

Insurrection

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Chapter 1

Chiira, 12 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

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Chiira, 12 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Biogenics Compound, Karsa, Karis

Strange to think that this was his anniversary.

Jason stood on an observation deck overlooking a large manufacturing bay in the massive Biogenics Compound, what many called the Shimmer Dome because of the ever-present security force screen that protected the facility from both physical attack and any attempt to survey the activities inside by spy devices. Below, on the assembly floor, human, Faey, Makati, Kizzik, and Kimdori workers were installing the new line of biogenics mainframes in the line of Gladiator II exomechs, the staple e-mech that formed the backbone of the Karinne ground forces. The old Gladiators had served them well, but thanks to the research team, they had all been refitted to such a degree that Myleena gave them a new designation. Old Gladiators were put on an assembly line on one side, and they were stripped down and rebuilt with new armor, new weapons, new biogenic mainframes, and new interface systems. When they were piloted out the door on the far side of the bay, they went out with the new designation of Gladiator II.

Jason didn't need to be here, but Myleena asked him to come see the operation for himself now that they had it going full tilt. It certainly was a big shock to see this place. This building was only built last year on the sprawling ground under the security dome, in one of the open spaces they'd intentionally left for expansion, and now it was going at full capacity, producing 20 refitted Gladiators a day. At that pace, they'd refit the entire line of 1,890 Gladiators, they'd be finished in just a few months. Once the refits were done, this facility would produce new Gladiator II units from parts manufactured on the continent, which was the way things worked with all Karinne units. They were either partially assembled or had their pieces built in factories on Karsa, and then shipped here, to the Shimmer Dome, so the biogenics could be installed and final assembly could be done. The cruisers and other starships were a little different, though. For those, the biogenic mainframes were sent up and installed in an ultra-security bay that only the high-security segment of the shipyard could enter. The shipyard workers had no idea what went on in that bay. They built the shell and did some of the internal fitting, then it was towed into that bay and the doors were closed, where the ship was completed.

The average shipbuilder never saw the weapons, armor, shields, or computers installed on the ships they built. Those were only seen by the most trusted within the Karinne organization.

He had to admit, they had quite an efficient system. It was odd to see more than Kimdori down on the floor working on their most secret technology, but those workers were beyond trustworthy. They were Karinne subjects, and what was more, they had passed rigorous screening to ensure both their discretion and their loyalty. They were the new face of the new house of Karinne, transplants from other parts of the Imperium, brought by the Kimdori, sworn into the house and to its secrets. And these people, workers, engineers, scientists, even farmers and housekeepers, were all absolutely trustworthy. Though the workers below didn't know the true secrets of biogenics—only the Kimdori and an elite segment of Faey and human engineers knew those secrets—they definitely knew enough to threaten Karinne technological superiority if they ever defected.

But they'd never do that. They were down there because they believed in Karinne, believed in what they were doing, and they were loyal to Jason and the house.

Those transplants were just a small example of a larger truth. The continent of Karsa was completely restored, and what was more, it was *populated* now. When they first arrived here on Karis, they were less than 2,000 people here. They were settlers, people willing to rough it, people selected by the Kimdori to be the new backbone of Karinne. But now there were over *six million* people on Karis, living in Karsa, Brenna, and the interior frontier city of Arrion. They had real cities now with real governments, and people who came here did more than farm or help reclaim the planet. There were factories now, farms and factories and new businesses, as people came in and helped make Karis a thriving planet in more than one sense. As the Kimdori moved in and rebuilt a section of the continent of Karsa, people literally raced in to claim it, set up shops and farms, build factories or ranches.

