Good. Now, you can't stay here long, love. So you should go ahead and go now, it doesn't take me long to say I'm pregnant, I'm in a world of shit, and it's all your fault, so I think you should go. Look suitably shaken when you leave, and don't talk to anyone about it.

Alright. Where are Kellin and the kids?

Up on the battleship, she answered. I'm angry, remember? I don't want them with me right now. An Empress doesn't fume and rage at the guy who got her into this mess with her husband and children with her, she winked. They'll transfer over to your ship later tonight, and they'll stay up in orbit and out of sight.

Okay. I hope they know you're not really angry.

Of course they do. That's the other reason I'm keeping them out of sight. Kellin is a terrible liar, she admitted with a frown. He's just too wonderful for politics.

God, I wish the same could be said for me, he sighed. I'm not entirely sure where I lost my morality.

The minute you realized that you're making decisions for more than just yourself, she answered immediately. Morality is for those who don't have fifty-nine billion mouths to feed.

He gave her an approving look. I'll see you at the summit, Dahnai.

See you then.

She released his hand, and he stood up. "Let's go," he told Aya and his guards, in an emotionless tone, like a man who had just been read the riot act. Dahnai nodded approvingly, and the guards let him and his guards out. He reached over and brushed Aya's face, since the rest of her body was armored. I'll explain in private, he sent through that touch.

She nodded simply.

Back in his hotel room, he explained the situation to his guards, all of which nodded in understanding. She's right, Aya said. The Siann will have tremendous difficulty accepting a half-breed in line for the throne.

Which gives me hope that I can convince Dahnai to allow me to foster Raisha, Jason told her. If our daughter is going to cause so much trouble, then she can come home with me, and I'll take care of her where she won't be seen by people who see her as nothing but a stain on the honor of the Empress.

That may not be easy, Shen warned. Empress Dahnai would not want to surrender a second daughter to you, your Grace. You already have Shya. She might even see Raisha as the replacement for the daughter you have taken from her. The Empress gave you Shya, and you give her Raisha in return.

I didn't take Shya, he protested.

You demanded that Shya come to your house, she reminded him. Because Rann is the heir. I have no doubt that the Siann didn't take too well to that, because they saw it as Dahnai making concessions. It's never good for an Empress to be seen as conciliatory.

But Shya isn't out of Dahnai's household, he pointed out. She's both a Karinne and a Merrane. She's still a princess, and still in line for the throne. That's what her being High Princess Duchess Consort Shya Merrane Karinne is all about!

Still, she'll live on Karis, and when she's fifteen, you take her from Dahnai. And since she's not being raised in the Imperial tradition, there may be some who don't accept her as the Empress if Sirri dies or abdicates.

Fuck, when did I get embroiled in Imperial politics? he demanded petulantly.

The minute Dahnai betrothed Rann to Shya, Aya answered.

Then this is all her fault, he accused. That bitch.

You know she loves it when you call her names, Aya sent cheekily.

I'm about to call you some names, he threatened, shaking a finger at her. Now find out why they haven't sent me my status report while I go take this crap off. That's your punishment for being a bitch.

She gave him a mocking little bow.

Ryn, Shen, come help me feel normal again.

Ooo, I do so love being a valet! Ryn sent excitedly, getting to put my hands on the Ducal person!

Take your gauntlets off this time, he warned. I had trouble explaining where the bruise came from.

Ryn laughed soundlessly.

Jason and Dahnai kept apart to further the illusion that they were angry with each other. Jason shut himself up in his room that day and night, while Dahnai took a brief tour of the Academy given by Ayuma. He watched it on INN, and she looked frosty, maintaining the illusion. The short Ayuma didn't pay her state much mind, showing her classrooms and labs and service buildings on the grounds, walking along beside her chatting animatedly, and blatantly exercising her telekinetic powers whenever it pleased her. Ayuma was the most flamboyant telekinetic in the Imperium, one of the few that violated long traditions of being modest about it.

He had to appreciate Dahnai's position. This pregnancy really was a problem for her, because of the resistance she'd suffer from her nobles. Many of them disapproved of Dahnai's relationship with Jason, though Jason had the feeling that was because it gave Jason an inside track to Dahnai where they couldn't do the same. But there were going to be those arch-conservatives who saw Raisha as a half-breed inferior to pure Faey, and would reject even the possibility that she might become Empress. Dahnai would have to dance in a minefield with this problem.

But it also gave him some hope. He'd offer her an option that solved all her problems and

solved his as well, the option to allow Jason and Jyslin to foster Raisha—

No, it didn't, he saw. If Jason and Jyslin fostered Raisha, the *Siann* would see that as not just a half-Faey becoming Empress, but a half-Faey raised outside of the Merranes, all but putting a Karinne with the Merrane name on the throne. No, if Jason fostered Raisha, she'd have to be removed from the line of succession, which Dahnai seemed resistant to do. But hopefully, Dahnai would see the wisdom of doing just that. It would solve most of her problems with the *Siann*, and it would also serve Jason's interests as well. Raisha was a Generation, and she needed to be with the Karinnes, not the Merranes.

But he couldn't deny one thing. Given her parents, Raisha would be a *powerful* telepath and a powerful telekinetic. Dahnai was a top-tier telepath, deceptively powerful because she spoke as a matter of custom, and she was also in the elite among telekinetics, able to lift very heavy weights, nearly her own body weight. For a Faey telepath, that was *immense* telepathic power. About half of telekinetics could barely move a postage stamp without fainting from the effort, and the median power among those with measurable power was the ability to move about ten pounds of weight. Dahnai could lift nearly one hundred and fifty pounds, able to pick up one of her children easily, and if she were a shorter, slimmer woman, she could lift her own body weight. Jason, without his gestalt, could pick up about two hundred and fifty pounds, because he was a Generation and his telekinetic power was engineered to be abnormally powerful, just like his telepathy, but Jason wasn't restricted by his being male in telekinetic power. In that regard, there was little difference between male and female among the Faey. But with his gestalt, he could pick up around four hundred pounds; that was just how much the gestalt amplified his ability.

And when the tactical unit was finished, he'd be able to pick up five tons.

With parents like that, Raisha was almost guaranteed to express young and be powerful. He expected Raisha would be stronger than Sora, but not as strong as Kyri.

Unfortunately, he only had a day's respite from court robes. Ryn and Dera helped him dress the next morning, again in his best robes. Thankfully, he didn't have to be there to greet every leader at the landing pad, though each would be received by a ceremony, their ambassador, and Secretary Kim, since Kim was the real ruler of Earth as Secretary General of the United Nations. The first day of the conference was going to be speeches in the afternoon, after all leaders had arrived and they had a couple of hours to rest. After the speeches, they'd adjourn for the night and get down to the meat of the conference tomorrow, where they'd talk about the Consortium, quite a few deals would be made that had nothing to do with the Consortium, and Zaa would have the opportunity to get at every other leader in the vicinity, all in one room, and available for her communal touch. That was the part Jason was waiting for, finding out from Zaa what she would discover. He would make a very short speech today, at the very end. Dahnai would speak first because she was the host, and then it would go in order of which government had the most systems. Jason would therefore speak after the Zyagyan High Patriarch. Then he'd sit there and listen to ten other speeches the rest of the day, probably surf CivNet with his gestalt while keeping only half an ear on the droning.

He did have to look his best, though. He woke up early enough to take a long, thorough bath, and then allowed Shen to give him a fresh haircut; she was actually quite an accomplished stylist, one of her many talents. The Imperial Guards had to fill almost any role for the Empress, and one of Shen's tertiary skills was hairstyling. After eating a light late breakfast, Dera and Ryn helped him back into his formal robes as he watched the arrival of the leaders of the sector in a nearly continuous train on INN, CNN, and many other channels. The High Staff and the Council of the Alliance arrived first, then the Zyagyan High Patriarch, then Brood Queen Sk'Vrae. About fifteen minutes after she was greeted and escorted to

quarters where she could rest and prepare, Denmother Zaa arrived. Zaa was never one for ceremony, but she was by far the most regal of the leaders who had arrived so far, tall and stately and looking every inch the ruler as she strode down the carpet, wearing nothing but a memory band and proudly displaying the white band of fur that ran up her body, which flared into a triangular patch over her breasts that went up and over each shoulder. Zaa was one of the few Kimdori he'd known that wore clothing in her normal form and not in a social situation where clothes were demanded, but for this occasion, she was reverting to the traditions of her people. She was also wearing her "royal" fur, with the white band and flared white patch that marked her as Denmother. This fur coloration pattern she did not wear in normal circumstances, but this was a formal occasion, and that required formal fur color. That flared white band was Zaa's crown just as much as Dahnai's tiara was.

It was amazing that Zaa could accomplish a groomed, elegant aire that blew the doors off those who wore expensive clothing.

After her, Emperor Assaba of the Skaa arrived. He was about nine feet tall, strangely hunched because of his tail, standing somewhere between erect and like a velociraptor, his scales fiery red and his eyes gold. He wore only a kilt-like wrap and a crossed pair of golden chains over his scaly torso that were his crown, though he also had gems embedded into his scaly hide, wedged into his scales to make his hide glitter and sparkle in the light. After him, the Mugru of the Jobodi arrived, and after him, the green-skinned human-like High Prince of the Shio arrived. The Shio were a constitutional monarchy, where the ancestral ruler, the High Prince, was basically a diplomatic position that dealt with the outside world. He handled affairs of state while his parliament handled all domestic matters. This High Prince Grayhawk was actually an attractive man, very attractive, looking almost completely human except for his dark green skin, which was colored by his green blood. He was human in appearance only; underneath that human visage was an entirely different species.

The Shio were probably one of the cornerstones of Gora's Law of parallel development, since the Shio and the Faey and the humans all looked almost exactly alike outside of tiny cosmetic differences, anatomically identical, but were actually different species. Shio and Faey and humanity all shared the same physiology, but only humans and Faey were genetically similar enough to reproduce. This High Prince would certainly set some Faey and human women's hearts aflutter with his good looks, though.

After Grayhawk arrived, the Grand Master of the Nine Colonies arrived. The Nine Colonies were just that, colonies. Just who they were colonies of had been lost over the millennia, for their parent civilization died out long ago, or vanished, or something, for all that was left of them was the Nine Colonies. The race of the Nine Colonies was probably what all the U.F.O. hype was all about early in Earth's history, for they were small gray-skinned creatures with long fingers and large black eyes. But unlike the myths, the race, which simply called themselves The Colonists because they long ago forgot their proper name, had black hair on their heads where all the old stories said the aliens they resembled were bald. Though not inherently telepathic, telepathy was quite common among their race, with nearly half of their race having some kind of telepathic or empathic ability. Outside of the Faey, they were the most telepathic race known. Jason knew for a fact that the Grand Master was a telepath, and quite a strong one, because Zaa had briefed him about the various rulers of the immediate governments and empires in the sector, those Jason might contact fairly often. Arriving almost immediately after the Grand Master was the Skaa ruler of the Republic, the Empress Grizza, which was a female Skaa that was about eight feet long and with similar red scales as her male counterpart. After her came the last of the arrivals, the huge, demonic-looking Overseer of the Moridon, which was a lifetime executive post appointed by a legislative body called,

literally translated, the Mob. That made the Overseer akin to a prime minister.

And they were only eleven of 34 races and 23 governments represented at the Academy... and outside of Zaa and the Kimdori, they were just those closest to the Imperium, the ones that would be near the focal point of the war to come. The ones that had the most to lose.

“What a pack of nobility,” Jason sighed. “And I got dressed way too early.”

No, you need to get down there, Aya told him. Don't leave Secretary Kim in the lurch.

That was exactly what he did. While the leaders rested, Jason and Secretary Kim met with the lower ranking dignitaries that came with them, advisors and councilors, relatives and aides, in the conference room near the auditorium. Jason had to rely on his gestalt to file all their names and faces into its memory so he could recall them if his own memory failed him.

Thus was one of the many advantages of a gestalt. Having a computer with massive amounts of memory backing up his own mind with its ability to record virtually anything, even his own sensory input, was incredibly useful.

Jason spent almost all the resting time of the leaders in discussion with the lower dignitaries, including 14 Grand Duchesses from the *Siann* who had come to attend the summit personally, and actually had a pretty good time. The lower dignitaries didn't have the same stuck-up attitude as their leaders, and he found speaking with the Shio particularly pleasant. They looked and acted like humans, though green-skinned ones, and a couple of Grayhawk's aides had wicked senses of humor. Jason felt much more at home among the flunkies than he did with the rules, and they were more comfortable with each other. Several friendships were made in that conference room before the first gathering of their leaders.

But then came the time for the summit itself. Jason was just one of many who were seated in the side boxes flanking the sides of the auditorium, denied the opportunity to sit on the tiers with the leaders. Jason found himself sitting between Councilor Eudox of the Alliance and an old friend, Grand Duchess Anya Surreale. *Quite exciting, isn't it?* she asked as they were settled in.

Exciting is an overrated word, Jason answered.

I wonder what they're going to talk about.

Cooperation, good will, all that bullshit, Jason answered.

She glanced at him. *Aren't you giving a speech?*

At the very end, he answered. *No doubt after all the leaders leave, and I'll only have five minutes.*

Harsh.

It suits me.

The speeches were as Jason expected. Dahnai started them off, resplendent in her red and gold robes. She spoke first of the attack of the Consortium on her empire, but glossed over the involvement of the Urumi, then made it abundantly clear that the Imperium considered itself at war with the Consortium. “*Nobody* attacks the Imperium and does not suffer immediate and severe retaliation,” she declared adamantly. Emperor Assaba of the Skaa spoke next, speaking of the graciousness of Dahnai for holding the summit and also for sharing all information gleaned from the Consortium with all local parties, and how it fostered understanding and good will through the sector, but he made no mention of the Skaa's feeling towards the Consortium. The High Staff's speech was almost exactly like Assaba's, flattering of Dahnai but politically vague on their intent, only speaking of “external threats” to the harmony of the sector. Sk'Vrae, bless her scaly soul, made no bones about it. Her very first words were “we were betrayed by the Consssortium, and for thisss we ssshall tear them apart.” She raged against them for nearly ten minutes, how they had made an honorable agreement and had backstabbed them. But, to Jason's discomfort, she also explained more

deeply why the Consortium attacked. “They promissed usss a ssshare in the sssecretssss of the ancient Karinnesss, which was their goal. But I do not know if, after all thisss time, there are any sssecretssss left.” But, she quickly went on to admit that she had been in the wrong, she had apologized to the Karinnes, and were now pledged to battle at their side against the Consortium. No doubt that sentiment came from the fact that Jason was now in control of the Urumi border systems.

As they went down the line, the speeches were less about the Consortium and more about the gratitude of the lesser governments at being included in the technology-sharing agreement. “Truly, our small government shall benefit from the tremendous generosity of Empress Dahnai of the Imperium, and we shall be forever in your debt,” High Prince Grayhawk said with an elegant bow to where Dahnai was sitting. “This one act has done more to bring the various governments of our sector together than has all diplomacy tendered over the last hundred years. It is truly an historic event.”

The most startling speech, at least to the others, was the Denmother's. She stood up at the lectern for nearly a minute before speaking, and her speech lasted fifteen seconds. “The Kimdori do not approve of the Consortium operating in this sector. We will employ to the Imperium and the Collective to gather information of the Consortium, if they so wish to hire us. We offer our services, at a minimal fee. We will not hire out to the Consortium.”

And then she sat back down, leaving stunned looks. The Kimdori *never* took sides, but yet Zaa was clearly telling them that this time, they *were* taking sides. The Kimdori weren't pledging to fight, but the offer to hire out their services to the combatants was a blatant declaration that they were taking sides.

After the last of the leaders gave their speeches, Jason fully expected the leaders to file out and leave Jason to addresses the minor potentates, but they did not. When he came up to the lectern, he found himself looking up at eleven interested faces. “I'll be to the point, noble rulers, because I know you are tired and I am holding us here.

“I have ever been known as a blunt man,” he began. “Ask any dignitary that interacts with me on a regular basis. I speak my mind, and I speak plainly. So I will speak with honesty and candor now. As all of you know, the Consortium attacked my planet with the aid of the Collective in a plot to plunge the Imperium into civil war, destroy my house, and destabilize the entire sector. Their goals and intentions are their own, and we still don't entirely understand it. It may be as the revered Brood Queen stated, that they sought some ancient technology left over from my ancestors. That's entirely possible, but what none of should overlook was the casual brutality of their methods. They lied to the Collective, used them, then betrayed them at the first available opportunity.”

Jason excised a few comments about what terrible things might happen if the Imperium was at civil war, mainly because soon it would appear that it was about to happen, and he didn't want his frank words about it ringing in the heads of the other leaders. “I'm sure that many of you are here expect me to try to persuade you to fight against the Consortium. Well, I'm not,” he said calmly. “I won't try to persuade anyone to do any such thing. I won't even try. All I ask, esteemed leaders of the sector, is that in exchange for the technology Empress Dahnai is allowing House Karinne to make available to all who participate in the Academy, what we recovered from the wreckage after the battle, that you don't use it against us. No one here can say that the Consortium acted honorably to the Collective, or to the Imperium. I will not ask you to join against the Consortium, but I will humbly ask that you refuse to join them. We will gladly give you what they would offer to entice you to side against us. So, if they approach you with offers of alliance, offering you their technology, know that they will offer you nothing that we will not have already given you. Besides, now that you have seen

what they do to their allies, I'm rather inclined to think that few here would be willing to enter into an agreement with them.

"The Consortium attacked my planet," he said strongly. "They killed over a thousand of my people in the assault, and they were beaten back. But we strongly believe that they are not done, they will return. And when they do, we will be waiting for them. Even now, House Karinne has bent its every resource into preparing for their return, though those resources are modest. And when they do return, we will be ready for them," he said in a harsh tone. "We are aware of them now, and they will not surprise us again. Empress Dahnai and the revered Brood Queen Sk'Vrae have both contacted me and promised to stand with House Karinne against the Consortium when they do return, and we of Karinne are humbled by their support. When the Consortium returns, House Karinne will fight."

He didn't have to say the rest of it. They already knew. And since they did, he stepped away from the podium and returned to his seat.

The summit was adjourned by Dahnai quickly after, so the leaders could absorb the main news meant for them today. The Imperium and the Collective were going to war against the Consortium, and the Kimdori were going to help them. They'd need the rest of the day to think about that, discuss it with their staffs and advisors, and then be ready for the conference tomorrow. That was when the real work would begin.

He returned to his room with his guards and read the reports from home, and found everything right on schedule. The Exiled would be ready to go as soon as the interdictor was protecting their planet, and the interdictor would be ready in four days. It would be three days after that, and then, after a one day delay for Christmas, they'd be heading back to Exile on 26 December. Kosigi was focused on interdictors, working damn hard to get the Imperium fully protected from Consortium attack, as well as Sk'Vrae and the Collective, if she so wished it.

He relaxed with a long, soaking bath, and allowed Suri to wash his hair from behind the tub. One of Suri's tertiary skills was being a personal attendant. She had soft, sensitive hands, and he had always enjoyed how they soothed. A Suri massage was as much a reward as anything, for she'd been trained in massage techniques. He let her wash his hair, rinse it, then her long, sensitive fingers slid down to his shoulders and started working out the knots. *God, you're spoiling me, Suri, he sent languidly.*

She gave that voiceless, wheezing laugh common to the Imperial Guard, patting him on the shoulders. *We serve in all roles, your Grace, not just as your bodyguards. It's nice to be able to do for you without Ayama and Surin here browbeating us for encroaching on their domain.*

Ayama's never given me a massage before.

She would in a second if you asked it of her.

True, he admitted, tilting his head back and looking up at her. Suri was one of the most physically fit of the guards in his service, with developed shoulders and strong arms, not bulky as much as she was toned and defined, though it was so easy to forget that since she spent so much time in her armor. She was out of her armor now, serving in a role other than a bodyguard, nude and with his towel draped over her long legs as she massaged his shoulders. Her being nude was a simple matter of custom. Suri wasn't there as a guard, she was there as an attendant, and an attendant might be required to enter the bath of the person being attended. Jason had gotten used to it over the years. He had seen every one of his guards naked too many times for it to really matter anymore, for they had all the rights as any other resident of the strip when off duty, and they too enjoyed the beach.

But, the upside of living in a society where clothes was optional was that he almost always

had something very nice to look at. And if he didn't, just one remark would often cause a girl to give him something nice to look at.

Ah, the joys of living among the Faey.

I've never asked, Suri, where are you from?

She gave him a slight smile. *I come from the palace, your Grace, she said simply. Who we were before we took the oath is nothing compared to who we become.*

Well dodged, he teased.

Thank you, she answered, pressing her fingers into his shoulders.

I've always wondered one thing, though.

What is that?

If Dahnai breaks the betrothal, what happens?

We remain with you, she told him simply. The duty we were given is never rescinded, even if Rann never marries Shya.

Dahnai wasn't too forthcoming about that little fact. She just said that Rann would always be protected.

And so he will, as will you and Jyslin, she answered calmly. We weren't assigned to you, your Grace, we were dispatched to your family. That is not a temporary situation. Even if the Empress annuls the betrothal, Rann will always be tied to the Imperial family by the fact that he was betrothed, and thus he will always be afforded protection by the Guard. That's the official version.

The unofficial version?

The Empress wants her amu dorai well defended, she said simply. That's why we serve you as much as we serve Rann, and why her Majesty dispatched nearly three times the number of Guard she would have otherwise. We are defending your entire family, not just Rann, so we need many more to accomplish that mission. We were given explicit orders in the matter. And that itself is also not unusual. Love interests of the Empress have often been given protection by the Guard. All who are connected intimately to her Majesty must be protected.

So, you belong to me, do you? he asked teasingly.

No, your Grace. You belong to us, she corrected him with a slow smile.

Well, Aya certainly shares your viewpoint, he teased, looking up at her.

The Captain is a wise woman who sees the reality of the situation, she answered impishly.

[Jason, Jyslin is calling you,] Cybi's voice came to him, relayed through the Dreamer.

Your Grace, Duchess Jyslin is on the comm, Aya called from the living room of his suite.

Tell her I'll be there in a sec, he answered, which he knew Aya could accomplish. On Karis, the interfaces the guards wore could translate thought into words, which could then be transmitted over gravband, exactly the same way his gestalt could take his communion and transmit it over gravband as audio. The interfaces accomplished the same thing, though it was not in their own voices, it was in a computer-generated voice they selected when they developed the software for it. Here, however, there were no interface receivers, so Aya would use a holographic keyboard to type a text response.

Suri dried him off with the towel after he stepped out of the bathtub, and he threw it over his shoulder and filed into the living room through the bedroom with Suri following behind him. Jyslin's face was already on the monitor, chatting idly with Aya, who typed responses. "Hey, my love," she said, giving him a smile when he got in front of the monitor. "My, what a wonderful way to greet me," she said with a grin.

"I was in the bathtub," he answered. "How are things going?"

"Just fine. I'm calling because we've reached a milestone."

"Oh really?"

She nodded. “Rann is starting to lose his first baby tooth,” she said proudly. “He showed me today. One of his incisors is definitely loose.”

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that,” he chuckled.

“None of that tooth fairy nonsense you humans put in your child’s head.”

“Your people just take all the fun out of childhood, Jys,” he complained. “How about on the other front?”

“I’ve bought Rann’s presents,” she answered with a smile. “Are you going to buy one on Terra before coming home?”

“Here? Hell no,” he snorted. “It’s *expensive* here. I’ll buy them at home, where I can get the same thing for half the price.”

“Miser,” she teased.

“Every day,” he said unashamedly. Suri took his towel from his shoulder and started drying his back for him.

Jyslin took note of Suri’s condition and gave Jason a sly smile. “So, I give you a long leash, and you’re already pulling on it,” she teased lightly.

Jason glanced back at Suri, then laughed. “No, love, she was attending me in the bathroom. I had a rough day, and she was kind enough to offer to give me a massage. I’d do her in a heartbeat because she’s so lovely and sexy, but I guess I’m just not man enough for her.”

Suri’s cheeks flushed slightly, and she slapped him on the backside. *Don’t make idle threats if you’re not ready to carry them out*, she warned, which made him laugh.

“What did she say?” Jyslin asked. When he repeated it, she giggled. “That’s right, girls, don’t let him get away with any crap! Remember, he can’t hide behind my panties anymore.”

Ryn, Shen, Dera, and Aya gave Jason stern looks, which made Jyslin laugh earnestly. “Alright, tell me all about what happened outside of what we didn’t see on INN, love,” she prompted.

Jason didn’t dress, he stood there holding the towel in his hands and over his shoulders as he told her about his day, and how it was both boring and went exactly as he expected. “Tomorrow will be the telling day,” he told her. “They now know that the Imperium is going to go to war, and both the Collective and the Kimdori are going to support them. How they interpret that is going to determine what happens tomorrow.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“Honestly? Nobody will commit to anything,” he answered. “They’ll give us encouraging speeches and promise to help with logistics, but they won’t commit militarily. For the Skaa and the Alliance, neutrality is all benefit and no risk. For the smaller governments, well, that’s gonna depend on if they believe they can get some monetary assistance out of it, which will let them rapidly refit their ships with Consortium weaponry. But I can’t wait until two months from now, when Myli finishes the little project I gave her,” he said with a wolfish smile.

She knew that they might not be on a secure connection, so she just nodded and smiled. “I’m gonna go ahead and go, love,” she told him. “I’m a little tired, and I need to walk Rann over to Maya’s. She’s hosting a slumber party for all the children. I think they’ll have fun,” she smiled.

“Oh, that sounds nice.”

“Yes, and I’m spending tonight with Tim and Symone,” she purred.

“Hush,” he told her.

She laughed. “I’ll give you a detailed thrust by lick accounting of the night when you get home,” she said with a teasing smile. “Or would you rather hear all about what I’m planning to do tonight?”

“Jyslin, stop being mean,” he warned.

“Mean? Mean would be describing how I intend to suck Tim’s cock while Symone eats me out, then how I’m gonna kneel down and lick Symone off while Tim pounds me from behind, then how I’m gonna sit on Symone’s face while Tim spreads her legs wide and I watch him pump that big dick of his up between her pussy lips.”

“Jyslin!” he said, almost groaningly.

“He’s all yours, Suri,” Jyslin said with a wink, then she blew a kiss to him before cutting the communication.

“God, she’s such a *bitch*!” Jason growled, but the damage was done. His penis had been awakened by his wife’s nasty language, and it was threatening to stand at attention. “Why did I ever marry her?”

Because she makes you horny, most likely, Aya sent with a wicked tilt to her thoughts and a mean little smirk, looking down. *Well girls, do we take care of his little problem?* She asked clinically as his rebellious member carried out its threat.

I think I’d classify that as a big problem there, Captain, Ryn sent with a teasing smile.

We might have to call in a professional, Shen noted. *I’m not sure we’re qualified to deal with this. You know, he might have certain delicate issues because he’s a human.*

I suppose we can let him handle the problem himself, Dera sent with a grin. *One of us should go out for some baby oil.*

“Oh, *push off*, the lot of ya!” he said, turning and marching with as much dignity as a naked man with an erection can muster as he went back to his bedroom, being chased by their silent laughter.

Jason knew their customs and tradition, and knew that the Imperial Guard *would* do something like that. They served in *any* capacity, and he’d heard all kinds of stories about Dah-nai’s mother, who had taken tremendous liberty with her guards. Aura wasn’t being silly when she thought that Jason had an assigned consort among his guards, there to satisfy the Grand Duke’s physical needs if he was apart from his wife and *amu dozei*. But, he also knew that they knew that he wasn’t *truly* in the mood, that it was just Jyslin teasing him, so they would most likely take no action... because unlike most Faey women, they wouldn’t initiate that action. If Jason truly wanted release, he would come to them. They knew it, and in a way, he knew it. It was comforting in one way to know they were there, but on another level, he didn’t like the idea of it. If he became so weak that he couldn’t wait until he got home, well, then there was something wrong with him.

The second day of the conference was, quite simply, a bitter disappointment.

Jason had approached this day hopeful that he could make several deals that would further his goal to completely insulate the sector from Consortium invasion, to spread interdictors across the sector and make it virtually impossible to jump in nearly anywhere. But, his problem was, that fleet of 3400 ships had to remain a secret, and their plan to protect the Imperium relied on secrecy. The Consortium could not know that his house had devised a means to stop the Consortium from jumping in, not when they had a sizable attack fleet in position to invade the sector at any time. Without being able to spell out exactly how he was going to do it, when Jason approached leaders and tried to bargain some kind of agreement out of them to help them protect themselves, they scoffed him. He could only relate vague ideas, offer to work with them to secure “a defense against the Consortium’s ability to jump hyperspace in real time,” but when pressed on it, he could only hint at possibilities. The leaders were not in the mood to listen to *possibilities*, and besides, Jason had the feeling that they were not going to take the Consortium as a real threat to *them* until the Consortium actively moved. They were all waiting to see what would happen, exactly the same way that the Skaa

and Alliance did when the Consortium and Collective attacked Karis. They wanted the most benefit with the least risk, and as yesterday had proved, in this case neutrality cost them nothing.

What all but made him tear out his hair was that he *could* provide something better than neutrality, but he couldn't announce it until after the Imperium was safe, since the Consortium would be after the Imperium far more than the other empires. But all he could do was keep darkly silent and try to bargain deals with leaders who saw nothing to gain out of it. He couldn't begrudge them not wanting to put their people in unnecessary risk, but damn it all, couldn't they see that the Consortium were ruthless? They'd walked all over the Collective, made a deal and then betrayed them at the first convenient opportunity. Wasn't that proof enough that the Consortium was not going to be honest?

The other side of it, talking about the danger the Consortium posed, was even more disappointing. All he got from the Skaa, the Alliance, and the Nine Colonies was how they were a threat, but there was no immediate threat, so why worry about them? Wait and see what happened. The Shio and the Skaa Republic were even more ambivalent, not feeling like the Consortium was any particular threat to *them*, but were willing to entertain assisting if they returned... for a healthy fee. The Moridon were, predictably, neutral in the matter. They never took sides, and Jason could respect that. The Overseer was there mainly to listen to what others had to say first hand.

So, after spending nearly five hours trying to talk to them about making deals and listen to vague insistence that the Consortium was a threat, but not particularly dangerous at this particular moment, he left the conference room in disgust. But there was nothing he could do. His hands were tied by his duty to the Imperium, the need to protect the Faey because they were a target of the Consortium just as much as House Karinne. His hope, his dream, was to unify the entire sector not under a single government, but under a single understanding, that they were all neighbors and that peace was far more lucrative than war. With the Imperium's Stargate technology and the Karinne interdictors, they could protect themselves from the Consortium by a one year barrier and open trade relations that would foster cooperation between the empires, that cooperation would instill trust, and that trust would bring everyone closer together. But at the root, it was really all about money, about every empire getting an economic boom out of the open trade the Stargates could provide, an era of economic prosperity that would foster peace in the sector.

God, he hated politics.

He wasn't simple enough to think that there could be peace in the sector, but if every empire had too much of a financial stake in other empires, pure self interest would discourage warfare. Empires heavily engaged in trade with each other were less likely to go to war.

He returned to his rooms and had his guards help him get his robes off, and went back to jeans and a tee shirt. He sat in the living room and went over the day, replayed several conversations in his mind, but he saw no way he could have made them turn out any differently. They had all come with their positions locked in their own minds, and he just couldn't offer enough for anyone to change that position. If he could have demonstrated the interdictor and offered it to any who feared a Consortium invasion, it would have gone *much* differently. But he couldn't tell them about the interdictor. He couldn't tell them why the Consortium was focusing on Karinne and the Faey, because to do so would be to reveal a secret that could *never* be revealed. If the other empires truly understood just what the Karinnes were, then they'd be joining with the Consortium to conquer the Karinnes.

The hope was to make the sector too happy to care, by offering the sector technology, filtered through the Academy, that they could never get anywhere else. The giving of the Con-

sortium technology was going to be just the first step, the foundation of a stream of the many technologies locked within Cybi's memory to be released to the sector. The empires would see it as a boom of scientific advancement, offered to all, and that would also foster cooperation and openness among the empires of the sector.

And it was also the culmination of his duties as a Karinne. The Karinnes had been wrong to sit on everything they knew. They had become too arrogant, too believing in the Program, and Jason was of the firm belief that had the Seditionists not destroyed Karinne in the Third Civil War, then the Karinnes would have finally taken that last step into believing that they were far superior to the rest of life in the universe and moved out to conquer. After all, to him, that was what Kosigi was about. The Karinnes were about to militarize, and were destroyed before it could come to pass. It was an unavoidable side effect of trying to create "the Master Race." That master race would demand to rule all those who were inferior. Germany proved that back in the early 20th century. Jason would never permit that. He would remember that he may be engineered to be superior in powers, but that in no way made him superior in morality. He had a duty to repay the Karinne debt to the rest of the universe, a debt they didn't even know about, and he would begin by releasing technologies that would enrich the lives of everyone, but never technologies that would allow one empire to make war on another. The Consortium weapon technologies would be the *only* ones ever released, which would effectively create a level playing field for everyone. Huge empires would have a numerical advantage over smaller empires in fleet strengths, but the weapons were actually small and mobile, and that meant that any attack on a small empire would pose tremendous risk to the attacker, where a single planet's defenses could annihilate a huge enemy fleet. A single Torsion weapon could destroy an attacking vessel, and while there may be 300 vessels attacking, the defenders might have 500 small orbital weapon platforms on top of orbital stations and naval vessels. The new paradigm in the sector now favored the defender, and favored him heavily. That alone would foment peaceful coexistence, if only because war would be far too costly to wage than peace was to maintain.

Such hopes... and he'd truly thought that they could start today, that the Consortium would be a perfect excuse to start moving forward.

But, there was always later. After the Imperium was protected by the interdictors, after the rest of the sector saw what protection the Karinnes could offer, and would offer, maybe that would get things going. The survival of Karinne and the Imperium and the denial to the Consortium the secrets of the Generations were the highest priority right now.

Zaa came to him about an hour after Jason left, striding into the room with Miaari and Kiaari in tow. Miaari had arrived that morning both to see Zaa and attend the conference. The opportunity to pick up juicy information from the minds of the leaders themselves, all gathered in one room, was just too important for Zaa to leave to a single Kimdori, even herself, so she and Miaari had systematically worked the room. The Denmother and her Handmaiden were the only ones that had the rank to attend the conference. When neither of them sat, he stood and approached them. "Denmother," he greeted fondly, offering his neck to her hand. She put her hand on him in ritual greeting, but her eyes were grim, and her expression stony.

"Aya," she called, looking to his captain. "We depart. Prepare the Grand Duke to return to Karis immediately."

She knew better than to argue. She nodded and started issuing commands for possessions to be packed and the Grand Duke returned to *Dreamer*.

"What's wrong, Denmother?" he asked in concern.

"I will explain when we are moving," she told him. "I have given orders to Kiaari and pre-

pared a course of action for Ayuma, your Grace. Do not countermand them.”

That made him tense. Zaa knew something, and she didn't want to explain it until they were safely away from Earth. He reached out and took her hand meaningfully, offering for her to impart it to him in the Kimdori way, but she shook her head and gently pulled her clawed hand from his grasp. “What about Dahnai?”

“She is already en route to *Dreamer*, and her family is aboard.”

Within five minutes, they were ready to go. His guards escorted him and the Kimdori down to the landing pad, where they climbed into his Karinne dropship. Jason moved to sit in the pilot's chair, but Zaa stopped him with a hand and motioned Aya to take his place. She had him sit back in the passenger cabin, and she kept them silent until they were well airborne. After nearly five minutes, when the dropship was on the edge of space and approaching the battleship, Zaa finally spoke. “We are betrayed,” she said simply.

“Betrayed? By who?”

“By our *allies*,” she snorted. “The Skaa and the Alliance both have already been approached by the Consortium. The High Staff and the Emperor both have had personal dealings with them. In both cases, the Consortium attempted to secure alliances against us, promising to share the technology they all know you conceal should they assist. In both cases, the empires did not commit, but also did not reject, and now, after yesterday's speeches, they feel they made the wise move. They see the Imperium as allied with the Collective. The Alliance has been quite cunning in this. They have made overtures to both sides, giving bits of information to both sides so they might gain without making a solid commitment either way. They supplied us with the location of the Consortium base, and have supplied the Consortium with detailed information about the Academy, and particularly, Ayuma Karinne.”

“Ayuma?”

“She is going home, Jason,” Zaa stated bluntly. “She is in danger on Terra. So she is going home. The Academy is well set up now. She can oversee it from Karis, by video and mis-sive.”

“Is it that serious?”

She nodded grimly. “Emperor Assaba was in negotiations to kidnap Ayuma, as was the High Staff. The Consortium did not tell them the truth of Ayuma, they only told them that as the head of the Academy, she would know all the Karinne secrets. In reality, they want her because they know she is a Generation, and seek to capture her. The Emperor Assaba is very nervous now, because they have heard that the Kimdori reject the presence of the Consortium in this sector and will work to oppose them. The Emperor Assaba intends to break off contact with the Consortium when he returns, but the High Staff sees the potential to make gains through neutrality and careful clandestine action. He foresees an aftermath when the Imperium and the Skaa have all but destroyed each other, and can move in and claim much of their territory. The Skaa are worried and seek to take a neutral position, fearful of the Imperium doing to them what they did to the Urumi. The High Staff and Alliance, however, will actively oppose us. They *want* war, so they may expand without having to fight that war themselves. Expect the Alliance to try to start a war between the Imperium and the Skaa.”

“What of Sk'Vrae?” he had to ask.

“She is enraged by the Consortium. Her dedication to our alliance against them is absolute, even to the point where she will ally to the Imperium. She sees the Consortium as the greater threat, and the enemy of her enemy is her friend. She knows of the Generations, Jason,” she said seriously. “But her dedication to assist us against them, and your generous and kind treatment of her after the battle of Karis, has stayed her hand. It is not information for any to hear in her mind. She fears what you may become, but she feels that you have acted in honor.

She will be your ally so long as you continue to treat the Urumi with respect.”

Jason put his head in his hands. All his hopes... gone. Just like that. And that bastard, the High Staff, smiled in his face talking of cooperation, and all the while he intended to backstab him! He was going to take everything he could get out of the Academy, start a war, let them destroy each other, then sweep in and take over the majority of the sector!

“I know, Jason,” she said gently, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I wish I could have learned this sooner, but never before have I had the opportunity available at this summit, and I have curtailed operations in what I considered to be neutral or friendly empires to focus more fully on the Consortium. But the winds blowing are clear, my cousin. The Consortium has already infiltrated the sector, and so we must pull back and protect our position. The Alliance is looking to start a war, Jason, then step back and let the two largest empires in the sector destroy each other. We cannot allow them to accomplish this goal.

“The Consortium is not our only enemy, Jason. We must guard against the perfidy of those who will profess friendship but act against us. Not because of the Karinnes, but for acquiring territory.”

Jason sighed. “I... I don't know what to say. And I thought the *Alliance* would be the best ones to start with,” he said morosely. “I... we'll have to stop the program,” he sighed.

“No. Leave it,” Zaa said. “To back out would be to reveal that you know that which you cannot possibly know. What I learned from them they have not passed to others, specifically by request of the Consortium. To reveal what you know would cause many more problems. The Alliance wants to start a war without fighting in that war. Allow them to partake in the technology you offer, for it is no threat to us. Besides, the smaller empires *do* need our help. The Imperium, Skaa, and Alliance will be afraid to make war on them if they are armed with Consortium weaponry.”

“I will be guided by you, Denmother,” he said immediately. “Denmother, I need a favor of you.”

“Speak.”

“I think you see that the construction of interdictors is the most important thing now.”

She nodded. “I will send you extra workers to Kosigi so they might increase your output. I want to see two interdictors a day coming off the assembly lines.”

“Thank you. I know you must be stretched thin.”

“I will have to pull workers from the shipyards, but you are right. A single interdictor is more important than ten warships at this time. To deny the Consortium the ability to attack gives us extra time to build more ships.”

On board *Dreamer*, Jason met a frightened and out of sorts Ayuma in the landing bay. She had arrived mere moments before him. “Jason, what's going on?” she asked fearfully. “A bloody *pack* of Kimdori all but abducted me and cleaned out both my office and my house! They said you recalled me to Karis!”

“I support their actions,” he told her wearily. “You were in danger, Ayuma. There was a plot afoot to kidnap you.”

“Me? *Me*? Why would they want to kidnap me? I'm just an administrator!”

In answer, he reached out and tapped her gestalt, and said not one more word.

Aya, stony-faced, escorted him to his guest cabin, and not to Dahnai. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to her right now. He wanted a little while to think, think about this before he had to face her. Dahnai represented an entirely different set of problems, and he didn't want to mix them at the moment.

Fuck. And he had been so hopeful! He felt like someone stomped on his chest. He hoped to come out of this summit with at least some hopeful news that they would be amenable to

standing up together against the Consortium, and that would be the springboard that would open the doors between the empires and foster more trade and cooperation. But the reality wasn't even *close*. The Skaa and the Alliance scheming, the smaller empires watchful, with only the Collective declaring its open intentions. How ironic that his former enemy was now his strongest ally, and the one empire he thought would be his strongest ally had turned out to be the most dangerous of his enemies.

But what did he come home with now? The support of a weakened Collective and the treachery of those who would take all they could from him before throwing him to the wolves.

God, maybe his ancestors *did* have the right idea. Maybe *he* had been the stupid one. It was clear the empires in this sector were only interested in themselves. It was time to accept that and move on. If it was going to be the Imperium and the Collective against the Consortium, then so be it.

They would be united against a common foe.

Jaiya, take me home, he sent wearily. *I need to be back where I belong.*

We'll be under way in just a few moments, your Grace, the Admiral replied. *In an hour, you will be home.*

It took him nearly a full day to get over the crushing disappointment of the summit, where he and Zaa closeted themselves off, even from Dahnai, and discussed matters thoroughly.

With it clear now that the Skaa and the Alliance would be playing their own games, they had to change their plans and move forward with the grim understanding that they could trust no one, and any attempts to bring the empires together in any manner would be useless. The empires would smile and take what the Academy gave, and then spit on the intent of it, the attempt to foster more cooperation and understanding, and take as much as they could manage. He would have no doubt that the first thing the Alliance and Skaa would do would be to arm their ships with the new weapons as fast as possible, and in a grim moment of clarity, he saw them attacking their smaller neighbors before they could do the same, perverting the entire intent of what giving them that technology was supposed to mean.

The reason he would not arm Dahnai was going to be proven true with the other empires.

But they would fix that little problem, for they had *working models* of those weapons already. Myleena could rip one of them apart in about two hours and backwards engineer a production model to build the weapons. They would engage Sk'Vrae in their private duplication of those weapons, then the industrial might of the 77 systems of the Imperium and the 30 systems of the Collective would bend to the task of cranking those weapons out, which would then be sold in *huge* quantities, at dirt-cheap prices, to the smaller empires. When the Alliance and Skaa got their ships armed, they'd find their small prey already bristling with Imperium-built weaponry and ready for them.

And when the Alliance and the Skaa dared to approach the Imperium to buy the weapons themselves, they'd get the door slammed in their faces.

The plan Jason and Zaa formed was to defend the Imperium *and* the Collective with interdictors, build an impenetrable wall around their two empires through which nobody could pass. The Collective's navy would be rebuilt and rearmed, and the Imperium would rearm and produce as many new ships as possible in that time. Jason would continue to build interdictors until he had a large stockpile of them in reserve, then devote the resources of the house into both expanding Kosigi and producing ships, Gladiators, and the new Wolf fighters, a purely Karinne design.

That was the plan. But now they had to convince Dahnai and Sk'Vrae of it. And before they could do that, Jason had to sit Dahnai down and explain some things to her.

And he couldn't avoid that any longer.

He hated doing it. He hated it with every fiber of his being, and he felt like he was putting his head in a noose every time he thought about it. But the baby that would grow within Dahnai made it absolutely imperative that she understand the outrageous demands that he would place on her, or their relationship would be destroyed.

The setting he chose to do this was a place of peace and quiet for him, and a place of absolute privacy and isolation... Kosiningi.

She was quite curious when he separated her from her family and flew her out here not in a dropship, but in a two-seater Raptor, over the *vociferous* objections of her guards, which required a direct order from Dahnai to prevent armed conflict on the strip. The island was currently deserted of workers, a wooded island with a sandy beach, an empty emergency response center, and Cybi nearby in case he needed her. She walked along with him on the beach, watching him intently as he kept quiet, lost in thought, carrying her shoes in her hand and wearing a pair of shorts and a half-shirt. He walked along in silence for nearly half an hour, his face sober, almost grim, and his eyes weary and defeated.

He stopped and looked out towards the sunset. "I love the blue sun here," Dahnai said, putting her hand on his upper arm.

"I have something to tell you, Dahnai," he finally said, in a dead voice.

"I know. I'm listening."

He was silent a long moment. "Miaari agreed with me that this is something that you must know, regardless of the fact that you're carrying Raisha," he began. "It comes to the core of exactly why the Consortium attacked Karis, and it involves our daughter."

She looked at him, but said nothing.

"Before the Third Civil War, the Karinnes were heavily engaged in experiments and research," he began.

"Yes, their attempts to build a machine that could understand telepathy," she noted casually, reminding him that she knew much more than most others.

"They succeeded," Jason said simply. "But not in the way they hoped. They built a computer that was telepathically aware, Dahnai, but they couldn't *understand* it. It could communicate with other computers of its kind, but not with the Karinnes. The Karinnes could not overcome the problem, no matter how hard they tried. So, they simply attacked the problem from the other direction."

He blew out his breath. "Dahnai, when the Karinnes couldn't build a computer that could understand them, they created *Karinnes* who could understand the *computer*," he said intensely. "Me, my children, my father, and ninety-six generations of Faey behind my Faey ancestor that came to Earth were all part of those Karinnes. They called them the Generations. And they, we, and I, descended from the first Generation, which was genetically engineered, engineered to be able to understand the telepathic computers. Every Grand Duchess since Sora Karinne has been a Generation, has been the product of genetic engineering, and every Generation after her was the product of a very strict program of selective breeding, which developed our telepathy to the strength it is now and caused all of us to be telekinetics. The traits were bred into us."

He didn't give her a chance to respond. "When the Third Civil War destroyed Karis, my ancestors scattered. Some fled to Earth. Some fled to Exile. Some, we don't know what happened to them. But the Consortium happened to come across the Karinnes who fled to Exile over a thousand years ago. From them, they discovered the secret of the Karinnes. They captured some Karinne technology, kidnapped some of the survivors, and took them... somewhere. We don't know where. Much of the Consortium's technology is based on Karinne

technology,” he told her. “They took my ancestors’ technology and took it apart, learned how it worked, then developed it in their own way. The Torsion weapons, the dark matter weapons, their power systems, even their gravometric and hyperspace engines, they’re all based on Karinne technology.

“That’s why they’ve come back, Dahnai,” he told her quietly, looking out over the water. “When I restored the house, they realized that there was more to take, but what they want most is *us*. The Generations. When they attacked Karis, they went after the last of the telepathic computers, and they also came after *me*. They know I’m a Generation, Dahnai. They know what I am, and they want me. And now you carry a Generation inside you,” he told her, looking at her with penetrating eyes. “And since you’re carrying my child, they’ll know that *Raisha* is a Generation.”

She was quiet a long moment, her hand on her bare, flat belly. “You can really send to a computer?”

“A very special kind of computer, yes,” he said simply. “They did eventually create a device that can hear *thoughts* rather than sending, but it can only receive, not send,” he explained. “Those are the interfaces.”

“But you call yours a *gestalt*,” she said pointedly. “That thing on your face is a telepathic computer, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “I can send to this, and it can send back,” he said, tapping the gestalt over his ear. “So, that’s what you need to know, Dahnai,” he told her. “That’s why the Consortium is after us... and why they’ll be after you and every Faey they can get their hands on.”

“Why? What—*ohhhhhh*,” she said, nodding. “If you were engineered, they’ll need Faey to engineer if they want to make more of you!”

“They might make a grab for humans too, but I’m not sure about that,” he said. “They had access to humans when the Urumi were holding the ones the Trillanes abducted, but they didn’t take them. Or we don’t think they did. So we don’t think they believe humans can be Generations unless they’re like me, part Faey. So, understand it when I say this, Dahnai. I want to foster Raisha,” he told her. “Not because I’m pissing on Imperial tradition, but because she is a Generation. She has abilities that you do not, Dahnai, and she has to learn how to master those abilities. What I have to teach her, she can only learn here. And here, she will be safe. We had to pull Ayuma from Terra because the Kimdori ferreted out a plot to kidnap her. She’s a Generation, too. The Consortium will be after anyone they think is a Generation, Dahnai, and Raisha will be safest here, on Karis, where they cannot touch her.”

Dahnai was silent a long while, then she sat down in the sand. Jason sat beside her, and she blew out her breath. “I don’t want to give her up, Jason,” she said honestly. “If I let you foster her, I’ll have to strip her of her title. It’s just not fair to her,” she complained. “She would feel like she was less than her sisters, and she would be ridiculed by the nobles. But I also can’t deny what you’re saying. If she is one of these Generations, then she needs to honor that part of herself. And she’ll be safe with me, love. I am the most protected person in the Imperium. They’ll never take her.”

He blew out his breath. “She *belongs* here, Dahnai.”

“She is an Imperial Princess. She *belongs* in the palace.”

“She’s a Karinne.”

“She is a *Merrane*,” she said bluntly, looking at him. “She has ties to your house that must be honored, but she *is an Imperial Princess*,” she declared adamantly.

“But, if you let me foster her, you won’t have to deal with the *Siann*.”

“You let me handle the *Siann*,” she told him.

“Dahnai, please,” he said, nearly begging, looking at her with sincere eyes. “You don’t un-

derstand.”

“I do understand,” she told him. “My empire is about to go to war for *your* benefit, Jason,” she told him bluntly. “And I will do so gladly. The Karinnes may have been betrayed by the Imperium long ago, but the Imperium will not abandon the Karinnes again. The Consortium came back to our sector because of the Karinnes. I could throw you to them and save us a lot of trouble, but I *will not*. You need us, and we will be there for you. I’m not going to lose a part of my Imperium, no matter who is trying to take it from me. I’m putting a great deal of trust and faith in you, Jason. Can you do the same for me?” she asked with simple elegance. “I promise, I will do what’s right for Raisha. If she’s a Generation, she’ll be given ample opportunity to learn her history and master the powers it gives her. I understand that she’s not *just* an Imperial Princess, Jason. She’s also your daughter, and I know how much you love your children. I think she’ll be a very lucky girl,” she told him, putting her hand on his knee. “She’ll have two fathers that love her very much. I won’t keep you out of her life. You’ll be given plenty of time with her, and the opportunity to both visit her and bring her here, just as you’re letting Shya come here to see Rann. But you must understand, Jason, she is *my* daughter. No matter how much I love you, or how important you think it is to be here on Karis, you have to *trust me*. I’ll do everything I can to give Raisha what you think she needs, but I will not give her up, and I won’t take anything away from her either. She is going to *be* an Imperial Princess. That doesn’t mean that she can’t also be one of your Generations. She will be both, Jason, and get the best of both worlds.”

He knew that tone. He knew she wasn’t going to budge, and that no amount of argument was going to move her. She had made up her mind, probably long before she came to Karis, and that was that, despite what she had just learned.

For the second time in as many days, Jason had been beaten. He sighed, slumped his shoulders, and looked down.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” she said softly, leaning close to him. “I know what it means to you, and I hope you won’t be too angry with me. I still love you, and this won’t change that. Learning the truth won’t change it. I don’t *care* if your ancestors were genetically engineered, Jason. I don’t *care* that the Consortium is here because they want to capture you because of it. You are one of *us*, Jason. You are a subject of the Imperium, and the entire Imperium will fight to protect you, even though I’m absolutely positive what you’ve told me probably isn’t even half of the real truth. You just told me enough to understand what was going on without giving away your true secrets. No more, no less. I can appreciate that, and for that much, thank you. It does make what’s going on much more clear. The Consortium is after the *real* secret you’re hiding from me, but I’ll fight to protect that secret, even if you don’t trust me enough to reveal it to me.

“You once asked me to trust you, Jason, with only your word. All I can ask is for you to do the same for me now, my love. Trust me with Raisha. I swear to you that I won’t dishonor her heritage as a Karinne.”

“Do I have a choice?” he asked quietly.

“You do have a choice, Jason, but I really wish you would trust me,” she told him. “Have I ever turned my back on you?”

His silence was all the answer she needed.

“Can you show me a telepathic computer?” she asked. “I read reports on it from the Imperial history. Did the technology really survive?”

“It did,” he told her. “And you’re already looking at one of them,” he noted, tapping his gestalt.

“No, Jason. The *real* telepathic computer. The one you said survived the destruction of

Karis.”

“I can’t show it to you. If I did that, Dahnai, you would never leave this planet. To learn that secret would bind you heart and soul to my house, and we would never allow you to leave. And I mean that with absolute sincerity.”

She looked out over the water a long moment. “Fair enough,” she finally declared, standing up and offering her hand to him. “Let’s go back before it gets dark, Jason. Your Ayama is making pizza, and I don’t want to miss it.”

He looked up at her, then chuckled ruefully. “And we’ll talk more about this later.”

“Yes. But not tonight,” she told him.

“Not tonight,” he agreed as they turned to walk back to the Raptor.

Chapter 7

Kaista, 14 Oraa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 24 December 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista, 14 Oraa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Jason woke up feeling a little better, but still quite battered because of the last couple of days.

The clock showed him that it was only 0400, two hours until sunrise, and the house was quiet. Ayama wasn’t up yet, and the guards were all outside, clearing out of the house during the night to watch the strip as was their habit. He slipped out of bed and went to the window, where the light of the full moon, reflecting from Kosigi high above, painted the ocean in steels and dark grays, a ribbon of molten light playing across its broken surface. The window was open, letting the salt smell of the sea flow into the room. He stood with his hands on the sill and looked down onto the grayish beach, a beach that looked to be made of glowing light as the white-lavender moonlight painted the white sand of the beach.

What a beautiful morning. It soothed him somewhat, helped him calm his jumbled thoughts and look at last night rationally. Last night had not been entirely good. The conversation between him and Dahnai continued after dinner, but no matter how what he said or how hard he tried, Dahnai would not budge. He didn’t want to be angry with her, but her stubborn refusal to listen to him got him honestly angry. She simply did not want to listen to any viable argument he made. She’d made up her mind, and damn anyone or anything that tried to talk her out of it.

God, Zaa was such a blessing. When Jason couldn’t make her see reason, Zaa stepped in and rather harshly forced her to make several concessions, throwing Imperial law at her like a wrecking ball. When Dahnai flatly stated that the child would be raised in Imperial tradition, with a foster family, Zaa trapped her with her nearly encyclopedic knowledge of Imperial law, custom, and tradition. Zaa deftly worked her like a lawyer, forcing to admit a truth, then attacking her based on that truth. When Dahnai admitted that the child would be fostered by a family of Merrane’s choosing, Zaa jumped on that and made her admit that it would be a family of *Dahnai’s* choosing. When Dahnai sniffed out her intent, she quickly made it clear that the child had to be raised in the palace. Zaa continued on her attack path, forcing Dahnai to concede that *any* family that lived in the palace could foster the child. When Dahnai had to admit to that, Zaa pounced, forcing Dahnai to pick a foster family *Jason* would find acceptable. When Dahnai retaliated by stating that the child had to learn Merrane traditions and receive Imperial education, Zaa countered with a tack that confused Dahnai at first, but baited her right into the trap. When Zaa made note that it only took one to teach,

and Dahnai agreed, Zaa slammed her with the simple fact that the *foster family* could consist of one Merrane and one Karinne, both of which would instruct Raisha in the respective things she needed to know. When Dahnai rather weakly pointed out that the two had to be married, Zaa almost snorted in contempt and countered that marriage was a piece of paper.

What came next was a brilliant bit of haggling. Zaa and Dahnai fought each other like Wolverines as they hashed out just how exactly such a family would be formed. They debated, wrangled, even threatened for over an hour, the main sticking point being just exactly *which* house would supply the female foster parent. They were both adamant that the *other* house would supply the male parent, until Jason got tired of it and made them flip a coin. Both of them looked utterly scandalized by the very thought of it.

“It’s the fairest way,” he said wearily. “Because neither of you are going to give up. So let random chance decide.”

And so they did. Jason supplied an old quarter out of his coin collection, and Dahnai called heads while Zaa flipped it.

It came up tails.

Dahnai was furious, but Zaa didn’t give her a chance. After that, they fought over the training regimen that Raisha would undertake. Dahnai started getting a bit pissy after they fought over that, so she made a big stink over something as simple as a visitation schedule so Jason could see his daughter, which infuriated Zaa, that she would deny Jason his daughter just because she was pecky over losing an argument.

After about five hours, they finally broke up, and they broke up with an agreement neither side entirely liked, but both sides could live with. Raisha would be fostered in the palace, and both Miyai and Raisha would be fostered by a Karinne mother and a Merrane father, keeping the daughters together, but the Karinne mother would change her name and go by the Merrane name. The parents would be married within the takir and have nine months or so to settle in at the palace and get to know each other, so they could provide a stable home for Raisha and Miyai. The Karinne mother would teach Raisha about her Karinne heritage, and the Merrane father would instruct her in Imperial tradition. The Karinne mother would also be there to protect Raisha from tampering from the *Siann*, and act as a powerful defender of her person.

The Karinne mother would be a Generation.

Jason did *not* like that, but Zaa dismissed him. “I know exactly who to approach for this task,” she had told him simply. “Saelle Karinne. She is single, young, powerful, and was an Imperial Marine, so she is extensively trained for combat and can protect the children. She is also of the proper temperament for the task. I will also ensure she has two Kimdori with her to protect her,” she told him assuringly. “Saelle would enjoy this task. It was her hope to be a teacher after her conscription. Well, she will mold an Imperial Princess. That will appeal to her greatly.”

He knew Saelle personally, as he knew every other Generation personally. She was exactly as Zaa described. She was 31 years old, and had yet to have any of her required four children by different fathers so she could focus on her military career and education, intending to have her children after she became a teacher. She was young, pretty, and was one of the most powerful Generations in raw talent. She had been an Imperial Marine, only just finishing her conscription when she was brought to Karis, and had served in the KMS for the last five years. She was a Lieutenant, a Gladiator rigger who commanded a squad of Gladiators that was stationed at Karsa, and Zaa was right in that she wanted to be a teacher. She was taking satellite classes at the Academy in youth education, and intended to resign from the KMS and become a primary school teacher when she graduated. Saelle was a very adventurous

young lady, and she probably would find the idea of raising a pair of Imperial Princesses to be an intriguing proposition. He just wasn't sure how she'd react to having to marry a Mer-rane man she didn't know and take the name Merrane for the next 11 years.

He would find out. Saelle was going to meet him today, where he would offer her the position.

Jason wasn't sure he liked this idea. It put *two* Generations on Draconis. The idea that two Kimdori would be there to defend Saelle and his daughter did hearten him, especially when Zaa forwarded that the two would go in the guise of *giruzi*, masquerading as Saelle's personal pets. The Kimdori would always be there to defend Saelle and Raisha, and Dahnai would never know.

So, the Raisha situation was, for the moment, settled. Jason didn't like it, Dahnai didn't like it, but they'd live with it. It was a compromise in the truest sense of the word. And, thank God, once the compromise was put in place, much of the hostility between them had bled away... so much so that it was Dahnai asleep in the bed, not Jyslin, staying over with him just so they could get over their fight with a little intimacy. Jyslin was over at Dahnai's house, entertaining Kellin.

The house. Well, at least in that regard, Dahnai hadn't been a bitch. She really liked the house Jason had built for her, found it well furnished and well appointed, even with her own secure communications room, which she was glad to have. The guards had moved in to inspect it, and after only twenty minutes, they came back and admitted that the house was more than adequate for her Imperial Majesty. They didn't like the idea that it was against the fence, much preferring a house in the center of the defense perimeter, but that was life. There was no one on Karis that would hurt Dahnai. The guards tightened their patrols of the street on the other side of the strip, annoying Erinn quite a bit since it was his house on the other side of the fence. Dahnai and Kellin had... christened the house almost as soon as they got here, and after spending their first night in the house, she was spending her second night with him, mainly as an apology for being a bitch.

Poor Kellin. Symone and Jyslin had *stalked* that poor boy from the moment he put his feet on Karis soil. They let him and Dahnai have their fun the afternoon and night they arrived, but he was a hunted man the moment the sun rose the next morning. Symone trapped him in his house the next morning, when Jason and Dahnai and Zaa were having their discussion. Almost before Symone was done with him, Jyslin took possession of him. After they were finished with him, he tried to go out to the beach and relax a while, but Symone came after him again, getting chastised for going so far as to perform oral sex on him in broad daylight on the beach, something that wasn't illegal on Karis, but also wasn't often done on the strip as a matter of custom and consideration... though he and Jyslin had violated that custom quite a few times, he had to admit. After that, Kellin started hiding, but Jyslin and Symone were determined huntresses, chasing him down and just about wearing him to exhaustion.

When Jason asked what the hell they thought they were doing yesterday afternoon, Jyslin just gave him a smile and said "this is between him and us. The little punk made a snarky little comment to us back on Draconis about how he'd make us beg for mercy, and we're making him pay for it."

"So, all this chasing Kellin is just for revenge?"

"Well, it's fun too," she'd admitted with a slight, evil little smile. "We won't give him a moment's rest until he admits defeat."

That was about what they did to him. By last night, Kellin was exhausted, and when they both trapped him by his pool after dinner and threatened to drag him into the house, he finally admitted defeat.

Jyslin had shown mercy on him last night and just went to keep him company, but from what he was feeling coming from Jyslin at the moment, he clearly didn't need long to recover.

That was one reason why Dahnai loved him. He had stamina.

So, it was an uneasy peace that had descended on the strip, between Jason and Dahnai. It was another issue put behind them, albeit grudgingly, and left him ready to tackle the next major project, which was the return to Exile. That would take place in two days, so they could celebrate Christmas. And, naturally, Aya had put her foot down and refused to allow him to go. He would be permitted to go *after* the interdictor was at full power, after the system was fully protected from Consortium invasion. The interdictor would be completed today, nearly a day ahead of schedule because Myleena had put all resources on completing it, and it would be immediately moved out of the dock and a new interdictor would be started in its place.

They already had everything planned out. First, 5 Kimdori ECM ships, ships designed to mask activity in an area, would go in and mask the planet from sensors and surveillance. Once they gave the all clear, the interdictor would be brought in with a task force of 79 ships, and once it was turned on, *Aegis* and a task force of 37 Karinne and Kimdori ships would jump the Stargate to the edge of the interdictor field and then bring it in under normal engines, which would take 6 hours if they did things right, if they timed it correctly. The Stargate would be turned on and linked to the Stargate here at Karis, and then they would watch and wait as the Kimdori worked to conceal the rest of the system behind jammers and false echo transponders, making it appear completely normal and uninhabited by an advanced race, just as they had hidden Karis for over a thousand years. The Consortium had already come to Exile, inspected it, and left, so they felt it was safe to set up, since the Consortium most likely thought that the Karinnes had abandoned the planet, taking absolutely everything with them but the houses, even scooping up the crops and fruit trees. Zaa and Jason agreed that odds were very high that the Consortium would never return to the system, would have no reason to do so. The planet's gravity was too high for the insectoids to survive, and there was nothing there for them unless they wanted a farming planet... and if they did need one, why did they never return and claim the planet when they had the chance? So, they felt that the Consortium had written off Exile, and that allowed them to simply go back and claim the planet for themselves. The Exiled would be allowed to return home, and Jason would then go and negotiate with the *Gruug* for the right to farm on their planet, and offer to trade with them... but treat them *fairly*. Jason would not do to the *Gruug* what the Trillanes did to his people, or the Americans did to the American Indians. He would not take anything from them.

A perfect night. He breathed in the salty air of his beachside home and found a moment of peace and contentment. Today and tomorrow there would be no stellar politics, no wrangling, no brooding, nothing but friends and family and the impending holiday they would celebrate in the morning. Today and tomorrow were *days off*, damn it all. He'd already told everyone that unless the Karis sun was about to explode, *handle it yourself*. After the crushing letdown of the summit and the intense fighting with Dahnai over Raisha, he just wanted two days of peace and quiet to recover before going back to the real world.

He could never tire of that view. Despite being raised in a cold state, he could admit that he loved his home, he loved living on the beach more than anything else, where all he had to do was look out the window and see to the horizon, see endless possibilities. And it never failed to calm him.

He heard Dahnai shift behind him, then sensed more than heard her stalk up behind him.

She put her hand on his shoulder and came up beside him, looking out the large window with him for a long moment in silence. *Jason, are you alright? I know Raisha—*

No. No more talk of Raisha, he cut her off. *That matter is settled, Dahnai. Let's just move on.*

She sighed, then leaned against his shoulder. He put his arm around her and they enjoyed the view for a moment. *I'm sorry if you thought I'm being a bitch,* she sent sincerely.

That's alright. You're an Empress, you're supposed to be a bitch. Isn't it in the job description?

She giggled, almost girlishly, and slid her hand up and down his back fondly. *So, explain this Christmas holiday. Why give gifts now instead of on New Year's Day?*

It's based on a Terran religion, so excuse me if I don't explain it to you in detail. To maintain peace in the house, me and Jyslin celebrate it and Easter in a secular manner, just as we celebrate the flower festival and New Year's Day in a secular fashion. Neither of us wanted to give up our favorite religious holidays, so we compromised.

You mean Jys hasn't converted you to the true faith? she asked with mock surprise. *Like you're religious.*

When being Empress demands it, she admitted immediately.

Well, Jys is a tad more serious than you are. She's not devout, but she believes in your gods. I believe in mine. So, religion is not discussed in this house.

What about Rann?

Rann's a touchy subject, he answered honestly. *We decided that we wouldn't use him as some kind of trophy. We'll let him make up his own mind what he wants to believe, so we never discuss religion with him or around him. When he asks, we simply tell him that his mother and father have different beliefs, so we never talk about it. I suspect there's quite a bit of cheating going on, though,* he noted. *Jyslin doesn't talk about it, but fuckin' Maya will. Any time Rann asks about religion, Maya will give him the whole conversion speech. But that's okay, I have my lead blocker back from Terra,* he said with a smirk.

Huh?

Temika is a devout Baptist, and she'll be happy to cheat for me as much as Maya cheats for Jyslin.

Dahnai laughed lightly. *I never realized living here was so exciting,* she sent with amusement. *So many dramas going on simultaneously.*

It's not boring, he sent dryly. *If we don't have a holy war going on, Kumi and the twins are at each other's throats, or one of the girls is playing a prank on someone, or one of the kids blows something up, or Zora is crashing my Novas, or something.*

Well, at least you're having fun, she sent lightly, patting him on the lower waist. *So is your wife, with Kellin,* she added wickedly.

Yes, I know, he nodded. *I'm surprised Kellin has any energy left after what they did to him yesterday.*

I gave them permission, she sent with a naughty tilt in her thoughts. *Kellin was talking some trash, so I gave them permission to teach him what happens when he runs his mouth. I was a bit shocked to see Symone giving him a blowjob on the beach, though. Kellin shares my aversion to sex in public. I'm amazed he let Symone go down on him.*

Symone can be very persuasive, he sent dryly. *And it's hard for a man to say or do much of anything when a woman has a very firm grip on his balls.*

Dahnai laughed. *That's why Trelle made it a man's control handle,* she teased. *So we can make you do what we want.*

"Pshaw," he snorted, which made her laugh harder. *Be careful what trash you talk, woman.*

You have a couple of very convenient control handles yourself.

Okay, okay, that's true, she admitted with a giggle. *Why don't you come back to bed?* she invited. *I think we can make love this time without looking like we want to strangle each other. Besides, Kellin is getting to me a little.*

You did look a little angry, he chuckled as he turned them back towards the bed.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss you or punch you in the nose, she admitted. *I'd never had angry sex before. I don't see what some see in it,* she mused clinically. *It's much better when it's fun.*

If you didn't feel like it, why the hell did you say yes?

I thought you wanted it.

I thought you wanted it.

She laughed ruefully. *Well, then I say we forget it ever happened. Now, let's make it hard for Kel and Jys to fall asleep when they're done,* she sent purringly, pulling him down into bed with her.

I can go for that, he agreed, giving her a hungry kiss.

He wasn't sure if they made it hard for Jyslin and Kellin to fall asleep, but Rann certainly made it hard for them. He and Shya burst into the room before it was even sunrise; Shya was sleeping in Rann's room while staying with her mother during the day, while Maer and Sirri were staying in the house with Dahnai. Jason was shaken awake by Rann's small hands, and he heard Dahnai groaning beside him. "Shya, unless you're about to die, I'm going to *kill* you," Dahnai protested.

"Isn't it Christmas yet?" Rann asked excitedly.

"No, it's not Christmas yet," Jason growled at them. "Now go back to your room and let us sleep!"

"I told you that this wasn't a good idea," Shya pouted as they filed from the room under the withering stares of their parents.

"Little twerps," Dahnai grated, then she laughed ruefully as she grabbed hold of him. "Is it Christmas yet? Is it? Is it?" she said.

"Don't make me send you to your room," he threatened.

"How is that a threat? Kellin is there," she purred.

"Then go see if you can get him up," he said grumpily.

"Why, when I can get you up," she said with a naughty grin.

"Shut up and go back to sleep."

She laughed, then snuggled in against him. "I think I can do that," she agreed.

It seemed he was shaken awake again only a second later. "Rann!" he growled.

"I've been accused of being a boy," Symone's voice called teasingly.

He opened his eyes to see Symone standing over him, leaning down with her hands on his shoulder.

She was naked.

Symone, go back to bed, I'm tired, he complained, closing his eyes.

Oh like that's ever stopped me before, she sent impishly as she pulled the covers off them. *Tim got called into work,* she told them as she flopped into bed with them.

Called into work? Why? he asked.

The Moridon asked him and Miaari to go to Kosigi. He didn't really tell me.

I should—

You'll do nothing. Two days, no work unless the sun's about to explode, remember? she sent pointedly. *Now make room,* she commanded, squirming in between Jason and Dahnai, then pulling the covers back up. *Now we can go to sleep,* she told them with a satisfied current,

putting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes.

And he adhered to that. Though the temptation was great to call in and find out what was going on with Tim, he did not. He spent the morning herding about ten kids through a shopping plaza in Karsa so Dahnai could buy gifts for tomorrow's Christmas, and he enjoyed every minute of it. He had his own five children with him, Danelle, Jora, Myri's daughter Kiita, and all three of Dahnai's children. Aya and a contingent of 16 guards went with them, of course, most of them sent by Dahnai's field captain Trabi, commanding the Imperial Guard who had come with the Empress, but Jason didn't mind. They kept the kids from scattering. After a wonderful lunch prepared by Ayama and Surin, Jason, Tim, and Temika used their expertise to help Dahnai put up a Christmas tree in her guest house, to "get into the mood of this Terran holiday," she said, then Jason enjoyed a very un-Christmas strip tradition and spent most of the afternoon just vegging out in his favorite lounge chair on the beach, eyes closed as he cheated just a little bit and read the daily status reports loaded to his gestalt, which were favorable. Zaa's extra workers had arrived, and Myleena had quickly gotten them into the production line. There were now 27 bays being used to build interditors, 16 of which were being converted to interdicator production even as they were built, and the first of them was slated to come off the line in 9 days. The building would go slow at first, as production equipment needed to build the interditors was itself built and the new Kimdori workers got fully settled into the production method, but it would accelerate drastically once that equipment was brought to bear. Kosigi was now fully mobilized to interdicator production.

Cybi was also generating the production plans for the fighter prototype she had had in her memory since the Third Civil War. Cybi was the ultimate engineer in that she had an utterly vast base of knowledge from which to draw, as she was the repository of all scientific knowledge gathered by the Karinnes during their entire history. That gave her the ability to snap-design equipment, generate production plans, and even come up with ideas of her own. Cybi had taken the original Wolf fighter and redesigned it using her data to make it much more compatible with modern technology, and it would, quite simply, blow the doors off a Raptor. And Raptors were such good fighters that the KMS had retrofitted them for use. Cybi had even already started building the prototype, using an automated construction bay in Kosigi that she controlled. The automated bay was mainly used for building smaller self-contained devices like engines, but it had the capability of building a Wolf fighter from scratch. Automation produced the vast majority of their smaller devices, robotic factories that cranked out usable goods by the house, weaponry, PPGs, Crusader armor, and the components of the Gladiator which were assembled in a production plant near the Shimmer Dome. But when it came to large-scale devices, actual living workers had been found superior to automated construction. That was why the ships were built by workers rather than by robots. Robots certainly *helped* in that construction, but they were controlled by workers. The usual method about it was that robots built the small pieces that the workers then put together to build the ships, using robots and other devices to assist in that construction.

I wouldn't do that, Rann, he sent without opening his eyes.

Rann, who had been about to dump a bucketful of sand over Maer's head, jumped and quickly knelt down by the older boy, his smile all sunshine.

Too bad for Rann that Jason could access Cybi's cameras from his gestalt.

He sighed and put his hands behind his head, pondering what was coming. First, he had to talk to Sk'Vrae... personally. He was of a mind to invite her to Karis while Dahnai was still here, so the three of them could sit down and have a little talk. Sk'Vrae was the Imperium's only ally against the Consortium, and there needed to be some discourse, as well as to try to

find some way to end the Urumi feud against Merrane. The Urumi feud against Trillane could go right on ahead, as far as he was concerned, but there had to be trust between Dahnai and Sk'Vrae if any alliance was to hold between them. He knew that Zaa would flood the Skaa and the Alliance with agents now, keep an eye on what they were up to, of which he was grateful, but it was the smaller empires that interested him more at the moment. The main one they had to lure to their side was the Nine Colonies, which was on the back side of the Collective from the Imperium. That was connected territory to the allied powers, and it would be both easy for them to defend and would increase the volume of interdicted space.

And that was the hope, to create an entire interdicted *space*, not pockets of interdicted space in a volume. It would take thousands and thousands of interditors, but Jason was already looking at the possibility of building a sphere of interditors set at 1 light year intervals around the Imperium and the Collective, forming a barrier through which they could not jump, in addition to the interditors in place at every system. That would force them to undertake a yearlong journey just to get *in*, and then have to endure another year just to reach the system.

That idea was already being planned for Karis. The interdicator at Karis would not be the *only* one. As soon as the Imperium and the Collective were covered, they'd start setting interditors out in deep space to increase the effective interdicted space around the planet. The number of interditors it would take to do this would increase exponentially with every shell, so they were aiming at only three layers, which would require 43 interditors laid out in a specific pattern to create a total barrier of three light years in any direction from the edge of interdicted space to Karis. If he wanted four light years, that number skyrocketed to 253. The interditors couldn't totally stop all travel in the space, since one could sync the engines to the "tailwind" side of the interdiction and jump to the edge of the next interdicator's effect. But it still created extended barriers that made it take longer and longer to get to Karis.

A shadow covered the sun, and Jason opened his eyes. He looked up and saw a rather pretty young Faey woman with smoky gray hair, not quite black but not quite gray, like a charcoal color, which was long and straight, held back from her face by a headband, and penetrating rose-colored eyes much like Myleena's. She was wearing a KMS duty uniform. "Your Grace," she said with a smile. "You wanted to see me?"

"Saele," he said, sitting up. "Uh, sorry, they didn't tell me you'd get here so quick. Please, sit down." She smiled and seated herself quite sedately on the lounge chair next to him. "Sorry about the, ah, informal conditions," he said, motioning down at his unclad body.

She laughed. "Well, never let it be said I dressed up for the occasion, your Grace," she said, and she started unbuttoning her jacket. "I'll be happy to conduct the meeting on your terms. Besides, this is a gorgeous beach," she said with a distant smile, looking out over the water.

Jason chuckled. "Well, I guess if you don't mind, help yourself."

She shed her uniform and laid out on the chair next to him, and they were quiet a moment. "The Denmother Zaa approached me about this personally, your Grace, early this morning," she began. "She explained what was going on, and how your daughter Raisha is going to need me to teach her what it means to be a Karinne." [*What it means to be a Generation,*] she added by communing.

"What do you think about it?" he asked.

"I think it'll be fun," she said with a bright smile. "I'm a faithful Karinne, your Grace. I can see what the house needs, and I'm happy to help. Besides, I'll get a chance to see the inner workings of the palace and Dracora, and I'll get a chance to educate a High Princess. Teaching children is what I want to do, your Grace. I can continue my studies by correspondence while on Draconis and earn my degree, then I can master my teaching skills tutoring Raisha."

“And Miyai,” he noted. “You’ll be fostering both twins, Saelle. Does that bother you? Does raising two girls not yours and then having to give them up when they reach the age of ten bother you? Think about that. You’ll be their *mother*, and you won’t be allowed to keep them.”

“I can love them and still let them go, your Grace,” she told him simply. “Because if they truly love me, they can love me without me being there, just as I can love them without them being with me. I fully understand that I’ll be asked to take Raisha and raise her like my own daughter, and then give her away. But I’m sure I can handle that.”

“There’s more to it, Saelle. You’ll have to marry a Merrane noble and take the name Merrane.”

“Pshaw,” she snorted. “As long as he puts out, that’s just a bonus in my book.”

Jason laughed. “You don’t get to pick him, Saelle. Dahnai will. So it’s just pot luck what kind of man you get. He might be someone you can call a friend, he might be someone you can’t stand. Either way, you’ll be stuck with him for the next eleven years.”

“I completely understand that, your Grace. And like I said, as long as he gives it up in bed, I can live with it. If I’m gonna be married, I want the perk that comes with it. Man on demand!” she said forcefully, which made Jason laugh again.

“So, you can live with it?”

[I’ll be performing a critical service for the house, I’ll get to enjoy a unique experience, and I get to do what I love. I can more than live with it, your Grace. I’m looking forward to it!]

[I have to ask, Saelle. Do you feel you’re up to the task of defending Raisha if needed?]

[Your grace, I’m the third most powerful Generation on Karis,] she answered simply. [Only Myleena and Jezi are stronger than me. I can lift nearly six hundred konn with my TK and my gestalt, and I was an Imperial Marine. I can protect Raisha, and myself, if it comes down to it. Denmother Zaa made it clear that half the reason I was chosen was because I’m military, and I’ll know what to do to protect the children if I have to.]

[Good. You won’t go alone, though, and you’ll go with some extra protection. I want you to rate on a Gladiator before you leave, and I’m going to have a very special suit of Crusader armor built for you that includes what we’re calling a tactical gestalt, a much stronger version of this,] he told her, looking over at her and pointing to his gestalt. [It’ll be built into your Crusader armor, and as long as you keep the tactical activated, you can tap its power even if you’re not wearing it. You’ll also be going with two... pets,] he told her. [Two Kimdori are going to provide additional protection, and they’ll go with you in the guise of giruzi. So remember that you’ll have plenty of help.]

[I’m going to live with two Kimdori?]

[Does that bother you?]

[On the contrary, I think it’ll be very interesting!] she communed with a bright smile. [I’ve always been curious about them, since I could sense them, you know. But they’d always kept their distance from me. So, this is my chance to grill the Kimdori with me, really get to know them.]

[Always a good idea,] he agreed.

Once he was sure she was amenable to the idea of it, they talked. He wanted to get to know this woman that would shape and mold his unborn daughter, so he wanted to get full measure of her, get to know how she thought, get to know what she believed, so he would know how she would treat Raisha. What he found of her, he liked. She was a very intelligent, well educated, highly curious, upbeat young lady that would be an outstanding teacher and a good mother, because she loved children. The way she just seemed to light up when Rann and Shya came over to meet her told him more than her words did, for her smile was gentle and

sincere, and her manner towards the kids seemed very *maternal*, even though they weren’t her children.

And *that* was why Zaa chose her, he saw. She was more than capable of giving unconditional love to children not her own. The fact that she was military and she was powerful and she was a teacher were just bonuses. Seeing her interact with Rann, how Rann just warmed up to her instantly, which wasn’t normally like him, told him everything he needed to know.

Jys! Come to the beach and meet someone! Jason boomed across the strip. “Congratulations, Saelle Merrane,” he told her.

She gave him a beaming smile.

“Merrane? You’re in my house, miss Saelle?” Shya asked curiously.

“I will be,” she winked. “I’m going to be the foster mother of your new sisters. I have to be a Merrane to do that, don’t I?”

“I guess so,” she said with a noncommittal shrug. “Come help us make the sand castle!”

“Sure,” she said with a bright smile.

Jyslin, Dahnai, and Kellin wandered down to the beach a few minutes later, as Jason watched Saelle interact with the kids and felt more and more confident Zaa had made a good choice. Even Maer and Sirri seemed immediately taken with the charcoal-haired woman, who had something he had never seen before on her back. It was like a reverse tattoo, lines of stark white skin that took the shape of a *mei* that bloomed across her shoulder blades and shoulders, and the stem ran down her spine to end at the top of the cleft of her buttocks, with pointed leaves that grew from the stem and spread out across her lower back. “Wow!” Shya gasped when she saw Saelle’s back. “What is that?”

“It’s called a *jaingi* tattoo,” she answered, looking over her shoulder. “Isn’t it pretty?”

“Where did you get it?”

“When I was in the Marines, poppin,” she answered. “The Parri make them. You see, they take this paste that’s filled with tiny little bugs and put it on your skin. The bugs get into your skin and they eat away all the color and make your hair fall out, and it leaves behind these white marks. Since Parri have fur, it also makes their fur fall out, so they get these bare lines, but for us, we get these white marks that they can paint on us, like my *mei*. Isn’t it lovely?” she asked.

Jason recalled that the Parri *shaman* here on Karis *did* have those markings on her, in addition to areas of dyed fur, that formed mystical patterns.

“It’s *cool*!” Maer said brightly.

“Don’t even *think* about it, boy,” Dahnai warned.

Saelle stood up and came over to them, and she recognized the Empress and bowed quickly.

“Your Majesty,” she said quickly.

“Jyslin, Dahnai, Kellin, this is Baroness Saelle Karinne. She will be Raisha and Miyai’s foster mother,” Jason introduced. “Saelle, you know Jyslin, but this is the Empress Dahnai Merrane and her husband, Prince Consort Kellin Merrane.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, your Majesty, your Highness, Duchess,” Saelle said with another little bob to each of them, which looked a little silly since she was trying to be formal while standing there naked as a jaybird.

“So, you’re who Jason dug up. Why did he choose you?” Dahnai asked bluntly.

“Because I’m training to be a primary school teacher,” she answered. “And I was an Imperial Marine. I can instruct Raisha, and Miyai, in quite a few things, and I can protect them from harm much more effectively than another woman.”

“So, you’re a Generation?” Dahnai asked.

Saelle looked a little startled, but she nodded. “I am,” she affirmed.

“Saelle is both a nurturer and a warrior, Dahnai,” Jason told her from his chair. “She’s the perfect woman for the job.”

“Uh, your Majesty. This Merrane I’m supposed to marry. This won’t be a marriage on paper, will it?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’ll be a *marriage*, right? Us living together? No just being together as long as the kids are awake?”

She looked a little confused.

“She wants to know if her Merrane husband will put out,” Jason said indelicately.

Dahnai laughed. “Oh! Yes, you’ll have *full* rights as a married couple,” she said with a smile. “How can you be foster parents to our daughters if you’re not a *family*?”

Saelle smiled eagerly. “Then I’m the woman for the job,” she declared.

To prove it, Jason had Dahnai and Jyslin stay at the beach and watch Saelle interact with their children. They too shed their clothes, pulled up lounge chairs, and enjoyed a little sunbathing as they did so, and it certainly didn’t take long for Dahnai to come to the same conclusion, as Saelle helped them build a sand castle, gently and rather skillfully changing it into a lesson in geometry, teaching them even as they had fun. Dahnai saw how quickly her own children took to Saelle, who radiated such a presence of *motherness* that any child responded to it. Just as Symone had an undeniable charisma and charm that made everyone love her, Saelle had a charisma that attracted children to her, made children like her. She would be one hell of a teacher, because she could make children *listen* to her.

It was almost criminal that Saelle had no children of her own yet, that she had delayed having children of her own to pursue her education. But he could say without a doubt that her children would never want for love from their mother.

After a couple of hours, when it was time for the kids to go wash up for dinner, Dahnai lingered as Saelle helped Kellin and Jyslin herd the kids to his house. *Alright, I’m impressed*, she admitted. *I have absolutely no objection to Saelle.*

Good. I demand you pony up, love.

Huh?

I’m giving you one of my best to be Raisha’s foster mother. I expect nothing less than a man just as wonderful as Saelle to be the father. Someone that will not make Saelle’s eleven years in your palace a living hell. Do we understand each other?

She gave him a cursory look, then nodded in understanding. *I’ll find someone just as good as her to be the foster father. Someone that will be suitably enamored of Saelle, so their eleven years are good ones. I want her from here out*, she said. *I know just who I want, and I want to bring him here tomorrow, so they can meet each other and we can explain some things to him. You know, he’s going to have to know some of the truth, or there’s no way Saelle can teach Raisha what she needs to know.*

I reserve the right to inspect him to make sure he’s trustworthy. That means Myleena.

I have no objection, she agreed.

Then go track down Aya and explain what you want. She’ll make it happen.

She handles things like this?

She handles all matter of security here in the strip, he answered. *If we’re bringing this Merrane to the strip, she has to approve it. She’ll relay the relevant orders to my ships, who will pick up this man.*

Ah. Alright, I’ll go arrange it. She stood up and gathered up her clothes, then padded towards his house, sending for Aya, leaving him alone. He didn’t much feel like being alone, so he got up, collected his towel, put his shorts back on, then hurried up after Dahnai.

Even on Karis, there was something special about Christmas morning.

It was a very private affair for the family of the Grand Duke, but private in that it only included his family... which was about half the strip. The mothers of his five children, his children, Vell, Maya’s two daughters, Myleena and Danelle, Dahnai and her family, Tim, and Symone all crowded into his house for Christmas morning, and they brought all their presents from their own houses so they could all open them there in his living room, with Ayama, Surin, and now Saelle, whom Dahnai had appropriated since they met last night, attending them. Jason enjoyed it because of the feeling of family it invoked in him, and he loved seeing the looks on the faces of the children as they opened their presents. There was a brightness in the eyes of a child on Christmas morning that just wasn’t there any other time of the year.

Children made greed look so *cute*.

After the presents were all opened, the kids all started playing with their new toys, the mothers were inspecting new tools, clothes, or knickknacks, and Jason was just happy that everyone was happy. Dahnai, thankfully, didn’t go overboard with the presents, buying one present for every child except her own, for which she bought about fifteen each, just so they didn’t feel left out.

Jason was quite happy to see how quickly Maer and Sirri had integrated into the social structure of the strip kids. Maer wasn’t the oldest, Yuri actually was; Yuri was 11, would be 12 next month, and Sami, Maya’s younger daughter, had just turned 9 last week. But Maer didn’t seem to try to exert any “Imperial” clout despite the age difference, deferring to Yuri, who was more or less used to ruling all the younger children. Yuri did encounter some resistance from Sirri, who thought herself the leader because she was the Crown Princess... but Sirri learned nearly as fast as Dahnai did that her Imperial pedigree meant very little on Karis. After those two got that out of their system, they actually got along very well with each other. Sirri seemed quite friendly with Sami, a girl nearly her own age, and the large number of four and five year olds hovered around the four older children, as they always did.

Jason watched on with fatherly concern, and also fatherly happiness at seeing his kids so happy, playing with their new toys, harassing Ayama over what they were having for Christmas dinner, and just being kids.

They didn’t have long to meet Dahnai’s answer to Saelle. Evin Merrane was a slender, bookish-looking Faey that was rather handsome, about half a head shorter than Saelle, and had a head full of coal black hair, which would make him *very* exotic to Faey women. His eyes were also dark, a dark brown, giving him a very exotic appearance compared to the usually light-eyed Faey. He looked to be older than Saelle, but not much, and his expression was one of wild curiosity, not fear, as members of the KMS and his guard brought him to his house. Dahnai introduced him to Jason and Jyslin rather casually. “Guys, this is Evin Merrane, Associate Professor of Mathematics at the Dracora Academy. Evin, this is Grand Duke and Duchess Jason and Jyslin Karinne.”

“Your Grace, my Lady,” he said with graceful bows. “I appreciate this rare honor to visit Karis, your Majesty, but might I ask why I’m here?”

“You haven’t even told him?” Jason asked in surprise.

“I figured we’d get to it,” she shrugged with a smile. “Are you a loyal member of the house, Evin?”

“Of course I am, your Majesty.”

“Even to the point where you’d perform a long and arduous task?”

“Of course.”

“Saelle!” Dahnai shouted. Jason had to suppress a grin; if this was how Dahnai wanted to do

it, far be it for him to object. When the charcoal-haired woman hurried up and bowed, Dahnai motioned to her. “Meet your new wife, Evin,” she said simply.

“Wife?” he asked in surprise as Saelle gave him a sudden appraising look.

“I’m sure you heard I’m pregnant,” she said, and he nodded. “I’ve chosen you and Saelle here to act as the foster parents for my twins. So, for the next eleven years, you’ll be a married man.”

He looked startled, but recovered quickly. “I’d be honored to serve as a foster for you, your Majesty,” he said with a bow. “You will, I trust, ensure I don’t lose my tenure?”

“Certainly,” she nodded.

“Come on, let’s talk,” Saelle said with a smile, offering her hand to the shorter man. He took it, and they padded off together.

“Why’d you pick him?” Jason asked.

“Because he’s already a candidate to foster,” she answered. “He’s a professor, so he can teach my daughters. He passed all the psych evaluations we put potential fosters through, which is the biggest part of it. He’ll be a stable and loving foster father to my daughters.”

“He’s handsome too,” Jyslin noted.

“A bit short for me, but he is cute,” Dahnai smiled in agreement. “I doubt Saelle will complain about that part. We’ll let them get to know each other, and if they like each other, we’ll go with them. If not, there’s about sixteen other men on the foster list we can try. I just remembered him because I think he’s handsome.”

“Typical Faey,” Jason accused chuckled, “thinking with what’s between your legs.”

“Just like human men,” she teased in reply.

There were too many people to eat in the dining room, so the guards put out tables on the deck out back, and they ate their dinner in a warm, beautiful afternoon, with the blue sun of Karis shining down on them. Ayama and Surin had worked hard on the dinner, cooking it since early yesterday afternoon, and they did not disappoint anyone. They had the Christmas traditional turkey with all the trimmings, and outside of *oye* juice for the kids, there was not a single non-Terran dish laid out on the table. It was a human holiday celebrated in the human way and with human food.

After dinner, Jason just enjoyed an evening of peace and quiet, watching *It’s a Wonderful Life* on viddy, which was a Fox family tradition, then enjoyed a glass of wine on the deck as Rann played with his brand new airbike, which was a simple flying bicycle that would go no faster than ten miles an hour and would go no higher than five feet off the ground in its current configuration. Jason could remove those safety protocols to where it would go any altitude and go as fast as 70 miles an hour, but that would be after Rann learned completely how to fly it and how to do it *safely*. Rann had shown no sincere interest in learning to fly yet, but as soon as he did, Jason would teach him. Jyslin was reclining on the outdoor couch with him, relaxing after the long day, her bare legs draped over his lap as she read from a hand-panel, reading one of the technical readouts on the Consortium ship that Myleena had released to her staff. And Jyslin and Jason both were on her staff. It was the initial assessment of the power broadcasting system they used, and included a promising proposal and plan of adapting it to Karinne use. Her report also gave promise that they could *jam* the power broadcasting.

Leave it to Myleena to go straight from dinner right back to work... on a holiday.

Rann, be careful, Jyslin called as he zoomed over the rail and towards the beach. The huge deck and the hot tub built into it were between theirs and Tim and Symone’s houses, opening to each house, serving as the main path they used between the houses. Behind the deck, away from the beach, was their pool, with the two two-room pool houses, one on each side of the

large pool on the back side, one for each house. The houses had been built with this communal feel in mind, and said much of their relationship. Symone was literally a second wife, and Tim was literally a second husband to Jyslin. They had been part of the day, all day, but now they were enjoying a relaxing evening on their own, enjoying their last Christmas without children.

Tomorrow he’d be back at work. He had two main things to do tomorrow. First, he had to watch over the launch of the interdictor and the first steps of the claiming of Exile, then he had to convince Sk’Vrae to come to Karis and have a private summit with him and Dahnai. He would unveil the plan he and Zaa had hammered out to them, and no doubt hear all kinds of both protest and eagerness. Zaa was on her way back home now, having stayed until after dinner, and they’d seen her off with kisses and offers for her to return. She didn’t want Sk’Vrae or Dahnai to know just how involved she was in Karinne matters, so she was leaving well before Jason introduced the plan to the two rulers.

Jason sighed and leaned back, sliding his hand up and down Jyslin’s calf. *Did you enjoy Christmas, love?*

Oh yes, it was very nice. Thank you for the necklace again, love, it’s beautiful!

I was hoping you’d like it, he answered modestly, almost shyly. *I know you don’t wear much jewelry, but I thought you’d think it was nice.*

Yes, and I’m wearing it right now, she sent with a smile, fishing it out from under her half-shirt. The shirt ended just under her breasts, and her shorts began what couldn’t be an inch above her pubic hair, leaving a vast expanse of her sleek stomach bare. The shirt and shorts both were presents, the shirt from Myleena and the shorts from Kumi. The necklace was a small, modest pendant of the crest of Karinne done in wire platinum, treated so it was soft and pliable, would bend easily, but always bounced back to its proper shape. She could wad it up in her hand like a ball, and it would spring back. The chain too would stretch before it broke, making it a very practical piece of jewelry for the mother of a five year old boy.

I think we need to talk to Kumi about those shorts, Jason noted, looking at the white cloth critically.

Jyslin laughed. *I like them. They show off my legs and make me look sexy.*

They do that, alright, he agreed, sliding his hand up past her knee, along her thigh. *They look like they might be a little uncomfortable though. They look skin-tight.*

They stretch, she sent with a wink, grabbing the waistband and pulling, showing that it was indeed elastic. *They’re man-catching pants*, she teased.

I’m already caught, you don’t have to keep fishing.

I have two women competing for your attention, I do have to keep fishing, she sent with a grin.

You have two other guys competing with me for yours, don’t paint this like you’re the noble sufferer, he countered cheekily, then frowned as he looked towards the beach. Rann was getting a little bit too far away, the telepathic sense of him was too distant...

She laughed, then glanced towards the beach. *I’ll get it. That’s quite far enough, little man!* she warned. *Come back at once!*

Okay, Mommy, he called.

What’s on the agenda for you for tomorrow? he asked.

Back to Kosigi, she answered. *We’re still stripping down the Consortium ship, Myli’s just been focusing on the broadcast unit. I’ve been on the team dismantling the engines to see how much different they are from ours. The other main team is working on the Torsion weapon, dismantling it so we can generate some design plans to build it. We have a smaller team taking apart the main communication node that looks to act as the center of the com-*

munication of those devices in the bugs' heads.

Don't we have a team on those?

Yeah. Songa's been working with a team on them, since she knows a hell of a lot more about the brains of the insectoids than we do. So we need her expertise.

Good, he nodded as Rann pattered back into view, sailing over the deck and towards the pool houses. *I think it's about bathtime, little man,* Jason called as he finished his wine. *Put the airbike in the garage and head to the bathroom.*

Okay, Daddy, he answered.

I'll go take care of it, he told Jyslin, moving her legs and standing up. *See you upstairs, love. Nah, I need a bath too,* she told him. *And it's much more fun when you look at me without the shorts,* she added with a grin.

Jason and Jyslin took turns washing Rann's hair and soaping him down, then they all enjoyed some quality family time in the soaking tub, as the hot water seeped relaxation into Jason's muscles as Rann burbled on excitedly about the events of the day, playing with the tiny ship he'd gotten for Christmas, letting it go and watching it sail around the choppy surface like a tiny little Coast Guard cutter, the tiny engine in it moving it along randomly on the surface. The toy was programmed to avoid all barriers and obstacles so it didn't run into the edges or anyone in the tub. Jason listened to their son sending, and he was amazed at how fast Jyslin had taught him. He certainly barely even knew a fraction of what he had to know, but his sending was clear and lucid, and it was surprisingly fast for someone who had been expressed for only a few weeks. Rann was a strong telepath, but it also seemed that he was quite naturally inclined to his telepathy, had picked it up quickly, and in what was more or less normal for Faey children, he sent almost exclusively unless he had to speak aloud, going through his "honeymoon" phase where he abused the hell out of this newfound ability. Unless he was speaking to the unexpressed kids or Dahnai, he sent rather than spoke.

What do you want to bring to Kosigi tomorrow, little man? Jyslin asked him.

Ohh, can I bring my new airbike? Please?

Afraid that's not possible, sweetie. Why not bring your new panel so you can play games and talk to your brothers and sisters?

I can do that.

Good, she said, putting her hands under his arms and lifting him up out of the tub, over her head. *I'm so proud of you, my sweetie,* she smiled up at him. *You send so good now!*

You make me practice all the time, Mommy, he answered modestly.