The Kimdori were the reason for it all. They found suitable people willing to make a fresh start and didn't mind living out of contact with the Imperium, and they brought them here. And here, they found a gold mine of opportunity. They didn't have to buy a house. They simply found an empty house and filed a claim with the Karinne Provincial Government. The government didn't allow anyone to claim more than one building of the same kind, so they usually had no trouble. After they had a place to live, they decided what kind of work they wanted to do, and they went about getting it going. Some people came to farm in the vast tracts of newly fertile farmland in the interior of the continent. Some went into manufacturing, either producing goods for Karis or goods sold in the Imperium. Others took advantage of the microbe-free environment to take up ranching, and because of that there were now one hundred times more animals living on Karis than there were sentient beings. The Kizzik especially seemed quite adept at ranching, but what they ranched were large insectoid creatures that produced a nectar the Kizzik liked almost to the point of addiction. Those big beetle-like creatures thrived in the southern reaches of the Karsan plain, where it was hot and dry, and the Kizzik that had come here had a booming business selling the nectar back to Kizzik Prime.

Not directly, though. Karis was still a closely guarded secret. There was plenty of commerce going on between Karis and the outside, but it was done carefully, through shell companies that concealed just where the goods being traded were either going to or coming from. That was Kumi's realm, and she rode jockey over it like a little queen.

Karis was so diverse, they even had *Parri* here. That still surprised Jason. It turns out that the *oye* fruit that the Parri cultivated on their homeworld, that everyone thought would only grow there, could grow on Karis. The Kimdori had managed to find one tribe that was curious enough to leave their precious homeworld, and that tribe had come to Karis, built their hide huts in a newly reclaimed area of grassy hills on the northern tip of Karsa, and planted their *oye* trees. The trees were now about ten feet tall, but wouldn't start producing fruit until they were about fifteen feet tall...which would be in about two years. The newly invigorated soil and the nitrogen/oxygen balance of the atmosphere was well within both Parri and *oye* tolerance, and that strip of Karsa was in the perfect temperature zone for their precious trees. The Parri themselves were very curious creatures. They were cat-like, moving on all fours most of the time but having prehensile hands, rising up on their back legs to use them. They were shamanistic in ideology and rejected technology, like the Amish back home. They lived like they'd lived for thousands of years, in a simple harmony with nature, even the sterile, artificially produced nature of Karis. But that was one of the reasons they'd come here. Jason had talked to the *shaman* of the Parri tribe, their leader, and she had told him that the soul of Karis was in need of healing, and the Parri could understand the need to bring comfort to the land. They saw the planet as a living thing, and they felt it their sacred duty to try to heal the *soul* of the land while the Karinnes tried to heal its body. Since their *oye* trees would grow here, they saw it as their duty to come to this place and tend to the wounded soul of Karis.

He didn't believe in what they did, but he was happy to have them here. Right now, every pair of hands helped, and the Parri were very devoted to trying to help restore Karis...but only in their own special way.

"Very efficient," Miaari noted as they looked down from the balcony. There were six of them there looking down. Jason and Jyslin, with Rann in Jyslin's arms stood to one side, and Myleena, Kumi, and Miaari stood on the other. This was the most elite of inner circles of the Karinne noble house. The Grand Duke and his wife, the Duchess Myleena Karinne, who oversaw all technology and research, Duchess Eleri Karinne, who managed the house's financial affairs, and the enigmatic Miaari Threxst, a Handmaiden who was the direct liaison between the Grand Duke and the many Kimdori who swarmed all over Karis. The workers on the floor below could look up and know that they were looking at the four people who directed almost all activity on Karis, in one way or another. The Grand Duke handled the overall direction and objectives of the house. The Duchess Myleena ran the technological centers and directed research. The Duchess Eleri handled all matters of finance. The Handmaiden Miaari directed the Kimdori, both with and without the Grand Duke's direct consent or knowledge...but they all knew that the Grand Duke trusted Miaari utterly, and allowed her to do what she thought best without his permission.

"I thought you'd been here before, Miaari," Kumi noted, looking at her.

"Not since this facility was built," she answered.

“You like it, Jayce?” Myleena asked, brushing her hair away from her gestalt. All of them except Miaari wore one of those devices, where Miaari wore a metal band around her wrist. They all knew what they did, but those below only knew what they were told. To them, they were interfaces, which allowed the Faey to control Karinne technology. For the non-telepathic humans, Kizzik, and Makati, some alterations had to be made. They used manual controllers that translated spoken commands into communal instructions for the equipment they used while on Karis.