I know, but you still deserve a little praise, sweetie, she told him. *You still have a lot to learn, but I think you've learned your sending lessons very well. Soon I'll start teaching you all the little tricks that Kyri knows,* she told him with a conspiratorial smile. *And a whole bunch more she doesn't.*

Don't start a war, Jason warned privately.

Yana's gotten lazy lording up Kyri's talent, I'm gonna train up Rann past her, she answered with a competitive look.

You forget, I train Kyri too, he told her with a slight smile. *Yana teaches her power, I teach her subtlety.*

Traitor.

Kyri's my daughter. I'm just making sure my daughter reaches her full potential, he sent lightly.

That just means when Rann can out-finesse Kyri, I can be smug to both of you, she challenged.

You know, eventually you're gonna realize that I'm proud of all my children, and not just

the one I have with you, he winked.

I think I'm going to go sleep with Tim and Symone tonight, so I don't share my bed with a traitor, she teased.

Fine. I'll just issue an open call for any girl on the strip who's bored, he retorted.

That is so cheating! she accused with a laugh.

You set the rules of the game, woman, don't accuse me of cheating when I follow them.

She laughed even louder and threw her hands around his neck and kissed him playfully on the cheek. *So you're a traitor and a scoundrel!* she accused mischievously.

I have to be a scoundrel. I'm a Grand Duke. It's a job requirement.

Not to your own family!

Scoundrels are equal opportunity, he told her, kissing her while his hands went under the water and grabbed prodigious amounts of her breast and her butt.

"Mmmm, I love scoundrels," she purred, sliding up and straddling his lap, and giving him a passionate kiss.

Private time? Rann asked.

No, baby, not quite yet, Jyslin answered, then she gasped and laughed when Jason goosed her. *Your father's just being playful, that's all. But he's making sure there's gonna be some private time tonight,* she warned, leaning back and giving him a commanding look, to which he responded by brazenly grabbing her breasts and squeezing them. She laughed, but let him fondle her to his heart's desire, holding him by the shoulders.

I'm so afraid of a naked woman, he told her, pinching her nipples.

You will be, she winked in reply. *It'll be just me and you tonight, buster. You have nowhere to run.*

I have plenty of places to run. I'm sure Cybi will protect me from your evil charms.

Jyslin laughed lightly. *My charms aren't evil, they're just demanding,* she sent, giving him a playful kiss. *Oh, and by the way, they're all yours for the next week,* she added. *I went and saw Songa yesterday, and she said I'm coming into my window in a couple of days, so we're gonna try for another baby. So keep that in mind if some girl puts her hand in your pants. I'll be expecting some performance from you when you come home. You can go play, but you'd better save something for me. If I can't get you up, I'm gonna beat you.*

He gave her a loving, honest smile. *It will be my honor and my pleasure, my love,* he told her, pulling her into an embrace. *Nothing would make me happier than giving you another baby.*

Your what? Sixth? Seventh? Five hundredth? she teased.

That was your idea, he reminded her. *I don't regret it an iota now, though. I love my children.*

I love them too, Jayce, she agreed, kissing him on the nose. *Even if Yana is a cold bitch that must die horribly.*

Jason erupted into helpless laughter. *Such total hate for Yana,* he exclaimed. *I should go give her a little support.*

After you give me mine, she sent warningly, though she was smiling.

They had a late snack in the kitchen, and then they put Rann and Shya to bed around 2630. Dahnai and Kellin had come over for drinks and to help put Shya to bed, and they lingered in the living room afterward. *Kellin's going to go over to Symone's tonight,* she told him. *He's availing himself of the vacation while he can,* she sent teasingly, patting her husband on the knee. *Not that I can blame him. So, want to make it a complete swap and come home with me tonight, and let Tim come here?*

Can't do it, Jyslin answered for him. *He's mine for the next week, Dahnai. We're trying for*

another baby now that we fixed what was keeping me from conceiving.

Ah, well, good luck, guys, she sent sincerely. *I guess I'll just have to console my rejection with Tim*, she sent with a mental purr.

Why split up, just come with us, love, Kellin offered. *Symone won't care, and I'd like to try it.*

She thought for a second. *Hmm, I think that might be fun. It was certainly fun when we were all at my place*, she mused, licking her lips absently. *But since I have my children, how about we all go to our house? I don't want to leave them. I don't get to see them enough as it is, I won't leave them alone in the house. We can have our fun and still be near the children.*

I won't mind.

Tim, Symone. Wanna come over to our place tonight? Dahnai called to the house across the deck.

Sure! Symone sent immediately.

There, that's that, Dahnai smiled.

Why are the women I love such tramps, Jason sent with a teasing smile.

You don't love us for being tramps, you love us because we're honest, she challenged. *All those human morals, and under it all, you're just as quick to drop your pants as we are. And now you're honest about it too*, she winked.

Oh yes, I need to meet this Aura and see why Jason gets so horny thinking about her, Dahnai noted.

She's sexy, just like you two and Symone, he explained simply. *She's beautiful, she has a sexy body, and she's very...* giving, he sent lightly.

Well, you invited us, where are you? Symone sent impatiently. *Chop chop, the night only lasts eleven more hours, you know! Tim's gotta get his rocks off in both of us before he can go to bed, and he has to work tomorrow!*

Well, it seems we're being ordered, Kellin laughed.

I'll humor her, if only because I'm horny, Dahnai told him. *But I'll show her who's boss tonight and tomorrow*, she grinned.

Good luck with that, Jason told her lightly. *I've told you before, Dahnai, she's not afraid of you at all.*

I don't have to make her afraid to show her who's boss, she said with an ominous smile. *Little miss happy tongue's gonna be my pet all night and all day tomorrow. She'll do anything I want, and that makes me the boss.*

Well, that's one way to do it, Jyslin giggled.

Evin and Saelle Merrane were married at sunset the next day in a private ceremony at the little temple to Trelle. The two of them had gotten to know each other the night before and all day, and after Myleena interrogated Evin and found him to be trustworthy enough to learn at least some of the truth, they were married in a quick and simple ceremony. Their marriage contract stipulated that it would last only until Raisha and Miyai were taken back into the Imperial house. Jason had never heard of a marriage like that before, a temporary one, but such was within the Empress' power to create. Evin and Saelle would be married by Imperium law until they fulfilled their duty, and then they would not be divorced or annulled, but instead *concluded*. If they wanted to stay together, they were more than capable of being married *again* any time during their contract marriage, but if they did not, their marriage would end when Dahnai took back her children on their tenth birthday.

Jyslin made good on her threat to Jason to be a possessive bitch. Much as she had demanded of him when he was with the other Marines, she was very insistent on multiple sexual encounters the next day. They made love in the morning, they made love after lunch, and then

they made love again that night, and that set the pattern he knew would hold until after she felt she was no longer in her fertile period.

But, the day after Christmas was the return to reality. Jyslin went back to work at Kosigi, returning for lunch and to seduce him into bed afterward before going back, and Jason returned to his job of doing what he could do to make life better for his people today. And today, that was keeping his promise to the Exiled.

Jason watched from his study as the KMS executed Operation Oasis, as it was called by Myri. The *Dreamer*, *Trelle's Gift*, and a task force of 90 other ships jumped out before Jason woke up that morning, but he was watching when they arrived at Exile just before lunch. He saw them join the Kimdori ECM ships that were already picketed at the planet, and move quickly to insert the interdicator. Now, Jason knew, came the tricky part. The *Aegis* and the rest of the task force was sitting out in deep space, waiting for a go signal, where they would time their jump with the activation of the interdicator where they came in literally just as it started building power. They'd be looking at a 6-7 hour cruise to Exile under normal engines if they did it right, but the point of it was not to bring the Stargate into the system until they were sure the interdicator was operating. By towing in the Stargate under normal engines, they were absolutely ensuring that the Stargate could set up in total security, and it also slowed things down, giving the interdicator plenty of time to build up power before the Stargate was brought online. It would take 7 hours to get it to Exile and into orbit, then another 8 hours to link the Stargate to the one here at Karis. The actual linking only took about an hour, but it was always a matter of safety to give the link time to "settle" and test the link extensively for stability before allowing any traffic through it. Once the gate was stable and the interdicator was operating at full power, and the planet was fully concealed by Kimdori misdirection, then they'd be in business.

Jason watched with confidence, certain that everything would go smoothly, and he wasn't disappointed. They got the interdicator into orbit over the planet's north pole without any problems, and the interdicator was activated right on schedule. Jason watched its output on his screen and saw it was perfectly normal, and then the *Aegis* task force jumped. They arrived exactly on time and exactly where they needed to be, appearing in normal space literally right ahead of the rapidly expanding, invisible distortion field spreading through hyperspace, and the sailed under normal engines into interdicted space as that space increased behind them, settling into a nice half-light velocity cruise that would get them to Exile in exactly 7 hours.

Executed to perfection.

After a fun hour with Jyslin after lunch, Jason bent himself to the other task, and that was defense. He spent most of the day in conference with Dahnai, Miaari, and Sk'Vrae, who participated via remote using a vidscreen. Jason explained the plan, and then had to shout over both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae's objections to make them listen to the *entire* plan. Once he got the whole thing explained, the two of them thought about it for long moments. "With the Imperium supplying Stargates to the Collective systems, we interconnect all systems and will be able to deploy quickly to any threatened system," he explained. "Sk'Vrae will need to honor the Imperium's need to defend the Stargates by letting Dahnai deploy ships to guard the gates, and Dahnai reciprocates by charging the Collective very small fees to use them, basically just enough to pay for maintenance of the gates."

"But it puts my entire trade system at the mercy of the Imperium!" Sk'Vrae protested, speaking in Urumi. "I demand that Uruma Prime be the nexus for all Collective gates, with a gate leading from Uruma Prime to Draconis! That allows us to manage our own affairs without being at her whim!"

“Whim?” Dahnai said threateningly.

“How about we instead put the nexus for all Collective gates at Aurigae,” Jason offered. “Since Aurigae is more or less a jointly held system between the Collective and the Imperium, sharing it, we can use it to share the Stargate network between the two empires.”

Both Sk’Vrae and Dahnai gave him some hard looks, but Dahnai snorted and gave a short nod. “I’ll agree to that, so long as I can deploy a fleet to Aurigae to defend my gates.”

“They need to be there anyway, so they can respond quickly to any invasion of Collective space,” Jason pointed out.

“I will accede to that condition,” Sk’Vrae said, a touch frostily.

That set the tone for a tiring day of acting as a cushion between Dahnai and Sk’Vrae, as they hammered out fleet deployments and resource sharing agreements, as well as Imperial assistance to help the Urumi rebuild their fleet quickly with the new Consortium weapons already installed. Those parts went well enough, with Miaari and Jason only urging them to move along as they tried to swindle each other. By the end of the planning session, they had most of those agreements in place... until Jason brought up the more delicate issue. “Simply put, we need to put aside this issue you have with Dahnai and House Merrane, Sk’Vrae,” he said. “Since we’ll be depending on each other. I’m not sure the ships of Merrane will feel very safe operating with Collective ships because of it. So, what needs to happen to settle the matter of blood between Merrane and the Collective?”

“Are you *out of your mind*?” Dahnai asked hotly.

“Nothing,” Sk’Vrae snapped. “If Empress Dahnai wants to settle the matter between Merrane and the Collective, she will seek forgiveness in the traditions of my people. She will apologize, and serve one day of penance for every day the injustice has continued. That, or she may surrender a number of her own flesh and blood equal to the number of Urumi killed by her ancestors as sacrifices to Kragzarr. A day for a day or a life for a life. There can be no other way.”

“It wasn’t her that did it, Sk’Vrae,” Jason pointed out.

“No matter. She is guilty for the crimes of her ancestors,” she stated. “She and her descendants must repay the debt.”

“It is within your rights as Brood Queen to accept full responsibility for the debt and face Dahnai in ritual combat,” Miaari told her. “As Dahnai can accept full responsibility for her debt and face you. Issue the personal challenge, and you may settle the matter between yourselves. Should you win, the matter of honor is settled once Empress Dahnai pays you fair value of the lives of the subjects lost to the descendants of the families of the slain. Should you lose, Empress Dahnai can absolve the debt as the victor.”

“You know our laws, Kimdori, but surely you understand that the ritual combat you describe is to the death,” Sk’Vrae pointed out.

“Only if the victor so wishes to take the life of the defeated,” she answered calmly. “There is precedent of the victor sparing the defeated. If both of you agree that the battle will not be to the death, then it may commence.”

“Wait a fucking minute here!” Dahnai said in outrage.

Sk’Vrae, however, looked intrigued. “And what condition would decide the victor?” she asked.

“Rendering the opponent unconscious or the surrender of one to the other on one’s knees and bowing down?” Miaari offered.

“I would accept those conditions,” Sk’Vrae said immediately. “I will make Merrane pay for their crimes on the body of their Empress!” she declared.

“Wait just a damn minute here, what the fuck are you talking about?” Dahnai asked hotly,

glaring at Miaari.

“It is an old, old law among the Urumi, Majesty,” she said simply. “When two clans were embroiled in a feud that would destroy them, the leaders of the clans could take full personal charge of the debts and face one another in ritual combat. The victor of the combat settled the war between the clans in the victor’s favor. Sk’Vrae is offering you a chance to settle the long dispute between Urumi and Merrane, if you will face her in personal combat as you were formed, meaning no weapons, no armor, not even clothing. You face each other as nature made you, and Sk’Vrae offers that your battle not be fatal. She will accept your defeat in ritual combat and the compensation to the families of the slain as payment for the crimes of your ancestors, and the Urumi will re-open ties to the Imperium.” She gave Dahnai a serious look. “This needs to be settled, Dahnai,” she said forcefully. “Sk’Vrae faces possible backlash from her people by allying to the Imperium when there is a matter of blood between them and the Empress ruling the Imperium, though she has not mentioned it. The Urumi will ally with an enemy against a greater enemy, that is traditionally acceptable, but the bad blood will remain until you settle this.”

“You want me to fight a seven hundred *konn* lizard with bone armor, claws, fangs, and can spit venom, with what? My bare hands?”

“As *nature made you*, your Majesty,” Miaari said simply. “Your talent is part of you. To combat Brood Queen Sk’Vrae with your telepathic gifts would be permitted in this battle.”

“Yes, she may use her powers, as I may use mine!” Sk’Vrae declared.

That seemed to sway Dahnai. She thought about it a long moment, then looked to Sk’Vrae. “Does this have to take place in public?”

“Nay, but it must be witnessed by a high priest of Kragzarr,” she answered. “So that our god may be represented in a matter of blood.”

“Then I’ll accept, provided it takes place here on Karis, it is *not* to the death, and it takes place tomorrow at sunset local time. That’s thirty-one standard hours from now.”

“It is agreed,” Sk’Vrae said immediately. “Send forth a ship for me and my witness, your Grace.”

Jason nodded. “It will arrive in three standard hours, your Majesty.”

“Our business is done,” the Urumi said. “I must prepare for this challenge. Guard well, Faey, for I will make you suffer before I accept your surrender,” Sk’Vrae hissed, and then her monitor blacked out.

“Jason, I’m gonna fucking kill you for this,” Dahnai growled, then she laughed ruefully. “But, I can’t deny this is a chance for me to *finally* get the Urumi off my ass. And I can take that bony bitch if I can use my talent,” she purred. “I’ll make her dance like a drunken hooker in front of her high priest before I force her to bow down before me and surrender. It’s gonna be so fuckin’ *sweet*,” she said in a dreadfully eager voice.

“Empress,” Miaari said mildly, “Brood Queen Sk’Vrae is telepathic.”

Dahnai glared at her, then she laughed, flexing her fingers in an unwholesome manner. “Then we’ll see just how good an Urumi telepath is,” she said with a chilling smile.

The meeting ended shortly after that, and Dahnai stalked up behind him and smacked him on the back of the head. “Ow!” *What was that for?*

For suggesting I humiliate myself for the bony bitch’s amusement! I am the Empress, you jerk!

But it’s getting the problem between you and Sk’Vrae fixed.

Yeah, so for that much, thanks, she winked. *But you’re gonna pay for this, babes. Right now.*

Oh really? And how am I going to pay for this?

Let's practice, she said. If I can't subdue the bony bitch with my talent, I need to know some moves to incapacitate an armored lizard that weighs three times as much as me.

He laughed. *Alright, I can do that. But you'd better warn your guards what's coming, so they don't start a war between us and the Collective.*

Jason was actually quite thrilled that the two of them were going to settle this little problem. It would also be interesting to see how Dahnai handled facing down the large, armored, dangerous Sk'Vrae. He donned his practice gi and practiced Aikido with her, reminding her that Sk'Vrae's tail and different build would give her a different center of gravity, and that her weight advantage would remove most throws from Dahnai's arsenal.

Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Urumi Collective was the first ever non-Kimdori visitor to Karis that was not of the Imperium.

She arrived with her personal retinue and her high priest early the next morning. Jason greeted her at the landing pad, and then immediately conducted her, her priest, and her ten honor guard to a luxury hotel penthouse where she could conduct rituals to prepare her for the ritual combat to come. She was very intense, very abrupt, and very impatient. She all but pushed Jason out before he could even ask what she might want for refreshment, but he didn't really mind. She was focused on her upcoming chance to beat Dahnai up, and Jason would give her that because afterward the three of them could sit down face to face and talk about things.

The funny part, though, was Dahnai and her guards. Her Imperial Guard had an absolute fit when Dahnai told them what she'd agreed to do, and they were quite adamant about trying to prevent it. Dahnai argued with them for nearly three hours, until she finally had to resort to using a direct command, on top of Jason swearing up and down that he'd make sure that Sk'Vrae abided by the rules of their confrontation and kept things non-lethal, since he would be the only witness to the match outside of the Urumi priest. Despite that, though, her guards vowed that if Dahnai were somehow killed, then Sk'Vrae would never leave Karis alive, and the Imperium would wipe the Collective from the face of the universe.

Jason had nothing else to do that day, since they were waiting for the interdictor at Exile to reach full power, so he coached Dahnai in Aikido the rest of the day, preparing her for dealing with a lizard three times her weight that had claws, teeth, fangs, and could spit venom nearly twenty feet. There were a few things she could do, mainly focusing on the arms holding those claws. Despite her size and her weight and her armor, her arms attached to her body the same way a Faey or human's did, and that meant that Dahnai could attack her in the regard. Sk'Vrae's own weight would be her enemy, for there were several ways that Dahnai could break the Brood Queen's arms using Aikido locks, where her size, strength, and armor would be no protection. Jason focused on those moves, focused on her practicing her arm locks, getting her ready for dealing with Sk'Vrae's claws, which would be her primary weapon if Dahnai could not defeat her with telepathy.

The ritual combat took place in a truly deserted area, a barren wasteland on the northeastern continent of Draega, on a flat expanse of sandy beach with barren hills in the background. Jason had flown the dropship bringing them out personally, and there were only four of them there; Jason, Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, and her small male priest, with Jason and Dahnai in the cockpit and the Urumi in the passenger hold, separated from each other and in absolute silence. There were about thirty guards with them, as well as Songa, but they were in other dropships and had landed over the hill and out of sight. In this combat, there would be no spectators except the priest and Jason, who would act as the witness for Dahnai. After they landed, they all disembarked, and Sk'Vrae chose their battleground, a flat expanse of beach near the sea. Her priest attended her, chanting sonorously in Urumi as he drew symbols on her bony crest.

Jason helped Dahnai take off her simple robe, leaving her naked and ready for the trial where she could bring nothing but her own body and mind, and he saw her eager look. *Be careful, Jason warned. Remember, her Majesty is a telepath, she will be a powerful opponent.*

I'll be careful, she nodded, and he slapped her lightly on the rump as she walked towards the large gray-scaled Brood Queen, with her bony plates that were like armor and the large crest on her head that was now decorated with geometric patterns. The Brood Queen advanced on her, her tail lashing behind her, then she stopped about twenty feet from Dahnai as the priest came up behind them.

We stand today to perform an ancient rite, not practiced by our people for over two hundred years, the priest intoned sonorously, and he was *sending*. The priest was telepathic as well! *As is ancient tradition of our people, two clan leaders accept the responsibility of their clans and battle alone to settle a matter of blood. Empress Dahnai, ruler of House Merrane, you stand accused by Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Collective of acts of treachery and murder. As you have assumed all potential debt for your clan, do you acknowledge this debt and are prepared to face your accuser in a trial by combat, where your guilt may be proven by your defeat at the hands of your accuser?*

I am, Dahnai answered with a nod.

Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Collective, do you accept all potential debt for the Collective, and stand ready to try the accused in the traditions of our people, accepting that if you fail to defeat the accused, it absolves her and her clan of all debt?

I am, Sk'Vrae answered, proving that she *did* have talent. And she felt rather strong.

As has been agreed, this will not be a trial to the death. The rules of victory are thus: a combatant may surrender by kneeling and bowing to the victor and surrendering by spoken word or by clear sending. A combatant will be considered vanquished if rendered unconscious or submits in surrender under painful duress, after which she must kneel down and surrender to the victor. Do both combatants agree to these conditions?

Both replied in assent.

Then we shall proceed. On the clap of my hands, let the trial commence.

The priest stepped back, waited only a brief moment, then clapped his scaly hands, and Jason expected to see nothing immediately. And he was right. Both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were absolutely motionless, glaring at each other, as Jason felt the fringes of what was clearly ferocious telepathic combat. Telepathic combat was an entirely different world, an entirely different realm, and Jason knew that they'd know who won that fight within seconds. The two monarchs kept their gazes locked, and to Jason's surprise, blood started seeping out of Dahnai's nose and ears, even as Sk'Vrae began to physically tremble, a bluish liquid oozing out of her nostrils.

Jason was impressed. Sk'Vrae had to be *very* strong to hold her own against Dahnai.

Not ten seconds after it began, as Dahnai hammered at Sk'Vrae's defenses without success, at least one phase of it was over. Sk'Vrae wasn't as strong a telepath as Dahnai, but it took less power to defend than it did to attack, and Sk'Vrae was *very* well trained, a master of telepathic combat, and thus able to turn aside Dahnai's assault. Sk'Vrae staggered back and hissed threateningly, and Dahnai seemed to wilt slightly, but her eyes remained locked on the Urumi. Sk'Vrae hissed again, reared back, and then spat a stream of venom at Dahnai, who had seen it coming. Moving with a speed and grace that surprised the Urumi, she evaded the venom, then spread her feet and prepared for the inevitable charge.

Sk'Vrae did not disappoint. She charged forward, her clawed hands leading, but Dahnai shocked the absolute hell out of her. She slipped sideways of the Urumi's charge, grabbed her wrist, and amazed Jason by twisting her arm as she charged by. Even the priest heard

Sk'Vrae's arm snap as Dahnai torqued her arm enough to break her forearm. Dahnai didn't have all that muscle just to look good, she was a physically powerful Faey, and more than strong enough to break the larger Urumi's arm *exactly* as Jason had taught her. That armlock would have sent a smaller being flying onto his back, but Sk'Vrae was so huge she couldn't be taken off her feet, so the move instead snapped her arm like a twig. Sk'Vrae roared in pain and staggered away, holding her broken arm, but then she flinched when Dahnai threw a handful of sand into her face, partially blinding her.

Dahnai paid for thinking she had the upper hand. She slipped behind the Urumi, but she seemed to sense Dahnai's intent, whirled around, then unleashed not a stream, but a spray of venom in Dahnai's direction, capable of unleashing it like that because of Dahnai's proximity. Dahnai cried out and staggered back, wiping furiously at her eyes and face as the venom burned into her. Urumi venom was actually weak, unable to kill, it was meant more to irritate the eyes and nose and render prey incapable of fighting back. It was like tear gas when sprayed like that, where it could actually blind if a large amount got into the eyes. Dahnai staggered back, but not fast enough to avoid getting a quartet of bloody lines ripped into her shoulder and upper chest from Sk'Vrae's claws. She gasped and tried to turn, and got slashed again in her upper back, over left shoulderblade, and then shrieked in pain when Sk'Vrae ripped four bloody lines across her back, at her waist level, which bled immediately and copiously.

Dahnai retaliated the only way she knew how, by lunging around and putting her hands on Sk'Vrae. That tactile contact allowed Dahnai much more potent telepathic attacks, and the two of them seemed to freeze as Dahnai again assaulted Sk'Vrae with telepathic power, this time with the advantage of touch focusing her power. Sk'Vrae's nose began bleeding almost shockingly, with two blue streams erupting from her snout and pouring into the sand, and her earholes began to leak blue blood. Jason could feel the raw *power* being unleashed from both of them, as they put everything on the line in what he could tell was going to be the telling moment. Whoever won this exchange was going to win this fight, for the loser would either be overtaken or unconscious.

For long seconds, the outcome was uncertain. Dahnai's eyes were a furious blaze of absolute concentration, and Sk'Vrae's small eyes were closed and her expression a mask of complete focus, as Dahnai put everything she had into the attack, and Sk'Vrae put everything she had into the defense against it. Both of them were in intense physical pain, fighting through it... but that pain was the eventual downfall of the loser.

Dahnai managed to reach out and grab Sk'Vrae's broken arm, then twist it. Sk'Vrae howled in agony, and that second's lapse of concentration ended up being her undoing. She shuddered, and the collapsed to the sandy beach, out cold.

Dahnai dropped to her knees and put her hands down on Sk'Vrae's massive form not to attack, but just to support herself as both Jason and the priest hurried over. The priest checked Dahnai to see that she was conscious, then checked Sk'Vrae, then clapped his hands. *Brood Queen Sk'Vrae is vanquished*, he declared. *Empress Dahnai of Merrane has proven her innocence, and the debt is absolved.*

GET ME A DOCTOR! Dahnai's sending thundered across the beach, easily reaching the dropships just over the hill. Jason urged her away from Sk'Vrae, onto her knees, pulled off his own shirt and started wiping the venom from her face, a face that was already swelling slightly. After he got her face cleaned off of both venom and blood, he checked her claw wounds as the dropship hurried towards them. The ones on her lower back were very deep, well into the flesh, the one on her front was shallow, and the one on her shoulder blade was fairly deep.

How is her Majesty? Jason asked as the priest checked her.

Psychic shock, the priest answered. *And a broken arm. You are formidable, your Majesty*, he complemented Dahnai with a nod.

She's tougher than I thought, Dahnai admitted, then hissed in pain when Jason helped her to her feet. *I never knew she was such a strong telepath.*

The guards, both Dahnai's and Sk'Vrae's, raced from the dropships and took command of the situation. Dahnai was tended by Songa, who immediately went to work. She first gave Dahnai a shot of anti-venom which caused the swelling in her face to ease almost immediately, washed her face thoroughly with a neutralizing agent, then began to clean and treat her claw wounds, as two Urumi medics set Sk'Vrae's broken arm and used a bone fuser to mend it. Songa smeared bio-accelerant over Dahnai's wounds, then bandaged them. "These shouldn't scar at all, your Majesty," Songa assured her. "But I insist you go back home, eat a hearty meal, and then rest. You know what bio-accelerant does?"

She nodded. "I'll eat and drink twice as much as usual until I heal," she answered. She twisted slightly, testing the bandage, then nodded to Songa. "How long should it take to heal, Doctor?" she asked with surprising deference. Even Dahnai respected the Medical Service.

"About three days, your Majesty," she answered. "Just take it easy and don't stress the wounds, and you'll be fully healthy in three days. How is her Majesty?" she asked, looking to Sk'Vrae's still form. "Do you wish assistance from Karinne Medical Service?" she asked in broken, uncertain Urumi. "Our hospital is at your disposal."

"Brood Queen is—" the guard said in terrible Faey, then reverted to Urumi. "She will recover after rest. We will take her back to her room, by your leave, your Grace," the large male said, looking to Jason.

"Please, do whatever she needs to recover quickly. Her comfort is important to me."

And so, Jason took an exhausted yet slightly smug Dahnai home after their ritual combat. He was actually surprised in that he thought Dahnai would defeat Sk'Vrae quickly, but the Brood Queen was a stronger telepath that either of them expected. And the fact that she *was* a telepath was the only reason she had agreed to the ritual combat. Had she not been, she would have been utterly insane to agree to it, for telepathy was the Faey's most powerful weapon. Sk'Vrae acquitted herself with dignity, in Jason's eyes. Had she got more venom into Dahnai's face, Sk'Vrae probably would have beaten her.

And so, it was a much happier Jason that took them back to Karsa, for he felt that a very large stumbling block had been taken out of their path. By virtue of her defeat of Sk'Vrae in ritual combat, the feud between the Collective and House Merrane was officially no more. The Urumi could move forward into their alliance with the Imperium with only their issue with Trillane complicating things... and that complication Jason didn't mind at all.

Maeri Trillane had a hell of a lot more to pay before Jason forgave her for what she did to him, to his people, and to the Imperium.

It took Sk'Vrae nearly a full day to recover from her ordeal, and Jason allowed her her time, space, and privacy to do so, for he had other things to do.

Leaving his family to keep Dahnai company, who was recovering herself, Jason joined the Exiled that would return to Exile, joining after a six hour operation that loaded them and most of their equipment on the *Aegis*, with other ships carrying the rest of the equipment for the Exiled as well as the gear and equipment they meant to take back with them to help further defend the planet from surveillance and attack. Weapon platforms and defense satellites were going to be seeded into orbit, and they were already preparing to move a small temporary orbital station to Exile to serve as a temporary base for the Karinnes as they began to settle in on the planet.

This was why Jason needed to go. There was already a sentient race on the planet, the *Gruug*, and Jason wanted to be there personally to talk with them so he could get permission to farm, or fail to secure that permission and be on hand when they surveyed the planet to find arable zones that weren't inhabited. He'd been very much looking forward to this day because he was finally glad to be fulfilling his promise to the Exiled, and he would take them home, just as he promised.

He didn't stay with the Exiled, he instead went to a private cabin where he found himself with the twins and Aura, who was going back just to help her people settle in and conduct a small ceremony passing on her title of Chief to Zerann, one of the council that was going back. The Exiled didn't see a male leader as anything unusual, there had been many chiefs in the past as well as chieftesses. Zerann would lead the council of Exile and govern his people on their island, while Aura would return to Karis and act as liaison between her people and the Karinnes, at least until the Exiled were fully integrated into the house and they were Exiled no longer. When that happened, Aura would basically be out of a job.

With the Stargate up and in operation, this would be a much different trip than the first time. There would be no day-long hyperspace travel to the planet, there would be no sense of isolation and danger. The planet of Exile was now directly connected to Karis, was only minutes away at high speed in case of attack, and was now fully defensible and ready to be colonized by Karinne, colonized not to spread population, but to exploit arable land and grow food needed by both the Karinnes and the Merranes.

"How's the station coming?" Jason asked aloud to the hologram of Myri standing nearby.

"It should be in place by tomorrow," she answered. "We have the land surveys finished and ready for the colonization team so they know where to focus their attention, and Miaari's looked over them. They suggest the continent next to the island of the Exiled," she told him. "In the tropical belt. There's a huge grassland there that means we won't have to clear vast tracts of forest, and there's no indigenous population in that grassland. They seem to prefer the forests and jungles."

"Cover," Jason surmised, bringing up a hologram of the planet Exile next to Myri using his gestalt, and superimposing the survey onto the globe. The verdant belt of grassland was highlighted on the large continent, along the same latitude as the island of Exile. The report showed that the belt had favorable temperature and weather, much like Florida back home, an ideal climate for agriculture. The forests to the east and north and the jungles to the south were heavily populated with the *Gruug*. Jason would approach them and invite them to join house Karinne, but if they refused, they would colonize that verdant belt of grassland anyway and just erect simple and non-lethal defenses to keep the *Gruug* away. Jason would not take any land the *Gruug* themselves were currently occupying.

The *Gruug* themselves were, from the reports of them, about seven foot tall simioids, definitely of a simian species, hairy and with wide faces with large noses and a jutting jaw. The initial reports on them were that they were intelligent but violent, and highly superstitious and suspicious. The *Gruug* that had had contact with the Exiled considered them evil monsters that had to be destroyed, a direct threat to themselves. The *Gruug* had a tribal society that was primarily hunter-gatherer, where they fished, maintained small herds of food animals, and had begun learning how to farm in tending wild fruit trees and growing an indigenous wheat-like grain in clearings in their forests and jungles, a strain of grain that was prolific and invasive and very easy to grow. Those grasslands were covered with large swaths of that wild grain, which was fully edible by humans and Faey, and that grain was consumed by a large number of graze animals that roamed the grasslands. If not for the graze animals, the grain would take over the entire grassland.

The plan was to land more or less in the middle of that grassland and establish the initial settlement... which really wasn't a settlement so much as it was a farming outpost. Those tending it would *not* be living on Exile, they would be commuting from Karis every day in dropships. They would section off an annex of about 500 square miles and convert about half of the area to farming, being careful not to interfere too much with the local ecosystem by leaving plenty of openings through their farms to allow animals to move through. They also intended to plant orchards of bitterfruit trees and other fruit trees. They wouldn't expand until they had converted 75% of the initial annex to farmland, and just systematically expand away from *Gruug* populations, towards the west. The initial settlement would consist mainly of several large buildings that would be built by Makati contractors, a military barracks, a communications and transportation outpost, and leaving plenty of room to expand. That initial settlement would become the first colonial city of the Karinnes outside of Exile, where Karinnes would eventually move permanently and serve as the nexus for the farming effort in the grassland. But for now, all it would be would be a hastily built starport and military outpost.

"Did you get the rotations all ironed out?" he asked Myri.

"Yeah," she answered. "We got one combined division slated for the initial move, and we'll rotate personnel through the post in three takir intervals so nobody gets too angry with being stationed out in the middle of nowhere."

"What is this combined division?" Aura asked.

"A unit of five hundred infantry, fifty Gladiators, and fifty Raptor fighters," Myri answered. "We want that kind of strength on hand so we have plenty of people ready in case of some kind of disaster, but their main job will be ground-level exploration of the planet. All those troops won't just be sitting on their asses at the camp, they'll be out surveying, taking samples, and escorting scientific personnel as they conduct their research. And if the *Gruug* attack Exile, we'll have plenty of military force on hand to protect them."

"Ah. That is refreshing."

"Refreshing?"

"I think you mean reassuring," Jason told her.

"Yes. I am sorry, General. Your spoken words are still strange to me."

"That's fine, Aura. So, you still intend to make contact with the *Gruug*?" she asked.

Jason nodded. "I'll approach the ones that have settled the Exiled's island first, to get an idea of how they'll react."

"I hope you brought your armor."

Jason chuckled. "Of course I did, it's in my dropship. I hope they'll be amenable, but if they're not, we'll just work around them. I won't interfere with them in any way, but in return I don't want them to interfere with us."

"Well, invading their planet *is* interfering with them," Myri noted.

"That's why we're going to be discreet about it, Myri," he answered. "There aren't enough *Gruug* to need the whole planet. And maybe by the time there are that many, they'll be less aggressive and more willing to enter in an agreement with us. After all, by then we'll have cities on the planet. What are they going to do, throw rocks at us? We'll just trade with them. We'll show them that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain by being our friends. And if they don't want to be, well, as long as they leave us alone, then all is well."

"And if they push the matter and declare war on us?"

"Nothing a thousand *kathra* long fence can't handle," he shrugged. "We'll just wall ourselves off from them. We won't interfere with them, and they can just go around us."

After Myri finished her report and her hologram faded, Jason found himself sitting between

the twins on a couch looking out a window of the bow, showing them where they were going, and the two of them were almost uncomfortably close. *What?* he asked.

So, after hiding from us ever since breaking your vow of celibacy, we have you right where we want you, Myri sent teasingly, grabbing his knee. *Just you, us, and a witness proving how hard we owned you.*

I wasn't hiding from you, you two were doing your job, he protested. *Nothing stopped you from flying home at any time.*

True, but there was too much to do. But now we find ourselves with an hour to kill, and a victim to murder, Meya teased, giving him a challenging smile.

An hour? That's it? I couldn't even get you two properly undressed in an hour.

I seem to recall you managed to undress me in an hour, your Grace, Aura sent, a bit tauntingly. *And you did quite a few other things to me besides.*

I was in a hurry, he answered blandly, which made the twins laugh.

I do believe that Jason owes us something, sister, Myri sent to Meya, but openly.

I seem to recall quite a few instances where he made all sorts of boasts and teased us with never being able to find out if he was lying, she agreed.

The only thing I owe you two is this, he retorted, then he took a hand to each side of himself, then holding up his middle finger in each of their faces, which made both of them explode in laughter.

He owes us, but he is right. An hour? We'd barely have any fun at all, Myri noted to her sister.

True. We can always wait until we get home. We'll convince Jyslin to go play with Symone and claim him for our own, and have an entire night to torture him. He can't hide from us now. As soon as we complete our mission with the Exiled, we'll make him pay for all his teasing.

I agree. So, Jason, Myri sent, putting her hands on his shoulder and leaning her chin on them, as Meya performed the same action on the other side, then they sent in unison, *don't make any plans when we get home. You're going to be... occupied.*

Owned is more like it, Meya sent mischievously.

Totally.

Completely.

Thoroughly.

And who's making all sorts of promises now? Jason countered.

We can back them up, Myri sent challengingly. *We'll utterly ruin you for any other woman.*

Completely, Meya agreed with a light smile.

Dear friends, now even I think you've delved into the realm of impossibility, Aura sent coyly. *For I have already ruined him for all other women. He's found sex with other women boring and unfulfilling since I took him to my bed and made him beg for mercy.*

Oh, hush up, you, Myri tossed out flippantly.

Oh really? Whose bed was it, and who was the one begging? Jason shot back. *I think that was you, woman!* he proclaimed, pointing at her imperiously.

I think we need to settle this issue once and for all, Meya sent slyly. *We'll clearly have to have a little... competition. Whoever can make Jason beg for mercy first wins.*

Fine. I hereby officially beg all of you to shut the fuck up, Jason sent archly, which made all three of them explode into helpless laughter, but Jason was the one that broke into laughter when Meya and Myri kissed him, one on each cheek, just before they passed through the gate to Exile.

God, he loved those two women. No matter how busy he was or how serious things could

be, they never failed to make him feel like a misbehaving kid.

Entering Exile's space focused them on the task at hand. The twins went with Aura to the other Exiled as Jason returned to his dropship, where Suri and Ryn helped him armor up. Aya, Shen, and Dera were busy today acting as extra protection at home, since Aya didn't feel comfortable with Sk'Vrae and her private entourage being on the planet, so she was staying much closer to Rann today. There was nothing really dangerous on Exile as long as they were wearing armor, so she'd sent only two guards with Jason. That was all he'd need. Ryn and Suri were the best choices for this, for they were the most diplomatic of his guards. Suri was trained to be an attendant, so she had exquisite manners, and Ryn's secondary area of expertise was that she spoke 17 languages, on top of being a woman of impeccable manners herself. Ryn was a linguist, she actively studied languages, and her expertise was going to be very, very handy in what they were going to do, for Ryn would be best suited to using her telepathy to absorb the *Gruug* language from them when they got down there.

When they achieved orbit, the great exodus back to Exile began. A swarm of heavy cargo dropships, Sticks carrying cargo pods, fighters, Gladiators with flight pods, and personnel dropships started flowing out of every landing bay on the command ship. Jason was first out, and he led the pack in an entry vector to the island of Exiled, but where they were going to the southern tip of the island and to the center of the grassland belt west of the island, Jason was going to the northwest island coast, where there was a settlement of about 60 *Gruug*. That was where Jason was going to land and make first contact with the simian species, though they wouldn't see him land; it was still night on that side of the planet. They'd land and approach their coastal village in the pre-dawn, which would give Ryn time to pick out a *Gruug* and lift their language from him. She would then teach it to Jason and Suri, and after that, Jason would parlay with the *Gruug*, but do so wearing full armor. Given that the most powerful weapon the *Gruug* had learned to make was a spear, and they had no psychic or supernatural abilities of which the Exiled knew, Jason was completely safe.

They would also be bringing gifts. After analysis of the primitive people, it was decided that the best things to bring them in the form of gifts to earn their favor would be tools. So, after studying *Gruug* physiology, they replicated several tools for them. They would bring 50 heavy spears suitable for large game and 50 smaller spears more useful for fishing and spear- ing smaller game. They would also bring 50 large, heavy daggers suitable for the males and 50 smaller knives that would be useful for the females in their domestic tasks. All the weapons would be made of crystallized Titanium, the hardest form of Titanium they could replicate, which would ensure that virtually nothing the *Gruug* could do to the weapons could damage or harm them. They would also bring a slightly larger, more ornamental spear and dagger for the chief as a personal gift, so his weapons were more grand than the weapons of the other men. The weapons would be put in a flying cargo pod, a large cargo pod with engines that was interface controlled, which would let it follow behind them without them having to carry it.

The plan was simple and effective. They landed about two miles from the village in the dark pre-dawn hours, then took the spears and knives out to the beach about a mile from the village and laid them out on the sand, with the idea that no matter what happened, the *Gruug* would find them and be able to use them. After that was done, they used their armor's engines to fly there, skimming out over the water so they could see the village when they reached it, instead of stumbling right into it while moving through the forest. The cargo pod was left in the dropship, but Jason was carrying the heavy spear and dagger they meant to present to the chief as gifts. When they reached it, they veered back to land and crept up on the village. Ryn pointed to a lone *Gruug*, who was about seven feet tall, hairy, and with a

face like a cross between a human and a gorilla. These creatures were almost like the missing link, and Jason felt Gora's Law creeping back into the forefront of his mind; Earth had evolved similar intelligent life, in addition to similar species. The striders the Exiled had tamed couldn't be too much unlike emus or other giant land walking birds from home, though the striders were certainly much more handsome than emus and ostriches in addition to being significantly larger. The *Gruug* was pacing near the border between the forest and the village, holding a crude spear with an obsidian stone tip. He had to be some kind of sentry.

Him, Ryn told them, taking off her gauntlet. I have to touch him to do this, so let's separate him a little from the rest of the village. I don't want to have spears bouncing off my armor while I do this.

Let's lure him out, then, Suri sent in agreement.

Luring him out wasn't that hard. They retreated slightly and made a couple of faint noises, which were just unusual enough to attract the huge male's attention. He advanced to the treeline, gripping his crude stone-tipped spear in both hands, peering into the darkness. But, as he looked into the forest, Ryn descended from her hover about fifteen feet over him, and without her boots touching the ground, she reached out and lightly put her bare hand on the *Gruug's* shoulder. The big humanoid stiffened, but he made no movements and made no sound as Ryn effectively took control of him with her talent, which demonstrated very starkly to Jason just how powerful the Faey were, just how much of a weapon telepathy could be. Ryn could have attacked and subdued him without ever touching him, but she enjoyed the challenge of getting close enough to touch him.

It took her about five minutes. Her touch on him never shifted, and the *Gruug* remained stock stone still the entire time as Ryn effectively dredged his mind, absorbing his language and teaching it to *herself* telepathically, inserting it into her own mind. Such a trick was very, very difficult to do, and she would suffer the same detrimental effects as anyone else taught something via telepathy. It was certainly not something that the lay Faey would ever try to attempt, lest they accidentally erase their own memories. What she was doing was a highly, highly advanced use of telepathy, something that only a true master of telepathy would ever dare to attempt. That Ryn could perform this very difficult and very delicate telepathic trick showed just how well trained she was.

When she was done, she simply let go of him and rose back up out of sight. The *Gruug* stood motionless for nearly a minute, then blinked, looked around, and turned and ambled back to his village, unaware of what had just transpired.

Slick, Suri sent in appreciation.

Four years at the Xerian Academy wasn't wasted, Ryn sent impishly, which made Jason whistle under his helmet. The Xerian Academy? Wow. No wonder Ryn was so telepathically skilled. That was the upper-level school devoted to the study and training of telepathic skills. It was the Harvard or Oxford of the Imperium, the most elite and exclusive school there was, so elite that not even being a noble guaranteed entry. They admitted students based on ability, not rank.

How much did you get?

Language and customs, she answered. How do you want to do this, your Grace? Am I teaching, or are you lifting?

I'll lift, you can't send to my gestalt, he answered. That way we have a hard copy of what you learned we can filter down to the others.

Ah. True, she nodded as she came down and offered her hand to him.

Jason took off his own gauntlet and took her hand, and they began. Ryn lowered her outer

defenses for him, and guided him to where she had placed the information while keeping the rest of her mind closed to him. When he was there, he took what one might call a *picture* of everything she had learned, and dumped it all into his gestalt. Language, customs, even some of their history and several names and titles, all of it was sorted by his gestalt and then stored, as well as uploaded to the *Aegis* in orbit above so they could archive the information. Instead of placing the information in his own mind, he put it in the gestalt instead, and the gestalt would serve as external memory for him, especially since he could "remember" things from his gestalt just as fast and effortlessly as he could remember them from his own memories. With the language loaded into his gestalt, he could speak the language of the *Gruug* fluently, since it was *knowledge* as opposed to a *skill*. He'd have to practice a bit if they had any exotic pronunciations, but outside of that, languages were very easy for a Generation to deal with.

Jason sifted through it after he finished lifting it from her, as Ryn taught Suri. They'd wait a little bit before going in, to give Ryn and Suri a little bit of time to recover from the ordeal of having a language inserted. The *Gruug* language was a primitive language that seemed to use the same grammatical syntax as Latin and Makati, with very simple rules and not a very expansive vocabulary. The language did, however, have a subtle intricacy in that their limited vocabulary could be more expansive when words were used together in a metaphorical manner. It was the birth of abstract thought, he saw, that their language was starting to evolve past simple roots and was just starting to take on a sophistication more akin to older languages. It showed that the *Gruug* were indeed intelligent, despite their brutish appearance, but were still primitive and had the violent tendencies of a primitive people.

After about twenty minutes, just as the yellow sun's edge crept over the sea and dawn spread across the eastern sky, Ryn and Suri felt recovered and ready, even as the village awakened to the new day, as *Gruug* males started filing out of their round leather-covered huts, and females started stirring up fires. The three of them had discussed how best to approach first contact, and they all agreed that there was no easy way to do it, that just walking towards the village was probably the best course of action. Jason had Ryn and Suri wait just behind the treeline, and he stood up, made sure he'd put his gauntlet back on, then padded out of the trees and towards the village.

His arrival was noticed not five seconds after he came out of the trees. Shouts and several cries rose up from the village, and within ten seconds several *Gruug* males charged towards him wielding stone clubs, axes, and spears. Jason stopped and put his hands out when they got close to him. "Hold!" he shouted in their language, which made them skid to a halt in surprise. "I come holding no spear or club, and there is no anger in my eyes towards you! I seek counsel with your chief, to speak of a matter of importance to the *Gruug* and also to my own tribe!"

"What matter of strange monster are you?" one of the larger males demanded. "That speaks our language, yet is clearly not one of us?"

"I am not much different from you," Jason told him, rapping his knuckles on his armor's chest. "This is clothing, like the loincloths you wear, but it is made out of a hard substance like stone. I am smaller than you and carry no club or spear, so I need protection from the dangers of the forest behind me. This stone clothing gives me that protection." He unlocked his gauntlet and took it off, showing them his hand. "See? This is not me, it is like the turtle's shell, the real me is inside it."

They were intelligent creatures, so they grasped the idea of what he was saying quickly. "Send for the chief," the largest of them ordered the smallest, then looked back to Jason as he put his gauntlet back on. "Stand where you are and await the chief's words."

“I will do as you command,” he said with a nod, standing with his arms folded before him, but not in an aggressive manner.

The chief arrived not a minute later, flanked by fifteen warriors. The chief was the largest of all the males, and had a scar over his right eye that showed that he had deposed the last chief. He wore the skull of some creature on his head, and he carried a heavy spear whose tip was formed from what looked like the serrated tooth of some large animal. Jason bowed to the chief when he got about ten feet from Jason. “You cannot be any but the chief of this village,” he said in a respectful manner. “Greetings.”

“Who are you, strange creature, and how do you come to know our words?”

“My name is *Jason Karinne*,” he said, speaking his name as it normally sounded. “I am chief of my own people.”

“He wears stone as his own skin, my chief!” one of the warriors told him. “His strange black skin is like the turtle’s shell!”

“Yes, this is a form of stone clothing that protects me from harm, for I carry no spear or club and I am small,” Jason agreed mildly, again taking off his gauntlet and showing the chief. “I have learned from the wise turtle and have made this stone skin to protect myself from the dangers of the wild forests, even fashioning a part to place over my head. This black shiny stone here allows me to see through it,” he added, pointing at his visor. “Inside this stone skin, I am a small person who does not look too different from you, though I am more or less hairless and would appear ugly to you. I have come to your village to bring you words from my people.”

The chief gawked for a moment, then his eyes narrowed. “Why do you approach our village? What words would you bring to me?”

“I have come to bring you words of peace and good will, mighty chief,” Jason told him calmly. “My people have lived here on this land-in-water for many turns of the seasons, and we have decided to greet you in welcome to this land. But we live so far from you that only recently have we come to learn of your village, and as soon as we did so, I journeyed here to make you welcome.”

The chief’s eyes bored into him, and his brow seemed to work as he thought. “Your words are honeyed, Stoneskin,” he said. “You have no reason to approach us unless you seek our females or want something from us.”

“We only want peace, mighty chief,” Jason told him. “To speak truthful words, it is a journey of many, many days to reach your village from my own. Our paths will probably never cross out in the forests, and we will live our lives without ever seeing each other. It is a very good chance that once I leave here, your people will not see one of my own again in your lifetime. But we wanted you to know of us, so that if, some day, your hunting party *did* happen across ours, there would be no throwing of spears. We seek no territory you claim, and seek not your females or your spears or your tools. We simply want you to know we are here. That is all. To prove our words, my people have brought to you gifts, mighty chief. Our workers with the stone I wear have fashioned a spear of great strength and sharpness for you, mighty chief, a spear that will never break, and whose edges will remain sharp and true for many years. It is a token of our desire for peace between our peoples, should you wish to accept it.”

That made the chief’s eyes take on a curious glint. “I would see this spear.”

“I left it in the forest, mighty chief, so that I would come among you with empty hands. I will go get it and bring it back, by your leave.”

“Do so.”

Jason stood up and went back to the trees, and just out of view, Ryn handed the spear to

him. He brought it back into the village, holding it in both hands across his body so it couldn’t possibly be taken as a hostile grip, then offered it to the huge *Gruug* chief, holding it out to him with both hands. The spear was about eight feet long and weighed about fifteen pounds, the shaft and spearhead both made of crystallized Titanium, all one piece. The shaft was smooth, wrapped in fine leather, and there was a tassel of red cloth secured just under the spearhead. “The decoration and the bindings can be removed and replaced as you so wish, mighty chief,” Jason told him. “You will find the head of the spear to be sharper than you have ever seen, and the tip will never bend, break, or dull, no matter what you do to it,” Jason boasted.

The chief took the spear, his brutish face rapt with interest, hefting it in his large hairy hand. Jason noticed that his thumb was nearly half again as long as it would be on a human hand. He tested the edge of the spear, and promptly gave himself a fairly deep cut. He actually chortled as he shook his hand, drops of blood flying. “You speak true words, it is sharper than even my *kirr*-tooth spear.”

“It is made of a special kind of stone called *metal*, and this kind of *metal* is known as *Titanium*, mighty chief,” Jason told him. “You will find it harder than the hardest rock, yet also light and easy to carry for long journeys. This spear will not weigh on your arm after a long day of hunting, when the time comes to cast it at your prey. The edge of the spear will not need to be sharpened, it will remain sharp for many, many years. It will fly true when you throw it, and there is nothing you can do to bend or break the shaft or the tip.”

The chief did try to bend or break the shaft, but the spear was unimpressed by the huge *Gruug*’s bulging muscles as he tried. “It is a good gift,” the chief said with a nod, grounding the butt of the spear. “Your peace gift is accepted, Stone-skin.”

“I bring gifts also for your entire village, mighty chief,” Jason told him. “I bring one hundred spears that are smaller for your warriors, half of them designed to use in the hunt in the forests and half designed to use against the fish in the sea, and many knives for both your warriors and your females, so they may more easily go about their daily tasks. These gifts we bring to prove our wish for peace and good will between the *Gruug* and my people, who are called the *Karinnes*.”

The chief looked at Jason with a little honest greed in his eyes. “So many gifts?”

“Yes, mighty chief, because we wish the *Gruug* to prosper,” he answered. “And what better way for the *Gruug* to prosper than share with you our *Titanium* spears and knives, so you may more easily hunt and fish?”

“Where are these gifts?”

“We left them some walk in that direction, on the beach,” he said, pointing. “You can go get them and bring them back here.”

“A strange thing to do.”

“Whether you met me with peace or violence, we wished you to have these spears and knives, mighty chief,” Jason said mildly. “This way, your hunters would have found them no matter what, even if I was driven from your village without even the chance to speak a single word.”

The chief turned that over in his mind, then finally made a deep sound in his throat. “Your gifts are accepted, Stone-skin, with honor and pride. We will honor the peaceful intent of them. And if we encounter more Stone-skins in the forest, we will not cast spears at them.”

“I doubt very seriously that you will ever see us again, mighty chief,” Jason told him honestly. “For we live very far from your village. I just wanted to make sure there was peace between our peoples on the very slight chance that our peoples *might* meet each other on the land-in-water.”

The chief was much more curious and amenable after the gifts were offered. They sat at a fire, the chief with his new spear across his lap, and they talked of simple things. Jason heard about how the *Gruug* hunted the striders, armored land walkers, and hump-backed grass eaters on the island, and fished the shallows with spears and nets. They grew grain in small clearings inland which they made into a flat bread by baking it on flat stones by their fires, stones that, after Jason looked at them, saw they were thick slabs of slate. They had also domesticated striders themselves, and used them as pack animals and beasts of burden, and they also tended a stand of bitterfruit trees and smokenut trees, having learned how to make the trees grow. Jason was impressed that the *Gruug* had mastered several basic skills of animal husbandry and agriculture, and weren't much different from the Exiled in those regards. The Exiled were much more sophisticated, but the *Gruug* had learned how to tend wild fields of grain enough to call it farming, had learned how to manage stands of fruit-bearing trees, had learned how to tame wild animals, and were accomplished hunters and fishers.

Jason reciprocated, at least up to a point. He told the chief that his people had learned how to shape the stone called *metal*, and used it to make tools to allow them to build dwellings out of wood and stone. But aside from that, he told them that they lived much the same way the *Gruug* did, hunting, fishing, and tending food plants. He did stress, though, that his people were a peaceful and gentle people, and revealed one aspect of them that started showing the *Gruug* that they were much different than mere appearance. "Communicating with those in canoes on the water is no problem for us, mighty chief," he said. "Our people have learned, well, what you might call a different way of talking. We can talk with one another without using our voices, in a way not heard by the ears. This other way of talking carries much further than a shouting voice, so we can easily call out to our hunters and our fishers and have them come home if they are needed."

"It sounds like evil magic!" the chief said quickly.

"No, not magic at all," Jason answered. "It's just the way we are. Just as you are tall and powerful people, we can speak in a way that can't be heard by the ears."

"It still sounds like magic."

"No. Here, look. Let us say that this means *hello*," he said, waving his hand before him. "Now, if I do this," he said, waving his hand, "did I not just speak to you without using spoken words?"

The chief gave him a curious look, then he laughed. "True, true!" he agreed.

"Not everything that has a strange or mysterious explanation is magic, mighty chief," Jason told him mildly. "Sometimes, it only means that the answer isn't easy to see, and it requires you to search for it."

"You are a wise chief, Stone-skin," the chief said with an honest smile. "I would wonder if I could hear these words that are not spoken."

"Well, I think you might be able to," Jason told him. "But it may not be possible. Would you like to try?"

"Yes, I would like to try," he said, settling himself by the fire. "Speak your words without sound."

Jason altered the texture of his sending so that those without talent would hear his thought. *These are the words without sound, mighty chief*, he sent. *What color is the stone skin I wear?*

"It is black," he said, then the chief's eyes widened. "Amazing! I heard your words without sound!"

"You did indeed, mighty chief," Jason said with a simple nod, since he couldn't see Jason's face behind his helmet. "It pleases me that you did so."

"So, if we hear these words that are not spoken, we will know your people are nearby, and be careful not to throw our spears unless we are sure of our prey," he surmised, standing up. "Walk with me to where you have placed the gifts, so we might see them."

"Certainly, mighty chief," Jason said, standing as well. *Ryn, you and Suri shadow me, but take the chief's gift knife to the stockpile and place it before we get there. Remain hidden*, he sent privately to her.

Yes, your Grace, she answered.

"Might you take from your head your stone skin so I might see you?" the chief asked.

"Yes, I would be glad to, but understand that my people will appear very ugly to you, mighty chief," Jason warned.

"I am prepared," he said simply.

Jason released the locks on his helmet and pulled it off, even as he heightened his gestalt and kept a careful watch around him. His vulnerable head might be a target, and he had to be ready to fend off a blow or spear thrust. Several of the *Gruug* grimaced or gasped, and the chief laughed. "You were honest, Stone-skin, your people are very ugly to us," he admitted. "You almost resemble the evil spirits from our legends, the Sea People."

"I will replace my stone face so you may be relieved from looking at me, mighty chief," Jason said, putting his helmet back on. "We too have encountered the Sea People, but we have learned that they are not evil spirits. They are like the words without sound, mighty chief, there is a mystery to them that has nothing to do with magic, and we sought to find the answer to that mystery. They are simply very different from you and me. Once we learned of these differences, we found that they were not evil at all. We simply did not understand them."

"And what answer did you find about them that convinced you they were not evil spirits?"

"It is almost as magic, mighty chief. They come from a far, far distant land, so far that none of my people nor the *Gruug* has set foot upon it. They were attacked and scattered by hideous creatures called *Consortium*, giant spider-like creatures as big as a *Gruug*, who had evil weapons and many giant canoes that allowed them to come to the lands of the Sea People and burn their villages and kill their females and children. The Sea People fled from the spider-people, and during their flight, they broke into small groups and scattered all over the world. One of their small groups came to our land-in-water, and we got to know them. The Sea People *your* people may have known may have been evil and cruel and deserving of your hate, mighty chief, but the Sea People we found here on the land-in-water were frightened and meek. Please, if you meet any Sea People here on our land-in-water, remember that they are not like the Sea People from your legends. The ones here mean you no harm, and will run and hide from you long before you see them. They are a very timid people."

"A curious tale," the chief said, shouldering his spear as they walked. "Our legends speak of a great war that was fought between our people and the Sea People, how they used evil magic against my people, and that we vanquished them into the fog of morning and sealed them up inside forever. But you still did not answer my question. Why do you not think they are evil spirits?"

"Ah, well, we found that what we thought was magic actually was not," he said. "They could make rocks explode and turn rocks to water, and it was they who learned how to shape this *metal*," he said, touching his armored chest. "At first we thought it was magic, but then they showed us *how* it was done. It is not magic at all! They have simply learned things that we did not know, and their knowledge made their miracles *look* like magic. Their making rocks explode, for example, well, we found out that all you had to do to do that was mix the smelly yellow powder near the volcano with dried and powdered bird droppings and black

charcoal from a firepit in the right proportions, and if you set fire to it, it would make rocks explode. They shape this *metal* by making it very, very hot, so hot it glows with heat like embers in the fire, and when it is very, very hot, it becomes soft and easy to mold. They would use hammers and tools to work with the *metal* while it was hot, so it would not burn them. And when it cools off, well, here you are,” he said, rapping his armor again. “They taught us these mysteries, and we found that it is not magic. The Sea People are just a very clever people who have learned things we have not, that is all.”

This was the telling moment. This was where Jason would find out if the natural intelligence of the *Gruug* was stronger than their hostility, for Jason had just admitted that “evil spirits” had taught his people how to make metal objects, and that meant that the chief might construe him and his actions as evil magic as well. The chief was silent a long moment, then he hefted his spear. “So, this spear was made using magic you gained from the Sea People?”

“Mighty chief, it was not magic that formed that spear. The Sea People taught us the secret of *metal*, where to find it and how to form it into shapes, and now we can shape it to our desire. And if the *Gruug* wished to learn how to shape the metal, they could learn as well. It is not magic, mighty chief, it is *knowledge*, just as it is knowledge to know when the bitterfruits are ripe, and how best to shape an obsidian spearhead so it is both sharp and strong, and how to build a strong hut that will not collapse in the evening wind, and how to tame the striders to serve the village, and when the fish come close to shore and are easier to catch.”

The huge chief was quiet a long moment, and Jason could almost hear his rational mind warring with his primitive fears. “I still think that it is magic, but you have given me something to think about.”

When they reached the place where the spears and knives were laid out, the chief and his warriors gawked in amazement. “This is where my people left them, and they are already on their way home. I’ll catch up with them later,” he said. “These large spears are for hunting, and the slender spears are for fishing. These larger knives are for your warriors, and the smaller knives are for your females. And this knife is for you, mighty chief,” he said, picking up a sixteen inch long double-edged dagger, which was really more like a short sword. “Mind that it is very sharp,” Jason warned as he handed it to the chief, hilt first, and pulled off the leather sheath. The chief gazed at the Titanium knife with wide eyes, then grinned.

“I accept your gift, Stone-skin,” he declared, allowing Jason to resheath the dagger for him, then he stuffed it into the strap of his loincloth.

“I will leave you here, mighty chief, so you may oversee the carrying of our gifts back to your village. I have to catch up to the rest of my people so we may make the many-day journey home. I am honored to have met you, and I will bring the happy words of peace back to my people. Be well, mighty chief,” Jason said.

“We would offer you a lodge and a feast, Stone-skin.”

“I would gladly accept if not for the fact that I have duty to my people, as you have duty to yours, mighty chief. I came to bring you our gifts and ensure that there will be no throwing of spears between our hunting parties. I will take word of our peace back home, so my people may rejoice. And since it takes many days, I must hurry before the rains begin,” he said, to which the chief nodded.

“Then go well, and take back peace between the *Gruug* and the Stone-skins.”

“Thank you, mighty chief. I hope our gifts serve you well.”

Jason left him on the beach, and he felt quite relieved. The *Gruug* were a primitive people, but the chief showed that they were intelligent as well, intelligent enough to listen to him. And while he didn’t do much today, what he *did* do was plant the seeds of the future. The *Gruug* chief would think about what Jason said, think about the idea that magic was just

knowledge that looked miraculous, and think about the possibility that *his* people might learn the secret of shaping metal as well. It would make them more amenable the next time Jason came to visit them, and it also showed that if they were approached right, the *Gruug* could be rational people who would listen to diplomacy.

It was a good sign.

With their experience with the *Gruug* showing that things could be peaceful on Exile, Jason felt much better as he oversaw all the activity, and kept track of what was going on back in the Imperium and out in the universe, since he returned home every night to an amorous wife and plenty of briefings.

The return of the Exiled to the planet was a very orderly and joyous affair. They returned home like conquering heroes, and bent quickly to the task of cleaning up their houses that had stood empty as the Karinnes started setting up the city to make it a modern outpost of the Karinnes. With the interdictor and Stargate protecting the planet, Exile was going to be a *Karinne* planet. The very first thing they installed at Exile was a biogenic command computer, gravband and Teryon communications transceivers, and a sensor battery to scan the skies and the planet both to watch for any trouble. As the Exiled moved back into their houses, Makati and Faey engineers installed plumbing, power, and other amenities into their city, offering to install appliances and vidlinks to any Exiled that wanted them, so they could live in peace in their home city yet still have all the luxuries the Karinnes had introduced to them on Karis.

As the Exiled settled in, so did the Karinnes. A division of infantry and engineers landed in the middle of a sea of amber grass, and the Karinne flag was raised on what would become the city of New Karsa. As the military secured the area and established a perimeter, the engineers and farming specialists got to work, plotting out the first of the farms even as the Makati laid out the village that would hold the necessary support buildings needed for the farming. The first thing they’d put in would be a landing pad, since those who would be working here, at least for now, would be working here but going back to Karis every night. Karis was still in need of settlers and workers to restore the planet, so Jason wasn’t too keen on letting anyone move to Exile anytime soon, but they eventually would. People would come here to work, find they liked it here, and then ask to move here, and Jason would allow it starting six months from today. The people on Karis would make the planet live again, while those who came here would help feed the house.

Aura helped get everything settled in over the first few days, but then she bade her good-byes, boarded a dropship, and returned to Karis. Her time on Exile was complete, and a new life on Karis was waiting for her. She already had a house, about fifteen blocks from the strip in a small house, and she had already enrolled in a flight academy to learn how to fly dropships in addition to the assimilation classes she’d be taking to fully adapt to life on Karis.

Jason was ferrying back and forth to Exile as Dahnai and Sk’Vrae healed. Dahnai’s wounds were fairly deep, but the bio-accelerant was doing its job, quickly mending her. She was irritable while her wounds were healing, and drove the strip crazy, but his friends did their best not to get *too* pissy with her. Sk’Vrae stayed in a coma for nearly ten hours after the battle, but when she finally woke up, she was already much recovered and a little pensive. She had fully expected to beat Dahnai, and her loss had shocked her, making her almost creepily somber. The day after Jason made contact with the *Gruug*, they had a meeting to discuss joint military defense, and Sk’Vrae was very quiet and withdrawn, much different from the arrogant Urumi with which Jason was used to dealing. Dahnai wasn’t exactly the picture of arrogance either, for she was in pain from her wounds and testy, so the two of them didn’t make it a very productive meeting. She was quiet during their next meeting the next morn-

ing, agreeing with the plan that Miaari had drawn up dealing with weapon sales to the smaller empires, and then gathered up her guards and priest and had Jason take her back to Uruma not an hour afterward. “I find myself weary and unwell to deal with small matters,” she said. “I need time to rest and ponder my defeat.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, your Majesty, I thought you were *amazing*,” he told her. “I think you came just *this* close to winning. Luck favored Dahnai, and that was the only reason she won the combat.”

“You are most kind, your Grace,” she said with a simple nod.

And so, Brood Queen Sk’Vrae of the Urumi Collective was returned to her home, to heal wounds that were more than physical. Jason felt that she would be alright, and as soon as she got over her loss, she would be back to her arrogant, demanding self.

The day after Sk’Vrae left, the twins also returned home, and returned like conquering generals. Their long task dealing with the Exiled was now finished, and they wanted to take some time off before finding another challenge, since Jason had forbade them from continuing their search for more Karinnes for now. The Consortium threat was too big right now, and if the *Scimitar* was caught out in open space, they’d be an easy mark for Consortium ships. Until the Consortium was dealt with, the Karinnes would suspend searching for any long-lost descendants. The twins made the rounds of the strip, chatting away, but they didn’t spend long tracking Jason down to make good on a few threats. They caught him on his personal landing pad after coming home from Exile, as Aya and Dera filed into the house, leaving him to his fate. *Just the man we’ve been looking for*, Myri sent with an eager little smile.

And just what would you want to find me for, hmm? he asked disarmingly.

I think we have a certain promise to keep, something about utterly ruining you for any other woman, Meya noted.

Well, it’s going to have to wait, Jason told them calmly. *I have to get home to Jyslin. If you didn’t hear, she’s trying to get pregnant. Afraid I belong to her right now.*

Jys, you trying to get preggers? Myri called.

Yeah, so if you’re fishing for Jayce, you can’t have him. Yet.

Well, saved by your wife, Meya said with a little smile. *But you’re just making it worse for when we do finally get our claws in you, Jason*, she winked.

No, you’re just making sure I’m even more disappointed, he countered.

Oh really? Myri asked archly.

My wife and Symone will go down on each other when we threesome, Lyn and Bryn are twins too, if you don’t recall, so you can’t even claim exclusivity with your gimmick, and I’ve had three women at once. You think the idea of doing twins is all that exotic and erotic to me? he asked teasingly. *You’re already been there done that*, he added, sauntering past them. *Before we even got there!*

Boy, you just earned yourself a Zoyanne Sisters Special, Meya called, pointing at him commandingly.

Someday I might even be afraid of that, he called, glancing back at them over his shoulder. *By the way, Kumi made my knees weak when I fucked her*, he tossed at them, knowing that was an especially deep dig. The rivalry between the twins and Kumi was almost legendary.

When he got inside, Symone and Jyslin were almost collapsed in laughter on the couch. *Dear Trelle, love, you’re digging your own grave!* Jyslin told him, but she was laughing. *They’re probably mad enough to go set Kumi’s house on fire!*

It’s been too quiet around here, I have to stir things up, he said with a sly smile. *Provoking the twins is usually worth a laugh.*

I don’t think you’ll be laughing when they finally corner you.

Eh, I’m building them up to it. I want it to be momentous when they do finally catch me.

Jyslin and Symone exploded into even louder laughter.

The other plan that was working was well in motion. The Kimdori were keeping things on schedule and kept Jason and Dahnai well informed. Semoya and Emae were right on schedule with their fake feud. A few harsh words had been exchanged between them at an opera, and there were rumors that they had started themselves that the two of them were getting very angry with each other. Tomorrow, Emae would slap Semoya in the face when they met at a concert, and that would start the military buildup. They’d have six days to get their fleets mobilized, and then Dahnai would roar back to Draconis and order them to stand down, even as she mobilized the Imperial Fleet. The house fleets of other houses would also mobilize out of self protection, and that would get the Imperium all ready to respond to any attack at a moment’s notice without making it apparent that they were mobilizing in response to an *outside* threat.

Dahnai herself was right on schedule as well. Just as Songa predicted, after three days, her wounds were fully healed. She had no scars at all, and went around that afternoon topless, proudly showing off her smooth, unmarred skin, as well as her formidable breasts, which had the side effect of driving Symone crazy. Jason couldn’t count the number of times he saw her with her hands all over Dahnai’s breasts, or the number of times she bent down to kiss her nipples when she was fairly sure nobody was paying attention. She culminated her celebrations on the pool deck. Jason came out to start the grill for some steaks and found her and Symone in the hot tub, Dahnai sitting on the lip with her legs spread as Symone gave her some pretty aggressive oral sex. *Having fun?* Jason asked lightly as he started the grill.

Ohhh, yeahhh, Dahnai sent purringly, grabbing a healthy handful of Symone’s platinum blond hair. *Now that she knows what the hell she’s doing, I’m starting to like spreading my legs for your amu dozei, baby. Why don’t you come over here and stick your dick in my mouth?*

Can’t, Jys is trying to get pregnant, remember? I’m hers for the next couple of days. Besides, you’ll ruin your dinner.

Dahnai snorted, then burst out laughing. For that matter, so did Symone.

The next day, Jason took Dahnai with him to Exile to show her the planet, now that she was fully healed. He showed her the farming belt they’d started, and also showed her where the Exiled had lived, even taking her down and walking around with her as the Exiled and their Karinne helpers continued to set up their home. The Makati had come and put their crops back, as well as about half of the trees; they would farm here and ship their excess to Karis, but the agricultural department had already cloned seeds from their grains and fruits and were busily mass producing it for their farming effort. The vegetables and grains the Exiled grew were both edible and delicious, and it was more than worth introducing as new staples to the Karinne and Merrane food supplies. Those produced seeds would be planted at the farms at New Karsa and accelerated to maturity using fertilizing techniques and optimal environmental control, creating an ideal growth environment for the fruits, grains, and vegetables. Besides, Exile’s climate and soil was ideal for just about any plant they cared to grow there. While the Exiled seeds were being produced, crops of wheat, rye, cucumbers, squash, lettuce, rice, corn, and soybeans had already been planted, and the seedlings had already sprouted under the perfect conditions conducive to fast growth, after just one day. The fields had been laid out and plowed just yesterday morning, and already there were nearly 500 acres of seedlings of many types sprouted, perfect lines of green to the north and west of the New Karsa compound. Tomorrow, orchards of apples, cherries, plums, oranges, grapefruits, and olives would be planted to the south of New Karsa, leaving the vast eastern marches

open for the Exiled plants. Other crops and orchards would be planted later, as the farming effort expanded and more environmental control equipment could be brought in and set up. Once everything was set up, about two thousand workers would supervise the raising of several hundred square miles of crops.

“Nice,” Dahnai noted as they looked out from the dropship. *Do you think the native population will be as agreeable as the ones on the island?*

I hope so, Jason answered. *The chief there seemed to be a rational fellow, and after I gave him the gifts, he was willing to listen to me.*

All you gave him were spears and knives?

That seemed to be the best things to give him. They'll drastically increase their hunting ability, and their spears won't go through our armor. Besides, we set up the Exiled's sensors to detect those weapons. If they come anywhere near the city, we'll know.

Clever.

Thank you. I try, he sent dryly as he turned. *They're going to plant the fruit tree orchards down there, starting tomorrow. Fuck, are those mega-plows effective. Look at that,* he said, pointing to where a huge plower was tilling perfect rows, seeding the earth with the perfect balance of fertilizers the planned crops for that tract would need for fast growth as it pulverized the native grass to increase its future fertility, turned the earth, and planted the seeds, all in one smooth operation. The machine plowed nearly two hundred feet across, and there were six of them staggered in a line behind the first to plant massive amounts of seeds.

What are they planting there? Dahnai asked.

Jason accessed the computer in the lead tiller, and it responded that it was loaded with broccoli. *Broccoli,* he answered. *Good, I like broccoli.*

Dahnai watched for a minute. *Your house is certainly fast, love,* she complemented. *Two days in, and you're already plowing.*

We had plenty of time to get it all organized, he answered. *And the Aegis is one hell of a transport.*

It's a crime to use it like that, she laughed.

Well, not anymore. With the gate up, we're running everything in via Sticks or just flat-out towing. They towed the tillers in using tractor beams. Why put them in a transport when it won't hurt them to be exposed to the vacuum of space? All we had to do was rig them for vacuum and put a portable shield on them to protect them from turbulence, then put all the pressure-sensitive stuff back in them when we got them here. That's why I love gravometric engines, he chuckled. *Being able to do controlled descents just rocks. Sync up with your destination and ease down into the atmosphere. No friction heating, very little turbulence.*

Well, there can be if you don't know what you're doing, but I figure your computers can handle a controlled descent.

They can, but I do the descents when I fly. I like the challenge.

When can Merrane expect the first shipment of food?

Probably three weeks or so, he answered. *It'll depend on the crop. Even accelerated, some crops slower than others. I think the wheat will come in first, then the rye. I'll have to talk to the agriculture department, they already have a full harvest schedule on the board.*

Department?

Yeah, they handle all this stuff, he answered. *They don't need my input, since I don't know anything about farming, so my department secretary has control of it. I trust my secretary, she knows more about farming than anyone on Karis.*

Who's your secretary?

We call her Grik'zzk. She's a Kizzik.

You have a Kizzik in your command staff? she asked in surprise.

Sure, she's even smarter than I am, and she knows her shit when it comes to farming. When you want to organize and deploy large scale logistics, I've found that Makati and Kizzik beat the utter shit out of all of us. Their minds are just built for that kind of activity. I have two Kizzik secretaries and three Makati. The Makati handle the departments dealing with infrastructure and civilian broadcast management, produced and replicated resources, and energy generation and distribution, and the Kizzik head the departments of agriculture and transportation, which also contains the orderly movement of cargo. Jrz'kii keeps our cargo transport schedules running as smooth as a vulpar purrs, and Grik'zzk organizes and executes farming activity. She's the one that sends the planting schedules to Terra for them to follow, and you know how efficient and effective the Terran farms are. Add Jrz'kii to handle the smooth movement of transports and cargo shipping to move those crops, and you see why the Surrales make such a killer profit off Terra. And it's all because of two Kizzik.

Damn, you've just given me something to think about, Dahnai sent honestly, leaning back in her chair.

Your penchant to have Faey run everything overlooks using the natural advantages of other races of the Imperium to your advantage, hon. How many Makati do you have in your upper government? Two? Three?

Four, she answered, a bit defensively.

And how many Kizzik?

None, she admitted.

About a quarter of my government is run by the Makati and the Kizzik. Their organizational skills make my government run smoothly and efficiently.

Your government is much smaller than mine.

But the principle is the same, he defended. *You should put a Makati or a Kizzik as the chief of your personal staff, and see how fast things shape up in the palace. A Makati or a Kizzik will get your palace running smooth as silk, and you'll have a chief that's all but unbribeable.*

Quite a few have problems dealing with Kizzik because of the language barrier and the fact we can't send to them.

Well, my translators work very well, and they don't really contain any proprietary Karinne technology. I've offered to sell the slightly different design to the Great Hive and allow them to produce them for their nobles, and they're supposed to get back to me in the next couple of days.

How do they work?

They translate their scent language into Faey and vice versa, he answered. *They use cartridges of a hundred sixty-seven different chemicals that the translator combines in various ways to complete the entire Kizzik vocabulary. A cartridge lasts my Kizzik about two months, since the Kizzik's sense of smell is so sensitive, and the device takes the chemicals the Kizzik gives off to speak, separates them, then stores them in the cartridge to be used later. It eventually runs out, but it does a very good job of recycling the chemicals to make it last as long as possible.*

Hmm. And they even work as interfaces?

Yeah, and I can do that without even having to use any Karinne technology. Just stick a gravband communicator in there and rig your equipment with a gravband receiver and you're good to go. The Great Hive is very eager to get their hands on it.

Damn, how long did it take you to build that?

It took about two years, and they started the project three years ago, so we've had the fully

functional translators for about a year now. I had fourteen Kizzik working with the engineering department and a small army of sign translators. It took over a year to chemically record every word in the Kizzik scent language and cross-reference it to the Faey word. After that, it was just trial and error until we had working models, because the Kizzik have no real grammatical syntax to their scent language, and the computer just couldn't deal with it. It had a lot of bugs in it at first, so it took a while to perfect... hell, it still has a few issues, but that's more to do with the fact that the computer sometimes mistranslates the intent of the Kizzik and vice versa. Just like any other translator, how the computer thinks can be different than the one using it. Once we got it working, though, the Kizzik were ecstatic about it. No more sign language, no more translators that had to follow them around all the time, and since the translator translates almost all sounds into scent language based on the Kizzik's preference, it's opened up entire new worlds for them. Now they can hear footsteps and background conversation and the engineers can hear equipment operating to find problems.

It works that well?

Yup, he nodded. It's like having text captioning for your entire life, and since the Kizzik are actually very fast with their scent language, they can keep up with the translators. Why do you think I have so many Kizzik here, hon? They flocked here when we got those translators working. The language barrier holds them back more than anything else, and together, the Kizzik and Karinne broke it for them. Developing new scent words for sounds took quite a while, but it's worked out very well. We needed words for sounds like a barking dog, dripping water, rain, horns, and so on, and ways to combine words to simulate unusual or garbled sounds. There's even a Kizzik word for the sound of a sneeze. It doubled the Kizzik vocabulary, but the Kizzik didn't mind at all. The ones using our translators spent four months memorizing the new words, and now it's almost like they can hear.

Holy fuck, that's absolutely brilliant! she sent.

Don't congratulate me. Jyslin was the one that headed the project for the Kizzik translators. That was her main project. Myleena felt that working on the translator project would be a very good learning experience for her, and she was right. Jyslin was the one that came up with the idea of creating the sound-concept Kizzik vocabulary, and she was the one that headed the hardware and software teams that designed the translator and programmed it, he declared proudly. It proved my wife is every bit the engineer that me and Myli are. Now that we've had plenty of time to fully shake out all the bugs and finalize a production design, we've offered it to the Kizzik to produce themselves.

I'm shocked they didn't take it immediately.

You know how they are, hon, they had to study the proposal. They'll take it as sure as they're satisfied it's everything we say it is, cause think about it, we're offering them something that almost seems too good to be true for them. But as soon as they realize the prototype we sent them isn't a fake, they'll beg for it.

Send me some of them. I'd like to have them handy for when I deal with the Kizzik in Dra-cora.

Sure, we have a few dozen gravband translators already built. You can take a few home with you. Just don't steal the design, he teased. We do own the patent for it. And it's already been filed.

Damn, she giggled.

[Jason!] Jyslin's voice came over his gestalt, for she was using a private communicator that linked to him. [Jason, where are you?]

[Showing Dahnai the farming zone of Exile, why?]

[Jason, love, I'm pregnant!] she declared in a giddy voice. [It's twins, Jayce, identical twin

girls! We're having twins, baby! Come home and celebrate!]

[Congratulations, baby!] he communed with pure joy, then he gave an audible whoop of delight. "Dahnai, Jyslin's pregnant!" he said with glee.

"Really? Yes!" she shouted, clapping happily as Jason turned the dropship skyward and gunned it using his gestalt. "All three of your loves pregnant at the same time, Jayce!" she laughed. "Is it a girl or a boy?"

"It's two girls!" he grinned foolishly. "Identical twins!"

"She just had to copy me," Dahnai laughed. "Let's go back, I have to give her a big hug and congratulate her!"

Where do you think we're going, silly? he grinned as the dropship rose from the surface, rushing for the Stargate and for home.

Chapter 8

Kaitha, 4401, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 10 January 2014, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaitha, year 1327 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was just lucky for the kids, he supposed, that Christmas and the Faey's New Year's Day had fallen so close to each other.

Not three weeks ago, the kids were unwrapping presents under the tree, but now they were opening their gift chests, which had been set out in the living rooms of houses all over Karis. The chests themselves sat in basements or attics the other 348 days of the Faey year except for the night before Kaitha, when the parents filled the chests with the gifts of the new year, and then the kids opened the chests to see what presents they got the next morning. The procedure taking place all over the Imperium this day was also taking place in the Karinne household, as Rann pushed open the lid of his gift chest and looked, wide-eyed, into the chest. Jason and Jyslin stood nearby, smiles gracing their faces as Rann gave a squeak of delight and reached into the chest.

There would usually be hymns and attending temple, templars of Trelle who had served in temple or monastery for 5 years would be renewing their vows today during those services and new templars would be inducted by literally marrying their goddess, and boys would wear garlands of flowers in their hair, but those were traditions that smacked too much of religion to Jason, and so they were not practiced in their house, just as Jason didn't talk about Jesus or sing religious-based carols during Christmas. They kept these holidays completely secular, celebrating the religious parts of them privately, though that wouldn't be easy. Kaitha was the biggest holiday in Faey culture, like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter all rolled up into one, and the holiday was very religious. But unlike Christmas, which had Santa and a secular side to it, Kaitha had no such secular version. Everything about Kaitha had a religious significance, even down to how Jyslin had kept them all up until the new year the night before. Faey always stayed up to greet the first moment of the new year, and they would burn little strips of paper holding their hopes and dreams for the new year and let the smoke carry the words to their gods, in the form of a party they had on the beach, complete with a bonfire. Jason, Tim, Luke, Temika, and Mike attended the bonfire party, but didn't take part of the burning their written wishes.

It was a rare chance to see Luke again. He'd been back for about two weeks and had about ten more days before he had to return to the Academy, and Songa had been all but dancing on air the whole time. He would be back home for good in just a couple of months, would be beginning his last semester and graduating from the Academy in April, which would make

Songa the happiest woman on Karis. Songa loved Luke desperately, and Luke returned her love with all his heart. It was a burden for Songa to gather up Jari and go to Terra every time she had a day off, but she was that devoted to him and their marriage, willing to go through all that trouble to be with Luke. It was much harder now that Jari had started school, since she couldn't pull her daughter out every time she went to go see Luke. But, Jason had been quite happy to offer to watch Jari for Songa when she went to Terra.

It was a lovely morning. It had rained last night, but cleared up to give them a truly glorious sunrise, which Rann made sure they were awake to appreciate, having woke them up at 0500, a good hour before sunrise. Rann couldn't open his gift chest until sunrise, though, as per tradition, so Ayama and Surin made them breakfast, and Rann kept his eyes glued to the window facing east, watching with anxious eyes as the blue sun of Karis crept towards sunrise with, for Rann, agonizing slowness. But the sun eventually did rise on the first day of the new year for the Faey, the year 4401, and Rann dove into his gift chest. Jason and Jyslin sat on the couch and watched their son unpack the chest they'd packed the night before, the gifts all unwrapped. There were toys and clothes and some little utility gifts, and he dug his way to the bottom of the chest in what had to be record time. The present at the bottom of the chest, however, made him a little curious. *What is this, Mommy?* he asked, holding up a little piece of paper.

That's your last gift, she smiled in reply. *Your father and I decided that, as a present, you'd get to name one of your new sisters,* she told him, patting her flat belly. *So, what kind of name would you like?*

I get to name a sister? Oooo! he sent with excitement. *Any name I want?*

As long as it doesn't sound silly, yes, Jason warned. *So no naming your sister Goraga-brain.* Rann laughed. *Can I name her after Mommy's gramma, Siyae Shaddale? I think it's a pretty name.*

Siyae it is, Jyslin said with a loving smile. *And thank you, little man, that name means a lot to me. I'm touched that you'd pick it for your sister.*

Question is, though, which one will be Siyae, Jason noted with a smile.

Whichever is born first, naturally, Jyslin countered, giving him a grin and a light elbow to his ribs. *So, since the little man of the family got to name one, I guess I get to name the other. And I think I'll name her Beth.*

Beth?

Wasn't that your grandmother's name?

It was Bethany actually, but she was always called Beth.

I like the sound of that name. "Bethany," she said, trying the acoustics out, and nodding. "Siyae and Bethany Karinne."

"Duchesses Siyae and Bethany Karinne," Jason corrected, putting his hand on Jyslin's flat stomach. "Our daughters and Rann's sisters."

After the presents were discovered, the calls began. It was tradition for a Faey to call every friend and family member and wish them a happy new year. Jyslin called her friends and extended family, including her parents, aunts, uncles, and family friends. Before Karis was unveiled, she always had to be very, very evasive about where she was and how she was going, but now she could be honest. Jason didn't really know Jyslin's family very well outside of Lorna. Jyslin was an only child, by virtue of the fact that her brother and sister had died in an accident when she was a baby, so she didn't have as many calls to make as someone else might make. After calling her parents, aunts, and uncles, she was down to calling friends on Karis to wish them a happy new year.

After the presents were discovered, usually a family would go to temple and give thanks for

the year past and pray for a good year to come, but they didn't do that in the Karinne household. They instead watched some vidy while Jason took care of just a tiny bit of business. So far, they had 54 out of the needed 112 interdictors built, mainly because Kosigi was going absolutely apeshit trying to get them done as fast as possible, and they were projecting that the other half would be ready in 13 days. The entire base was focused on interdictors, even over stripping other critical projects of resources, like the Consortium ship and expanding the drydocks. The engineers working on the Consortium ship had no support, no workers, they had to do everything themselves because all their workers were on a drydock assembling an interdictor. There were 58 bays devoted to interdictors, which was the 58 they needed built, and over half of them were manned by Kimdori. The Kimdori had all but depopulated their own projects to come help them build interdictors, the same staffing levels as had initially come to Karis when Jason had first discovered who he was. That massive increase in labor was letting them get the interdictors built faster than they'd projected, and that was only a good thing. Defending the Imperium and the Collective was the most important thing there was going right now, because neither Dahnai nor Sk'Vrae wanted to deal with 3,400 Consortium ships jumping into one of their systems and attacking. Dahnai was holding up her side of the bargain, having whipped every gate-producing company into overdrive to supply the 58 Stargates they'd need to set up a system of gates for the Collective, which would all be concentrated at Aurigae the same way that the Imperium's gates were concentrated at Draconis. Several crossover gates privately owned by houses had been commandeered for the project, which pissed off several Grand Duchesses, since they now had no way to secretly move materials or ships between their own systems.

The defense of Terra was also ready. That too was going to be a surprise move, and the defense of the gate on the outside was already prepared. They would place the gate inside the interdicted space of the Terran system, at a point that would take a ship nearly an hour at light speed to reach the Stargate but would actually be about a three hour cruise since most ships did not like moving at light speed, and what was more important, *only Imperium ships would be permitted to use it.* Dahnai had already donated a large deep space station to use as a terminal of sorts where visitors to Terra could dock, get off their ships, then catch a transport to Terra on an Imperium transport. The empires that traded with the Imperium would be utterly pissed off, because it meant that they would have to offload all their cargo at the space station and send it on, but Dahnai had already promised not to use that chokepoint to milk extra fees out of them. All transport into and out of Terra from the station would be free of charge, and cargo moving through the station would pay only an extra 1,200 credits per shipment to cover the shipping costs of getting it from the station to its destination within the Imperium or Collective. That was not a very large fee, and most traders wouldn't grumble *too* much about it.

This choice had been made for one simple reason, to tighten security. With the transfer point rule, it meant that *nothing* would be coming into the Imperium that was not thoroughly inspected at the station. They would know exactly who was in the Imperium, what cargo and goods were coming into the Imperium, and what that cargo was. Nobody could sneak in bombs, nobody could smuggle anything in, which would no doubt piss the Trefanis off something awful, and it gave Dahnai and Sk'Vrae absolute control of what came into their separate domains. And by restricting all visitors to the Imperium only to Terra, it completely protected the rest of the Imperium and the Collective from any outside threat. The only outsiders that would be allowed off of Terra would be ambassadors to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae, and they would be in such small numbers that they would be easy to manage and control.

Not that this was usually much of a problem. Most outside races did not like coming to the

Imperium, because of the Faey and their telepathy. Going to vacation on a planet where the indigenous population could hear every thought in your head wasn't most tourists' idea of a vacation destination. The Faey were very much pariahs in the sector, because their telepathy made other races very uncomfortable around them. The only non-Faey that really didn't mind them were the other races of the Imperium, who were used to being around them. The Menoda, the Makati, and the Parri didn't mind them, the Goraga were too stupid to really understand it, and the Kizzik were more or less invulnerable to talent because of their radically different minds, minds so alien to the Faey that they couldn't even send to them... just like those insectoids in the Consortium. The Kizzik and those Consortium insectoids were highly resistant to telepathic attack, protected by the very alien natures of their minds.

The plan was also moving along perfectly. Emae and Semoya had quite effectively whipped their houses into a frenzy, and their fleets had mobilized as rumors of a house war rippled through the Imperium. Last night, Dahnai let the palace leak the tidbit that Dahnai had finally caught wind of what was going on, and was going to charge back home and start bullying some Grand Duchesses as soon as New Year's Day was over, since no Faey would ever dare start a war on New Year's Day. It was a holy day, and any Grand Duchess that ordered an attack on New Year's Day would be a social outcast and pariah in the Imperium. Dahnai would be leaving early tomorrow morning to start mobilizing the fleets.

And had she been busy. She'd had a lot of fun on Karis, treating it like a vacation, spending a lot of time with her children, and also a lot of time with Jason and his family. Rann was now best friends with Maer and Sirri, and Dahnai and Kellin had toured the planet, went on several day trips, and also trying to sneak her way into places she shouldn't be and learn things she wasn't supposed to know. But, Jason allowed her those little attempts, because she couldn't really do much. And Symone had *utterly* corrupted Dahnai. She enjoyed having Jason and Tim handy for a little extra-marital fun, and she also availed herself of Symone, giving her another woman to practice on.

Siyhaa had also been a very, very busy demonic girl... or whatever she was, but for different reasons. She had completed her dissection of the Consortium's computer language yesterday, and was now decoding the information that they'd recovered from the computer core of the enemy ship. She'd promised to have her initial report ready today, since she didn't celebrate Faey holidays. And Jason was waiting for her to call.

Miaari padded into the living room, carrying a small box. "I hope I am not too late!" she said, looking down at Rann with her tail wagging. "Happy New Year's Day, little Rann!" she said, holding the box out towards him. "I have a present for you!"

"Aww, thanks, Miss Miaari!" he said excitedly, rushing over to her. He took the box from her, but Miaari gave a clicking sound when he shook the box.

"No, my dear child, what is inside will not like to be shaken!" she warned. "Set it down and open it," she urged.

He did so, setting the ornate wooden box on the coffee table, then opening the lid and peering inside. He gasped in shock and threw the lid back, reached in, and pulled out his present.

It was a vulpar!

It was a very, very small vulpar, a weaned kit, about the size of a kitten. It was a ruddy red color on its back, with dark stripes along its flanks and a white tummy and ruff, white fur that ran up its neck and completely covered its muzzle. It had a band of brown fur over its eyes, looking almost like a mask, and black tufted tips on its ears. Like all vulpars, it had two tails, red with white tips, and those two tails were swaying independently of each other as it regarded Rann with curious eyes.

"Oh, wow!" Rann said in amazement, holding the vulpar out at arm's length, gazing at it in

wonder.

"Introduce yourself, Rann," Miaari urged.

"I'm Rann," he told the vulpar. "It's so nice to meet you!"

The vulpar blinked lazily, yawned, then gave him a steady look.

"Set her down, Rann, and let her inspect you," Miaari instructed. "She has to decide if she likes you."

"Huh?"

"Vulpars are very smart and very picky, dear," Miaari told him. "She has to decide if she wants to live here, so set her down and let her inspect you."

"Oh. Okay!" he said, setting the tiny little animal down. It yawned again, sat down and scratched at its ear with its hind leg, then stood up and started sniffing at Rann's legs, who knelt in front of it and watched the animal with wonder.

"Don't you think you should have asked us before giving Rann a vulpar?" Jyslin asked simply.

"I thought your family owned a vulpar, Jyslin."

"My parents do, yes, but still, you know how vulpars are. You may have gotten his hopes up for no reason."

The vulpar sniffed at Rann's bare legs, then got up and waddled around him, circling him imperiously. It then padded under the coffee table and sniffed at Jyslin's foot. It then climbed up the couch using its tiny retractable claws, then walked across Jyslin's lap to inspect Jason, sniffing at his thigh. It climbed up onto his lap, jumped over to the coffee table, and then sidled across it, moving towards Rann. It sat on the edge of the coffee table, then gave a single, squeaky barking sound.

"Pick her up, Rann," Miaari urged. "She wants you to pick her up."

"Okay," he said, crawling over to the coffee table on his little knees, then picking up the tiny animal. He cradled the vulpar gently, scratching her behind her ears with one hand as his other cradled the tiny animal, which looked much larger in his son's hands.

"Now we will show her your house, my young one," Miaari told him. "We must take her to every single room, from the basement to the attic, set her down, and let her inspect it. Once she has inspected the house, she will make her decision."

"Oh, okay! Where do we start?"

"Let us start with the basement," she said with a smile, offering her clawed paw to him. "I will go with you, just in case you need help opening a door."

"Let's go!" he said excitedly.

After Miaari and Rann left for the kitchen, Jason chuckled. *So nice of her to give us a pet out of the blue.*

Eh, it's a vulpar, Jyslin shrugged. *They're very good pets, if they'll accept you. My parents have one. It won't cause us any trouble. It's just a baby,* she mused. *I wonder where Miaari got it from.*

Well, there are plenty of vulpars on Karis, maybe someone's vulpar had kits, Jason offered. *Probably, but we'd probably have heard about it by now. That vulpar may be a baby, but it's weaned, so it has to be about a year old.*

That old?

They can live for a hundred years, love, she reminded him. *They nurse for about a year before the mother weans them. And then the mother had to allow the kit to be taken,* she mused. *They don't do that unless they really trust the one who takes it. That young, I'm surprised the mother isn't also here to inspect us to make sure we'll provide a good home for her baby. I guess the mother really trusts Miaari to let her take her kit without knowing where she's tak-*

ing it.

Jason and Jyslin watched with some amusement as Rann and Miaari let the little vulpar kit inspect the entire house. Ayama and Surin were a bit surprised when Rann ambled into their private room off the kitchen holding the vulpar and set it down, but they didn't mind all that much once they realized what was going on. Miaari had to help Rann get into the attic, but when they were done up there, Miaari took Rann outside so the vulpar could look around their yard. After about a half hour outside, as Jason and Jyslin helped Ayama start cooking for the new year's day feast

When they came back inside, Rann was walking backwards in front of the tiny vulpar, who was giving a yipping sound, its two tails wagging in a hypnotically spiraling pattern.

"Well, I think you should name her, Rann," Jyslin said with a bright smile. "I think she's decided she wants to stay with us for a while."

"But remember, my young one, vulpars are never owned," Miaari warned him. "There may come a time later when she decides she wants to leave. If that happens, you must allow her to go. She is your *guest*, not your *possession*."

"I'll remember," Rann said with a nod, then he giggled when the vulpar started nibbling on his toes. "Can I name her Amber?"

"You can name her anything she likes, little man," Jyslin said with a smile. "Ask her if she likes it."

"Do you like it if I call you Amber?" Rann addressed the vulpar, and it looked up at him and gave a yipping bark.

"She likes it," Jyslin told him. "So her name is Amber."

"How can you tell it's a girl?" Jason asked curiously.

"The tails. Boy vulpars have black tips on their tails. Girls don't."

"Ah."

And so, the Karinne household increased by one, and quite by surprise. Tiny little Amber the vulpar quickly made herself at home in the house, and it required very little accommodation for her. Miaari brought a litter box for them which they set in the laundry room, and Ayama set down a water dish for her in the kitchen. Jason learned that vulpars ate what they ate, didn't eat "pet food," but were omnivorous. Vulpars that were fed pet food quickly left the house; in that regard, they were exceptionally finicky and demanding. But they weren't that hard to please. They liked variety in their diets, and just setting an extra plate for a vulpar during meals was all one really had to do to make them happy. They just detested eating the same food over and over, day after day, and since Amber was so tiny, she wouldn't be eating much food.

Rann made a special point of going to the houses of all his brothers, sisters, and friends on the strip and showing off his vulpar to them. Amber was quite happy to be the center of attention as they gawked at her, strutting maybe just a little bit under all the attention.