“Looks like a typical Myleena operation,” Jason chuckled. “How different are the new exomechs?”

“Not much. It’s only taking the pilots about twenty logged hours to train to the new system,” she answered. “I have the specs with Cybi, she can upload them to your gestalt and you can take one for a test flight.”

Though Karinne was very small by Imperium standards, it had a formidable military...and their technology was only one reason. When Jason first began, he used mercenaries to fill his need for an immediate standing army that knew what it was doing...and, well, they were still here. But they were mercenaries no longer. When Jason created the Karinne Military Service, all the mercenaries folded into it as regulars, because Jason paid them well and he really looked out for them. The mercs had become his new army, but on the other side, with the Navy, it was a bit different. Jason had started with the Faey conscripts he had captured from Trillane not long after the house began, and upon them was built a small but highly effective, devoted, dedicated Navy. The Kimdori had, in five short years, built a veritable *fleet* of ships to make the Karinne Battle Fleet more than three ships. They had 62 ships now: 24 destroyers, 18 light cruisers, 9 medium cruisers, 5 heavy cruisers, two battleships, and one huge command ship, which had just been commissioned last week. Those ships didn’t count the Trillane ships that Jason had captured and salvaged, though. Not all of them had been built at Kosigi either. The heavy cruisers, battleships and command ship had been built at Kimdori Prime, then the biogenic systems had been taken there to finish the construction. Kosigi was big enough to build ships that size, but right now quantity mattered more than size, so the lunar base had been working to build as many ships as possible. And they had done amazingly well. The navy was considered tiny by the standards of the huge Highborn houses, but what the Karinnes lacked in numbers, they made up for in sheer power and mobility. Karinne technology was hand over fist better than Imperial technology, and a single Karinne destroyer was more than a match for anything but a Faey battleship. It was more heavily armored, had shields that could resist MPAC technology, and had those deadly particle beam weapons that could slice a ship apart like a Thanksgiving turkey. That combination made Karinne ships the most feared ships on this side of the entire *galaxy*. Even other galactic civilizations had come to respect the might of the Karinnes, for the Karinne ships could beat the snot out of just about anything anyone had. The other side of that was that since Karinne ships didn’t suffer the relativity delay when jumping through hyperspace, Jason could jump the entire fleet virtually anywhere, at any time, in real time. That let him field his entire navy anywhere it needed to be, literally minutes after the order came for them to get there.

The other civilizations were aware of the Karinne naval buildup, but didn’t fear it. The neutrality of the Karinnes was almost as legendary as their technology. The other civilizations didn’t see the military buildup of the Karinnes as a threat, they saw it as a means to make sure what happened to them in the Third Civil War didn’t happen again.

Jason had done everything Miaari had told him to do, and it had worked out wonderfully. Building on the experience of his Faey mercenaries and conscripts, Jason had, with the help of the ex-Marines and Kimdori advisors, built an efficient, effective, highly disciplined and very capable military, whose loyalty to House Karinne was unswerving. His ex-merc and the new Faey and human elements formed his army, piloting their deadly Gladiators, while the Navy protected Karinne space with their lethal ships and the only non-Karinne technology they used, Imperial Raptor fighters that had also been refitted with Karinne systems. The Karinne’s technical arm, mainly Kimdori, had designed a Karinne fighter based on one of the designs Cybi had in her memory, but production wasn’t slated to start until early next year. But until then, the Raptors would do nicely. Once they were outfitted with biogenic computers and Karinne armor, shields, and weapons, they were very, very effective.

The military was Myri’s domain. She was now *Duchess* Myri Karinne, and second in command of all Karinne military forces, with only Jason outranking her. She often joked that it quite a promotion from being an Imperial Marine sergeant, going from a non-com to the commander of all military units for an entire noble house. But she did well enough, since she had Kimdori advisors that had helped her settle into the role. She was a good tactical and strategic commander.

And boy, did that duchess title *really* make the others jealous.