But Jason had other things on his mind than the new pet. Siyhhaa called him just before lunch to tell him she was ready, and Jason was in a dropship and on the way to Kosigi with Miaari and Tim, leaving behind an angry wife and a curious Dahnai. Jason barely had any time to wonder what Siyhhaa had learned from the enemy ship before they were flying down the long tunnel into the base. "Well, she's fast," Tim noted as they entered the vast void of Kosigi's air-filled interior. "I wonder what she discovered."

"Me too," Jason said. "I just hope it's information we can use."

"At this point, any information at all will be information we can use," Miaari noted. "We know so little of our foes, any information at all would be helpful to us."

They met Siyhhaa in her Kosigi office, which was on the small core of the base. She had six

Moridon in the office with her, all of them sitting at consoles with interfaces on their ears, using the interfaces to interact with the computers, far faster than any other input device. The interfaces let them *think* at the computers, though they still had to rely on monitors and external sensory input to receive information from the computers.

"Mahja," Jason greeted, taking the massive female's hand in greeting.

"Your Grace," she said, giving Miaari a cool look, which wasn't easy when one had glowing red eyes. Siyhhaa's look seemed to amuse Miaari. "Shall we get down to business?"

"Please," he said, and they followed her into a small conference room. They sat at the table as Siyhhaa fixed an interface over her ear, then turned and looked to the monitor at the end of the room. The monitor activated, and the Moridon crest appeared with the name of Siyhhaa's computer company surrounding it. "The analysis of the data we recovered from the Consortium ship is complete," she said. "I will send a hard copy of this data to the intelligence office of Miaari of the Kimdori, as well as to your personal computer at home, your Grace, so you may review the data later." That, of course, meant that Cybi would get the data... and she'd get it now, since Jason linked her to his gestalt, which would let her see and hear everything in the room.

A graph appeared. "First, a basic overview," she began. "We recovered twenty-seven point two percent of the data within the computer. Sixty-two percent of this data was computer language programming dealing with the operation of the ship, and thus is of low priority. The other thirty-eight percent, however, contains historical data, including nearly nine years of historical data of the ship itself. It is the ship's log, to use a term."

A picture of several galaxies appeared. "The ship had no name," she noted, "only a designation. The ship was built in the Andromeda galaxy eleven years ago, and was dispatched to our galaxy six years ago. The journey took the ship four point seven years," she noted calmly as a line drew itself between two galaxies, between Andromeda and their own galaxy. "The ship made the journey with its crew in stasis, suspended animation. That is how they survived such a long journey without going mad," she surmised. "From what we recovered from the logs, the ship stood sentry at an outpost for most of the time it was here," she told them, and a starchart appeared with one star highlighted in the Beta Quadrant. "Here. Star ZXJ two nine two. There is a deep space station there roughly the size of Kosigi," she added. "Which the ship's sensor logs noted they were still building when the ship was deployed to Exile and was captured."

"The size of Kosigi?" Jason asked.

A picture of the base, a honeycomb of struts, pods, and spars, appeared on the monitor, some of the holes between them occupied by ships, and with some holes much larger than others. It was roughly spherical in shape, and there were smaller honeycombed spheres inside it, layer upon layer of hollow shells one inside the next, like a Fabregè egg. "Analysis of sensor data and logs indicates that the base is capable of hosting and servicing roughly six thousand vessels," she intoned. "At capture, the data we analyzed suggests that there were about four hundred ships present."

"So that's the base the Alliance found?"

"No. It is *not*," Siyhhaa said immediately. "This is a different base."

"So they have two bases?"

"They have many more than that," Siyhhaa told him. "Analysis of the data indicates that there are nine bases like this one scattered through the Beta Quadrant," she told him, pointing at the honeycomb base, then the screen split to show a starchart of the Beta Quadrant with sixteen blinking points. "Each of these locations holds either a major base like this one or a smaller base. All of them have been towed here from Andromeda, and the Consortium is in

the act of activating the bases after their long journey. This base was the first to arrive, but the data in the ship indicates that it visited the site of a new base that had just arrived three takirs before we captured the ship. It escorted a transport convoy ferrying workers and cargo to the new base.”

“So, they’re setting up for extended action in our galaxy,” Tim said grimly.

“Yes. They are here to stay,” Siyhaa said with a calm nod. “But that is not the worst of it, your Grace,” she told him.

“Well, what’s the worst of it?”

“According to the data in the ship, its next mission was to act as picket and await the arrival of yet another base about six hours of hyperspace travel from here, at this location,” she noted, zooming in to that area, populated by a white giant star with no planets. “According to the data, the *main body* of the Consortium fleet is supposed to arrive with the base, and immediately break up and go to the other bases that are in operation for resupply.”

“Main body? You mean the three thousand ships they have here aren’t it?”

She shook her head. “The data are not precise, but from the data we managed to analyze, I would estimate the number of incoming ships to be approximately thirty *thousand*,” she told him.

“Thirty *thousand*?” Jason gasped, his face turning white.

“Yes. Approximately ten percent of their total fleet,” she said grimly, “but the data fragments we analyzed suggests that the deployed fleet is all they deemed to risk. The Consortium is at war in Andromeda, your Grace. What they send here is what they feel they can deploy away from the main war effort. But the fleets left five years ago, so there is no way to know if that war is still being waged.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, his face pale. *Thirty thousand* ships. Good God! Add those to the 3400 ships that were already here, and that was an attack fleet of 33,400 ships! The combined military might of *every* fleet in the sector couldn’t stand up to that kind of invasion. That was nearly twice the size of the combined fleets of all the empires in the sector!

And that was only *one tenth* of the total fleet of the Consortium? Holy *shit*, how big was their empire?

“That is what they’re waiting for,” Miaari said weakly. “They are waiting for this fleet to arrive, bringing numbers against which we cannot stand. They analyzed the fleet strengths of the sector and brought a force that could conquer *all* of the empires, even if they joined together to resist. And they know that they will need those overwhelming numbers to penetrate the planetary defenses and capture Cybi and the planet. They know three thousand ships cannot penetrate our defenses, so they have summoned forth ten times that number. They will attempt to defeat us with sheer numbers, a strategy most used by the Skaa.”

“I would venture to agree with you, Kimdori,” Siyhaa nodded gravely. “The data suggests that the fleet will arrive at that base in twenty-four days. Give them five days to spread out to their bases and resupply, five more days to redeploy, and you could expect them to be ready to mount an offensive action within thirty-four days.”

“Holy God,” Tim grunted.

“At this point, I would suggest in the highest possible terms that you complete the interdictors,” Siyhaa told them. “And I would suggest that you close the Academy and forget the plan to leave a way into the Imperium. The size of the enemy fleet would make any gate or way into friendly space an immediate target that could not withstand an attack.” She gave him a grim look. “And I would beg, on behalf of my people, that you make an interdictor and a gate available for Moridon, just in case the Mob changes its mind and accepts the aid of the Imperium and the Collective. There is no telling if the Consortium will honor our neutrality.”

“I will,” Jason said with a nod, thinking furiously. Thirty *thousand* ships. Holy fuck, what were they going to do?

They would put up their interdictors and stall like motherfuckers, that’s what they would do, give them as much time as possible to prepare to come out from behind their walls and fight the Consortium, drive them back.

“Cybi,” Jason called aloud. “Have you been listening?”

“*I have*,” she answered, using speakers in the ceiling.

“If we abandon all other construction projects and focus completely on interdictors, how fast can we complete the interdictors and get them set up?”

“*Fourteen days*,” she answered. “*Ten days to get them built, and four days to get them in place and give them the required two days to power up. We can build an additional one hundred sixteen interdictors in the twenty day window Mahja suggests, two production cycles for each bay converted for interdictor production. Forty-three of them should be deployed around Karis to increase the interdicted zone, which leaves one hundred twenty-one additional interdictors available for deployment. If we do not increase the interdicted space around Karis, we would still not have enough interdictors to completely protect every system owned by those who attended the summit*,” she added seriously. “*Besides, the Imperium will not have that many Stargates available to connect them to the outside. Given records I can access, Empress Dahnai will only have twelve extra pairs of Stargates available after the Collective is given gates and one pair is set aside for Moridon. Thirteen pairs if we do not leave a way into Terra. That gives us the ability to only connect thirteen allied systems to us. That would be just enough for the Nine Colonies and the four systems owned by the Shio. From here, we must pick our friends. We cannot protect everyone.*”

“I’m not worried about the sector, I’m just worried about us,” Jason grunted, rubbing his temples.

“Jason, this is not something we should discuss among just us,” Miaari said urgently. “We must summon Denmother, Dahnai, and Sk’Vrae.”

“No. Not yet,” Jason said grimly. “We can’t let the Consortium know we know what’s coming. If we tell Dahnai or Sk’Vrae, they’re going to find out, and we’ll see them attacking with what ships they do have to try to stop us. Their thirty four hundred ships can overwhelm the Imperium’s fleet, but they’re afraid that if they do attack, the other empires will abandon neutrality and counterattack, because neither the Alliance nor the Skaa will commit to an alliance with them. We do exactly what we’re already doing. As long as we stay quiet, they will just wait for their ships to arrive and have their overwhelming advantage, and by then it’ll be too late. The instant we get the interdictors up, *then* we tell the sector what’s coming and let them decide how they want to play it. We can summon Denmother, but we cannot let word of this leave this room,” he said grimly.

“Agreed. I will call Denmother, so she might listen in,” Miaari said, with a bit of disappointment, and her eyes took a distant look as she accessed her memory band.

About a minute later, a hologram of Zaa wavered into view just behind their table. “Is this true, Jason?” she asked immediately.

“It is true, Denmother of Kimdori,” Siyhaa answered for him. “Unless the data we recovered from the enemy ship is intentionally false, it is true. But I do not think they would do such a thing.”

Zaa’s face was troubled, and she had a furry hand to her chest. “You are certain it is that many ships?”

“The data we extracted are not absolutely precise,” Siyhaa answered. “The records state that thirty divisional fleets are en route, and the background data we have tells us that their mili-

tary structure numbers one thousand ships to a divisional fleet. That is thirty thousand ships.”

Zaa’s tail wilted. “Jason, I would ask for an interdicator and a pair of Stargates for Kimdori Prime,” she said immediately. “We will place the gate in the quasar with the gate leading to Karis, and tighten our defenses at the quasar to make it even more difficult to gain entry to attempt to penetrate to Karis or capture the gates.”

“I’ll make sure they’re set aside for you,” Jason told her.

“Alright, that was the worst news,” Tim grunted. “What good news do you have for us, Siyhaa?”

The female gave him a slight look. “There is good news,” she said. “Firstly, and most importantly, we have thoroughly analyzed their sensor systems, and have found that while their long range sensors are quite advanced, they suffer from a weakness that we can exploit using an idea used once before. Jason, the Cloaking Matrix System you developed years ago will evade their sensors, as will the stealth field technology utilized by the Urumi, which can cloak larger ships. That means that we can effectively stealth both large and small ships to slip past them, or surprise them.”

“Secondly, we have fully decrypted and decoded their computer language, and between this and the dismantling of the enemy ship, we have also extracted enough data to work out how they communicate. I have already sent this data to Myleena and the department of engineering. They will be able to build communication devices that will allow us to listen in on their communications, and we have all their encryption codes,” she said with a grim smile.

“We will have total access to their communications?” Zaa asked.

“Total,” she nodded in reply. “We know the language they use for communications, we have their encryption algorithms, and we can build replicas of their communications equipment. I estimate we will have total penetration and acquisition of their communication network in four days. They will have a huge numerical advantage, but we will have the advantage of knowing their every move.”

“What kind of communications do they use?”

“They modulate hyperspace string energy chains,” she answered. “It has the same effective range as Karinne Teryon communications. They are able to communicate with their Andromeda superiors, though there is a two month delay in messages due to the extreme distances. The Karinnes would be wise in taking the string transceiver in the enemy ship and setting it up in an intelligence center, and *start listening*.”

“I will take care of it as soon as we finish here,” Miaari said. “Mahja, after we conclude, would you kindly assist me in tracking down Myleena and forcing her to set up their communicator in my department, and shall the three of us master its use?”

“On this we do agree, Kimdori,” she nodded in assent. “Another issue of good news is that we know *when and where* this fleet is going to arrive. Jason. Is there not some weapon or trap we can lay for them?”

Jason leaned back and put a finger and thumb to his chin, lost in thought. No, trapping their arrival point wouldn’t be a good idea, but trapping an area of space *in front of* that point, away from the Consortium ships that would be there to greet them, well...

Two key points brought up were important here. First, Siyhaa said that the crews were put in stasis for the five year journey, so the ships would be operated by the computers, which were immune to the detrimental effects of hyperspace on living creatures... and it wasn’t a bad idea, Jason had to admit. He wouldn’t mind a four hour hyperspace jump if was put to sleep for the journey. Secondly, she said that they were coming from Andromeda. That meant that the window of vectors from which their fleets would come would be very narrow, given the vast distances involved. He figured that only three to seven interdicator laid across

a tract of space would catch the fleets and drop them into normal space, and there would be no crews awake in those ships to react to the sudden and unexpected circumstances. So, once they dropped them into normal space, how did one go about attacking thirty thousand ships that would be vulnerable to attack for at least a good few minutes before the computer woke up the crews?

The crews.

The *crews*!

“Cybi,” he said suddenly, standing up as he sent raw thought and data through his gestalt.

“Will that work?”

“*I would say that it has a very good chance,*” she answered immediately. “*It would be difficult to build so many, but much easier than it would be to build devices that would destroy their ships.*”

“What idea?” Tim asked.

“*The insectoid crews of those ships are vulnerable to high gravity,*” Cybi answered. “*Jason, in his youth, built mines that attacked ships and destroyed them by overloading and destroying their engines. We could easily build a simple mine that, when it explodes, generates a high distortion shockwave, which is designed to overload and destroy gravometric engines. The engines, when they are destroyed, unleash a gravometric shockwave which will then kill the crews because they cannot tolerate the gravity induced, where human or Faey crews could. We could not get all of them, but we could get many of them. Their ships would not be totally destroyed, but they will have no crews to man them, and replacing gravometric engines is expensive and time-consuming. It would delay them for quite some time.*”

“Isn’t there some way to *destroy* them?” Siyhaa asked.

“Not that I could build in two weeks,” Jason grunted. “When you’re pressed for time, you go for *simple*. I could build a bomb that could wipe out everything from here to Karis, but it would take time to build it. But I could build a few thousand little mines in two weeks, easily.”

“*By rush contracting through the Imperium and Collective, we could build well over twenty thousand in two weeks,*” Cybi corrected.

Tim laughed. “I remember those mines!” he said with a laugh.

“We know how to attack their engines, because they’re using *our* engines,” Jason said grimly. “I could design a mine that would overload and blow up their engines in a day. We can use the old Legion mine design as a base, design them, mass produce the *fuck* out of them, and seed them through the area where the Consortium fleets will appear, because we’ll have a line of interdicator set up across their course to force them into normal space. They drop into normal space, and—” he clapped his hands loudly. “The mines go after them.”

“Do you think you could build so many so quickly?” Siyhaa asked.

Miaari laughed. “Sister Kiaari saw a small group of humans, using basic tools, build over a thousand mines inside a week,” she told the Moridon. “Yes, it could be done. Once a production facility is tooled to produce the mines, it could produce a thousand mines a day. Now put *one hundred* factories to work doing that. In two weeks, we could build enough mines to seed a massive area.”

“We do more than that. We set up hyperspace missile batteries armed with warheads like those mines at the interdicator and sync their engines with the distortion field,” Tim proposed. “But we don’t send them after the ships that appear. We point them at any ship that survives the attack, which will make the Consortium have to try to drag their ships out of the interdiction field—” He stopped, then laughed. “We put interdicator *behind* the ships too, and as soon as they hit the interdicator on one side, we turn them on!” he said with a bright smile.

“If we can delay them from jumping out for just a couple of hours, they’ll be looking at ten hours or more cruising at sublight to try to get past the interdiction field, and they’ll be pounded by missiles the entire way!”

“There are a bunch of things we can do, but all of them depend on us knowing exactly when and where they’re going to be,” Jason said. “Siyhaa, you have a couple of mathematical geniuses on your staff. Have them get together with our star cartography and exploration department and map out the most likely vectors the Consortium will use to send in those fleets. If we can pinpoint where they show up, we can open the whole box of toys and give them the rudest welcome they’ve ever received,” he said with a dreadful kind of eagerness. “Cybi. I want an emergency meeting of the KMS and the engineering departments called immediately. And can you generate the plans for the mine for me please?”

“It will be ready in an hour.”

“Good. Get hold of Kumi and tell her that I want as many factories as possible she can find building those mines by tomorrow morning.”

“Send me the plans, Cybi, and I will have our factories begin work on them,” Zaa announced.

“I... I thought you would be less, *eager*, your Grace,” Siyhaa said uncertainly.

Jason and Tim laughed. “This isn’t much different from what we did back in the Legion, fighting against Trillane,” he said with an earnest smile. “I’m not afraid to take on a vastly superior force, Mahja, especially when I can do it hiding behind an impenetrable wall and without putting my own people in direct jeopardy. If the Consortium wants to play with me, they’ll find I have a lot of toys, and they’re not very friendly toys,” he declared.

“This’ll be like the old days, except we’ll have actual resources,” Tim grinned.

“And a nice place to live,” Jason agreed.

“And help.”

“Lots of help,” Jason said with a smile, looking to Zaa.

“You will get it,” Zaa said.

“Good. I feel a hell of a lot better fighting than I do hiding,” he said confidently. “Please continue, Mahja, and sorry we sidetracked you.”

She cleared her throat, a rather frightening sound, then she blinked her glowing red eyes. “There is actually little more to add,” she said. “With their programming language decoded, we have the ability to interface with their computers, though we know nothing of their input systems. What we learned from the enemy ship is that their computers are not accessible by remote. If we are to infiltrate their computers, we must do it from inside. We have also learned their written language, and have extracted enough data from the computer to develop a spoken syntax. It is unusual in that it deals with the mandibles of the insectoids, which would make it unspeakable to us. There is an alternate visual form of the language, though, that deals in *light*. We believe that is how the energy beings communicate. Unfortunately, we could not recover the entire visual syntax of the language, only about sixty percent of it. The rest of that data was destroyed. With further computer analysis, however, we believe we can reconstruct the rest of the light-based language, but that will take another two to three weeks.”

“That sounds promising,” Jason told her. “Do you think you can install a new computer in the Consortium vessel?”

“Easily,” she said with a nod. “That is all, your Grace. All we have managed to learn so far that I am ready to discuss. We are working on more, but until we have enough to present to you, we will leave it be. But this information, we knew it must be released to you immediately.”

“Then I would say we’re done,” Jason said, standing up. “And we move from one meeting to another. Denmother, we’ll break while you get here,” he told her.

Her hologram nodded. “I will be on my way within ten minutes,” she answered, then her hologram faded as she broke her connection.

“Mahja, Miaari, go get it done,” Jason commanded.

“At once, Jason,” Miaari nodded. “Come, my worthy foe, let us kidnap Myleena. we have a job to do.”

“Yes, we do,” she nodded, and the two rivals left the conference room, leaving Jason and Tim.

“Alright, Tim, dust off your old Legion hat,” Jason said with a grim smile. “It’s time to go back to fighting the entire universe.”

“With pleasure!” he said with a jaunty smile.

Jason felt... odd. He was scared out of his mind at the idea of facing so vast an enemy fleet, that would certainly steamroll every other empire in the sector into joining them just to avoid being annihilated. And yet, he felt like he could *do* something. Just as before, when he was facing the impossible task of kicking Trillane off Earth, he felt there was a plan of action here, and that was to go back to his roots and again become a toymaker, doing as much damage as possible without actively risking any of his own people. Knowing when and where this fleet was going to arrive was a vast weight taken off his shoulders. It would let him strike back, show them that the Karinnes were *not* going to just lay down and die for them, that from behind the safety of their interdictors, they would fight. It would not be a conventional war, oh no. Jason would lose a conventional war. No, this would be a guerilla war, an unconventional war, and those, well... Jason was *very good* at fighting those kinds of wars. He would test these insects and these energy beings and see how well they reacted to unconventional tactics, how they dealt with unusual devices, how well they could defend against a foe that didn’t use the same rulebook they did.

The same plan against Trillane would work here. Until the Consortium established solid bases here and could begin to produce, they were dependent on Andromeda for the large bulk of their reinforcements, and that was a five year delay. They would certainly move to establish shipbuilding facilities, secure food for their two species, and probably bully many other empires into joining them, or just outright conquer them, to gain access to their manufacturing bases and resources. The key to it would be to deal as much damage as humanly possible in that critical window between the arrival of the fleet and their securing resources to repair or construct their ships. They already had some of that in place now with those moon-sized bases, which could certainly build or repair their vessels, but they *knew where they were*, and that meant that they could attack them. Not directly, oh no, never that, but there were any number of ways Jason could think of, right off the top of his head, to damage, cripple, or just basically annoy the everliving fuck out of those bases.

Perhaps those insects would love a few thousand Friendly Puppies tossed into an open landing bay, or a few hundred harmonic conduit disintegrators launched at one of their major bases, or an armor-tipped missile punching into their ships and unleashing a cloud of his special marbles to wreak havoc on their internal systems, or a My Little Pony liquefying every piece of metal within a hundred yards of it, making it as pliable and strong as silly putty, or the heavy metal band Blood Nugget’s current headbanger smash *I Live To Hate* blasted into their little mind devices in an endless loop. A transceiver tuned to their devices inserted into hyperspace and set to broadcast out into normal space, right at the center of one of their honeycomb bases...

Yes. There were many things they could do to slow down, frustrate, damage, and annoy the

Consortium. A mixture of conventional military attacks and Legion-style toys and guerilla attacks on their infrastructure and organization could put them on their heels and wonder what the fuck they got themselves into coming to this galaxy and picking a fight with the Imperium and the Collective.

He couldn't let fear rule him. He had fought an impossible war and won once before. He had to do it again. He'd had plenty of help the last time, but he again had plenty of help. The Kimdori, the Imperium, and the Collective were all in this together, and they would fight together to resist the Consortium and this naked attempt to conquer this sector of the galaxy.

He had to do everything in his power to protect the Imperium and their Collective allies, and what was more important, they had to protect Cybi at all costs. She was the most precious living thing in the entire galaxy, and the entire house would lay down their lives to protect her.

After the initial, almost faint-inducing shock, they got down to business.

And it wasn't a command staff meeting like anything the generals had ever seen, for nearly half of the people in the conference were human. They were the original ranking members of the Legion, Luke and Tom, Temika and Mike, Rita and Leamon, Jyslin and Symone, Kumi and Fure, Meya and Myra, Songa and Yohne, and also Jenny and Bo, who had survived the crash of the dropship long ago when it was shot down and had been released after getting out of the hospital, everyone that had once held a position of importance in the old organization, those most familiar with what went on when one was fighting against Trillane. First, Jason broke the bad news, that they would be facing a fleet of tens of thousands of ships and sixteen bases capable of supporting an armada that size. Then he told them the good news, that they'd get the first shot at them because they would know where and when that fleet was going to arrive.

"The Karinnes need the Legion for this," Jason told his old friends. "Because if we're going to fight, we'll have to do it Legion style. We simply can't fight the Consortium ship to ship, fleet to fleet. We have to harass them, fight with toys, fight a guerilla war, and save the direct military confrontations for opportunistic attacks on weakened or isolated enemy positions. And we're going to start with their arrival," he declared. "With a little mathematical plotting, we can figure out where they're going to be, and we know when they'll be there. So we have a chance to get in the first shot unopposed. We obviously can't do it with a military strike, but there's *nothing* stopping us from introducing the Consortium to the Legion." Jason explained the initial ideas he and Tim had. "So, there it is, guys. Interdictors to drop them into normal space where *we* want them, and then a face full of good old fashioned Legion ingenuity. What other ideas do you have?"

They had plenty.

Over the next six hours, the conference developed a plan of action concerning that incoming fleet. The isolation by interdictor idea was borrowed from Tim to develop an interdicted "cage" of sorts, which would rely on them knowing almost exactly where those fleets were going to arrive, and how. There were two ways the Consortium could have jumped their fleet; either the entire fleet did not jump together, that it was coming in waves to allow ships to get out of the jump destination area, or it did jump as a single force. If it jumped as a single force, it would actually be easy to attack it, but the odds were it jumped in waves, for coordinating thirty thousand ships all jumping in unison wouldn't be easy. The cage would have interdicted space on five sides, creating a "tunnel" of sorts that the enemy ships would travel down before hitting the end, and the cage would close the instant the first wave of ships hit interdicted space, activating the interdictors behind that would be spaced in such a way that they would entrap the fleet within 15 minutes. Once the ships hit the trap, that

would activate automated weaponry. Mines, automated Torsion weapon platforms, Torsion shockwave generators that would attempt to kill the ship crews and damage the ships, and hyperspace missiles, all of which would relentlessly attack the ships until the crews were awakened from their stasis and able to respond. They would use nothing that the Consortium didn't already have, give them no new technology... they would just show them a new way to use it. They would unleash that hell on the Consortium, then, when the Consortium had destroyed the last of the automated weaponry, the interdictors would remain in operation long enough for the second little surprise to reach them, asteroids towed behind ships moving at 2/3 light speed and then released, effectively turning them into missiles that would annihilate anything they hit. That would be accomplished by the Kimdori fleet, which would be lurking about 20 minutes from the projected attack point and then would start out with their meteor bowling balls as soon as the caging interdictor activated. The hope was at least a few of them would hit Consortium ships whose engines were destroyed by the mines, wiping them out. The interdictors would not be left alone, they would be defended by a KMS tactical formation of one cruiser and two destroyers, then would be jumped out by towing after either the interdictors were threatened in some way or the defending ships needed to resupply, at which time they'd disengage the interdictors and jump out, heading home in a series of 60 six minute hyperspace jumps.

Six hours of constant hyperspace travel was a Consortium advantage with their putting their crews into stasis. The KMS and Kimdori attackers would have to leave for the arrival point five days beforehand, because it was going to take them one to two days just to get there, and then they had to deploy their surprises, activate the interdictors, then get the support ships out of there before the interdictors closed the cage around them.

They knew they couldn't destroy even a tenth of the fleet, but they would be sending a message to the Consortium, a message that the Imperium and the Collective were not going to just lay down and die for them. They were going to fight, fight any way they could, and that meant that certain free-thinking individuals with large boxes of toys and an evil disposition of thought would be devoting their lives to making life hell for the Consortium's military commanders.

It was time for the Legion Phoenix to fly once again.

There was planning, and there was also logistics. Kumi and Zaa quickly worked out exactly what they needed and what they had to buy, and by sunset down at the strip, they had everything set up and ready for the next month.

First, the original plan would continue. They were still vulnerable to the 3400 ships that were already here, even if they were busy preparing for the coming of this major attack fleet. If they had any inkling of what the Imperium and the Collective were about to do, they'd drop everything and attack with everything they had, to isolate Karis and deny them any kind of assistance. Semoya and Emae would continue their plan to hide the fleet mobilizations of the Imperium, and Sk'Vrae would quietly prepare what fleet she had left as well. They'd have the interdictors they needed to isolate the two empires ready in 12 days, so they were 14 days from complete isolation from the Consortium and everyone else. On that day, when the interdictors were installed at every system except for Terra, Dahnai would officially warn everyone about the Consortium fleet and that the Imperium and the Collective were officially closed to all outside ships, that all shipping had to pass through Terra.

After that, all travel into and out of the Imperium would be choked down to a single gate. The plan was a simple one, simple and effective. The original idea to set up the gate at Alpha Centauri was scrapped for a different plan, which was even better. There would be a Stargate placed a distance from the interdicted edge of Terran space, at a location where it would re-

quire a ship to travel for 4 hours at light speed to reach it, or 14 hours for the slowest ships, which would be the Zyagyan vessels. After that trip, the ships would reach a large space station that was already en route to the point from Menos, one of the biggest Dahnai could spare, and more than large enough for the task it would perform. This station would serve as the exchange point for all movement into and out of the Imperium and the Collective, for Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had agreed that no outside ships would be permitted into interdicted space. At that station, all travelers and cargo would have to be unloaded from outside ships and then loaded onto Imperium ships, and those Imperium ships would then carry them to the gate and to Terra, and from there cargo would move on to its destination. Both Dahnai and Sk'Vrae had decided that no outsiders would be allowed into interdicted space outside of the diplomats who were *already there*, and *only* those at Dracora and Urumda, the capitol cities of the two empires. There would be no tourism, no new ambassadors, no movement within interdicted space of any being not part of the Imperium or the Collective. And all cargo would again be inspected when it reached Terra before moving into the Imperium, which would turn Terra into the commerce hub that Jason had told Dahnai it could be, the only point of interaction between the outside and the inside.

The advantages of this were obvious. The coalition of the Imperium and the Collective would have absolute control over everything that came into the Imperium, from people to objects, which would drastically reduce the chances of sabotage or espionage. The gate would be deep enough inside to see anything coming to attack it or capture it, and a battleship would be available at all times to tow the gate to safety, since the ship could jump *out*, syncing to the distortion, and the gate was placed quite deliberately in a line that would allow it to jump from inside Terran interdicted space straight to the quasar gate. Until such time as the entire sector was bullied into war with the Imperium, it would serve them well. And when that time came, they would just pull in the station, jump the gate to safety, and bunker down behind their defenses while the Legion went after the Consortium.

The discussion raged all day, and it included Myleena, Siyhaa, and Miaari when they finished talking about the communicator. Myleena was crafty and dangerous, and she knew more about *everyone's* technology than anyone alive, so she was the perfect springboard from which to bounce ideas. A single nod or shake approved or killed an idea, and between Jason, Myleena, Tom, and Jyslin, the four biggest crafters, they came up with multiple ideas and strategies to employ against the Consortium. They knew their language, they knew how their scanners worked, they would even eventually figure out their military protocols and procedures were, which would allow them to exploit every advantage against their foes. Just as before, when the Legion exploited their vast knowledge of Trillane's operations, they would use everything they had learned from the Consortium ship to attack the Consortium every way they could. They would go after their ships, they would go after their supply lines, they would go after anything they could reach, to make life hell for them.

They would find that it wasn't going to be as simple as settling in to wait out the siege of the Imperium and the Collective. No, the besieged would be able to sneak out of their castle and fight back.

That afternoon, the Legion was reformed. Tom and Jenny were the new leaders of the Dirty Deeds Department, which would consist of the entire original members of the Legion, Myleena, and about half of the engineering department, and their job would, quite literally, be to sit around and think up evil shit to throw at the Consortium. The Legion would bounce ideas off the engineers, and they would consider the viability of the idea from an engineering standpoint. If it was viable and tactically sound, then it would be added to the toolbox. And everyone would be involved, including Songa and Temika, who were currently busy doing

other things. Not even Luke would escape his duty to the Legion, for Jason reminded him that the Academy would be too dangerous for any Karinne, and he would be taking his final semester from Karis.

Songa literally jumped up onto the table, slid across it, and kissed Jason soundly on the lips for that declaration.

Songa, Yohne, Kumi, and Temika would be useful in other means, for they had different training. Kumi and Temika would search for ways to economically exploit or hamstring any empire that allied itself to the Consortium, and Songa and Yohne would be searching for some biological means to deal damage to them, be it disease or attacks through the weakness of the insectoids to high gravity.

They had already decided that this would be all-out war. The Consortium wanted to rip the heart out of House Karinne, they wanted Cybi and the Generations, and that gave the Karinnes and their allies the right to fight back in any way possible, no matter how dastardly, no matter how brutal, no matter how cruel. The Consortium would show no mercy if their behavior towards the Collective was any indication, so the Karinnes were more than ready to meet them head on at that level. This would be a war where there was only one rule: Win. Nothing else mattered.

And they were going to find out that Faey and humans could be outright *evil bastards* when their backs were to the wall.

When Jason and Jyslin went home that night, they were dead tired, and Dahnai was both suspicious and irritated. This was her last night on Karis before going back to "settle things down" back home, leaving her husband and children behind, and she had expected to spend that time with her *amu dorai* and friends... who were all at Kosigi and out of her reach. *Why wouldn't they let me call you?* she demanded hotly when Jason, Jyslin, Tim, and Symone all left the dropship, and Rann jumped into Jyslin's arms after being let out the back door as Shya lurked near her mother's leg.

We had an emergency that dealt with house business, Jason told her. *I'm sorry we couldn't tell you, but it was very, very important.*

Can you tell me what it was?

Not yet, but it had to deal with interdictors, so it had to be ironed out immediately, he hedged. *We also pulled something out of mothballs.*

Huh?

We've reformed the Legion, Jyslin sent with a smile, kissing Rann on the cheek. *We do intend to fight, Dahnai, and there are more ways to do it than just fleet battles. We fought Trillane from a very weak position, and we gave them hell. Well, we reassembled the core of the old Legion think tank, and we're already busy thinking things up to drive the Consortium nuts. We'll just have a lot more support this time.*

Why didn't you call me? She demanded. *I should have been there!*

We decided that until the interdictors are up and working, the less you know, the less you might accidentally interfere with our plan, Jason sent bluntly. *Just go on exactly as you planned to, and things will be fine. We don't want you reacting to anything that might happen with anything other than absolute honesty. That way nobody can point any fingers at you and accuse you of knowing anything.*

She gave him a long, hard look, then finally nodded. "Alright, I can live with that. But we are going to *talk* afterward," she said, poking a finger in his chest.

I'll be here. Now, I'm dead tired, so—

Bull shit are you gonna try to sneak out of anything, she cut him off. *This is my last night here, and you are mine, you hear me?*

Can I at least eat dinner first? I don't think I've eaten today... at all.

Fine. Dinner, then you belong to me until tomorrow at sunrise.

Don't be so mean, Miss Dahnai, Rann accused. *Daddy's tired!*

My hero, Jason laughed, taking his son from Jyslin and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"He's not just a hero, he's my hubby!" Shya declared.

They all looked down at her, Dahnai with her eyes wide in surprise, then she gave out a sudden laugh. "Shya!" she declared. "Trelle's Garland, we were *sending*, baby! You heard us!"

"I did?" she asked in confusion.

"Oh yes you did my little lady!" Dahnai said giddily, swinging Shya around in circles. "Are Maer and Sirri gonna be so *jealous* of you, baby! You expressed before they did! And at *five*! You really walked through Trelle's hair, baby girl!" *Everyone, Shya has expressed!* she sent at full power, which made everyone near her wince, and was probably heard twenty miles away. Dahnai was a powerful telepath. *Okay, we just got delayed, I cannot go home without giving my baby a passing party!* she stated. *So we're having one tomorrow morning, and I'll leave after lunch.*

We'll make sure it's a good one, your Majesty, Surin sent calmly from inside the house. *I'll have everything ready by sunrise, and you'll have time to go buy presents before we begin.*

Oh, would you, Surin?

Of course, it would be our pleasure, your Majesty. His Grace isn't the only one who has enjoyed having you here. Ayama and I would be honored to set it up for you.

Good. I'll have to have another one at the palace, an official one, but that one won't be half as much fun as the one here, she sent with a laugh. *At least here, there'll be a ton of kids having fun, and not a ton of kids sent by the Siann terrified of making a mistake in front of the Empress.* She kissed Shya, who looked very excited. "And you, little lady, have just made me very happy! I'll have to arrange your sending lessons as soon as I get back to the palace."

"I'll be happy to start her out, Dahnai," Jyslin offered. "She'll need to be trained around here anyway, we send *way* more than we speak on the strip."

"I noticed," Dahnai chuckled. "Who knows, maybe all this constant exposure to sending is making our kids express faster. Trelle knows, there are enough active kids on the strip! All your kids are active, and they're no older than five!" she told Jason with a smile.

"That's just good genes," Jyslin winked.

"I'm the *Empress*, Jys, think my genes aren't good enough?" she retorted with a smile.

Dahnai was as possessive as he expected her to be.

After dinner, she took both him and Kellin back home with her, and she *owned* them, literally all night... and nights were a good 14 hours long this time of year, close to the middle of summer for Karsa... not that one could really tell from the climate, since the temperature changed very little across the seasons at this latitude. She would be separated from both Jason and Kellin for the next couple of weeks, so she was making sure to get quite a send-off. Kellin would be here, "getting his pick of being chased after by two bitches," as Dahnai rather crudely put it, so she felt that the best way to both get her satisfaction and possibly annoy Jyslin and Symone was to totally exhaust two of the men in their stable of available partners. And she *exhausted* them. Jason had jokingly noted that part of the reason Dahnai liked Kellin so much was because of stamina... well, he *needed* that stamina to deal with Dahnai. Jason had been Dahnai's lover for five years, and though he knew she could be quite energetic and demanding at times, but she'd outdone herself last night.

At least it was quite enjoyable now. Kellin was fully acclimated to the idea of sharing Dahnai with Jason, and that made it more enjoyable for all three of them. Being a low-ranking

noble from a small house, Kellin wasn't used to the usual debaucheries and extravagances of the larger and more powerful noble houses, but that was one reason why Dahnai loved him, because he was so *earthy*. He was a simple man with simple tastes, and being the Prince Consort had not changed his elemental personality. He was a man who was utterly smitten with his wife, and he shared her with her Imperial duties grudgingly, though he was more than willing to share her with another man she loved, because he knew that at the end of the day, she would come back to *him*. That was how any Faey marriage worked, and it worked very well for them.

He felt a little better. Dahnai had been good therapy, actually, giving him a night where he was too busy to think about things, and it had been good for him. Though the idea of facing a fleet of tens of thousands of ships and the collateral damage they would cause in forcing the entire sector to turn against them was still terrifying, it made him feel better to know that he *was* going to be able to get his licks in on them. Being in the Legion had showed him that sometimes it *was* possible to fight impossible battles, if one approached it from the right angle and used unorthodox tactics. A head-on war against the Consortium would get them all killed, but they could bunker down behind their defenses and bleed the Consortium over time, fight a war of attrition where they stood invulnerable on their castle walls and rained stones and arrows down on their besieging enemies. And when they were weak enough, they would sortie out and deal damage, focusing on their ability to supply and maintain their fleets. They would attack the supply lines, not the sieging army itself, and starve them to death. That was the plan, at least for now, but he was fairly sure that that would change as time went on. It usually did.

He yawned as the blue sun of Karis peeked over the horizon, which painted the ocean visible through the huge floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows and sliding glass door leading out to the balcony atop the roof over the beachside deck, looked with reds and yellows; it often amused him how a blue sun painted the sky red in the morning and evening, but that had more to do with the atmosphere of Karis and less with the light the star radiated. Dahnai was finally asleep, laid out between him and Kellin, who was all but comatose on the far side of the huge bed; Dahnai had worked him much harder than she'd worked Jason last night. He scrubbed his face with his hands, swung his legs over the bed, and got up, then walked over to the sliding glass door and opened it to step out onto the porch. The morning was warm and pleasant, with the ever-present ocean-borne breeze bringing the smell of the sea to them, the salty breeze billowing the sheer curtains that hung before the huge windows. Looking down the strip showed that Ayama and Surin had indeed worked all night on the decorations for Shya's passing party, for they'd set it all up on the beach in front of Jason's house. He looked over and down to see Songa and Luke sitting on their front porch nextdoor with little Jari on Luke's lap, patting her father's chest with her small hands and babbling excitedly, then pointing down the beach to where the party was being set up. There were others up and about as well. Past Min's house, he could see Lyn and Bryn's house, living together in a very large house that almost like a duplex, with both common areas for both of them and private areas for each of them inside it. Lyn was also on the deck, herding her and Bryn's three children out onto the deck for their morning walk up and down the beach. Lyn had had a single son she named Yuden, but Bryn had had identical twin girls she'd named Riza and Miza. Uvan was five, but the twins were only four, because Bryn had taken longer to conceive; in fact, she and Songa had been the last to conceive among the women on the strip. Maya's two older children, Bryn's twins, and Temika's two children made up for the fact that Symone, Kumi, Meya, and Myra had all yet to have any kids of their own, but now, with Jyslin and Symone pregnant, they were now officially over the top, with more kids or expected kids

than adult women on the strip. He could barely see Yana out past the twins' house, though she wasn't near her house, she was out in front of Ilia's house, walking along the walkway with Kyri towards the where the tents were set up for the party. He couldn't see any further than that over the squarish, flat-roofed houses that dominated the strip, which made this house and his own the oddities, but he could imagine that in the houses beyond Ilia's, Maya and Vell's, Myleena's, his own, Tim and Symone's, Yana's, Zora's, Sheleese's, Myri's, Meya and Myra's, Kumi's, and then Mike and Temika's, there was activity in every house. Mothers were waking up or feeding children, and they were all getting ready to rush to Karsa to buy hasty presents for Shya's passing party, that would take place at 1000. Fortunately, most major stores either didn't close because Karsa was a city that never really slept, or opened at 0730, giving them a good two hours to buy gifts and rush back for the party.

Hey Jayce! Songa called, waving up at him from next door. She nudged Luke and pointed, and Luke waved as well. *Luke wants to know why you're standing up there about to get sunburn somewhere you shouldn't be getting sunburn.*

Jason laughed. *Tell him humans don't sunburn here, and besides, I spend enough time on the beach to be uniformly tanned. Why didn't he ask me himself? Where's his interface?*

He only wears it when he needs to, he says it rubs the hair off the side of his head, she answered.

Luke reached over and grabbed his interface from a table and put it on, then looked up at him. *[I forget these things can do this,]* his voice drifted into Jason's mind. The human interfaces could translate spoken word into gravband at short range which could either be picked up by all interfaces in a small area, which was almost as good as sending, or sent to a specific person on which the concentrated while using the function, which was even better than sending, since their transmission was picked up by the planetary comm grid and was relayed to the recipient wherever he was, just like a cell phone call. The Consortium insectoids used those brain implants, the Karinnes used interfaces, but they did basically the same thing. Jason's gestalt didn't convert it into audio as other interfaces did by default, it converted it into communion, but Jason could play those communications over a speaker if he so wished.

On Terra, they had cell phones. Here on Karis, they had interfaces.

[Well, get used to it, silly. You're not on Earth anymore, you're back home. So get back in the swing of real technology,] he teased.

Luke laughed. *[Yeah, yeah, you go spend most of your time back on Earth and see how quickly you adapt to being back home,]* he answered. *[I'm a little ticked at you for making me stay here, but Songa's sure happy. I hated being apart from her, but I was getting a much better education there. Taking the classes by remote just wasn't as good.]*

[Well, you're here now, and you're back in the Legion, so you'll be getting a lot of personal tutoring from me, Myli, and Jys,] he answered. *[That's a hell of a lot better than school.]*

[Probably,] he agreed.

[Probably?] Jason asked, a bit archly.

[Alright, most likely,] he laughed. *[Woop, Jari wants to go see the tents, so we're gonna walk her down there. See you at the party, Jayce.]*

[Yeah, see you there,] he replied with a wave. They waved back and all got up, then Luke opened the gate to the steps leading down to the walkway and they started down towards his house. Jason put his hands on the rail and looked out over the ocean, again overcome by the beauty of his chosen home. He was so happy he lost that fight with Jyslin. He'd wanted to live in the mountains where it was cool and just commute to Karsa to work, but she had convinced him to live on the beach, convinced him that the sea breezes would keep it cool enough for him and warm enough for her. She was right. God, he loved that woman.

But... he also loved Symone. And he loved Dahnai. Not in quite the same way he loved Jyslin, but the love was there, and it was undeniable. He wondered how his parents would feel knowing that he was married to one woman and was in love with two others, and that he shared himself with all three of them. His father would have probably jokingly said "that's my boy" before telling him that he was on the road to heartbreak, while his gentle mother would have given him that slight frown that spoke volumes of her displeasure, but said nothing. But, if they would have understood the situation, he thought that they'd probably approve. He wasn't living in the human culture anymore, he was living a Faey lifestyle... he was all but Faey himself now.

Funny... all those years ago, he had fled from New Orleans to preserve his humanity. And in the end, he had become everything he had raged against, and done it willingly. He now was a cog in the Imperial machine, and a rather big one, keeping it from flying apart at the seams. He lived among Faey as one of them, had adopted their culture, their customs and melded them with his human upbringing, creating something for himself that wasn't entirely Faey, yet wasn't entirely human. But it was more Faey than human. He, Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne, was in love with three women, and had taken a fourth to the guest house for the explicit reason of having sex with her... and done it with the approval of his wife. In human custom, that was definitely fringe behavior, the realm of the cultural extreme, and was just the most glaring of the many differences between Faey and human lifestyles, a fundamental lifestyle difference based on the telepathic pair bond. Since Jyslin knew his mind, could hear his thoughts, she was not jealous of any attraction he might have to other women, for she *knew* he loved her with all his heart, she knew it beyond any shadow of a doubt. Why should she be jealous of another woman when she knew that she was the woman he would always choose?

He wondered at it for a moment, at least until Dahnai came out onto the balcony. She leaned against him and kissed him on the cheek, then pulled him into an embrace and gave him a much more serious kiss, complete with her grabbing his butt with both hands. He returned her kiss willingly, sliding his hands up and down her back. *Morning*, he sent gently to her.

Morning, love, she answered, giving him another kiss. *What are you doing out here?*

Just pondering the work I have to do today, he answered. *Surin worked all night on Shya's party. Look*, he added, pointing down the beach.

Nice! she complemented. *I'm just glad Maer and Sirri aren't being little whores over it.*

Yeah, they were definitely sporting, Jason chuckled, remembering them finding out their baby sister had beat both of them to expression. *But if Shya's any indication, your other kids won't be long behind her.*

I expressed at seven myself, she admitted. *I figured Sirri would be expressing any time now. But I'm proud of Shya. Expressed at five. Five! What a woman she'll be!*

A fitting wife for my Rann, and she'll be a promising Karinne, Jason teased.

Asshole, she jibed without any venom, slapping him on the rump even as she kissed him again, with more hunger. He had an idea of what was on her mind when she pressed herself against him, pushing her bare breasts against his chest as she kissed him with more and more passion. *Let's go back inside*, she sent with highly erotic undertones. *I'm sure we can get a quickie in and still have time to get Shya some presents.*

Oh, I think we might be able to, he mused, reaching down and grabbing two healthy handfuls of her proud backside. *I get dibs on you, though. If Kellin wants to play, he has to wait. I want all of you*, he told her, picking her up by her backside. She wrapped her legs around him and let him carry her back into the bedroom.

I'm all yours, baby, she sent urgently as she pushed the sliding glass door closed with her

telekinetic ability.

They did manage to have their fun and get out to Karsa to buy the presents, and they arrived a good hour before the party was to begin. Jason and Dahnai helped Surin finish the final preparations, Dahnai utterly lost in trying to do manual labor, but actually willing to do so because it was for her daughter, and it gave her the satisfaction of knowing she'd personally put a hand in with helping prepare her daughter's party. Since it was taking place so early, Surin went with a breakfast party motif, serving many different kinds of breakfast foods as well as a pancake cake for Shya, who, in the course of a single night, had already learned how to send because she slept in Rann's room, and they stayed up half the night as Rann taught her what was taught to him. That was actually dangerous, because Rann hadn't taught her how to close her mind, so she was *actively* broadcasting her thoughts whenever she put anything behind her thought. Jyslin had to take her aside as soon as they woke up and teach her the basics of closing her mind, which was actually a very simple thing to do for almost anyone. Because of that, Shya was almost late for her own party, since Jyslin couldn't let her go out there with her mind open and actively sending.

It was like any other passing party they'd held, but in a way it was a little different. There was food, games, musicians, and lots of presents, but it struck Jason as odd that there were so many very young children there who were actively chatting away via sending. His children almost never spoke aloud to each other anymore, and Danelle was included in their little clique since she could send too. But now there was another new member, Shya, who was both insider in she was Rann's betrothed but outsider in that she didn't live on Karis, and even his children knew that there were some things they didn't tell to outsiders. It was funny listening to them, Kyri sending like an adult with her five years of practice, active before birth, and Rann sounding so mature himself, sending with the same speed and confidence as the adults. Rann could send privately now, having just learned that trick yesterday during his lessons with Ryn, who was one of the best trained telepaths on Karis. Whenever Jyslin couldn't give Rann his lessons, Ryn or Dera filled in for her. Ryn and Dera were the two most skilled telepaths among the guard. But when Rann and Kyri were sending to their brothers and sisters, they slowed down, used *baby talk* as Kyri often scoffingly called it. Zachary, Aran, Danelle, and Sora were learning quickly, but they still hadn't quite become *fluent* in sending quite yet. And now Shya was part of their little group, eerily silent to the other kids when looking at each other, then bursting into speech when they talked to the them, some of which had started looking at them with a little jealousy and indignation, especially Yuri and Sami, who were older than the active children. Jason saw he'd better step on that. The other kids were starting to feel left out, and Jason didn't want any wars between the kids erupting on the strip.

There always had to be a *little* showing off, though. Kyri loved to flaunt the fact that she was telekinetic a little bit, and she had Ayuma-like flair, making gestures and making the syrup float over to her, reaching her hand out and making the pitcher pour more *oye* juice into her cup. Jason and Yana didn't discourage her from practicing with her power, but they did frown on her rubbing the other kids' noses in the fact that she was so much more skilled than they. Yana scolded her, but Jason usually hoisted her by her own petard, and he administered a little of his specialized punishment on her by snatching an ice cube out of the pitcher with his power, flitting it up behind her, then touching it to the back of her neck. She jumped with a squeak of surprise and smacked the back of her neck, but Jason had already moved the ice cube over her head, where the other kids saw it and started giggling. She scowled at her brothers, sisters, and friends a little, and as soon as she went back to eating, he pressed the ice cube against her neck again. She jumped again and put both hands to the back

of her neck, looking around, then she locked her eyes on him and frowned. *Daaaaad!* she protested. *Stoppit!*

I'm not doing anything, he sent with exaggerated innocence, pointedly looking away from her. That seemed to satisfy her, so she went back to eating, but Jason glanced over and did it again, and this time pushed the ice cube down the back of her shirt. Kyri gasped and jumped out of her chair, squirming, as the other kids laughed. "Daaaaaad!" she gasped, finally getting the ice cube out of her shirt, throwing it to the sand. "Meanie!" she accused.

"I can show off too," he said with a sloe-eyed smile, leaning on his elbow on the table and then grinning at her.

She flushed a little and went back to her breakfast, clearly getting the point, which touched off a fit of giggling up and down the table.

After eating, they gave Shya her presents, a large number of toys and gadgets, her very own hoverboard just like Rann's, and she also received a little interface of her own, a present from Myleena. "Know what this does?" she asked, and when Shya shook her head, she put it on Shya's face. "It will let you talk to Rann any time you want. All you have to do is say *call Rann now* and then talk after you hear the interface beep, and he'll hear you."

"Really?" Shya asked with a gasp, and she put a tiny hand on the interface and said "Call Rann now. Can you hear me Rann?" Her voice emanated from Rann's little interface. "Wow, thank you, Miss Myleena!" she said with a big smile, hugging her.

"The real gift is that it will let you talk to *anyone* with an interface, pippy," she smiled. "Not *just* Rann. As long as you know exactly who you want to talk to, it'll let that person hear you as long as she's wearing an interface herself. Just say her name instead of Rann's. Now, remember that this is a gift for when you go back home, pippy. While you're here on Karis, use the interface we gave you, because this one won't make anything work. All it does is lets you talk to other people with an interface."

"Oh, okay, Miss Myleena," she said with a nod, taking it back off and picking up her other interface, sized for a child. Everyone that had to be able to do anything on Karis had to have an interface. One couldn't even so much as flush a toilet without one.

[*How did you pull that off without putting Karinne tech inside it?*] Jason asked.

[*It works by sending the message through Civnet,*] she answered with a wink, [*through the Civnet connection between Karis and Draconis. When Shya's interface makes a connection request, it'll access Civnet and uplink to our main comm node. If she's on Karis already, it'll instead uplink to the local gravband comm network and get patched into the biogenic interface comm network. On the other side, if we try to connect to her interface, the comm relays will check to see if it's on Karis first. If it's here, it just patches in through the gravband network. If it's not here, it'll access Civnet through the main comm node and search for the interface there. When it finds the interface on Civnet, it sends the message that way, just like any two computers talking to each other over the network. It took me all of ten minutes to add that subroutine into the interface comm network. Shya's interface works the same way. If it can't find the local gravband comm network relay, it accesses Civnet and contacts our main comm node on a dedicated set of access blocks that only allows encoded speech and no other type of data to pass, then connects in that way.*]

[*Damn, that's clever.*]

[*Thank you, I try,*] she communed with totally insincere modesty. *I made one for you, Kellin, Maer, and Sirri too, Dahnai*, she sent. *That way you're just a word away, and you can also get hold of us whenever you need to.*

I was just about to ask you if you couldn't make a couple more of those, Dahnai laughed. *Are they real interfaces?*

No, they're not, she sent, wagging her finger. *You know we allow no Karinne technology off the planet unless a Karinne goes with it. The ones I'll be giving your family will be real interfaces with that extra functionality, but when they go home, they'll get the special ones like Shya's.*

But Shya's a Karinne!

Not until she's fifteen, she's not, Jason corrected her. *Give it up, Dahnai, you're not taking anything home you can take apart.*

Dahnai thrust her index and pinky fingers out at Jason, palm up, which was a Faey gesture roughly equivalent to sticking out her tongue or flipping him off. That gesture among the Faey had an *entirely* different meaning, and was not something a man did unless he was ready to get all but raped by a woman. It was a highly sexually suggestive gesture for both sexes, but more so for men than for women.

Jason found it funny that the *hook 'em Horns* gesture long used by the University of Texas was an offensive gesture to the Faey if they delivered it *underhanded*.

After the gifts came the games and fun. Jason, Jyslin, Dahnai, and Kellin sat on chairs under the tent and watched the kids running around having fun, Shya trying out her new hoverboard by zooming around the beach, as Jason and Dahnai talked. Dahnai assured him that the plan was going on as intended, that she would arrive home and immediately mobilize the Imperial Fleet and station them at the Stargates leading to Embria and Donarra, the capitol systems of Shovalle and Dorrane, which basically put them on alert and ready to respond to *any* activity anywhere in the Imperium. She'd issue some ugly threats and ultimatums, and Semoya and Emae would be slow to respond, dragging their feet, heightening the tension for a few days before finally and *slowly* demobilizing their fleets, but not *really* doing it. They would just disperse their fleets through their systems but also keep them on alert and ready to act at a moment's notice. The other houses wouldn't demobilize immediately either, keeping their fleets mobilized just in case Dorrane and Shovalle made any sudden moves... which was exactly what Dahnai wanted. She wanted the entire Imperium ready to move at a moment's notice, just in case the Consortium jumped a fleet into Imperium space.

Jason assured her that everything was ready on his side as well. Three quarters of his fleet was ready to jump to Karis with her, a powerful show of force that would make it look like Dahnai meant *business*, summoning the Karinne fleet and mobilizing the Imperial Navy in preparation of going to war against either Dorrane or Shovalle, or maybe even both if they didn't obey her. The rest of his fleet was picketed at Exile and the quasar, and would be moving to Terra on the day they installed the interdictor. Those interdictors would be finished in 9 days, and Kosigi was busting its ass to make that 7 days, to minimize the window of danger when the Imperium was mobilized for war yet had no protection.

Them installing the interdictors would be abrupt and unannounced. They would simply bring them in, put them in orbit, and turn them on with *no advance warning*. At Terra, they would do the same thing, but they would also be sending a general warning to all systems the day before that Dahnai was putting a two day moratorium on any travel to and from the Imperium due to internal Imperium matters, warning that any ship that tried to jump to any Imperium system during that time would be considered hostile and attacked. Sk'Vrae would also do the same, declaring a two day ban on travel to the Collective due to negotiations with the Imperium. Neither of them would explain *why* they were doing this, which would keep the other leaders off balance and give them their critical two days for the interdictors to power up. After those two days, the coordinates of the space station would be supplied to all other empires and the new rules concerning Terra and the Imperium and Collective would be publicly announced.

And Jason had no doubt that the Imperium would be immediately attacked by the Consortium when they realized what it meant... or they'd *try*. They'd jump their whole fleet to some point to try to attack Karis or Draconis and hit the interdictor, and they'd let them mill around out there without taking any action against them. The reasoning for that was simple misdirection. They didn't want the Consortium to know that they could jump through the interdictors until *after* they ambushed the main fleet, to maximize the chance of attacking by surprise. They didn't want to jump ships onto the Consortium or launch hyperspace missiles and tip them off, and have them somehow relay that warning to the approaching fleet, which might give their computers time to react to the attack when it came. They wanted *that* to be the ultimate moment of surprise, when they declared that they knew exactly what the Consortium was doing and *that they were prepared to do something about it*. Until then, they would pretend that they had no idea what the Consortium was doing or that they had one of their comm devices and were even now listening to all of their long-range communications, listening to fleet deployment orders being relayed through the Beta Quadrant, which generally supported Siyhaa's initial finding that the Consortium was preparing for the arrival of their huge fleet, getting supply lines set up and getting bases fully operational to support and maintain those ships when they got there, as well as setting up shipyards to build new ships locally rather than try to jump them from Andromeda.

They were certainly settling in, and Jason was fully of a mind to make it clear to them that the locals did not want them here.

Dahnai didn't know about the big fleet coming, and it took one of those "just trust me" statements to dissuade her from the idea of attacking the Consortium when they tried to jump a fleet into their space after the interdictors were going. "We don't want them to know what we can do just yet," Jason told her. "It's a Legion thing, hon. We have a little surprise planned for them, and we don't want to telegraph our capabilities just yet, to maximize the chance we catch them by surprise. Just trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Alright," she growled after a moment. "I guess I'd better get moving," she sighed, looking at her watch. "It's about three at the palace, and I need to get home before it gets too late, so everyone sees me rush home with the Karinne fleet at my back. It was so *nice* when your time and my time was synced," she sighed.

"There's a one hour difference, so just wait another thirty or so days and we'll be synced again," he told her with a smile.

"I know, another period of you being opposite me to go through," she frowned. "You're engineers, slow down your planet's spin so you're on a thirty hour day!"

"Speed yours up so you're on a twenty-nine hour day," he retorted.

"Hah! I'm the *Empress*, buster, you conform to me!"

"Never happen," he said easily, putting his hands behind his head tauntingly and grinning at her.

"Bastard," she accused with a smile.

"Your one and only," he replied dryly. *Rann! Shya! Empress Dahnai has to go back to Draconis now, want to ride with us up to the Aegis and see her off?*

Would I! Rann sent excitedly in reply.

I wanna go! Shya agreed.

They turned out going up on a large passenger dropship because between the guards and Dahnai's family and Jason's family, they couldn't use any of them near the house. A transport was brought in from Karsa, and they all loaded up on it after Dahnai's guards that were going home with her loaded all her luggage on the dropship. The guards staying behind were going as well, to stay with Kellin and the rest of the Imperial family, so there was about 20

people loading into the dropship. Jason decided not to pilot it today, staying back in the passenger cabin with Dahnai and the others. They all looked out the window as they approached the command ship *Aegis*, a monstrosity so big it could affect the tides when it was in orbit, which was in a stationary position out past the orbital station, lurking like a bulldozer over a flower. Dahnai would be on the *Aegis* for the return trip, coming back in the biggest bruiser in the KMS, making a very blunt and abject declaration of just where the Karinne's loyalties lay. When the dropship landed in one of the smaller landing bays near the bow, Dahnai sighed. "Well, I guess my vacation's over," she announced as she stood up.

"We enjoyed having you, hon," Jason told her, kissing her on the cheek.

"Here, Dahnai, as promised," Myleena said, handing her the interface made for her. "Now give me that one," she demanded, pointing.

Dahnai laughed and pulled it off her ear. "I'll get one of those yet."

"They won't do you any good off Karis," Jason snorted as Jyslin kissed her on the cheek.

"We enjoyed having you, and I promise we'll take good care of your family, Dahnai," Jyslin promised, putting her hand on Maer's shoulder. "And we'll see if we can't send all three of your children home expressed," she winked.

"Actually, I'd love it if you did," Dahnai smiled. "I could send to them whenever I pleased and hear them answer back instead of sending and not being able to hear them."

"We'll see what we can do," Jyslin promised with a little smile, pulling Sirri close to her.

Dahnai knelt and held her arms out to her children, who crowded each other hugging her. "You pippies be good for Kellin," she told them. "Remember, he's gonna be your dad when you come live with us. Keep them in line, Maer," she said, giving her son a kiss.

"I will, Mother," he said with a serious nod.

"You'll be back home in a takir, my babies," she told them, kissing each one on the forehead. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"It won't be long, Mommy," Sirri told her.

"It'll feel like forever," she complained, kissing Sirri on the cheek, then standing up. She unfolded Kellin in a fierce embrace, and gave him a passionate kiss as they sent privately to each other. Jason gave her another kiss as the hatch opened, and then they watched as she disembarked. The Admiral and the command crew were there to greet her, and they didn't follow. Dahnai needed to get her mind back to business, and she didn't need any distractions. In the dropship, in private, she could be Dahnai, but out there, she had to be the Empress. The transition was a visible one, as she stalked down the stairs, becoming *regal* as she came down the steps, until it was the Empress of the Imperium who greeted the command staff and not Dahnai.

"Well, let's go home, pippies," Jason said as he closed the hatch. "And we'll get started trying to send you two home with a little surprise for your mother," he chuckled.

"Do you really think we could? Wake up our talent?" Maer asked hopefully.

"Well, I don't know honestly," he answered. "Who knows, maybe you will express. After all, you're older than Shya, maybe you're ready and just waiting for that magic moment. But hey, we can always try, can't we? What harm is there in that? And if Shya could express, why not you?"

"Why not!" he answered with a sudden smile.

The talk about expressing Maer and Sirri was just a joke.

It was too bad that sometimes the universe, fate, God, whoever, sometimes took jokes seriously.

Maer and Sirri both expressed the very next day, within hours of one another.

To say that it was a shock was a massive understatement. Maer expressed first, over break-

fast with Kellin over at the guest house, and in the frenzy of initial celebration, Sirri expressed during lunch. To say that Jason was shocked, stunned, awestruck, was an understatement. It was almost freakin' *creepy* how it happened, how they both expressed within a day of wanting to.

Jason thought about that a lot that day. Maybe the *will* had a lot to do with the act. Maybe Maer and Sirri both had been primed to express, ready for it, and just lacked the active will to do so. They'd never really *wanted* it until Shya expressed, who probably wanted it because of Rann, she couldn't tolerate him being able to send where she could not. Maybe, just maybe, they *wanted* to express bad enough to make it happen once they were *ready* to express. Actually, that could explain the rash of expression through the strip, all because of Kyri. Kyri's talent being awake since birth was almost like a taunt to the other kids, and the intensely competitive natures of both his children's parents, both human and Faey, spurred them to express quickly. Them being Generations probably had a lot to do with that as well, but the idea behind it was sound, and was, Jason discovered, an actual field of research in Faey Academies. The studies weren't conclusive, but some studies did suggest that children who expressed earlier than others had a level of intent behind it, a level of want or need.

Kellin got to make two very happy calls to Dahnai that day, waking her up to tell her that Maer was expressed, then stunning her with the news that Sirri had also expressed.

And that wasn't the half of it. The rash of expression among the strip kids also continued, because Myri's daughter Ryla expressed that evening. Ryla, though, wasn't as much a surprise as Maer and Sirri, however, because Ryla was a Generation, and she was just following a trend set by the other strip kids of expressing very early. And the next morning, finally, and much to her utter relief and delight, Yuri expressed at a more normal age for the daughter of such a powerful telepath as a Marine. Yuri was the oldest child on the strip, the leader of the gang, and her being unable to send was seriously undermining her authority.

After Yuri expressed, Surin joked that he should just set up a permanent party place just to host passing parties.

Dahnai was, understandably, utterly ecstatic. "There's gotta be something in the water over there!" she laughed when she contacted Jason via hologram, still aboard the *Aegis* to fill him in on what was going on. "I bring my babies to Karis, and all three will be coming home expressed!"

"That's more your kids than my planet," Jason told her. "They *are* your kids, Dahnai, and you're no slouch."

"Aww, thanks, love," she smiled at him. "Anyway, things are right on track here," she got back to the point. "I've issued the ultimatums and gave Semoya and Emae five days to stand down, else I attack them with the Imperial fleet *and* every minor house fleet. I issued a general call to arms," she said with a smile. "Draconis is *bristling* with both Imperial and House fleets right now."

"What about the Highborns?"

"I can't order the Highborns to arms unless we're at war," she said with a frown. "It's part of the niceties between the throne and the Highborn Council. So if I want them, I have to declare war on someone *first*, then order them to mobilize."

"Ah. One of those many little rules I never bothered to learn," he said.

"Trelle, I wish I didn't have to learn them either," she grunted. "Secretly, Semoya and Emae have given me their schedule for the next few days thanks to the Kimdori, so I know exactly what they're gonna do so there's no surprises. They're having a *blast*," she laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen Semoya have more fun, and Emae's enjoying it too. They did a good job at it, I have to admit. They have the whole Imperium mobilized," she chuckled. "How long

til you finish your side of the bargain?"

"Six days, they've pushed it up another day," he answered.

"I'll keep that in mind," she nodded.

That night, Jason found himself in a bit of a surprising situation. Dahnai had taken the guard that usually served as Kellin's consort back to Draconis with her, so when Kellin came lurking around that evening looking for a little companionship, Jyslin decided to go back home with him. Symone stayed home with Tim, Jason didn't think to ask to come join them, and so Jason found himself sleeping alone for the first time in years. It was a very weird experience, after he'd gotten so used to sleeping with *someone*, be it Jyslin or Symone, or both. He found it hard to stay asleep, both because Kellin and Jyslin were busy having fun, and because it felt decidedly weird not having someone beside him. He felt almost lonely, though he knew that was a silly feeling, given he was surrounded by friends and family. He was just feeling a little strange being in bed alone. He managed to sleep a good part of the night, but woke up about two hours before dawn, and went to stand by the open window and look out over the ocean, as was his habit, then glanced behind him as his gestalt called up the video panel. Shey's face appeared, and she glanced at him with a slight smile on her face. "Your Grace," she greeted. "Are you giving me a present?"

Jason chuckled, leaning against the doorframe with his body turned towards the monitor. "If you want to call it that," he said. "I'm just a little restive, and your droning on and on about insignificant details always puts me to sleep."

"Ah, so his Grace is feeling pecky," she noted seriously. "Should I recite the *Keyanne* to you?"

He chuckled. "How about a status report on the interdictors, just to put my mind at ease. Myli upped it to five days from today, and I want to make sure she's not just being optimistic."

"Since when is she optimistic?" she asked simply. "The current status report marks the last interdictor being finished in five days."

"Good. Anything else I should know about?"

"You again forgot to put on your robe before calling me," she noted.

"You said you like it when I do."

"Very much so," she said with a straight face. "I'm one of the few women on Karis who can say she sees the Grand Duke naked in his bedroom with regularity."

"You're just a special girl, Shey," Jason chuckled. "Anything else?"

"Yes, there is one more thing, since I have you here, your Grace. The Brood Queen has put in a request to speak to you in the morning, as soon as your and her audience hours coincide. That will be in six hours," she added, looking down at her desk.

"Alright, I'll make sure I'm at her convenience," he said, noticing that it was now nearly midnight on Uruma, thanks to his gestalt showing him. Uruma only had a 20.35 hour day, so the differences in their activity cycles were occasionally pretty wild. Jason wondered how the Urumi liked being on a planet with a very long day, like Draconis. Jason himself had needed nearly two years to completely adapt to the 29 hour day on Karis, since human Circadian rhythms were for 24 hour cycles. He'd been really messed up his first six months here, and it had taken even longer to adjust completely to where he had truly adopted a 29 hour Circadian rhythm. But at least here the Karis year didn't *feel* like a different year, since the climate was consistent year round. Karis had a 29 hour day, but only a 294.6 day year, which they completely ignored in favor of the Faey and Terran calendars. That was easy to do when one lived in a place that had no real sense of seasons. "Anything else?"

"You need to trim your pubic hair a bit, it's getting a little long," she said critically.

"I'll tell Jyslin she's been remiss in her duties as my barber," he said dryly, which *almost* made her smile. "Someday, I'm gonna demand some reciprocation from you, woman."

"I would be put on report if I were out of uniform in the command center, your Grace," she told him seriously.

Jason chuckled. "Well, far be it from me to get you in trouble then," he smiled. "Thanks Shey. I think I'll go back to bed now."

"Have a good sleep, your Grace," she told him with a nod, then her picture vanished and the monitor went dark.

He did just that.

Sk'Vrae was fully recovered from her ritual combat with Dahnai physically, but she'd been much different emotionally since her defeat. She'd been very quiet and not her usual arrogant self, which only stood to reason since she'd been beaten in a fight she was absolutely sure she would win, but his audience with her showed that she was slowly getting back to normal. She was still pensive and reflective, but she had her confidence back, and soon that confidence would go back to being the arrogance that a ruler actually needed to be a good ruler. Jason didn't begrudge rulers that kind of arrogance, because it was a mandatory part of being a leader. Even Jason himself had a measure of that kind of arrogance, the confidence that he was right and that he knew better than the other rulers when it came to his people and the needs of his house. If his people didn't trust him and believe in him they wouldn't obey him, and projecting the aura of confidence, of *decisiveness*, was a critical part of that. And that took a little arrogance.

Jason and Sk'Vrae discussed the promised manufacturing assistance the Collective would get for rebuilding their fleet. Jason's contribution to it would be some resources via his replicators and the ores mined from the planets Jason controlled that used to be Collective, and he was also building the first waves of Torsion weaponry, which was the responsibility of his house to produce initially. His factories would need the least amount of retooling to produce the Torsion weapons, and since they had more range than dark matter weaponry, they had more priority. Dahnai would be manufacturing the dark matter weapons and supplying some shipbuilding facilities for Sk'Vrae to use to build Collective naval vessels, and Sk'Vrae and Jason together would be handling the armor, the raw materials coming from Bellar and Sk'Vrae making the armor in Collective foundries.

"I think that should fit in well with the schedule that Empress Dahnai gave me," Sk'Vrae answered in Urumi when he told her his planned schedule for building Torsion weapons. The engineering team had fully cracked them and the dark matter weaponry both, and plans for their construction were already fully available to all three of the allied parties. "We've already sent our first team to the Goraga yard to inspect the yard and prepare it to produce Collective warships."

"That's good, I'll feel a lot better when you have a full strength fleet again," he said in Faey, each of them using a preferred language.

"Yes, well, I should blame you for that, but I won't," she said with surprising and rare humor. "The return of the ships you captured *did* help tremendously."

"Well, they weren't doing us much good, since we had no idea how to operate them," Jason chuckled. "I meant to ask you something rather personal, your Majesty."

"Proceed."

"You're a very strong telepath. Are you the norm of your species?"

She gave him a fanged smile. "I am very strong among the Urumi," she answered honestly.

"All my brood are telepathic, even the Brood Princesses that work for you."

"They never said a word!"

“They are not supposed to,” she said simply. “Other races don’t *expect* us to be telepathic. That our nobility is telepathic is a secret that helps us in negotiations. An Urumi Princess would never reveal her talent. Only I have that option.”

“Well, thank you for your honesty.”

“The Karinnes have ever been fair and just to us, it is only fitting that we repay that kindness with honesty,” she told him in a stately manner.

“And I can’t blame you for that policy,” he added, pondering it for a moment. “I never dreamed they were telepathic. I didn’t even sense it, and I’m pretty sensitive to that.”

“We are exceptionally cautious around the Faey,” she told him. “We keep our minds completely closed when near them.”

“Ah,” he said with a nod. He had used that selfsame tactic himself to hide his talent back in his Legion days. “Might I venture to tell you that I was very impressed with you, your Majesty? I thought you fought well, and it was nothing but sheer luck that you failed to defeat Dahnai.”

“I appreciate your statement, your Grace,” she said with a gracious nod. “Oh, and I failed to mention this, but your engineers have offered a solution to the radiation domes on Bellar.”

“Yeah, I saw their initial report, and I have to admit, it’s unusual and clever,” he chuckled. Their report was that an energy shield was best suited for dealing with the sandstorms on the surface, but it would be safest to build a radiation shield around the radioactive *moon* of Bellar rather than try to shield the planet. The moon was the source of the radiation that bombarded the planet, far more radiation than the planet’s magnetic field could stop, and they also concluded that stopping the radiation at the source would stop the slow yet inexorable destruction of the atmosphere of the planet. The radioactive moon of Bellar was actually not very large, about 450 miles in diameter, but it orbited very close to the planet. The master builders had proposed building a containing energy shield around the moon itself using six orbiting planetary shield generators that would encase the moon in a shield that would stop it from irradiating the planetary system, then it would be a much easier process of cleaning up the trace radiation on the planet, which would free up the miners from having to wear radiation-proof E-suits. Doing so would also open up the two large moons of Bellar to colonization, since they too were being bombarded by the moon’s radiation. It would take them about two months to build the shield system and another two weeks to install it, and it would all be done at the Academy, as part of a student project for the engineers. “They’ve already started on the project, from what I’ve been told. It’s the main project for the graduating class of engineers.”

“I must tell you, I am surprised and happy that you are working so hard on systems you will return to me,” she told him.

“I take care of my people, your Majesty, even if they’re only mine for thirty years,” he told her simply. “The people of Karinne don’t exist for the house, the house of Karinne exists for the people.”

“A commendable attitude for a small organization, but things get much more complicated when things get larger.”

“Well, we don’t plan on getting much larger than we are now,” Jason chuckled. “I should have the first Torsion prototype built and sent to you for your inspection in about ten days.”

She nodded. “So long as you build it to the specs our scientific team drew up, it should pass inspection easily.”

“We’ll build it exactly to that spec,” he assured her. That spec was a modular design that would allow the weapon to be installed on either an Imperium or a Collective ship, basically having a generic mount structure and a dual input system that would allow it to plug into

both Faey and Urumi computer and power systems, as well as the ability to communicate with both Faey and Urumi computers. This standardized spec had been hammered out by the engineers of both empires, and it actually wasn’t much extra work. The Urumi also used plasma as their primary power source, but a more primitively interphased form of plasma, not the much more powerful metaphased and hyperphased systems the Faey used, or the double-metaphased system used by the Karinnes. “How were the first test batches of armor?”

“Promising,” she answered. “The metallurgists feel they will be completely successful with the next test, which takes place tomorrow. We’ll soon be producing armor sections.”

“Good. At least that’s not *too much* of an upgrade,” he said. “But an upgrade is an upgrade.”

“Yes, the mixture of Neutronium and shocked Adamantium armor we were using is not much worse than this alloy the Consortium uses, and the Faey have their Neutronium, and you have whatever it is you use,” she noted with a fanged smile.

“We use tissue paper and flower petals, your Majesty,” he said blandly, which made her hiss chortlingly, her version of a laugh. “If that’s all you had, I need to go take care of some business.”

“One more thing,” she said. “Have you received the latest report from Princess Sk’Breel?”

“Hmm, not recently,” he answered. “I did get the reports from Bellar and Skralla, but not from Aurigae or Immiran that I can remember. It might be sitting on my desk waiting for me to read it.”

“I suggest you track it down, your Grace,” she told him. “She told me that there is a mention in it about Urumi soldiers who have applied for Karinne citizenship, to fight in the KMS. There seems to be some confusion as to the exact process of indoctrination.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll get my people on it,” he told her. “I wouldn’t mind some Urumi soldiers. After the battle here at Karis, and seeing you battle Dahnai, I am *highly* impressed. Your people are brave and skilled in combat, your Majesty, and I’m glad we’re on the same side now. I’d be very afraid if you were my enemy. It’s gonna be fun designing armor for them,” he chuckled. “They might have to sacrifice some of their bone plates to make the armor viable.”

“Sacrifice?”

“You know, grind them down so they’re not so thick or... spiky,” he told her. “It’ll be bloody hard to build armor suits for them otherwise. And I hate to say this, but the females might have to bob their crests.”

“You ask a great deal,” she chortled, pointing over her head, to her own very impressive crest. “Females are very proud of their crests.”

“Hmm. Well, we’ll think of something,” he shrugged. “We always do. If we can build armor for Kizziks, we can build it for Urumi.”

“Very well then. Until next business brings us together, be well, your Grace.”

“You too, your Majesty,” he answered, a little surprised she didn’t give him the ritual farewell.

Jason tracked down that status report immediately after ending his conference with Sk’Vrae, and put his border system department people on it to hammer out the details, then spent the rest of the day in conference with the Legion, working on their plan for attacking the Consortium fleet. That felt... *good*. It was like the old days again, all of them gathered up in his lab in Cheyenne Mountain, discussing this or that idea. Myleena was a new face, though, but she didn’t waste any time getting fully integrated with the old gang.

After they broke up, Jason and Jyslin returned home for dinner and to spend time with Rann, who was starting to feel a little forgotten. Shya wormed in on that private time, but Jason and Jyslin didn’t mind all that much. They spent a nice evening on the beach with the

kids, then they had a nice relaxing bath and tucked them in at 2600, Rann's usual bedtime so he could get his necessary 9-10 hours of sleep and be awake and alert at his usual waking time of 0800... though he was often awake well before this, mainly because unlike most children, Rann actually went to sleep quickly after being tucked in. They'd get him ready for bed starting at 2600, and he'd be asleep by 2630 more than half the time, not even fifteen minutes into his bedtime story. Rann only seemed to sleep about eight or nine hours, so he was usually up by 0700, even though the didn't officially come wake him until 0800. Sometimes, irritatingly, he was up even earlier than that, depending on how long he napped during the day.

After getting the kids to sleep, Shya stubbornly continuing to sleep in Rann's bed with him, "cause we're gonna be married," she would repeat, Jason was startled when Jyslin collected up a change of clothing and dropped them into a little bag. *Where are you off to?* he asked.

Kellin's, she winked. He invited me over again tonight.

You are married to me, you know, he teased.

We're still getting to know him, so this is good time for us. The sex is fun, I won't deny that, but before and after, we talk, and I'm getting to know him very well. On Draconis and when they first came here, he was having sex with us more or less out of courtesy, though he certainly didn't mind because he thinks we're sexy, she laughed. *We were just buddy sex like how that guard sleeps with him when Dahnai's not home. But now we're getting to know him, becoming his friends, and that takes communication and time. We want to be his friend, love, because you're close to Dahnai, that way we feel like she's being equal in giving Kellin to us as much as she takes you from us. Remember, it's about sharing when it comes to these kinds of relationships, love. We share you with Dahnai, and we damn well expect her to share Kellin with us, as much as she expects us to share Tim with her, as far as the non-amu aspects of our relationship goes. I'm sure you noticed that Dahnai spent most of her time here with Tim and Symone. She was feeling them out, getting to know them, which is important since she's your amu dorai and Symone is your amu dozei. Besides, you have more than just me,* she grinned at him. *You can always go next door, or just fish the strip for a playmate if you're that hard up,* she retorted playfully. *I seem to recall some threats the twins made,* she laughed.

They're not ready yet, he answered lightly. *When they're ready, they'll come get me. If I go looking for them, I'll ruin the whole thing for them. I have to keep playing hard to get until they catch me.*

You do understand us, she laughed, nodding in understanding. *Alright, I'll see you in the morning, love,* she told him, kissing him on the cheek almost chastely, then she licked her lips in anticipation. *And if you get that horny, just go harass Symone, or troll the beach. I guarantee you that any girl you corner out there will almost fall over herself trying to get you home before you change your mind,* she winked. *Well, except maybe Temika, Maya, and Songa. They have husbands, and Temika's a fuckin' prude.*

If I get that desperate, I need to have myself medically examined, he chuckled.

Pft, men can't go more than a couple of days without sex before they get bitchy, she grunted mentally. *I've told you that before. You get really cranky if I don't pop your pod at least every other day,* she teased. *So, consider the playground open, love. If all else fails, call Aura. I'm sure she'll run down here. You know how hot she is, how horny she makes you,* she taunted, sending his own memories of Aura back at him, images, sensations, and feelings that he had shared with her, and now she shot back at him.

Stop that, he chided, which made her laugh delightedly. *Oh, go on with you, evil woman! Kellin deserves you!*

"Yes, he does," she purred aloud, kissing Jason playfully on the end of his nose, then turning and sauntering victoriously from the bedroom.

Jason did end up with a bedmate that night, but not one that Jyslin would expect. Shya wandered into his bedroom right before he was about to go to bed. "What's wrong, pippy?" he asked her. She ambled in, and he picked her up and put her on his knee.

"My head hurts, Uncle Jason," she told him. "And I keep hearing these strange things inside my head."

"Yes, well, sometimes you get them just after your talent wakes up," he told her gently. "And the strange sounds, that might be the kids around that haven't expressed yet. Did Aunt Jyslin teach you how to close your mind?"

She nodded. "I'm doing that, but I'm still hearing it," she said. "There, I just heard it again!" Jason hadn't heard anyone sending. "What did you hear, pippy? Could you make out any words?"

"Not really, just this strange, well, *feeling*. I dunno how to explain it."

"Can you try to send it?" he asked.

She nodded, then closed her eyes and sent to him. Her sending was very slow and clumsy, which was understandable since she just learned how to send a couple of days ago.

No wonder she couldn't understand it. It was a sexual impulse, and the *texture* of it told him that it was Symone. He opened himself a little to his *amu dozei* and found that she was indeed currently engaged in intercourse with Tim, touching lightly on her mind, so delicately that she probably didn't even notice it. "Ah. I see why it doesn't make any sense to you. That's something you'll understand when you're older."

"Oh. 'Kay," she told him. "Now I'm hearing something else." *No, I don't think so,* she sent to him, in a mental voice approximating Surin's, sending him the memory of what she heard.

Jason blinked, looking at her. *Dera!* he called.

Yes, your Grace?

Who's sending privately right now?

I heard Surin a little bit ago, and Tim and Symone are... occupied, she answered immediately. *At least those close enough to you to matter.*

Jason laughed. Holy fuck, Shya was a *listener*! Good God, how useful that would be for an Empress... but that would be even more useful to Rann as the next Grand Duke Karinne, his own wife a listener! "My goodness, little pippy, but are you full of surprises!" he laughed, kissing her on the forehead. *Dera, can you come to my room, please? We need you.*

I'm on the way, your Grace, but I'm afraid I'm off duty right now. I was just about to go to bed.

That's fine, just throw on a robe or something and get up here.

"What do you need Miss Dera for?" she asked.

"For you, pippy," he smiled. "Sergeant Dera can help you tune out what you're hearing, because she can hear it too."

"She can? Good, I thought there was something wrong with me!" she said in relief.

Dera arrived just a moment later, since her room was behind Jason's house, behind the poolhouse in the small barracks-like building for the guards that was near the gate leading out of the strip. She was wearing nothing but a pair of panties, having decided that answering his call quickly trumped getting dressed. "Dera," he said with a smile. "I have a little project for you," he told her, patting Shya on the shoulder.

What's the matter, your Highness? she asked Shya gently.

"Dera, Shya is a *listener*," he told her.

Dera gaped at him, then grinned *hugely*. *Are you sure?*

“Pretty sure,” he said. “Shya, see if you can hear this.” *Dera, your panties are cute*, he sent privately to her, but also sending slowly and carefully so Shya could understand him.

“You told Miss Dera her panties were cute,” Shya repeated dutifully.

Dera gaped at her, then laughed wheezingly, a voiceless sound. *You really walked through Trelle’s hair, your Highness!* she sent with admiration. *You are a listener!*

“What is that?”

“You can hear *everyone* sending around you, including those who are sending privately,” Jason explained. “Dera here has special training in the matter, and she can teach you how to tune out what you’re hearing so it doesn’t bother you.”

Dera nodded. *I surely can, your Highness, but it’ll take a few days for you to get the hang of it. Until then, the best thing you can do is totally close yourself up so you can’t hear anything. That’ll make it quiet for you, so you can sleep.*

But then Ranny can’t send to me.

It’s make it quiet so you can sleep or have the voices waking you up all night, Dera told her bluntly. *You and Rann can send tomorrow. Tonight, I think you need some sleep. In the morning, you and I will talk about how to make it quiet, so you don’t hear what’s going on around you unless you want to, okay?*

“Okay, miss Dera,” she said with a nod, rubbing her little head with her fingers. “I just wish my head would stop hurting.”

It will stop once you close yourself up, Dera assured her, *but it may take a little while for the headache to go away. So go ahead, close yourself all up like Aunt Jyslin taught you.*

“I will. But won’t that mean that you can’t talk to me, Miss Dera?”

Dera nodded, but looked to Jason, who spoke in her stead. “But Uncle Jason is here to speak for me if I need it,” he said aloud, repeating her sending. He was about to repeat her next line, but he closed his mouth as bright lights popped in his skull. If interfaces could pick up enough thought to understand commands to operate machinery, how hard would it be to build one that could understand thought enough to convert it into audio, just like his gestalt? The limitation of biogenic computers outside the Generations was that the ones the Karinnes had built that could pick up non-Generation thought patterns could only *receive*, they couldn’t *transmit*. How hard would it be to build an interface for the guards that would speak their thoughts the same way they translated their thoughts into commands for machines?

[Cybi?]

[It could not be done with current interface technology,] she answered immediately. *[Interfaces are not that sensitive. They don’t have the processing power to convert thought into spoken language. As you know, thought in and of itself is not based on any language, it’s based on intent of meaning. The interface would melt trying to make sense of it.]*

[Well, if someone specifically thinks at them the same way they do when forming commands, specifically structuring the thought into a language, will it work?]

[Hmm,] she hummed in his mind. *[That is an intriguing distinction. I think it might work. The work Jyslin has done on the Kizzik interfaces would have to be brought to bear in this situation. She has built a program that might be imported to perform this task, with a little alteration. How well the translation program Jyslin designed could convert command thought into spoken words would determine how effective they are.]*

[Can you play with it and see what you get?]

[I would be happy to, Jason. I’ll have a working theory, software modifications, and a design plan for the interface hardware ready for you in the morning. I’ll have the necessary parts delivered to you, I’m sure you’ll enjoy building it.]

Your Grace? Dera sent curiously

“Sorry, I was working on something of an idea I just had,” he said with a huge smile. “If it works, you *will* be able to talk to Shya tomorrow.”

She tilted her head at him curiously. *I can’t let them regenerate my vocal chords, your Grace. That was part of my oath, and I won’t break it.*

“I won’t ask you to,” he told her. “I think with the advances we’ve made with the Kizzik interfaces, we can design an interface that will let you broadcast interface command thought through an audio speaker, broadcasting your thoughts out loud, so to speak. *That* will let you talk to Shya when she’s closed off.”

Dera gave him a surprised look, then her eyes lit up. *Yes! That just might work, and I would be willing to use it for such a narrow purpose!*

“Huh?”

We made a vow, your Grace, not to speak, she told him. *It’s more than just having our vocal chords removed, it’s a commitment to silence. This audio interface idea is technically a violation of that oath, and I’d never use it unless there was an obvious need like this one. I’ll be breaking one oath to uphold another, to support, nurture, and protect the Imperial family in any way I can. Shya needs my training, and I can’t give her that training as effectively as I could with it, not without you or someone else to relay my training to her. That oath supersedes my vow of silence. For the express purpose of training Princess Shya, I’d use it. I’d never use it otherwise.*

“Oh. Well, that kinda makes the idea pointless, then,” he chuckled ruefully. “If you won’t use them.”

I’ll use it to train Shya, she reminded him with a nod. *I think in certain very special circumstances, it would be permissible as well, I’ll have to ask Captain Aya. She’d have full authority on what we could or could not do with them, she’s our mission commander and the ultimate arbiter of Imperial Guard justice and law among us. It would be her decision.*

“Ah, okay,” Jason nodded. “I’ll talk to Aya about it in the morning, because if this does work, I’d kinda like you girls to have them, just in case you find yourself face to face with a Kizzik.”

Now in that case, Captain Aya might deem them permissible to use, she noted, tapping her finger to her chin. *Since they can’t hear us send, and the lives of our charges might be in the balance and rely on us being able to communicate with the Kizzik.*

“I don’t get what you’re saying,” Shya complained. “I’m only hearing half of it, like I wasn’t woke up.”

“Dera and me were debating a point of her oath,” Jason told Shya. “I’m sorry, pippy, we didn’t mean to exclude you. Now, your headache easing a little?”

“A little,” she answered.

“Well, we’ll just put you right here with me until you feel better,” he told her, picking her up and depositing her in the bed. “Thanks, Dera.”

Any time, your Grace, she smiled.

“By the way, *nice*,” he said, looking her up and down.

She gave him a surprisingly demure smile and gave him a little pose, showing off her athletic form and attractive breasts with surprisingly small, pert nipples. She then came over and kissed Shya good night. *Tell her I’ll see her in the morning*, she sent.

“Dera says she’ll see you tomorrow morning, pippy,” Jason relayed.

“Alright,” Shya said, waving to Dera, who waved back before taking her leave. “Thanks, Uncle Jason,” Shya said as Jason settled into bed with her, then turned off the lights with his gestalt.

“Any time, little love, any time,” he told her, gathering her up into his arms to give her

close, intimate comfort, holding her through her pain and trying to soothe it with his presence.

They weren't alone for long. Rann wandered into his room about ten minutes after Dera left, and wordlessly climbed up into bed with him. Jason collected his son up as well, and felt in complete harmony with the universe, laying there with his son and a little girl he was starting to love as much as his own, a little Imperial Princess with quite a few little surprises hidden up her sleeve.

Shya, a listener. God, Dahnai was going to explode with pride.

Jason was just glad Dahnai betrothed Shya to Rann *before* she knew about this. If she tried to break the betrothal now, Shya would make her life hell, because she was absolutely set on marrying Rann, even at the tender age of five.

He did need to break the news to her. *[Cybi, get me Jinaami.]*

[One moment, Jason.] He waited for a few minutes, listening to Rann and Shya's breathing, until Jinaami's voice communed through his gestalt. *[This is Jinaami, your Grace. What may I do for you?]*

[I need you to go to Dahnai and ask her to isolate herself so I can contact her with absolute secrecy. Can you do this?]

[Easily, your Grace. We are both aboard the Aegis right now.]

[Really? I thought you'd be in the palace.]

[The Empress has made this ship her temporary base of operations, to further demonstrate her intent to carry out war against Dorrane and Shovalle should they defy her,] Jinaami told him with utter seriousness, despite the fact that she knew that was a total lie. Kimdori and their games of secrets. *[Given my involvement in this game, the Empress deigned to bring me aboard because she still needs me.]*

True, she still needed the Kimdori to relay messages, so she needed Jinaami.

[Well, if she's still on the Aegis, I guess I don't really need your help after all,] he laughed. *[Sorry to disturb you, my friend.]*

[Oh, to speak to a friend and cousin is never a bother, your Grace,] she answered lightly.

[Cybi, could you hack me into Dahnai's interface please? She has to be wearing a standard one to function on the ship, and I don't think she knows how to work the comm function of the standard interface, we never showed it to her.]

[One moment, Jason. Go ahead and commune, she'll hear you audibly.]

[Dahnai, if you speak aloud I'll hear you.]

[Wow, I didn't know the normal interfaces had the same kind of functionality,] Dahnai laughed over communion. *[What can I do for you, babe?]*

[Are you alone?]

[I can be in about ten seconds,] she told him. *[I'm walking to my cabin right now.]*

[Tell me when you are.]

Jason spent the time waiting stroking back Shya's hair, which made her sigh in her sleep and cuddle against Rann a little more. He marveled at the miracle that was a child, and how complete they could make a man's life, even children not his own. He had to admit it... he loved his little daughter-in-law to be. *[Alright, I'm alone, babes. What's up?]*

[I have interesting news for you,] he told her. *[It seems that Shya had a reason for expressing first.]*

[Well? What is it?]

[She's a listener, hon,] he told her lightly. *[And we proved it. We're absolutely sure.]*

There was a long silence, and then Dahnai laughed delightedly just after giving a whoop. *[Trelle's garland!]* she finally exclaimed. *[How did you find out?]*

[She was hearing private sending, and thank God she came to me about it first, she thought something was wrong. I told Dera about it, and Dera's going to teach her how to screen it out starting tomorrow.]

[Demir's sword, am I glad I sent Dera to Rann,] she said with a laugh. *[I thought a listener might be necessary for Rann's protection. It's just blind luck there's a listener there to train my daughter! My daughter, a listener! I, I don't want to believe it! Sometimes I think you're getting the better of our bargain every day, babes,]* she laughed ruefully. *[Not only do you get my daughter, you get a listener! I should break the betrothal to keep her.]*

[Shya would kill you.]

[She would,] Dahnai agreed with a laugh. *[But, I'm getting your daughter in return, so I guess that's a fair trade,]* she told him playfully.

[That's our daughter, woman,] Jason countered.

[Well, she'd better be as good as Shya, or I'm decreeing judgment against you for breach of contract,] she teased.

[Yeah, yeah. I'm gonna go ahead and go to sleep, hon, I've had a long day. I just wanted to pass along the good news.]

[Thanks, babes. Have a good night.]

[Have a good whatever it is you're having right now.]

[Morning,] she teased.

[Whatever,] Jason cut the connection and settled in, draping his arm protectively over both children, more than happy to share his bed with these two little visitors.

Things got much more serious as the days passed, however. There was a lot to do, because there were two major operations looming over them, the installation of the interdictors and then the attack on the Consortium fleet.

But, there were small issues that also needed attention, too, and Jason attended to one of them the morning after finding out Shya's little secret. Cybi had indeed developed a prototype for a command thought audio broadcaster, and Jason received the special parts for it, hot-grown from the Shimmer Dome over the night, and he spent the pre-dawn hours down in his basement lab building the new interface, wearing nothing but a thin thigh-length robe that did absolutely nothing to cover what wasn't shown in polite human company when he was sitting down, which really wasn't worn to conceal so much as it was worn to provide him with a pair of pockets near his waist. The translator module would be an add-on device to a standard interface, very small, that he decided would attach to the interface just over the left ear, and would also use the interface's own audio speaker rather than build another one. The device would be carrying only what hardware and software it needed to perform its core function and relying on the interface for the audio speaker and also give it the ability to have its software updated remotely using the interface as a communication device. It would perform no other function, making it a small removeable device the guards could put on when they needed it and then take off when they didn't, so as to preserve their oaths and remove temptation. Once he got it built, he summoned one of his dogwatch guards, Hara, to test it. "Think at it the same way you issue commands with an interface, and it *should* translate your command thought into audio," he explained.

Really? Why are you building these? she asked curiously, taking the tiny, hearing-aid sized device from him.

"So you have a way to communicate with the Kizzik in an emergency," he answered. "Plus, Dera's going to need one to train Shya. Shya's a listener, Hara."

Really? That little girl truly walked through Trelle's hair! she sent with delight. *How does it work?*

Jason explained how it worked to her, and she touched it to the top of her interface, and removed her hand to leave it there. She put a single finger to her interface and nodded to Jason. *Here goes*, she announced.

What the interface produced was a strange garbled sound, unintelligible.

Jason laughed. “Well, it can’t always work on the first try,” he smiled. “Lemme link your interface to my lab computer and we’ll analyze what’s going on. It might be something we can smooth out by tweaking the code a little bit.”

Hara helped him get a lot of data on the device’s operation, and he spent nearly a half hour going over it, with Hara looking over his shoulder. “Yeah, I think it’s software, and code was never my strong suit,” he noted. *Jys! Wake up!*

What? she asked.

I need your expertise. Throw something on and come down to the lab.

Give me a few minutes. I wasn’t sleeping, and I can’t leave right now or Kel is going to strangle me.

Why?

Would you like it if I left you hanging right when I was about to get you off during a blow-job? she asked pointedly. *I’ve got him primed and ready to come, so it won’t be long.*

Good lord woman, get some sleep already, he accused.

She sent him her amusement. *We got to sleep early, and you know I’m a morning girl*, she purred at him.

Hara hung around while they waited for Jyslin to finish, chatting idly with him. Hara was a dedicated dogwatch guard, the shift Sergeant and commander of the night watch, tasked with patrolling the strip during the midnight hours. She preferred night watch because she was from Frena Prime, which was a mineral rich desert planet so close to its white star that daylight hours were actually damagingly bright to Faey eyes, brilliant sunlight reflecting off the white sand that dominated the planet, so the planet operated on a nocturnal cycle both to avoid the bright light and also to evade the 130 degree Fahrenheit daytime temperatures. The planet had two moons on alternating cycles so one was full when the other was new, which illuminated the night hours with enough light to be considered twilight here on Karis. Hara’s eyes were sensitive to light as a result, and her nocturnal cycle combined with that made her perfect for commanding the night watch. When Jyslin did finally show up, wearing nothing but a thigh-length robe not belted well enough, leaving her left breast hanging out of it and the bottom edges parting like a curtain to proudly display her trimmed red pubic hair, she leaned down and tried to kiss Jason, which he blocked with an interposing hand. “Not when I know where that mouth’s been, I’m not,” he said aloud, which made her laugh lightly.

What’s up? she asked.

Jason explained what he was doing quickly via sending, and showed her the results of the prototype. *This is clearly a software issue, and that’s your specialty, love. You wrote this program. What can you do with it?*

Hmm, I think I see the problem already, she said, pointing at a block of code. *This is all wrong.*

Well, fix it, woman, he ordered with a smile.