Not that they really had reason to be. The ex-Marines were part of the inner core of the Karinne household. The Kimdori had brought all the hidden Generations to Karis, but to Jason they were just house members. Some of them were friends, like Ayuma who ran the Academy, but he didn’t know most of them very well. The Marines were part of his family...literally. Five of them had borne him children, part of the mandatory expansion of the gene pool that Cybi had mandated, but not the original plan the Marines had to have him father a child by *all* of them...on that, he drew the line, and bargained them down to five. Rann, the Heir Apparent, had two half-brothers and two half-sisters to play with that were all close to his age...and they were just *his* children. All ten of the Marines had borne a child by a Generation within the first two years of coming to Karis, and a few of them

had already borne a second child by a different father, while the female Generations had managed to produce either one or two children on the average...though Viera, one of the first female Generations, had produced two sets of twins in that time in addition to a third child, so she was leading the race with five children among the women, while Meran, a rather tall, handsome male, currently was outstripping all the men with eleven children to his credit.

To his surprise, the Faey Generations saw absolutely nothing wrong with the Karinne program of forced breeding, a program Jason himself didn't particularly like. After they got here and found out who they were and where they came from, and found out just how few there were left, they not only understood the need for it, they agreed wholeheartedly that it was necessary. So, with typical Faey enthusiasm for sex, they had thrown themselves into it almost to the point where Jason felt he'd taken on a house full of debauched nymphomaniacs. Generations would pair up both with other Generations and with normal Faey and keep at it until a pregnancy was confirmed. The men would then go off and try to impregnate another woman as quick as they could. But the frenzy had calmed down somewhat, since the babies were now everywhere, but the activity continued. Even now, the Marines who had borne Jason's first children were either pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or had already produced a child by another Generation male. And they wouldn't stop until they had borne three children by three different fathers, to maximize the effective expansion of the gene pool. That was the target for all women who had agreed to participate in the program, three children. Men too were to sire three children by three different mothers, but some of them were trying for quite a few more than that, and Jason had been all but commanded to produce five children by different mothers, because he was the *only* Terran Generation. He was literally the last member of a splinter of the Karinne Generations, and his line had to be protected by any means necessary.

And behind it all was Cybi, who kept careful record of the lineage of each child.

Not all the children were the same, either. Rann was blessed with tremendous talent at birth, and he wasn't the only one. Every single one of Jason's children were telepathically sensitive at birth, but even Rann was eclipsed by the child of Jason and Yana. Yana was one of the most powerful non-Generation telepaths—one of the most powerful Faey telepaths *period*—and Jason was officially documented as the strongest living male telepath in the Imperium. Their child, a platinum blond girl that looked almost completely human that Yana had named Kyri, was *definitely* the product of a union between two telepaths of their calibre. Kyri might be one of the most powerful telepaths alive...anywhere. She was *that strong*, even as a newborn.

And boy did she drive Yana nuts! Kyri wasn't just a telepath. Like all Generations, she was also telekinetic, but unlike any other Generation child, she *had full command of her talent since she was a baby*. Yana was worn ragged when her infant daughter kept making things fly all over the room, using her power almost without understanding what she was doing, and since she was telepathically aware, it gave her a frighteningly accelerated learning curve. Most sensitive children's talent faded a few months after birth and then remanifested later on, but Kyri's talent never faded. She had been born telepathically aware, and it had taken some careful training and work with her so she could control her talent, to close her mind. But that talent allowed her to develop language skills at a frightening rate; Kyri was only four, but she had the vocabulary and reading skills of a high schooler. She *was* a child and acted like one, but she was a child that threw out words that the adults had to go look up in a dictionary.

By the time Kyri was an adult, she'd have more practical experience with her talent than Faey three times her age.