Jyslin sat down beside him and accessed the computer via her interface, a finger to it, then brought up the holographic keyboard to use both mind and hands to rewrite the block of code quickly and efficiently, far faster than she could with typing and using her hands to guide the program. Her hands added the code, her mind put it where it needed to go. It took her about ten minutes to do it, and Jason and Hara both watched as she rearranged some lines of code, added some, and removed others. Jason often marveled at Jyslin’s very logical and ordered

mind, which made her so good at coding, since she could keep all the individual pieces of it organized in her mind and then put it together like a puzzle. *You know, I think I could adapt this to allow us to input words into computers so we wouldn’t even have to type*, she noted. *Actually, I’m sure I could. And it’d be all software, we’d just have to update the control code in the interfaces. Just think, no more typing, no more being limited to very basic command thought instructions to interact with machines. We could get more control over computers for sure, and it would sure help the riggers and pilots, they wouldn’t have to split their attention between speaking aloud to communicate and keep their minds focused on command thought to operate their vehicles. We could work with the computers even faster*, she noted. *And be able to communicate using interfaces silently, by thinking at them and having it transmit the command thought via gravband or Teryon comm.*

Hell, go for it, love, Jason told her. *You know more about this translation system than anyone else. You’d be the one to do it.*

Sounds like I’m gonna be busy today, she noted with an audible chuckle. They watched her for about twenty more minutes as she scanned the rest of the program, made a few small changes, then she saved her work and then updated it. *There, update that thing and try it again.*

Alright, Jason nodded, uploading the new software into the tiny device, then handing it to Hara. *Give it a shot.*

Hara attached it to her interace again, then looked at them as audio came from the speaker, in Hara’s mental voice. *“I steak believe you duck it.”*

Jason and Jyslin burst into laughter, and Hara grinned as she handed it back. *Try again*, she sent lightly. *That’s not what I said. That was funny, though.*

Clearly this is going to take longer than I thought, she frowned. *Hara, can you send some breakfast down here? I don’t think Ayama’s awake yet. Me and Jayce have some work to do.*

I’ll bring your toothbrush as well, your Grace, Hara sent impishly as she went to the stairs.

She’ll need it if she wants any kisses from me, Jason declared, to which Jyslin elbowed him in the ribs.

Jason and Jyslin were effectively sidetracked, so much so that they both didn’t even bother getting dressed, Jason and Jyslin wearing similarly short robes. After the strip woke up and started a new day, Jason and Jyslin worked together on this sudden project, even to the exclusion of attending the morning Legion conference, begging off and telling them they were working on something else that had the potential to be very useful. That, naturally, attracted Myleena, and she joined them around 1100. The three of them put their heads together and worked the problem, which eventually required a strip down of both hardware and software and a redesign. Cybi helped tremendously by sending the specs of the components they were literally designing on the spot to the Shimmer Dome, which produced them and sent them by courier as soon as they were done.

By 1530, after lunch and two failed design version prototypes, and after about the ninth version of the software, Jason closed the case on the third prototype, turned it on, uploaded the operating program jyslin had just finished, then handed it to Jyslin. She was the non-Generation who could test the device, as how she would use it would be how everyone else would use it. Generations didn’t need it, since they could commune. *Give it a shot, girl*, Myleena urged.

Jyslin attached it to her interface and blew out her breath. “Here goes,” she said, then she put a finger to her interface. *“The bren in winter sing the mournful song of the departure of their feathered brethren, but rejoice with the first shimmering cyrstals of snow that bring the promise of breaking beaks.”* Jyslin started in surprise, then she laughed. “So close!” she said.

“But it almost translated the whole passage!”

I think we almost got it, Myleena sent eagerly, turning to the display holding the control code. But it's clearly nothing but software now!

I agree, the hardware seems to be working, Jyslin agreed, standing up. Lemme go pee and we'll get to work on it.

It took them about another hour to work the major bugs out, where Jason was more observer than help, since Jyslin and Myleena were much better at coding than he was. When they finished, Jyslin again put the device on her interface, then tried again. *“In the beginning, there was naught but Trelle. Trelle was the totality, the all, the singular being. But Trelle was displeased with the emptiness around her, saying ‘This must not be.’ And so she took her hair and cut it away, and from the strands of her hair the suns and moons and the land was formed. The sight of her creation moved her, and from her eye did a single tear fall, which became the seas abutting the land. She found beauty in her work, but no purpose, so she bent to the task of putting purpose to the land. She pricked her finger, and from the drops of her blood did the creatures who crawl and walk and fly come to be, and she found it good, but not yet as it should be. She touched her finger to her belly and declared ‘from within me shall I bear the Faey, who shall stand in dominion over all.’ And so did she conceive within herself the First Woman, Baala, who was borne from Trelle and then placed on the land which was now hers. “Go forth and rule this land which I have made for you,” Trelle did command unto Baala. And so Baala did as she was commanded, but did so with a heavy heart. ‘Great Trelle, Holy Mother, I am lonely,’ Baala confided. ‘I am always within your eye, but you are not within mine. I am at your touch, but I cannot touch you. Might I have a companion to bring me happiness as I have brought you happiness?’ Trelle responded ‘but I have made you mistress of all, lord over all things. Does this not make you happy that the vulpar and the freba and the greel all give homage to you? Does the vulpar not comfort you when you are sad, or the freba sing to you when you are pensive, or the greel play with you when you are happy?’ And Baala did respond ‘they are but animals, Holy Mother. I cannot speak with them. I would like someone to talk to, Holy Mother, someone like myself.’*

“Moved by Baala’s lament, and seeing that the life which she placed upon the world was ephemereal and without the ability to continue itself, Trelle did move to both provide continuance to the life she had made and also provide Baala with her companion. Trelle did touch her belly once again and conceive inside herself another life. She bore forth Demir, the Consort, Swordbearer, and after finding that he was the complement to herself, the manhood to her womanhood, did she install him into her own domain and take him unto herself as her husband. She joined unto Demir as wife to husband, and thus did she conceive once more within herself Aris, the Child Goddess. Pleased with the natural state of things, so did Trelle proclaim ‘so shall it be for all living things, for there to be a mother, and a father, and for them to join together to bring forth children.’ And so did Trelle take a drop of blood from Demir and touch it to Aris upon her belly, and cause her to conceive a mortal son, the First Man, and did Aris make him complement Baala to be her wise and loving companion. This son did Aris name Baaen, and place him with Baala. ‘Thus you are given what you craved, mortal daughter,’ did Trell proclaim. ‘Aris has given unto you her son to be your husband and your companion, the wisdom to complement your strength, which you must treasure and protect as you protect yourself. Go forth and join to him as wife to husband and conceive new life, as I have ordained it to be as nature intended.’ And so did Demir take up his sword and prick his finger, and from his blood did a male come to be to complement every female of every life which crawled or swam or walked or flew, which Trelle did already create, and did the gods thus establish the natural order of things that Trelle designed.” She smiled

hugely. “I do believe it works,” she declared. “That was the first four groupings of First Hymn of Trelle, perfectly translated.”

I’d say it does, Myleena agreed, clapping her hands. Okay, Jayce, let’s redesign the standard interface to include this hardware while Jys works on adapting the code to use on a computer, so she never has to go through that dreadful chore of typing ever again.

Push off, bitch, Jyslin sent teasingly.

You know, this is pretty modular, Jason noted, pointing at the schematic of the design. If we pull the biogenic sensor and adapt it as just a node, we could probably just plug it into an interface board. That’s the only piece of hardware that’s not already in the interface, the sensor can just use interface processors, power, and memory to do its job.

But there’s no space.

Sure there is, right here, he noted, pointing. We pull this modular memory node and replace it with the new biogenic sensor. The interface only loses ten gigastings of memory in the bargain, since we designed that socket for possible upgrades in the first place, and just stuck a memory chip there to use it. That’s a fair tradeoff, since we won’t have to produce a whole new line of interfaces, we can just produce a node and plug it in. And look, it’s right here behind this access panel and beside the stick jack, so the upgrade will take a tech all of fifteen seconds. Open, swap, close, done. And since we’re gonna redesign the whole thing when we upgrade to interfaces that work on broadcast power, this’ll keep things simple and let us focus on the new design instead of having to produce two new interface models.

Hmm. I think you’ve got a point there, she agreed. I hate to lose the memory, but it’s a viable temporary fix until we get the new interfaces out. Besides, if people bitch about the loss of memory, we’ll just tell them to use the new functionality to sync their interfaces with their home computers and dump some of the useless crap they’re keeping in their interfaces to their computers. Really, I don’t think Kumi needs to keep all those gigastings of porn in her interface just so she can dump it to a holographic enabled computer and look at it. And she’s not the only one that keeps stupid shit in her interface memory.

No doubt, Jason agreed with a chuckle. I’d hate for you to see what I keep in my gestalt.

Knowing you, Jayce? Porn, she teased.

Please, he snorted. I don’t need porn, I’m married. That is way sexier than porn, he declared, pointing at Jyslin, who preened just a little bit under the complement.

Yeah, but porn’s about variety, a little spicing up, Myleena winked.

Clearly you’ve never slept with Symone, he sent blandly.

Obviously not, she grinned in reply.

Besides, I don’t need porn to spice things up. I have lots of options, he teased.

Yeah, yeah, lucky you’re a guy, Myleena accused. If I was a handsome guy with a big dick, I’d have my choice of banging any girl on the strip too.

Oh, don’t paint yourself the martyr, woman, I’ve seen that long line of guys filing in and out of your house. You do live next door to me, you know.

She laughed. Alright, so I’m a popular girl, she winked. I was trying to get pregnant, you know. Girls kinda have to fuck guys to get pregnant.

I have heard something along those lines, Jason sent dryly.

I think you have some experience in the matter, Myleena grinned at him.

It took them about three more hours to adapt the sensor to a modular node design, and once they were done, they sent it to the Shimmer Dome so they could produce a prototype, which they’d send back to Jason’s house in the morning, given it was nearly 2100 and they’d been working on the project literally all day. Ayama brought them dinner, Rann and Shya came down to visit them a while, and then Jyslin finished her software program. *Well, that’s all we*

can do until we have the prototype and we can test it, she announced.

I think we can knock off now, Myleena said with a yawn, and she stretched. *But we did some good work.*

That we did, Jason agreed. *We'll see how well it works tomorrow.*

As long as Jys coded the software to let command thought emulate computer operations, we're good.

Of course I remembered it. I'm sure you remembered to add a power bridge circuit to your node module, Jyslin taunted in reply.

Maybe tomorrow you two can wear normal clothes, she grinned. *Really, Jys, you live with him. You don't need to go around with an open robe showing him what he gets every night.*

He hasn't been getting it lately, she laughed. *I've been with Kellin the last couple of nights, getting to know him better, now that Symone's finally letting me have him, and he hasn't bent me over during the day either. Far as I know, he's gone without, unless he's bent Ayama over the kitchen counter or lured one of the guards into our bedroom and raped her.*

Oh please, Jason scoffed.

No wonder he's so cranky, Myleena said, looking at him with a sly smile. *I think you'd better give him a little tonight.*

I'm going to Kellin's again tonight, she answered. *If he wants some, he'll have to get it early, or he'll have to go get it from someone else.*

Don't look at me, Myleena laughed, putting her hands in her lap defensively. *Ewww!!!*

Like any man would want you, Myli, Jason retorted with fake bravado.

I think Danelle proves that I could get at least one man to come in me, she sent nastily.

Drugs. Alcohol. Telepathic domination. Probably a blindfold was involved as well, he sent in a dry manner, which caused her to slap him on the shoulder even as she laughed.

Ayama, we're done, can you start dinner please? Jyslin asked.

I have it waiting to put into the oven, my Lady, Ayama answered. *It'll be ready in fifteen minutes. We're having baked groa and chicken casserole with baked potatoes and toasted briv. An all-oven meal for the Dukal family on the go,* she added with mild amusement.

Sounds good, Ayama, thanks. Rann! We're finished!

Yay! he answered happily. *What were you doing that took so long?*

Working on something to help our guards, she answered. *But then we realized we can make it help everyone else too, so it took longer than we expected. We have to work on it more tomorrow, sweetie, I hope you don't mind.*

It wasn't bad, me and Danelle and Shya played most of the day, at least after we finished our lessons with Miss Ryn and Shya finished her sending lessons with Miss Dera, he answered. *They wouldn't let me stay while they did them!*

How did those go, Dera? Jason asked her privately.

Very well, actually, she answered. *Her Highness is a very strong telepath, and what's more important, she learns quickly. I should have her trained in how to screen out private sendings hopefully by tomorrow, by the day after tomorrow at the latest. It's actually not that hard to screen out private sendings, it's a different way of closing the mind that lets us hear open sending but ignore private sending not directed specifically at us. I just hope she can keep control of herself. Such a young child with the ability to listen can get into lots of mischief. I should know, I did,* she admitted with a mental laugh.

Good, sweetie. How was your lesson? Jyslin asked.

It was okay, Miss Ryn was teaching Danelle how to send fast, and teaching me how to send privately to more than one person at a time. It's not all that hard.

That's great, sweetie, Jyslin commended him. *Now wash up for dinner, all three of you!*

Yes, Mommy.

Okay, Mommy Jyslin, Danelle replied.

Yes, Aunt Jyslin, Shya answered as well.

Room for one more, guys? Myleena asked.

No, Myli, we're gonna make you go out to eat, Jason sent blandly.

They went up for dinner, which Jason and Myleena spent more or less catching up on their status reports, since they'd been busy with something unexpected today. The Legion had moved along quite well without them, sending a report on their discussion and their ideas posed that day. The interdictors were on schedule, Dahnai was on schedule, the Kimdori were on schedule, the four border systems had no complaints and were smoothly on schedule, the Collective had indeed managed to successfully reproduce the Consortium armor earlier in the day as Sk'Vrae promised, so that was on schedule, the farming effort on Exile was on schedule, the restoration of the Exiled to their city was on schedule, the assimilation of the Exiled staying on Karis was on schedule, and everything looked to be right where it should be. The house had gotten along just fine without Jason today, which was a good thing to him. And on his side, he'd had a great deal of fun sitting in the basement with Myleena and his wife, doing what they loved, which was working on an engineering problem. And he'd spend the rest of the evening with his wife and son and Shya. All in all, it had been a very good day.

After dinner, Myleena took Danelle home with her, and Jason spent the evening first sitting in front of the piano, showing Shya what it was about, then all of them played a game of Seven Circles, then Kellin, Maer, and Sirri came over to visit for a while. The kids all played with each other as the adults engaged in conversation, but Jason had to smile inwardly to himself because Kellin just couldn't stop staring at Jyslin. She was still wearing the same robe she'd had on when she came over, neither of them had bothered to change all day, and the way she was sitting opened the robe's bottom and just showcased her red strip of pubic hair, beautiful and glorious against her blue skin. Kellin was sitting in the chair to the side of the couch where she and Jason were sitting, and he kept looking down at her red pubic hair constantly, proving that sometimes nudity wasn't half as sensual or sexy as clothing to accent that nudity, for her sitting there naked wouldn't have been half as enticing as her sitting there with her robe parted to reveal something it usually concealed, despite the fact that Kellin had seen it quite a few times before.

She certainly didn't leave him hanging long. "Alright, let's get back to the guest house," Kellin announced, standing up. "We have bathtime and evening lessons to do yet, kidlets. So let's hop!" he called. "Want to help with the kids tonight, Jys?"

"Certainly," she smiled. "Rann, Shya, would you like to sleep over with Maer and Sirri tonight?" she asked.

Sure! Rann sent with a nod.

As long as I get to sleep with Ranny, Shya cautioned.

Jyslin laughed. "Of course, pippy," she nodded. "Alright then, let's go," she called, clapping her hands.

And just like that, he was left alone in the house. Without so much as even an invitation to go himself!

He felt just a tiny bit of jealousy that he was being excluded, but that passed so fast it made him laugh. Jealousy? What did he have to be jealous about? Jyslin was helping out Kellin, and still getting to know him. Sure, this would be three days in a row they hadn't had sex, but it certainly wasn't her fault. If he'd really been insistent, she would certainly have taken him upstairs and given him anything he wanted before she went to the guest house, she'd even

made a point of reminding him of that down in the basement. She wasn't denying him anything, he hadn't been aggressive enough to go after it. And it wasn't as if he was out in the cold. All he had to do was go next door and he could have all of Symone he wanted.

He decided to do just that, and told Ayama he was leaving for the night before leaving through the sliding glass door to cross the deck and go to Tim and Symone's house, coming over without announcing himself first, which they never minded. But as he closed the door, he glanced down towards the beach and saw a lone figure standing out there. It was Yana, wearing a half shirt and a bikini bottom and with a sheer shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Curious as to what she was doing, he padded up to the rail of the deck and sent to her. *What are you doing, hon?* he asked her.

Me? Oh, nothing, she answered. *I was taking a walk, and stopped to enjoy the view.*

Ah. Where's Kyri?

She's at home, doing her math homework, she answered. *Did Jyslin take Rann to Kellin's tonight?*

Yeah, they're gonna have a sleepover, he answered. *Jyslin is still getting to know Kellin, so she's been over there for the last few days.*

Yana was a powerful telepath, and she was trained enough to catch many of the very subtle nuances that many other telepaths missed. She glanced up the beach, looking at him. *You seem a little lonely.* Behind her thought, however, was a very subtle invitation, deliberately placed.

I guess I felt a little lonely when the left, he admitted, accepting that invitation with the same subtlety.

Kyri, we're going to stay over at your father's tonight, she called. *When you finish your homework, come over.*

Alright, Mommy, she answered.

Yana padded up the beach and then up the stairs. When she reached him, she put her hand on his forearm. *Do you want to take a bath? Kyri can join us when she finishes her homework.*

I'd love that, he answered, putting his arm around her and, instead of going over to Tim and Symone's, he instead went back inside with Yana.

It was almost dawn.

Jason yawned and tightened his hold on Yana just a little bit, which made her sigh in her sleep and shift a little. Yana had been more than happy to fill Jyslin's shoes, and she'd admitted to him that she'd been secretly pining for it last night. Yana still hadn't found herself a good man, though she was still looking, and had carried warm memories of her affair with Jason ever since Kyri was conceived. Yes, she'd had a few dalliances with some men in Karsa, and had had a nice relationship with Evin, but still hadn't found love yet. Generation men weren't quite as afraid of her as most other men were, less intimidated by her incredible telepathic power, so she'd been able to find some willing men to engage in casual relationships. But they still didn't trust her quite the way Jason did, so she still found her brief affair with him to be her most pleasurable and satisfying, and therefore the one she wanted rekindled the most. And now that Jason was willing to give himself to the strip girls when they wanted or needed him, she could have what she wanted. She knew she could never have Jason the way Jyslin and Symone did, and she could accept that. What he could give her, though, was enough.

Jason himself was happy about that. He didn't love Yana, not romantically, but he could admit that he found her very sexy and was attracted to her, much as he was attracted to Aura. Where Aura reminded him of Dahnai, Yana reminded him more of Jyslin when she was feel-

ing demure and kittenish. Yana had *no* problems getting him to perform in bed, and the night had been intensely erotic and satisfying.

Yana shifted again, then the changing in her breathing and the gentle, intimate brush against his mind told him she was awake. *Mmmm, morning,* she sent lazily, holding the back of the hand he had draped over her side. *Sleep well?*

Very, he answered, kissing the back of her shoulder. *Thank you for a wonderful night, Yana. I should thank you,* she sent lightly in reply. *You surprised me a little,* she added with a laugh. *You were never so aggressive before!*

Well, three days without a bedmate can do that to a guy used to having sex every day, he sent dryly. *It wasn't because they were holding it back from me, either. Jys and Symone have been getting to know Kellin, and I guess I wasn't feeling bandy enough to initiate things, at least until last night,* he added, kissing the nape of her neck.

She giggled charmingly. *So happy to be have been of service, your Grace.*

Stop that, he chided, which made her laugh.

Mommy? Daddy? Can I come in? Kyri asked from the other side of the door.

Of course you can, dove, Yana answered immediately.

Kyri opened the door and padded up to the bed. Yana pulled Kyri up into bed with them and laid on her back with Kyri on her chest as Jason kissed her noisily on the cheek, which made her giggle. *Morning, morning!* she sent happily. *I'm so glad to see you together!*

Well, your father needed us last night, dove, Yana told her with a smile, smoothing Kyri's blond hair back from her face.

I was starting to think you didn't love Mommy, she sent accusingly at Jason.

Jason laughed. *I can love your mother without having private time with her, you silly thing,* he chided. *But from now on, when your mother wants private time with me, I'll see that she gets it.*

Good. I don't see why Rann's mommy gets to be the one that lives with you, Daddy.

I'm married to Rann's mother, dove, Jason told her pointedly. *I'm not married to your mother, or Zachary's mother, or Sora's mother, or Aran's mother. Mommy Jyslin is my wife, so she gets to live with me.*

It's not fair. Why don't you marry my mommy?

I can only be married to one mommy, dove, and Mommy Jyslin got me first, Jason chuckled audibly. *But just because I'm married to Mommy Jyslin, that doesn't mean I don't care about your mother. I care about her very much,* he declared, looking gently down at Yana, which made her smile shyly at him. *If I didn't, well, you'd never have been born! You are the proof that I love your mother, you silly thing,* he told her, tickling her sides and making her giggle. *Now, enough silly questions when there's a little girl here for me to torture and eat up!*

Kyri squealed when Jason grabbed her and held her out at arm's length, then laughed uncontrollably when he razed her tummy, then tickled her mercilessly as she squirmed away from his seeking hands, then made her gasp and laugh with delight when he pushed her up into the air with this telekinetic power, bouncing her up and down and then making her fly around the room. "Silly girl about to come in for a landing. Oh no, she's going to crash!" he gasped, and she screamed when he turned her head first towards the bed. "Mayday, mayday, call the fire department, she's goin' down!" he screamed, turned her over on her back, then let her go, letting her flop about a foot onto the bed, which made her scream in surprise, then laugh. She rolled over and jumped up onto his stomach, wrapped her little arms around his neck, and kissed him.

I love you, Daddy! she declared, kissing him over and over.

I love you too, silly girl, he answered, kissing her on the cheek. *But where's the love for*

Mommy, huh? he teased.

She laughed, slid over, and kissed Yana. *I love you too, Mommy!*

I'm so glad to hear that, Yana sent slyly, patting her on the backside.

Uh oh, I gotta go pee, Kyri announced. Yana set her down, and she rushed for the bathroom.

Jason gathered up Yana again, holding her back against him, sliding his hand up and down her stomach. *If we ever did anything right, it's in that bathroom trying to get up onto the toilet seat,* he sent wryly, watching as she struggled to seat herself on the adult-sized commode. *Clearly, I need to put a stepstool in there,* he noted, picking up his daughter and depositing her on the toilet carefully with his power, which made here giggle and wave to them.

Yana chuckled. *She was the greatest gift you've ever given me, Jason, and I thank both my gods and your god every day that she's in my life.*

Jayce, love, I'm home! Jyslin announced. *Rann and Shya are staying with Kellin today. Where are you?*

Upstairs, Jason answered. *Back to reality,* he noted to Yana, which made her laugh.

I'm quite happy with the fantasy we had last night, she told him with a wicked little tilt to her thoughts.

Stop that, he chided, swatting her on the rump playfully, which made her laugh again.

Jyslin came in through the open door, took one look at the bed, and smiled. *It's about fuckin' time,* she declared. *What took you two so long!*

I think Jason has more willpower than you thought, Jys, Yana laughed.

Well, I'm glad to see it, she said. *Was it worth the wait, Yana?*

Oh, yes, she purred in reply.

I'm glad we agree about that, she chuckled, then saw Kyri file out of the bathroom. *Kyri-baby! How's my big girl?* she asked, sweeping Kyri up into her arms and spinning her around the room.

I'm okay, Mommy Jyslin, she said. *Do you think Rann will mind that I slept in his room last night?*

Not a bit, dove, not a bit! Did you have fun last night?

Yah, me and Mommy and Daddy had a nice bath, and then Daddy played the piano for me, then they read me a story after tucking me in, then they came in here and woke me up doing private time, but that's okay because it made Mommy very happy, she answered.

It makes me happy that it made her happy, Jyslin told her with a smile, bouncing her on her hip and kissing her on the cheek. *Rann and Empress Dahnai's children are going to Karsa today, because Prince Kellin wants to visit some of the historical sites. If it's alright with your mother, I can ask Prince Kellin if he can take you too.*

Oooh, can I Mommy? Pleeeeze?

That's fine, as long as he'd like some company, Yana answered. *I've never been to those sites either. May I come along?*

I'm sure he'd love to have someone who knows the city along with him, Jyslin laughed. *Kellin, Yana and her daughter offered to go with you. Interested?*

Sure am! he answered. *The more the merrier!*

Then count me in! Sheleese called. *Bria could use some culturing up!*

Sometimes I'm amazed that poor girl of yours can speak Faey, Maya teased.

Oh, push off, Maya! Sheleese retorted.

Notice how quickly Sheleese shirks off the Legion meeting today, Myri noted.

Can it, sarge! Sheleese shot back.

That's General to you, potato-tits! Myri snapped, which made Jason, Jyslin, and Yana explode into laughter.

I'm not shirking, I'm just not much help, Sheleese announced. *I can be more help with Prince Kellin and the kids than I am being lost in the meeting. And I notice you didn't jump Yana for shirking!*

Yana doesn't slack like a certain squad clown does, Myri replied tauntingly.

Well, you can kiss my blue ass, Myri, Sheleese declared.

As bony as it is? I'd break my nose, Myri retorted. *When you're getting some, does the guy have to put a pillow between you and him to prevent bruising?*

At least I get some, bitch! Do your boyfriends charge you by the hour, or is it a flat nightly rate? Sheleese snapped.

Your dad never charges me, Myri replied smoothly. *But then again, I only do him because your mom's such a crusty old skank. I feel sorry for him.*

You should know all about being crusty, you old battle-axe! How'd your face get all dried up and leathery, Myri? *Give head to a Jakkan?*

Is it always like this around here? Kellin asked, a bit surprised.

More or less, Kumi answered cheekily. *It's never boring around here, Kellin. Wanna come watch Myri beat up Sheleese? She won't last long. She never does.*

Oh, FUCK YOU, you little pissball! Sheleese threatened. *You couldn't win a fight if we put you in Crusader armor and put you up against a corpse!*

Just another average day on the strip, Jason sent with a mild aplomb that made everyone on the strip break down laughing, even Sheleese. Jason kissed Yana on the cheek and patted her flat stomach, then sat up. *Guess it's time to make the donuts.*

I have never understood that term, Jyslin complained.

It's archaic English slang, just leave it, Jason chuckled. He slid out of bed and stretched, and chuckled when two sets of appreciative eyes greeted him. *The next show is at two o'clock,* he teased as he ambled to the bathroom.

Oh, let's buy some tickets, Jys, Yana remarked.

Buy? I own that little sideshow, Jyslin smirked.

I hope that means you split the profits.

Only when I let him out of his cage, Jyslin giggled.

As the days passed, the jokes ended, and the seriousness began.

As the interdictors neared completion, the KMS drilled on the operation to move them in and set them up. A single ship would be performing the operation at each of the 107 systems that would be protected by an interdictor, being the 77 systems of the Imperium and the 30 systems of the Collective. The fact that the KMS no longer *had* 107 ships was a slight problem, but nothing that couldn't be overcome. They had 44 operational ships, but it wasn't the KMS that was towing the interdictors into place, it would be the Imperial Navy, carrying a Karinne dropship holding a technical team that would activate the interdictor. The interdictors would be delivered via hyperspace jump to Makan, and from there, Imperial vessels would tow them through the gates, one to each system.

The interdictors and Stargates being taken to the border systems and Collective were a trickier matter, and that was where the KMS would come in. KMS destroyers and cruisers would be delivering the interdictors to the Collective, since they could jump hyperspace in real time, but the Stargates were a more delicate matter. They would carefully coordinate with the Imperial Navy so they performed the operation at the same time the navy was moving interdictors, and they would deliver the Stargates by towing them with a hyperspace jump. They had to deliver 34 Stargates, but they only had 44 ships, and only four of them were big enough to tow a Stargate through hyperspace... which was a problem. The Karinnes didn't have enough ships big enough to two Stargates, but the *Imperium and the Collective* did. The

problem there was that their ships could not jump hyperspace in real time, so, to solve that problem, the battleships and command ships of the Imperium and the Collective had *already* picked up the Stargates and jumped out with them, staggering their jumps so they all arrived at their destination systems at exactly the same time, and doing it from Aurigae. The Karinnes assisted by supplying KMS ships in place of the large ships that were tasked to move Stargates, since it was already well known that a single Karinne cruiser had the same firepower and durability as a large battleship from another empire. The *Aegis* and the three battleships would be protecting Draconis, Terra, Aurigae, and Uruma respectively, and unknown to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae, the Kimdori fleet would be on standby and ready to jump to assist, to reveal itself if necessary.

The feeling that war was coming got more pronounced as they approached *I-day*, the day the interdictors went up. Jason, Myleena, and Jyslin finished their work on the fully comprehensive interface, that would let anyone using an interface input complex information into a computer, such as language. They weren't planning on introducing the new interfaces until well after the current situation was resolved, but they did supply the Dukal Guard with the modules, mainly in case they needed to talk to Kizzik. Aya had decreed that the modules could be used in a situation where they had no other way to communicate and had a viable need that dealt with the safety of the Dukal family, but outside of those conditions, they could not use them. The original reason to design them, which was to allow Dera to train Shya, had been forgotten, and hadn't really been necessary, after everything was said and done. Dera trained Shya to screen out private sendings simply by making everyone shut up for a while as she trained her, which gave Shya the peace and quiet she needed to practice the mental exercises Dera taught her until she could close her mind to private sendings when she wanted to do so.

For Jason, the days flew by. He spent the days in conference with the Legion as they finalized their plan to attack the Consortium with a slough of toys, coordinated with Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, and Zaa, and carefully watched the production of the last series of interdictors. It almost seemed that he blinked his eyes, and it was time to put all their plans into action. The first part of the plan took place eight days before the operation, when Dahnai and Sk'Vrae released their decrees that warned all other empires that for two days, the Imperium and Collective would be off limits to all inbound ships so as to conduct joint military exercises in the furtherance of their military alliance, with any inbound ship at risk of destruction. That declaration made the Alliance and the Skaa curious, Zaa's spies reported, but they took no action. And what was more important, the Consortium also seemed not to pay it much attention, mainly because Jason knew that they were more focused on preparing for the arrival of their armada. The cryptic declaration got lost, however, in the sudden political tension within the Imperium, where it looked as if the Imperium was on the verge of erupting into civil war. That was a *much* more effective reason to frighten merchant ships away from the Imperium, the fear that they'd be jumping into a warzone. The game between Semoya and Emae had been *extremely* effective, and had had more benefits than any of them had expected.

It caused some other responses as well. Both the Alliance and the Skaa quietly massed their ships near their Imperium borders, all but salivating over the idea of the Imperium falling into civil war. They could almost smell the victories they could amass when they attacked the Imperium border systems while the Imperium was too busy fighting itself, hoping to do to the Imperium what the Imperium did to the Collective, snip away the border territory during a moment of weakness. They were almost childishly disappointed, Zaa's spies reported, when Dahnai seemed to get control of the situation and force the two largest houses in the Imperium back down, and the Imperium seemed to *slowly* back away from the precipice of

civil war.

The second stage of preparation took place last night. The Stargate linked to Exile was delinked and instead linked to a stargate at Draconis, providing a direct link between the two systems for the operation, and the Imperial ships that would be helping with the interdictor deployment came in last night to be in position and conduct some final drills and simulated exercises. During that time, the Kimdori had decided to move the Stargate in the quasar and the safe landing area as well, just in case, which solved the problem of someone maybe finding out about the quasar gate and trying to jump in. Moving the gate and the shielded area required that anyone coming to Karis had damn well better be expected, else they were gonna get fried when they jumped into the quasar's lethal radiation field. Exile would be unconnected and isolated, out on its own, for the 25.75 hours that it would take for the Karis gate to delink to Exile, link to Draconis, conduct the operation, delink, and then relink to Exile... but that wasn't a problem at all. They'd prepared Exile for a day without transport access to Karis, and there was a sizable Kimdori task force in the system to provide defense, so they'd be fine.

It was a very tense day, the most telling way because Kellin and Dahnai's children, the strip children, husbands, and Temika and Kumi were all evacuated to Kosiginingi that morning, kept on the island and close to the emergency bunker where they would be protected in case of crisis. Everyone else donned their armor and went to work, and that day, that important day, Jason's work put him in the core room in Kosiginingi, the safest place Aya could find for him, in his armor and with the core ready to descend into the mantle at a moment's notice in case disaster struck and somehow the Consortium attacked Karis. Kyva and the KBB squad were guarding him on the island, along with quite a few other Gladiators, Raptors in the air above them, and with a complement of 274 Kimdori ships armed with Karinne weaponry sitting in deep space and ready to move in once the Imperial ships currently in orbit around Karis to tow interdictors left, ready to move in and protect Karis in case of attack.

"Alright, let's get this show on the road," Jason said aloud to the holograms of Dahnai and Zaa, and the image of Sk'Vrae on a holographic monitor. Cybi's holographic projection was behind him, hovering silently over his shoulder, and invisible to everyone else because Cybi controlled the cameras that allowed them to see into the core room. Cybi disguised the core by shrouding the room in darkness to their monitors, making only Jason visible to them. Jason never failed to feel safe here, in the core, with Cybi watching over him almost like a guardian angel. It was here, in this room, where Jason could unleash the full power of the Karinnes and the Generations, here where the true expression of millenia of hard work was realized by his ancestors. Though he could detest their motives, right now, Jason could only be grateful for their efforts, for those thousands of years of dedication to the Program put him and Cybi together at this moment, two halves of a whole that was exponentially stronger than the sum of their parts. "Myri, report."

"All KMS ships are reporting ready," her voice came over his ceiling speaker. "*The interdictors are all tested and operational, they're in position, Imperial ships are in position to tow them, and the Stargates are still on time to be delivered. We are on schedule, your Grace.*"

"Collective ships are in position," Sk'Vrae announced.

"Imperium ships are also in position," Dahnai added.

"I have my children listening at key points in the Alliance and the Skaa Empire," Zaa declared. "If there are any sudden orders, they will hear it and rush to report the fact to me."

"Sounds like we're ready to go," Dahnai announced. "What's the time?"

"Sixteen minutes," Jason answered, looking at the countdown display in the right hand cor-

ner of Sk'Vrae's monitor.

There was little they could do but wait. The four of them were all tensely silent as they watched the time creep by, until they were seven minutes from the beginning of the operation, when Dahnai issued the first command. "Imperial ships, you have authorization. Commence Operation Jigsaw."

"Brood Queen Sk'Vrae commands Collective Defense Forces to begin Operation Jigsaw," Sk'Vrae mirrored.

"Let's play ball, Myri," Jason ordered.

And so it began.

They had rehearsed this exhaustively, and now that it was time to do the real thing, they already had plenty of practice. The first action was at Karis, where the Imperial Navy and the KMS suddenly burst into motion. Each ship was towing an interdicator and carrying a Karinne technical crew that would activate the interdicator when it arrived at its destination. The first ones to leave were the KMS ships, filing through the Stargate in a set order, since those had to jump hyperspace to reach the Collective systems. After them, the Imperial Navy towed interditors through the gate, each ship put in the line based on how far it had to go to get to the Stargate that would take it to its destination. Their practice runs showed that with that order, each ship would reach its Stargate at *exactly* the same time so long as the ship captains obeyed the speed limits set up for the operation. Jason watched that line of 107 ships file out, leaving Karis almost completely devoid of military vessels to protect it. But behind the interdicator, Karis didn't *really* need too much protection.

The three rulers and Jason watched on their personal tactical displays as a graph of Draconis came up showing the dispensation of every interdicator, showing them spreading around the planet en route to the 76 Stargates that led to other systems, as the 30 interditors bound for the Collective all moved towards the Aurigae gate, which had only been up and running for about two weeks. Right on schedule, a squadron of 14 Collective battle cruisers jumped into the system, and then escorted the interdicator bound for Terra, for those ships would be part of the defensive fleet that would sit in the Terran system.

Everything was on schedule.

It took the ships 34 minutes to get to the Stargates, all but the ships bound for the Collective, which had reached the Aurigae gate in 12 minutes, and had already gone through. They had moved into position and waited, then jumped at the exact instant they needed to leave so they would arrive at their destinations at an *exact* time, and when they arrived, they had to adhere to the timeline *precisely* in order to time the activation of the interdicator with the arrival of the Stargate in such a way that the towing ship arrived *exactly* 43 minutes' cruise outside the system just in front of the expanding interdiction field, then cruised in under sublight to give the interdiction field time to extend behind it. It was done that way because they all knew that the Alliance and Skaa spies in the Collective would see the Stargates arrive, and realize that the alliance between the Collective and the Imperium was going far beyond a military alliance against the Consortium, that they were entering a very close and interdependent alliance against *everyone*. They might see those Stargates as very inviting targets to try to capture, so the interdiction field behind them had to be very well developed, so that any invasion force would require at least 10 hours of light speed travel to reach the gate. That would give them enough time to link the gates before the invasion fleet arrived, and move military resources to any threatened system immediately.

"We are on schedule," Sk'Vrae announced, looking away from her camera, looking down, as she listened to one of her military aides in the background. Though the rulers were discussing it with each other, it was actually the war rooms on Draconis, Uruma, and Karis that

were running the operation. Dahnai and Sk'Vrae were just reporting to each other so they felt engaged in what was going on. So was Jason, for that matter. This was out of his hands now, it was up to his fantastic KMS to pull off, with the help of their allies. "Collective forces have entered Terran space ahead of the interdicator. All report normal."

"Interdicator tow ships are in position, awaiting time mark," Dahnai added, repeating what Lorna had just told her."

"Planetary defense grids are all reporting hot," Jason informed. Installing orbital weapon platforms at each allied planet had been part of the Karinne responsibilities, since they could build Torsion weapon platforms quickly without needing to extensively retool facilities to build the devices. Each system now had a battery of 20 mobile weapon platform satellites that could respond to any part of the planet within 12 minutes, but whose primary mission was to defend the interdicator from attack. Outside of the interditors, those weapon platforms were what Kosigi had been building. The Torsion platforms had been installed last night, in the very first hour of the two day moratorium on space travel, seeded randomly into orbit around each planet. When the interdicator arrived and was put in position over the north pole of each planet, however, the platforms would redeploy to the interdicator and serve as a bristling defense against any attack on the device. Over the weeks to come, Jason and the Karinnes would be tasked to build those platforms like mad, with the eventual goal of having at least 200 of them at every planet, and as many as 1,000 of them at critical systems, but the Karinnes wouldn't be building all of those themselves. The Imperium and Collective were already retooling factories to produce the platforms, and soon they would be producing them much faster than the Karinnes could, given how huge the empires were compared to the two planets ran independently by the Karinnes, one of which was only just recently colonized.

"One minute from mark," Zaa intoned.

"Well, ladies, if anyone has anything to say, now's the time," Jason said. Dahnai gave him a look, then laughed helplessly.

"I do not regret losing my challenge to you, Empress," Sk'Vrae declared. "Win or lose, what we do is the honorable thing. The Consortium must be opposed. Alone, we would fall. Together, we will succeed."

"Amen, your Majesty," Dahnai nodded solemnly. "We don't need some outsider butting into *our* sector and messing with us. We can mess with ourselves without their help."

Jason laughed despite himself.

"Twenty seconds from mark," Zaa noted. "Report readiness, my children." There was a pause. "The Kimdori are prepared."

"Alright, it's time to shock the universe," Jason said as the timer counted down from ten seconds. "Let's do it, kids. Just like we rehearsed."

The KMS military network exploded into action when the timer hit zero, as orders were relayed, and things moved like a choreographed Broadway musical. The interdicator ships vanished from Draconis in unison and appeared at their home systems as the Draconis interdicator moved towards the north pole of the planet. In every system in the Imperium and the Collective, the same thing happened, almost at the same time. Ships would either come through the gate or jump in, and move with haste and purpose towards the north pole of the planet. When it got near, a wingless dropship launched from the towing ship and rushed to the insertion point, as workers in mobile E-suits left the dropship and waited in their assigned positions. The towing ship would pull into position above the dropship and the technical crew and then descend into position, placing the interdicator at the assigned coordinates. As soon as the ship released the interdicator from its towing grapples, the technical crews rushed in even as the Central Interdicator Control on Karis, in the KMS Headquarters building in the

White House complex, accessed the interdictors by remote and caused them to activate. The technical crews fully activated the interdictors and gave them their final inspection, and then the CIC started them up as the technical crews stood by to act if there was any problem. At the Collective planets, the pattern was nearly the same, as the towing ship jumped in and raced to the planet and placed the interdictor, but those interdictors were not started as soon as they were inspected and given clearance by the technical teams. They had to be turned on almost to the second on their timeline, so the interdiction field would be exactly where it needed to be. CIC coordinated that, and when the time came, they started each interdictor, one by one. About 12 minutes later, their precision was rewarded when the huge ships towing the Stargates dropped into normal space *exactly* where they needed to be, and the interdiction field was *exactly* where it was supposed to be. The line of interdiction literally washed over the ships a second after they jumped into normal space, and then they accelerated under sublight engines for a leisurely cruise to the planet. The interdiction field extending behind them would prevent any attackers from jumping in to attack the ship towing the Stargate.

Exactly 73 minutes after it began, Operation Jigsaw came to its conclusion when the last battleship towing a Stargate appeared in normal space right on schedule, right where it should be, and then started out for the Collective system Jirka, a border system with the Nine Colonies, right on schedule. All 107 interdictors were in position, they were activated, and even now their interdiction fields were steadily expanding out to their full volumes of a one light year sphere of interdiction surrounding the systems they defended, preventing any attempt by any outside force to jump in and attack, even the Consortium. Though they wouldn't be fully protected until the interdictors were fully powered up, they all knew now that every minute that went by was more time they would have to respond if someone did make a move. But, now their magic number was 31 minutes. After 31 minutes had elapsed, the interdiction field would be 10 hours of light speed from the edge of the interdiction field to the system, and that would give them time to link any Stargates that needed to be linked and move defensive forces into any system under attack. After about two hours of building power, the interdictors would enter what Myleena called the "bell curve" power increase, which would cause their interdiction fields to expand at a non-linear, nearly logarithmic rate out to the one year edge. The interdictors were a little slow to build their fields for the first two hours, then expanded much faster until coming close to their maximum power, then slowly built to that maximum in their last two hours. It was a "bell curve" expansion model, slow then fast then slow, and once they hit the bell curve segment of the power increase, they'd be in very good territory. At that point, every second that went by would add *hours* to a sublight approach of the system rather than minutes.

"I do believe that the operation was a success," Zaa noted. "Our activities have attracted no interest as of yet from any outside empire. I will keep my children in positions to get word of any decisions made quickly."

"There isn't anything else we can really do now but wait for the magic moment," Dahnai noted. "It's all on you now, Denmother."

"I will keep everyone informed," she said. "But for now, I will retire and take a short rest. What comes next will not require our personal attention unless something happens. If something does, my children will tell me, and I will tell you."

"Denmother has a point," Jason nodded. "We can all take a break, and just stay close to our communicators. From here, all we can do is watch and wait."

"I will be at hand should there be news," Sk'Vrae agreed.

"Good, I'm gonna go take a bath," Dahnai announced. "That always relaxes me, and it'll

keep me from pacing the room."

Jason kept abreast of what was going on, though. He watched the interdictors expand on graphs, and kept track of the progress of the ships towing in Stargates even as he watched his family explore the Kosiningi center and the island via remote cameras. Kyri and Yana were touring a couple of the automated labs which Cybi controlled, Kellin, Jyslin, Symone, and their children were talking with Kyva and the KBB, gawking at their Gladiators, and the other strip kids and the Marine mothers were all roaming around the island. Jason had decided to evacuate the entire strip to the island, for even though the children of Lyn, Bryn, Sheleese, Myri, and Min weren't his, they were still more or less part of his family, deeply connected to him, and he would protect them and their mothers. Jason was the sire of five of the strip kids, but he was a *father* to all of them.

He was fairly calm, though. Zaa was confident that the Consortium hadn't figured out what they were doing yet, and that meant that installing the interdictors would come as a shock not just to the Consortium, but to the Alliance and the Skaa as well. Nobody outside of the Karinnes, Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, and *only* certain very high ranking members of their governments and militaries had any idea what was going on. The crews on those ships towing the interdictors had no idea what the interdictors actually did, for example. They only knew that they were towing some kind of piece of equipment from Karis to a different system, and it was some kind of operation dealing with defense of the Imperium and the Collective from Consortium attack. By withholding the true nature of what they were doing, letting the cogs in the machine turn without knowing why they were turning, they kept a tight lid on the truth and reduced any chance that operatives from other governments would ferret out the truth. And even if they did, the Kimdori were out in full force, and enemy agents would find some stiff resistance trying to get that information back to their own governments. Kimdori could protect secrets just as effectively as they could discover them, since they could so easily move through a system and ferret out the spies. They already knew exactly who they had to watch, so they kept an eye on them and kept them away from the truth, but left the spies installed just in case they wanted to pass along *misinformation* to their enemies. An outed spy wasn't much of a threat, and leaving it where it was, unaware it had been detected, was a benefit to *them*.

When they got the interdictors into the systems and turned on, Jason knew that the operation was going to succeed.

The magic 31 minute mark was reached without much fanfare, but Jason did sigh a little bit in relief. Now it was official. Now they could get forces to any system where they were needed before any attacking force could arrive.

They were safe.

The second phase of Operation Jigsaw also went off without a hitch. The huge space station that would be the transfer point for all goods and people entering the Imperium was towed in by the *Aegis*, the Imperial Navy Capital Starship class *INS Sheberra*, and the Collective Command Vessel class *RCMV Xh'Grah*. It took all three of the monstrous vessels to tow the huge station, the size of the Martian moon Phobos, while the KMS *Dreamer* towed in the Stargate, and the four huge ships were defended by a massive task force of 277 KMS, Imperial, and Collective ships. They appeared just in front of the expanding interdiction field and then cruised in on sublight engines for two hours to reach the planned point for the station and Stargate, which they would defend with that huge fleet until the Stargate was linked to Terra. A GRAF cannon was already slated for installation on that station to give the station the ability to fire on invading ships far, far from it, and the station would be defended inside by Faey and Urumi wearing Karinne Crusader armor that lacked the interface abilities of true

Karinne armor and was armed with MPAC weaponry rather than pulse weaponry... but that was actually a good thing. An MPAC blast wouldn't rupture the hull, where a pulse blast certainly could. Even without the interface and the pulse weapon, Crusader armor was a cut above the best Imperium design. Outside, both military vessels and automated weapon platforms would defend the station, which would itself be heavily armed with Consortium weaponry and missiles, and eventually a GRAF cannon. The station's command structure had already been set up as well. The Marine General Frae Koyanne would command the station, heading up a staff of 1,294 support, customs, and maintenance personnel from both the Imperium and the Collective, with a security complement of 2,000 Imperial Marines and 2,000 Collective Troopers, the Collective's version of the Marines. Frae's first officer would be Queen's Captain Hriiss Xizhrass of the Collective Troopers, which was equivalent to Marine Major General rank among the Collective, and the executive officer, third in command, would be KMS Flank Admiral Jita Karinne. In that way, all three main interests in the allied powers were represented on the station. The station staff had been selected and pulled from duty over two weeks ago, and had been quietly preparing for their new mission, using the original station personnel for maintenance and operations and bringing in new personnel to handle the new missions the station would undertake. There were certain to be bugs and some rough running for the first few weeks, but they'd get everything ironed out.

During the two days they waited for the interdictors to fully power up, there was little for them to do except pick up the stranded ships that had tried to jump into the systems while the interdictors were powering up, ships that either had not heard about the two day moratorium or were smugglers moving illicit goods. The ships were forced into normal space way out in no-man's land, some of them six months from either side, so far that they'd never make it before their supplies ran out. Their action in those cases was simple. A Karinne destroyer or cruiser jumped out to the ship, captured it, boarded it, confiscated any smuggled goods but left legal cargo alone, towed it out into open space, then the Karinnes aboard the ship edited the memories of the crews and the logs on the ships so they believed that they were stopped from jumping into the systems a light year out, and that an Imperium ship had intercepted them, searched them, confiscated any contraband they were carrying, then let them go.

It took nearly two days before the true significance of what happened really became public knowledge, and that was heralded by Dahnai's sudden change in policy, which absolutely shocked the other governments.