Jason looked at the Gladiators, and thought a test flight might be fun. Jason was probably the only Grand Duke in the *Siann* that had more than passing familiarity with mechanized weaponry. Oh, he was sure that one of the other Grand Duchesses had a Class 3 and might be able to pilot a fighter or exomech, but Jason had *practical* experience. He had been the one to test the Gladiator they'd found here to help Myleena get the data she needed for the refit. Thanks to Kiaari, Jason had been implanted via Kimdori sharing with how to pilot both exomechs and top-line Faey military fightercraft. He could fly almost anything, from a Karinne battleship to an airbike, but the main difference is that Kiaari's sharing touch instilled him with a knowledge of using military machines in practical ways...her training also taught him to fight in one, and how to pilot a fighter in combat, including tactics to understand to get to the other side of that fight alive. Myleena was rated for an exomech, but she didn't have practical combat training that Kiaari's touch had given to him, so he was the one flying the Gladiator.

Now, though, half the army was rated on a Gladiator. Gladiators were the standard issue for the mechanized infantry, with the rest of the entire military wearing armor systems that were designed over a thousand years ago, but were still considered superior to the best personal armor the Imperium had to offer. Those suits, called *Crusader* armor systems, worked off the interface, and were much more efficient and effective than Faey powered armor. *Everyone* in the military was issued a Crusader armor system, from the greenest recruit just out of basic training to Myri herself. It was the basic, fundamental unit of equipment around which literally everything else was based. Gladiator pilots literally plugged their Crusader armor right into the exomech, and the armor was the bridge between the interface and the mecha. Gladiators and their refitted Raptors were *designed* around the pilot wearing Crusader armor, and the unit almost wouldn't function without it there...which was in itself an additional security measure. Crusader armor systems were so integral to Karinne that every member of the house also had a suit, and many of them wore them if for anything than the sheer convenience of having limited flight capability.

“That sounds good to me. I haven’t taken a Gladiator out in a while. I’ll start thinking I’m getting rusty.”

“What happened to the one you keep parked at Foxwood?” Myleena asked.

“It got recalled for the refit,” he answered. “ I haven’t had time to play with it anyway.”

“That’s at least the proper thing to say about it,” Jyslin laughed. “That’s all it is, a big toy.”

“The best toys are big toys,” Myleena grinned.

“Spoken like a true Karinne,” Miaari murmured.

“I’ll make sure you get another one, Jayce,” Myleena said to him around the Kimdori.

“What’s that, mama?” Rann asked, pointing down at the floor.

“That’s a Kizzik,” she answered. “They’re one of the races of the Imperium. He’s a drone. You can tell because he doesn’t have any wings. See?”

“I see,” he answered.

“I hope you have a noble here,” Kumi noted, looking around.

“Yeah, up in the control room right now,” Myleena said. “She already gave the drones their orders, and they’re very effective once they know what to do. They really got the assembly line going. One Kizzik drone does the work of five Faey in half the time.”

“All drones do is work, so naturally they’d be good at it. How is the Kizzik handling getting around without an audio interface? They don’t speak.”

“Well, I adapted one that responds to their scent language,” Myleena said. “It’s almost as effective as a Faey interface, since Kizzik can communicate *real* fast using it.”

“Clever,” Kumi said with a nod.

“Thanks, I try,” Myleena said with false modesty.

“Isn’t today our anniversary, Jason?” Kumi asked.

“Yeah. Five years,” he said, then he sighed. “Where does the time go? It seems like last month I was staring at a camera giving that message to Earth.”

“It has been a good five years, though,” Miaari said. “Karinne prospers and grows. Karis returns to life, and the house is well defended by its military and by its inaccessibility.”

Jason wasn’t the only one to remain quiet a moment. That inaccessibility wasn’t quite what it used to be. Given there were *six million* people here now, so many vanishing could not be hidden for very long, and the *Siann* was starting to piece things together. They knew that the Karinnes had to go *somewhere* when Jason picked up the human telepaths and the house members and vanished with them, and the list of possible places to go was very short. Some had correctly reasoned that the only place Jason could have salvaged Karinne military ships, and disappeared with so many people, was Karis. After all, it was the *only* planet that Karinne had owned. In the last year, no less than 29 breaches into Karis space had been detected by the sensor ring that defended the interior of the system, and also hid the planet from sensor sweeps by making the interior of the system look like radioactive slag. Those unmanned probes and scout ships prowled around the edges of the system, investigating, and then left. Jason knew that the *Siann* wouldn’t be put off by those sensor readings forever. Eventually, one of them was going to send a probe into the system itself to get visual confirmation on what their sensors were telling them. When that happened, then Jason could either

destroy the probe or reveal Karis to the Imperium.