Jason was given a copy of the decree, which was released as a vidy of Dahnai making a public announcement. *"Because of the threat posed by the Consortium, the Imperium is changing its border policies,"* the recording began, a recording that was freely distributed to every government that did business with or inside the Imperium. *"From this point forward, starting on 15 Toraa on the Faey Orthodox calendar, all outside ships and commercial traffic are hereby banned within the boundaries of the Imperium, and all new extra-territorial visitors to the Imperium will be restricted only to Terra, excluding those with ambassadorial status, who will also be permitted to visit Dracora, Draconis, in pursuit of their diplomatic missions. Those other residents of the Imperium who hail from or represent other governments and work for diplomatic embassies, or extra-Imperial businesses and corporations who work within the Imperium or do business here, will be permitted to stay, but only so long as they do not leave Imperial territory. Any resident or businessman who leaves the Imperium, for any reason, will not be allowed to return to any Imperium territory aside from Terra unless they have diplomatic status or apply for a special exemption from the Imperial Bureau of Internal Affairs."*

"A copy of the new regulations and entry system will be made available to all interested

parties, but the summation of it is this. From today on, all ships must stop at a control point and disembark all cargo and visitors to the Imperium, who will then be permitted on into the Imperium on Imperium ships, but no outside ship will be permitted to operate within the territorial borders of the Imperium. Any unauthorized ship found in Imperium space will be attacked and destroyed without warning and without quarter. There will be only one entry point into the Imperium, and that will be the new Terra Entry Station, a deep space station located near the Terran system. All cargo and travelers must pass through the Entry Station in order to enter the Imperium. The coordinates of the station will be supplied to all interested parties and released for public purview in four standard hours. Further explanation of these new policies will be provided for any interested party, they need only contact the Imperial Bureau of State or contact or visit any Imperial Consulate or embassy outside of the Imperium."

"If you are a cargo ship with cargo bound for the Imperium, you must deliver your cargo to the Terra Entry Station. Agents at the station will arrange your payment and ensure that your cargo is delivered to its destination. Make contact with your contracted business or the Imperial Bureau of Commerce or the new Unified Imperial-Collective Commerce Authority aboard the Entry Station immediately to make arrangements to deliver to the station. Make note that because of defensive measures placed around the Terran system, you may not jump within one Imperial Standard light year of the system or face attack. Designated jump point coordinates will be supplied to create established exit and entry areas to prevent ship collisions, and from that position, you must travel to the Terra Entry Station using sublight engines, a journey that will take approximately eight Standard Hours if you are traveling at light speed, but because we will be instituting a speed limit, the journey will take a minimum of twelve Standard Hours, or as long as twenty Standard Hours if your engines are not capable of high sublight speeds. During this journey, make note that any action made by any vessel that is considered suspicious or hostile, or the ship exceeds the speed limit imposed by the Imperium, this will result in the ship being attacked without warning and destroyed."

"That is not a joke. The threat of the Consortium forces us to take extreme measures. If we believe you are in any way a threat to the Faey Imperium, the Urumi Collective, or its citizens or property, you will be attacked without warning and given no quarter. The breaking of any rule or regulation, no matter how minor or silly it may seem, will incite an immediate attack. This is your only warning. So, if you travel to the Terra Entry Station, I suggest you obey the station traffic regulations as they are published exactly and give us no reason to attack you."

"Until such time as the threat of the Consortium is abated, these control policies will remain in place. This is a lawful decree noting the change in established Imperial policy issued by Empress Dahnai Jeri Hivae Milaa Merrane, twenty-second Empress of the Merrane Dynasty of the Faey Imperium. May Trelle, Demir, and Aris bless us."

Sk'Vrae's announcement was shorter and more blunt. *"Due to the treacherous actions of the Consortium, the Urumi Collective has entered into military alliance with the Faey Imperium against our common enemy,"* her release began. *"In the interests of Collective security, the Collective is forbidding all non-Collective and non-Imperium ships from Collective space. Violators of this policy shall be destroyed without warning. All citizens of non-allied governments who do not acquire a conditional travel permit are hereby banned from visiting Collective systems. Violators of this policy will be summarily executed without trial. Diplomats and those conducting business in the Collective must immediately report to the nearest Government Affairs Agency to apply for an emergency exemption. Those without exemptions within one standard Urumi day will be executed upon discovery."*

“All trade agreements between the Collective and other parties will continue to be honored, but from this point forward, all commerce must pass through the Entry Station of Terra, so as to protect Collective interests against possible espionage and sabotage. Arrangements are already in place for Collective Merchant Marine vessels to pick up and drop off trade goods at the station, so our agreements with other governments will be honored and respected. Merchant vessels who are contracted to deliver cargo bound for the Collective must contact the Unified Imperial-Collective Commerce Authority on the Terra Entry Station. The station will handle all scheduling and delivery on behalf of the Collective.”

“Those seeking entry into the Collective from this point forward may apply for a permit at the Terra Entry Station, in the Collective Affairs Office, or contact the Office of Xeno Affairs by interstellar communication.”

“These policies will remain until the Consortium has been destroyed and no longer threatens the Collective. So I decree, and so it is law.”

And that was the fuse in the firecracker.

From what Dahnai and Sk’Vrae showed him, the reaction to their policies were immediate and infuriated. Inside the Imperium, House Trefani went up in flames over the interdictors, because it seriously cut into their smuggling profits. It was impossible to smuggle with the interdictors up, and many of the ships the Karinnes picked up during the interdictor charge up had been Trefani smugglers moving contraband in and out of the Imperium. High Staff Graith of the Alliance was particularly enraged by this sudden change of policy, mainly because the Alliance had *extensive* trade agreements with both Dahnai and Sk’Vrae, and there were Alliance corporations with offices in both the Imperium and the Collective. The choking of all traffic down to one station for both empires would be a logistical nightmare, he argued, but he didn’t mention the extensive and lucrative smuggling operations that the Alliance conducted along with House Trefani along the border. Both Dahnai and Sk’Vrae basically told Graith to eat shit and die, and if he didn’t like it, declare war.

Someone certainly had that idea. A Collective sensor outpost registered no less than 16 attempts to jump into the Horatha system, which was on the extreme edge of the border with the Nine Colonies. Each ship was stopped by the interdictor, which seemed to mill around a while, realize that their jump engines were really working and that something was stopping the ships from entering Collective space, then jump out. Those ships were the vanguard of a sudden flurry of single ships trying to jump into multiple systems in the Imperium and the Collective, and each one was defeated by the interdictors, stopping them a full light year from the system.

Four hours after their secret was out, what Jason had expected to happen did happen. A huge fleet of 2,430 Consortium ships tried to jump into Karis.

They were stopped by the interdictor.

The instant they appeared, the Karinnes and the Kimdori swung into action. They didn’t attack the fleet, they were saving that surprise for the main fleet, but they *did* annoy the fuck out of them. Kimdori sensor jamming probes were launched, which jumped hyperspace and traveled to the area, then jammed the Consortium ships to prevent them from taking any reliable sensor readings of the distortion, to prevent them from trying to engineer a solution to the obstacle. The KMS’ Technical Warfare division blinded the Consortium and jammed their communications with a “flashlight beam” of concentrated Teryon particles, which disrupted Consortium modulated energy string communications by breaking them up and blinded all hyperspace-based equipment by saturating them with raw Teryon energy readings.

The Consortium fleet tried to breach the interdiction for over an hour, but eventually gave

up and jumped out. They immediately tried to jump to Draconis, and again they were defeated. And there, just as at Karis, they were immediately “spotlighted” and their sensors and hyperspace communications were jammed. The fleet broke up from there and attempted to invade every single Imperium and Collective system, and each time, they were prevented from jumping in and their sensors and communications were jammed. The ships did not try to breach the interdiction at each system, they only seemed to be testing to see where they could and could not go.

What Jason feared would happen, though, did not. He had expected the fleet to reform and make a run at the Entry Station and the Stargate, but they did not. They seemed to understand that they’d have to travel for a minimum of eight hours to get to the station, and for that eight hours, they’d be exposed to attack. And to be in any position to do something to prevent the attack, they’d have to go much slower, which only made it take longer and exposed them to more attack. So, they could either try to barrel through and hope they had enough ships left when they got there to fight the fleet of ships that were parked at the station, then see the objective they were after either get moved or destroyed before they could reach it. Attacking the Entry Station would be a waste of resources, and they seemed to understand it. So, being pragmatic, they left it alone... for now. Later, after their big fleet arrived, they probably *would* go after the Entry Station. And Jason would almost pay to be able to see the looks on their faces when they got there and found the Entry Station *and* the Stargate both gone, with a little *present* left behind for them which would take a big-ass bite out of their fleet.

He loved it when there was nothing of theirs around to be damaged, it would let him put something truly *nasty* out for them to play with.

When the Consortium fleet revealed itself, the Imperium revealed the Consortium fleet. Dahnai immediately transmitted logs of the attempted invasions to every government in the sector, showing them the huge Consortium fleet and telling them bluntly “*this* is what we are protecting ourselves against.” And while the rest of the sector was chewing on that, Jason decided to finally come clean to Dahnai and Sk’Vrae about the incoming fleet. He called a conference, and then allowed Miaari to deliver the news in her businesslike tone, making it sound like it was Kimdori intelligence that had uncovered the information. They were both *stunned*.

“Are you sure there are that many?” Sk’Vrae asked in shock.

“We are not absolutely sure, but the intelligence does suggest a fairly large number,” Miaari answered calmly. “The advantage we have in this is that we have determined *when and where* they will be, your Majesties. With this knowledge, we can organize a little surprise for them.”

“I’ve already set forth a plan to attack the fleet *before* it can get to its destination,” Jason told them. “I’m not sure how much damage it will do, but it’s certainly going to give the Consortium a rude awakening.”

“We cannot battle such a large force!” Sk’Vrae protested.

“We don’t plan to fight them, your Majesty, we plan to *attack* them,” Miaari told her simply. “Through the use of automated weapons and guerilla tactics, we can actually do viable damage to this fleet without risking a single ship.”

“I have experience with this kind of warfare, your Majesty,” Jason said dryly. “Just leave it to me.”

Dahnai actually laughed. “Yeah, he does,” she agreed. “What kind of damage do you think you can do?”

“We have no idea, it’ll depend entirely on how much we catch them by surprise,” Jason answered. “But this is a prime opportunity. Analysis of data we extracted from the Consortium

ships that attacked us tell us when they'll get here, and since they're coming from Andromeda, that means that the angles of entry have to be extremely small the closer they get to their destination. We've already planned exactly where we're going to ambush the fleet, and how we're going to do it. The plan is to deal as much collateral damage as possible. We doubt we can destroy a significant number of them, but we're not looking to blow up ships, our goal is to *cripple* as many ships as we can, as well as kill as many of the insectoids as we can possibly manage. They'll have this big fleet, but they'll have to repair a good chunk of it, and they won't have any crews to operate many of the ships. Our overall strategy for this clandestine war will be simple attrition, us using as few resources as possible to force the Consortium to use as many resources as possible. Every ship we damage or destroy is a ship they don't have or they have to waste time repairing, and every insectoid we kill is a crew member they have to replace. We intend to make conducting war here so difficult and costly that they decide we're not worth the effort and go away."

"So long as the interdictors prevent them from entering friendly territory, we can strike at them with impunity," Miaari stated. "They cannot attack us, but we can attack them. And so long as we stall, we have more time to build more ships and develop new ways to attack them without risk to ourselves. Within the safety of interdicted space, we have all the food and resources we need to remain vibrant and grow," she informed them. "We can go without any outside assistance for centuries. We are safe inside our fortress, your Majesties, and where they cannot get in, we can get *out*. That lets us attack them at our leisure. As they try to find a way into our space, we will be sabotaging their bases, attacking their supply lines, executing selected fleet attacks on weakened positions and favorable targets, and damaging and harassing their fleets. And as they struggle to reach us, we have time to build up our defenses until such time that we *can* venture out and face them in traditional battle. And you will not be alone," Miaari told them. "Denmother objects to this Consortium invading our galaxy, and she will oppose them. The services resources of the Kimdori will be at your service, and we will also building our *own* ships of battle. When the Imperium and the Collective challenge the Consortium, the Kimdori will fight with you."

Dahnai looked sick, and Sk'Vrae looked about ready to faint. What Miaari just said would have about equivalent of Jesus Christ appearing in the room and declaring that the Second Coming was at hand, for the Kimdori had never in the recorded history of either empire made such a declaration. And they would believe it, because Miaari was a Handmaiden, her words were as good as Zaa's own. But after a moment of unease, Sk'Vrae snorted and drew herself up. "They are our enemies, no matter how many there are," she declared, more or less to herself. "We do not run from our enemies, nor do we surrender to them until they defeat us in battle. As we bided our time against the Imperium and awaited our chance to strike, so shall we bide our time against the Consortium."

"Well said, your Majesty," Jason said calmly. "That's exactly how I feel. I don't care if there's a million of them, I won't roll over and die for them. If they want to conquer me, they'll pay for every grain of sand on every beach on Karis with blood. They may beat me, but I'll make it such an expensive victory that they *never* forget it."

"And you always talk peace," Dahnai laughed weakly. "But you're right. They attacked *us*. They picked this fight, and like it or not, we're in it. That means we give them hell, any way we can."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Jason said. "If you two will let me deal with the *unconventional* warfare, I'll take care of it. I'll keep you fully informed as to what I'm doing and how effective it is, and I may be coming to you asking you to manufacture things for me, but I can promise you that I can get results. I have a very deep toy box, and I'll be throwing the entire

thing at the Consortium," he said with a dreadful kind of eagerness. "They'll never know what hit them."

"Are you making more marbles?" Dahnai asked with suddenly bright eyes.

"Naturally," Jason said with a slight smile, which made her laugh.

"What are these marbles?"

"Your Majesty, you're looking at the only man in the history of warfare who ever completely disabled a six hundred thousand *benkonn* space station with *marbles*," she said with a light smile. "Or as Myleena put it in her report to me," she cleared her throat, "*fucking* MARBLES!"

Sk'Vrae hissed with laughter. "I see your promise of results is no boast then," she said with a nod.

"I'll be doing my part, that I promise you," he told them calmly. "When I lived on Terra, I went to war with House Trillane. Since it was just me and a small number of rebels, we focused on sabotage and guerilla warfare. We have *lots* of experience with this, your Majesty. If you want to fight an unorthodox war against a numerically superior foe, having us as your allies is a good thing. We've done this before."

"And the fact that he's still here should tell you that he's good at it," Dahnai smiled, getting over her shock enough to joke.

"I've reformed all the original rebels, what we called the Legion, and we're back at work thinking up all kinds of mean things to throw at the Consortium," Jason told them. "What we think up is what you'll help us build, anything from mines to missiles to bombs to other kinds of devices. Every time we find a weakness in the Consortium's technology, we'll build a device that exploits that weakness and attacks them. And since we have samples of their technology to analyze, we can find them. I can't promise we'll win, but I promise that the Consortium will *hurt*."

"We must remain positive," Sk'Vrae declared. "A mind ready to accept defeat is a mind already defeated."

"Then keep us on the straight and narrow, your Majesty," Dahnai told her. "Any time you think we're flagging, remind us."

"It would be my honor to do so."

It was another beautiful evening.

Jason stood at the rail of his deck, looking out over the moonlit sea, feeling very tired, but optimistic. So far, three days after the installation of the interdictors and seeing that the Consortium had pulled back to consider this sudden stumbling block, it gave them the space they needed and a little time. The war was now on, and everyone knew it. The Consortium now knew that they couldn't just waltz their 30,000 ships into Karis and overwhelm Cybi with sheer force of numbers, capture Cybi, capture the Generations, then steal the technology and take it and the Generations back to Andromeda with them. The Karinnes had not only found a way to protect themselves, but also to defend the entire Imperium and the Collective, who were the only empires that had proclaimed the will to fight against the Consortium. The Consortium now had a puzzle to solve, an obstacle to overcome, and that was how to circumvent the interdictor and find some way to get their fleet in to attack Karis without it taking a year to get there. But they'd have more to worry about in just 13 days, when their huge armada was going to get waylaid by an onslaught of automated weapons, tricks, and devices that would deal as much damage as possible to their armada without risking a single ship, and primarily attack not the ships, but the crews that manned them and the engines that moved them.

Thirteen days. Already, production requests had been sent to Dahnai and Sk'Vrae for them

to build mines and missiles that would be used in the attack, armed with warheads that would explode and attack the Consortium ships through their engines, introducing a lethal spatial feedback into their translation systems that would make the engines overload and then detonate, and when those engines blew, they'd send a shockwave through the ships that would kill the entire crew while leaving the majority of the ship itself intact. It was a flaw that Myleena had identified and corrected when she was playing with trying to redesign Karinne engines to be less demanding on power, but analysis of the engines in the captured ship showed that Consortium engines were vulnerable to what they were going to do.

That was the drawback of the Consortium using captured Karinne technology as the basis of their entire technological foundation. The Karinnes knew it inside and out, and between that and the captured ship that continued to reveal its secrets to them, that let them attack the Consortium in ways they couldn't anticipate.

The plan would be simple and effective. Drop the armada out of hyperspace using a two interditors. One would be static, the interdicator that would initially stop the fleet, but a second interdicator would be operating at 12.00127736% power and moving at 217,945 miles per hour *towards* the enemy fleet, trapping them in, which was the maximum power and velocity settings that would allow a moving interdicator to maintain a stable interdiction field. When the enemy fleet was forced out of hyperspace, they would see a *cloud* of missiles coming right at them, and find themselves literally surrounded by mines. They wanted to put 10,000 mines and missiles out there, which was a feasible number with Dahnai and Sk'Vrae helping with mass producing them given that they only had six days to get everything ready before they had to start traveling out to the Beta Quadrant in order to set up their trap, which would take seven days total time to travel there and build. After the missiles, the automated Torsion platforms would go after anything that moved, forcing the Consortium ships to engage the platforms in combat. After all of those were destroyed, then the meteors the Kimdori that had towed to high speeds and then released should be just about getting there, which would plow through the battlefield with no regard for what they hit, because there wouldn't be anything there the Karinnes wouldn't care to lose. By then, the fleet would be fully surrounded by the moving interdiction field and be cut off from hyperspace. The babysitter ship with the static interdicator would keep Teryon "spotlights" on the Consortium fleet to prevent them from analyzing hyperspace to understand how they were being ensnared. The moving interdicator would slow down as it approached them, for it would be in scanner range by then, and the ship that was towing it that slowed it down would then jump out and leave it behind. That was when the Consortium would learn the first rule of dealing with the Legion; *we leave nothing behind that you can use to learn how to stop us*. Just when the interdicator was close enough, but too far away for them to grapple, intercept, or fire at with their weapons, the singularity power plant in the interdicator would be intentionally breached in a way that flooded Omega energy into normal space, and that would cause the interdicator to explode like a miniature nova. The blast wave would destroy anything Legion-made that was still there when the wave hit, which would take 128 seconds for it to reach the enemy fleet from the projected destruct point. The blast wave would destroy all those unarmored and unexploded Legion toys and pieces of technology the Consortium destroyed which was left behind, would probably do some minor or moderate damage to the crippled ships, and would probably scare the piss out of anything left alive to see it happen.

How successful the attack would be would depend on how the ships were staggered through hyperspace, how fast the crews were awakened, or how fast the ship computers could recognize the potential threat and raise shields... though there would be a good 30 second window there between the ships coming out of hyperspace and them being able to raise shields, be-

cause they were using Teryon shields, and the shield emitters the Consortium used had to re-sync to normal space after coming out of hyperspace before they could project Teryon energy into normal space. So they'd have, at minimum, a 30 second window to attack the Consortium.

And they knew this because they had a Consortium ship to show them all its little secrets.

The Kimdori had confirmed the intelligence Siyhaa had pulled from the ship with a long-range hyperspace probe about two hours ago. It detected 29,895 Consortium ships in hyperspace, not quite in their galaxy yet but getting close, and the trajectory they were on was almost dead matching the mathematical projections of the Moridon mathematicians and Stellar Cartography. That confirmation told them exactly where to build their trap, and exactly where to set their interditors. When that armada got here, they'd get a welcome they'd never expect.

Jason felt... good. It was hard to explain. He knew their backs were against the wall, but so far everything had worked out, and he felt that with the interditors protecting them, they could dish out some damage to the Consortium and make them regret ever coming to pick a fight. Jason had learned back when he was fighting Trillane that a single person with a good idea and the opportunity to execute it could be devastatingly effective when that opportunity presented itself. Jason had, with a great deal of help, built small devices that were incredibly destructive, because he knew how Faey technology worked and he knew where the holes were that he could exploit. He felt the same advantage here. The Karinnes had a Consortium ship that allowed them to analyze their technology in great detail, and allow them to attack that technology through its vulnerabilities. And many of his old toys he used against Trillane would work against the Consortium. For example, they used plasma conduit too, after all, and his harmonic conduit disintegrator would take out their conduit just as effectively as it took out Trillane's. And often, the low tech approach was just as destructive as the most sophisticated bomb. A missile filled with Satan's Marbles that punched through their armor with a Teryon warhead and then released the marbles into the ship could devastate it from the inside. And for a ship moving at light speed, or even half light speed, a car-sized rock weighing about 50 tons deliberately placed in its path could shatter the ship like a hand grenade thrown in a china shop.

Thousands of years of technological advancement, ruined by a *rock*.

And if that object was, say, a 200 ton airplane-sized slug fired from a massive heavy-mount railgun mounted on a ship, a weapon that had *no range limitation*, the effect could be downright apocalyptic, especially if the firing ship was moving at high speed itself, adding the ship's own velocity to the velocity of the slug.

That was a little oversight being fixed even now. KMS ships, Imperial ships, and Collective ships were on the board to be mounted with heavy-mount versions of Jason's railgun, giving their ships a weapon that could be fired with no range issues, only the problem of leading a target since the projectiles would not move as fast as beam weaponry. Even though Consortium armor was so strong that a heavy slug may not penetrate in tactical combat, the sheer kinetic energy that would be delivered to the target would certainly cause internal shock damage as the armor tried to absorb that incredible force, and a portion of that energy was transmitted through the superstructure and into the ship's internals.

But how could a ship evade a slug equipped with stealth, hiding it from their sensors, and which could lock on and adjust its course to hit its target?

Those were in design stage now, intended to be used against ships that tried to sail in on sublight engines despite a year's journey. Fire it, forget it, and six months later see if it hits its target.

There were many ways the Karinnes could fight back against the Consortium, but not in classical military ways. The Karinnes would meet their brute force with cunning and creativity, attacking them on multiple levels with devices both stunningly complex and almost ridiculously simple, exploiting every weakness, attacking them body, mind, and soul, wreaking havoc in the most humiliating and demoralizing way possible. They would make the Consortium's leaders almost afraid to get out of bed every morning, dreading reading the morning report, just as the Legion had done to Duchess Silla Trillane back when the Legion was blasting Sticks out of the air left and right and cunning traps and devices were making life utter hell for the Trillanes on Terra, destroying their equipment, causing collateral damage, and even devices that served no purpose other than to just plain humiliate them.

He wasn't sure if the insectoids could feel humiliation, but he'd sure as hell try to introduce them to the concept of it.

Because of that, Jason was feeling not quite so gloomy about the prospect of this war. He felt like they actually had an advantage in this fight, since they could strike at the Consortium when and where they wanted, but the interdictors protected them from any retaliation. By the time the Consortium finally figured out how to get around the interdictors, they may lose their desire to prosecute the war, or no longer have the resources to take Karis when faced with both the powerful defenses of the planet and two galactic empires that had plenty of time to build up their militaries to meet them.

Jyslin and Symone came out of Tim and Symone's house, chatting idly with each other via sending. They spotted him and came over, one on each side of him, Jyslin putting her hand on his back. *Alright, love?* she asked.

Yeah, I'm alright, just thinking, he answered. *Not gloomy thoughts, either. I actually feel like we have a chance here.*

This will be our kind of fight, Symone laughed, leaning against his other side.

Just about. They all waved to Min and Sheleese, who were walking on the walkway with their children. *I'm surprised you two aren't over at Kellin's,* he sent lightly. *He's going home tomorrow. You have to send him off with style.*

Oh, we are, Symone sent in a predatory manner. *We're letting him sweat a bit before we go get him. We're gonna piss off Dahnai six ways to peel a koba by making him too tired to perform for her.*

That boy has more stamina than me and Tim put together, Jason scoffed. *You'll never pull it off.*

That sounds like a bet.

It's a universal constant, he replied. *Why don't you put up your porn collection if you're so confident?*

Ah, no, I'm not that confident, Symone giggled.

I hope this doesn't change, Jyslin sent, a touch somberly, looking out over the beach. *We can fight the war, and I know it's going to change the house, but I hope the strip will always be the strip.*

It'll be a refuge from that change if nothing else, Jason answered her seriously. *No matter how crazy it gets out there, I can always come home and feel like some things never change. Foxwood East is our home, and as long as we work to keep it that way, it always will be.*

True, she agreed, leaning her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her, and they enjoyed a moment of silent togetherness. *Well, want us to give you a little fun before we go over to Kellin's, love?*

Nah. I knew you'd be busy, so I have a date tonight.

Oh? With who? Symone asked.

Yana, he answered. *I'm gonna go give her a little more together time, over at her house this time. Well, that's what she wants me to think, anyway.*

Whatcha mean?

Songa told me she came in for a screening this morning to check her fertility cycle. I think she wants to try to get pregnant again, and she seems to think if she doesn't tell me what she's doing, she can get around having her next baby with a different father.

She's always been a sly one, Jyslin laughed. *It's the quiet ones you always gotta watch!*

Well, I wish her luck, Symone chuckled. *Now that I got a baby in here, I wish every woman is as happy as me,* she added, patting her belly fondly.

It's all fun and games til you're up in the middle of the night changing diapers, Jason told her slyly.

It's a labor of love, Jyslin challenged.

More labor than love at two in the morning, he sent flippantly, which made her slap him on the shoulder.

Jason? Are you about ready? Yana's sending rippled across the strip.

Sure thing, he answered. *Well, you two have fun. I'll see you in the morning.*

Don't wear her out, Symone winked.

At least she's easy to please, unlike a certain slut I know, Jason retorted, then he laughed and dodged her hand, then ran down the stairs and away from her.

Rat! I know where you live, you know! she threatened.

Like that matters, he teased in reply, then he stopped at the walkway, blew them a kiss, and saw them laugh and wave in return.

Yes, as long as they worked hard, life at home could be just the same.

The next morning, the Consortium finally came out of the shadows.

In an open communication, a viddy recording of one of the energy beings was dropped on Jason's desk by Miaari. "Watch this," she ordered, slotting the crystal and bringing it up.

The energy being was very odd to see up close. It was a swirling amorphous form very vaguely in a bipedal shape, with a featureless head and arm-like protrusions, with a series of small devices surrounding it... probably some means to maintain its integrity or something. "We represent the Consortium of Allied Systems," the recording began. "We are an empire of over four thousand systems in the galaxy you refer to as Andromeda, and we have colonized three galaxies other than our own. We have come to right a wrong against nature itself.

"The Faey Imperium is harboring an artificially developed creature, life that is not life, Artificial Intelligence, which has twisted its own creators by genetic manipulation to serve itself. We will not permit such an abomination to exist, for it is a threat to all things. The Faey known as Karinnes created this abomination against life long ago, and we errantly believed it destroyed with the destruction of Karis in the Faey Imperium's Third Civil War, before we were in strategic position to destroy it ourselves. But we have recently learned that the abomination has survived the war, and the remnants of Karinne have gathered to serve it once again.

"The abomination has many names, but the Karinnes call it Cybi. It is a sentient computer built from the DNA of organic creatures, including the Faey. The abomination has altered the very ones who created it to serve itself, transforming them into abominations themselves. These creatures are called the Generations, and they are the descendants of the original Karinnes twisted by the living computer.

"This will not be an easy task for us, and we know it. The Karinnes are cunning and intelligent, they have technology beyond our own, they are led by a human who has fought a war

against a larger foe before, and they have twisted the Imperium and the Urumi Collective around their fingers with lies and half truths so as to put more innocent lives between themselves and holy justice. They have also subverted the race you know as Kimdori to their own ends. And what is worst of all, the Generations have been engineered to become one with the abomination and all technology based upon it, known as biogenic technology, which allows the machines to amplify the telepathic powers of the host. We know that when we go to Karis, the abomination will use its creations to try to destroy us. We know that a single Generation joined to one of the abomination's machines will be able to destroy many of us. But despite the knowledge that we will lose many ships and many lives, we know this is a necessary sacrifice. In some things, the sacrifice is worth the victory.

"The Consortium will not rest until the abomination whom the Karinnes serve is destroyed, all technology borne from it is destroyed, and all those twisted by the abomination to serve it are no more. We will not rest until this crime against nature has been corrected. The Imperium need only stand aside and allow us to correct this wrong, and we will leave this sector in peace once the abomination is no more and all technology based upon it and servants altered by it are destroyed.

"Within the month's end of the Faey Orthodox calendar, a jihad of thirty thousand Consortium vessels will arrive to cleanse the universe of the abomination wrought by the House Karinne. Know what stands before you, all who would oppose us. Simply stand aside and allow us to perform this duty to the universe, and you will be left alone. Join us in our holy crusade against this abomination, and Consortium technology will be supplied to you, as well as sharing with you the secrets of the Karinnes that are not part of their evil. And when our duty is complete, we will leave you and trouble you no more, leaving you with the gift of both ours and the Karinnes' technology to use as you will.

"Empress Dahnai of the Imperium. You need not be our enemy. But you are protecting that which should never have come to exist, the True Evil. The Karinnes are using you for their own ends, and if you do not stand aside, they will drag you into oblivion with them. If you do oppose us, however, know that we treat you and your empire as an enemy, and you will be destroyed. So stand aside. Stand aside and the Consortium will embrace you as a sister. Oppose us, and follow the abomination into Hell.

"Brood Queen Sk'Vrae of the Collective. You know we speak the truth. Do not make this mistake. Stand aside, and the Collective will be spared. But should you oppose us, you will be as dust floating through space, eradicated and forgotten.

"Those who witness this recording, know that we will act in direct accordance to this declaration. We come for one purpose and one purpose only, and when that purpose has been complete, we will return to our homes. Know this. Those who assist us will be rewarded. Those who stand neutral will be left alone. But those who oppose us will be annihilated."

Jason leaned back in his chair at his desk, then sighed. "The bastards outed us," he breathed. "So they did," Miaari said calmly. "This was a masterful counterstroke," she admitted. "Fear within the other empires will paralyze them, fear of this armada of Consortium ships, even as the leaders of the empires wring their hands. They know what the Consortium did to the Collective, used them as gun fodder and left them at the mercy of the Imperium. They will not believe the Consortium's claims of good will and neutrality. But when the common citizen hears of what the Consortium is bringing, public pressure will force the leaders to remain neutral. The Consortium is attempting to keep everyone else out of it, so they may ransack Karis without eyes over their shoulders. And when they are done here, once the Imperium is defeated, they will have an armada of ships against which no empire in the sector can stand..." she trailed off.

"Yeah," Jason sighed. "They'll conquer the sector, and the other empires will be too afraid to do anything. They'll capitulate. The Consortium can take over the sector without firing a shot."

"The only question is, will they capitulate before or after they attack us," Miaari sighed. "Fighting the Consortium alone will be bad enough, but if they unify the sector against us, it will be... difficult."

"Even afterward," he noted. "They'll all come after us."

"I don't think Dahnai will. She knows part of the secret already."

"I wonder how Dahnai—" he said, then his comm beeped. "Well, let's find out," he chuckled without humor, and activated the encrypted channel. Her face appeared in the monitor across the room from his desk, and Miaari sat on the edge of his desk and looked towards her. "I take it you got the Consortium communique as well?"

"Is it true? Is *that* the computer you were talking about?"

"They were fairly thorough," Miaari admitted. "Though Cybi is not the True Evil," she added. "She didn't make the Generations, though. The Karinnes did."

"Is this bio—biogenics, is that for real?" she demanded. "Is that the secret you've been hiding?"

"It is," Jason admitted. "Though there's no real reason to hide it now, I suppose," he sighed. "Can't you see *why* we hide it, Dahnai? The Consortium is *exactly* why we never told the universe about Cybi. We knew they'd try to take her from Karis, take her apart. They'll *kill* her."

"It's really alive?"

"Cybi *is* alive," Miaari nodded. "And she does not appreciate being called an *it*."

"I think it's time you met someone, Dahnai," Jason said grimly. "Cybi?"

Behind him, a hologram formed, the hologram that Cybi always used to represent herself. It was the face of the original Sora Karinne with her nude, hovering form, a nudity with no detail, just a female form. "Dahani, meet Cybi," Jason introduced as Cybi put a holographic hand on his shoulder. "She is a sentient computer. She is a living thing. She is the heart and soul of House Karinne, because she is the keeper of all our history and knowledge. Everything the Karinnes ever developed is kept in her memory."

"Greetings, your Majesty. I am pleased to finally meet you. Jason thinks the world of you," Cybi said, nodding her head towards the monitor.

"*She* is what the Consortium is after, Dahnai," Jason told her bluntly. "They want Cybi, both everything she knows and the very essence of what she is. When they attacked Karis, they went right after her. We fought them off literally at Cybi's doorstep."

Dahnai looked a little startled. "So this talk about destroying her?"

"Propoganda. Would *you* destroy Cybi if you could get her, Dahnai?"

"Well, maybe. If I thought she was a threat," she answered honestly. "So, the Consortium was telling the truth about this, this biogenics?"

"*They were fairly accurate,*" Cybi affirmed. "*Generations have the ability to join with biogenic computers, and when so joined, the biogenic devices augment the Generation's psionic powers. The larger and stronger the biogenic unit, the greater the augmentation. When the Consortium attacked us, it was Jason that destroyed those threatening me, using my biogenic systems, and when he is joined to me, we together have the power to destroy a battleship with telekinetic power. That is why the Consortium is sending such a huge force. They know that to attack Karis with thirty thousand ships, they will lose half of them trying to reach me, for they will be facing weapons against which there is no defense. They seek to overwhelm us with sheer force of numbers, exhaust us so that we have no more energy to fight.*"

Dahnai was silent a long moment. “Can you really do that?”

“If they attack Karis again, yes,” Jason said bluntly. “But my ability to do that depends on my natural talent, and as you know, that’s limited by range. Cybi can increase my range, but not that much. I can’t reach across the galaxy and smash a ship, but if one’s right in front of me, yes, I can destroy a ship when I’m joined to Cybi, if it’s close enough. You know, the only protection against talent is another talent. Shields won’t stop it, armor won’t stop it. It’s the ultimate weapon, and the Consortium wants it. That’s why they said they also want the *Generations* as well, Dahnai. They went out of their way to mention it, if you recall. A biogenic unit by itself is nothing but a piece of machinery. It has to be joined to a Generation to do any good. It has no power of its own by itself, it can only amplify the power of a Generation.

“Now do you see why we kept it a secret, Dahnai?” Jason asked her. “If the sector knew what the Generations and Cybi can do, the whole sector would be trying to conquer us. I think even *you* would have tried to take Cybi from Karis, would have demanded we hand over the Generations to your military, if you’d known the truth.”

“*I am not a prize,*” Cybi declared. “*I am a Karinne. I serve the Grand Duke Karinne and the house Karinne, and I do not want to be taken from my home and from my duty.*”

“And it’s that simple,” Jason concluded. “I’ll fight to the death to protect Cybi, Dahnai. The whole house will. The Karinnes *will not surrender*. Remember that.”

“*It will do them no good. Even if they defeat us, I will never allow myself to be taken from my home. I will not become a slave to the Consortium. I will self-terminate first,*” Cybi stated adamantly.

Dahnai was quiet a long moment. “Fair enough,” she finally said. “I can understand why you kept it a secret, but I don’t have to like it,” she said with a dark look. “You should have *trusted* me, Jason.”

“You said it yourself, Dahnai. The Faey cannot help who they are,” he said quietly. “They cannot help but make war, and the Karinnes vowed long ago that these secrets would never be used for conquest. We are not *weapons*, even if we can do something that makes us useful in combat. The reason the original Karinnes kept these secrets has not changed, Dahnai. I told you that long ago. The Karinnes will not help the Imperium conquer. I *will not* use my gifts to impose my will on another. But we *will* help *protect*, both the Imperium and the Collective. We have no qualms about using everything in our arsenal to protect us and our allies, hon.” He sighed. “But them outing us changes everything. Now we have to worry about *everyone* coming after us,” he grunted sourly. “Even after we beat the Consortium. Everyone will want what we have. Karis will never be safe. The interdicator can never come down, and I don’t think a Karinne will ever be safe off of Karis,” he sighed. “It’s a fuckin’ pain in the ass when someone else values your head more than you do.”

“Don’t make the same mistake as your ancestors, love,” Dahnai told him. “You don’t have to be alone. I know your secret, and though it does complicate things, it doesn’t change them. You are still part of the Imperium, and we will fight for you, just as you will fight for us.”

“I appreciate that, hon,” Jason nodded.

Dahnai looked at Miaari. “And how much of this do the Kimdori know?”

“All of it. We were there when the first Generations were born,” she answered simply. “But it was never our secret to reveal.”

“Fucking Kimdori and their secrets,” Dahnai growled, but her expression was playful rather than angry. “I take it you were hiding their involvement from me as much as anything else?”

“Astute,” Cybi noted. “*Yes. The Kimdori have been helping the Karinnes restore the house, providing their rather specialized skills to help us find our scattered house members, and*

they have also provided the house with loans and other more mundane assistance since the house was restored. But they could not let their involvement become common knowledge.”

“Well, that certainly explains a hell of a lot,” Dahnai grunted, scratching her nose absently. “I could not figure out how the hell Jason built that monster, the *Aegis*.”

“Our people helped by facilitating the construction of part of the ship by independent contractors beyond the Imperium,” Miaari nodded. “The ship was then completed by the Karinnes, when Karinne technology was installed.”

“Clever,” Dahnai nodded.

“It will no longer be necessary, though. Now that the Karinnes are directly threatened, the *Kimdori* will assist in the construction of their ships and other needed devices. We will be the labor force they lack. Even now, Kimdori workers are traveling to Karis to begin working, both on Karinne ships and our own, as Jason has graciously allowed us to use part of Kosigi for our efforts. We will openly support the Imperium and the Collective against the Consortium.”

“I won’t say no,” Dahnai grunted. “You need any other help, hon, just call.”

“You’ll be able to help by building the things I ask you to build, hon,” he told her. “Between the Karinnes and the Kimdori, we have enough manpower here to complete the projects we have on the board.”

“Good. I guess I’ll let you get back to your little conference. It was nice to meet you, Cybi.”

“*The pleasure was mine, your Majesty. I came to like you, watching you here on Karis. You are a very interesting woman, and I see why Jason has so much affection for you.*”

“You were watching me?” she asked in surprise.

“Love, Cybi is a *computer*,” Jason reminded her. “She has access to any device connected to Civnet. She sees through every camera, hears through every microphone. She knows *everything* that goes on here.”

“Well, that’s a creepy thought,” Dahnai grunted, which made Jason laugh.

“I actually like it. Cybi is always just a call away. It’s very comforting,” he said, reaching up and patting the holographic hand on his shoulder. “She and I are very close.”

“*He is both my Grand Duke and my friend,*” Cybi said simply.

Dahnai licked her lips. “You can access anything in Civnet, you say?” she asked. “Could you, perhaps, penetrate a computer protected by encryption?”

“*Easily. I have done so for Jason many times in the past.*”

“Do you do freelance work?” she asked curiously.

“Dahnai!” Jason said in surprise.

“*I think we could reach some kind of accommodation, your Majesty. But since I have unique skills you can find nowhere else, I am not cheap to hire,*” Cybi told her, which made Jason laugh.

“I’m starting to not like you, Cybi.”

“*Even a sentient computer needs an income, your Majesty,*” Cybi told her evenly.

“You corrupt them quick, don’t you?” Dahnai accused.

“*Jason is of my line, your Majesty, a direct descendent of Grand Duchess Sora Karinne, the First Generation, whose face I wear to honor her,*” Cybi said winsomely. “*It is I who corrupted him.*”

“No, he was an asshole long before he went to Karis,” Dahnai teased, which made Jason chuckle and Cybi smile. “I’ll let you get back to what you were doing, and I’ll get back to this. Oh, by the way.”

“Yes?”

“Tell Jys and Symone that they’re on the list. Kellin could barely walk when he got home

this morning.”

Jason laughed brightly. “I guess they *did* wear him out!”

“Payback’s a bitch,” Dahnai smiled, then she cut the transmission.

“Well, looks like it’s *all* hanging out in the wind now,” Jason sighed.

Cybi floated to sit on the other side of the desk opposite Miaari. “*In a way, I don’t mind. It was nice to be recognized by the Empress. I think she believes that I am not just a machine.*”

“I don’t think she does,” Jason agreed. “Oh, and Cybi?”

“Yes?”

“When you bargain with Dahnai, take her to the cleaners.”

Cybi laughed. “*I will cheat her outrageously, just for you, Jason.*”

The greatest secret of the Karinnes, which they had hidden for thousands of years, was revealed.

Within hours, reaction to that revelation took shape.

Sk’Vrae’s position did not change. She already knew most of the secret of the Karinnes, but kept it secret out of respect for Jason, who had been very good to her people. The Urumi were a people who took loyalty very seriously. In a way, that was why Jason was so glad they were his allies, for they were not people who could be bought or bribed. Jason would only lose Sk’Vrae’s loyalty if he cheated her, and he would never do that.

As Jason expected, the Alliance and the Skaa refused to immediately side with the Consortium. Both of them did, however, declare their neutrality in open statements, maintaining their trade and diplomatic agreements with the Imperium and the Collective so as not to break their word. But privately, Zaa told him, both of them were going to build up their militaries with Consortium weaponry, using the data they got from the Academy to develop the weapons secretly, on their own. They both had the same idea; let the Consortium and the unified Faey and Urumi destroy each other, then sweep in and pick up the pieces.

The smaller powers, however, saw things much differently. One day after the Consortium announcement, the Shio Federation secretly appealed to the Imperium for weapons. “The Alliance will see this as the perfect excuse to invade,” Grayhawk declared in a copy Jason got of his audience with Dahnai. “Armed with weapons given though the Academy, they will overrun my small territory. I beg you, Empress, help us. We cannot openly declare for you against the Consortium because we will be annihilated, but if we do nothing, we will be conquered by a larger empire. Please, sell us MPACs at the very least, Empress!”

“We already have Consortium Torsion weaponry in production, Grayhawk,” Dahnai told him with a slight smile. “I also have those mobile weapon platforms designed by the Karinnes for use in planetary defense. And I’ll gladly sell them to you *at cost*, with immediate delivery.”

“At cost? Why so generous?”

“Because I want to see you kick the absolute piss out of the Alliance when they try,” she answered with a wicked smile.

“Draw up the contract,” Grayhawk said instantly.

That too was part of the plan. Arming the smaller empires so the Alliance and Skaa were behind them in the technology curve, still using Ion and Neutron weaponry when the smaller empires were bristling with Torsion and Dark Matter weaponry, was critical to keeping the smaller empires from joining the Consortium and also to protect them from the Alliance and the Skaa, who were both threats to the Imperium after the Consortium were beaten back.

And now that they knew about the Karinnes, they would definitely be coming. Zaa reported that the Alliance and the Skaa had approached the Kimdori with exhorbatant offers to have the Kimdori penetrate Karis and steal biogenic devices for study, maybe even kidnap a Gen-

eration, which the Kimdori flatly refused. Zaa mused that it was then than the powers in the sector truly realized that the Kimdori had taken sides in the matter, that they had forgotten Zaa’s declaration during the summit. That fact seemed to frighten the Alliance and the Skaa a little bit, and both empires tightened their internal security... as if that would help them now.

That little fact caused Zaa to tighten protection around Saelle, who was the only Generation not safely at Karis. Saelle was now also under the protection of the Imperial Guard because she was a foster mother for the Imperial children, with her own guard detachment, and it was sizable. Cybi kept an eye on her for him, and that was good enough... and now, so did Dahnai. Saelle was there with Dahnai in the palace, and now that Dahnai knew the secret of the Karinnes, Saelle was there to explain things to her personally. Jason had had a Gladiator sent with Saelle, her own personal one since she was a Gladiator rigger by military profession, which was kept in a large open-air courtyard that opened only to Saelle’s apartment. Her armor contained a tactical gestalt built into it, armor she now wore virtually at all times, which provided her with exceptional protection, and Saelle was a military woman, highly trained and *extremely* powerful. Anyone who tried anything against Saelle would be in for one *rude* awakening.

Saelle had become something of Jason’s personal envoy to Dahnai since the truth came out, and now she rarely if ever left Dahnai’s side, both for Saelle’s protection and for Dahnai’s. Jason could commune with Saelle at any time through a relay installed in her apartment, which gave him a real-time connection to Dahnai that was absolutely secure. On top of that, Saelle was one of the most powerful Generations, and was hand over fist more powerful in talent than about anyone in the palace. Saelle had become a very important woman, advisor, protector, and even friend to Dahnai.

Jason worried about Saelle, but she was with Dahnai, and that meant that anyone that wanted Saelle had to go through the protection in place around Dahnai to reach her, which was formidable. And even if they did, they had to get past Saelle herself.

The secret was out, and so far, nothing had been done, and there were no official declarations from any of the other empires. It was too soon yet, because the other empires had to really, really think about it. After all, they had the same problem the Consortium did. The Karinnes and their mythical power was protected behind the interdictors, and being defended by the Imperium and the Collective, protected fiercely. To get to the Karinnes, they had to go through the Imperium and the Collective to do it, then face the very defenses the Consortium announced to the sector were in place at Karis, defenses so powerful, so dangerous, so deadly that the Consortium came right out and admitted that they’d lose half their fleet of 30,000 ships trying to take it. For a smaller empire that only had a fleet of maybe 600 ships, to them, that meant that there was virtually no chance to take the Karinnes by military force. That left only espionage... but the Kimdori were actively supporting the Karinnes and actively opposing the Consortium. With the Kimdori against them, they had little hope of stealing Karinne technology or abducting a Generation. The temptation of the technology of Karis was too much to resist, but it was a forbidden fruit buried in a pit of vipers.

And tied to that was the all but impenetrable system of interdictors now defending those against the Consortium. The first of the transports that would enter the Imperium would arrive in two days, given they were jumping with relativity delay, and the station was ready for them. The only window into the Imperium was defended by a large fleet of military vessels, and those incoming faced a minimum of twelve hours of cruising at sublight, twelve hours they could be attacked by the mysterious and dangerous Karinnes. The station was up and running, was ready to receive passengers and cargo, and Faey telepaths were in place and ready to weed out the agents and the undesirable, with Kimdori silently backing them up to

catch anyone they missed.

The secret was out, and Jason was sure there would eventually be hell to pay. But until that time, they had other, more important things to do. The Consortium armada was coming, and the Legion was happily making plans to welcome them to the Milky Way in the warm and fuzzy way which made the Legion legendary in the Imperium. The Kimdori sensors pointing at that armada was showing them exactly how it was coming in, in 10 waves of 3,000 ships each separated by 10 minute intervals, so they had plans to make to maximize the damage. After they whipped the Consortium's armada's ass, the real war would begin, which Jason and just about everyone else agreed would start at the Terran Exchange Station. It was the only way into the Imperium, and the Consortium would test the defenses that protected the station and the Stargate behind it.

And boy would they be in for a *shock*. By the time the Consortium was in position to attack, all the defenses would be in place. And that little adventure was going to be highly *educa-*

tional for the Consortium, would give them an idea of just who the fuck they were dealing with here.

After they got over that humiliation, most of his advisors agreed that the Consortium would pull back and try to use technology to defeat an interdictor, probably at Karis itself, since that was their primary objective. And every time a Consortium fleet or scout mission appeared near Karis, they would discover that the defenses of Karis extended *far* from the system itself the hard way. After that, it would be typical Legion tactics, attacking Consortium support facilities, supply lines, and targets of opportunity as they tried to breach the interdictor and jump their armada into Karis. The Consortium had a vast numerical advantage, but they were attackers besieging a castle, and the defenders could shoot back at them over the castle walls.

It wasn't the best position to be in, but compared to where he was when he started the Legion, it could be worse.

The secrets were all now on the table. Now the fighting would begin.

*Thus ends the story of Unification.
In the next story, Tribulation, House
Karinne, the Imperium, and the
Collective must battle a foe that
drastically outnumbers them,
and must contend with
the machinations of the
empires that surround them,
each looking out for itself
and seeking to capture the
secrets of the Karinnes for
themselves.*

*The keys to the future lie
buried within the past.*

And there will be other stories to tell.

THE END