Neither option was very palatable. Destroying the probe was the safest bet, but it would only incite repeat missions until one of them succeeded, which would turn into a running war. Revealing Karis was also not a very good thing, because then the *Siann* would know exactly where to send their spies to try to steal the military secrets of the Karinnes. They wouldn't dare try to fight Karinne in a frontal war, but there wasn't much stopping them from trying to steal Karinne's secrets for themselves.

That was one reason why Miaari was here. While Kiaari ran Earth's security, Denmother Zaa had told Miaari *personally* that the security of Karis was her responsibility, that safeguarding the secrets of the Karinnes was her job on Karis, just as safeguarding the Academy and the lower-priority secrets found on Earth were Kiaari's duties. Miaari was more than an ambassador to the Karinnes, she was the Karis Gamekeeper, the head of the formidable Karinne intelligence network. Unlike most other house intelligence networks, Miaari had all the resources of the Kimdori at her disposal...and they both knew that she'd need them if the *Siann* knew where to send their spies.

Security around Karis wasn't too much of a worry to Jason. Myri, through Miaari's orders, dealt with the military aspects of security and the automated defense grid surrounding the entire inner system of three planets. Miaari handled the physical security in conjunction with Myri, and handled computer security in conjunction with her lieutenant. Jason wanted the best, so he hired a Moridon computer security company to partner with Miaari to protect Karis' secret when he decided that they *needed* to have Karis connected to Civnet. And when one wanted computer security, one went to the Moridons. The Moridon company's team was led by a project manager that was an eight foot tall female named Siyhaa, who was a sober, no-nonsense female that took her job as seriously as life itself. She was hired to make Karis impregnable to a computer hack, and she performed that duty with the utmost devotion and attention to detail, so much so that she and three of her best computer engineers were physically present on Karis, sworn to the utmost secrecy, while the rest of the security team, who dealt mainly with Civnet security, was stationed on Draconis and Moridon. Between Miaari and Siyhaa, Jason had no worries at all. Siyhaa's main job right now was carefully managing the link between Karis and the Imperium through Civnet. Karis had been connected to Civnet for two years, but Siyhaa made sure that nobody on Civnet could hack into any computer the Karinnes had connected to it, nor could they use communications to try to track down the physical location of those computers. Siyhaa's team was efficient and discreet, and the secret of Karis was utterly safe with them. Moridons were loyal to their employers when hired, and given who they were, they could keep secrets just as well as the Kimdori could.

Sometimes, watching Miaari and Siyhaa interact was amusing. Neither of them particularly liked the other, due to a bit of old rivalry between the security experts and the race of spies that tried to crack that security, but they worked well together, and respected one another.

"I still think you should've planned a celebration or ceremony or something."

"I'm too busy for that kinda shit, Myleena," Jason snorted. "You have any idea how full my desk is right now? I came here just for the opportunity to see something other than my in box."

"Tell me about it," Kumi agreed. "My in box is twice as full as yours."

"Delegate, hon," Jyslin chided. "You don't have to do it all yourself."

"I haven't found anyone yet with the right training I can trust with some of the shit I do," she answered. "Not even half of it's even legal. I'm not letting some greenhorn stick her hands in my *kaba* pod when she has no idea what she's doing."

How serious is she? Myleena sent privately to Jason.

Pretty serious, he answered. *She does do some pretty delicate stuff, and I can agree that it's not something I'd want just anyone to try to do. She is trying to find someone to help her, though. I worry about her, it's almost too much stress.*

Ah.

"There will be time for celebrations later," Miaari said calmly. "Maybe in five more years, when Karis is fully secure and we have the naval forces at optimum strength, we will have the leisure to celebrate thusly. Still we are in a weak position, and it worries both me and the Denmother."

Jason couldn't disagree. Though their navy was now strong in relation to the Imperium, both Jason and Miaari agreed that Karinne had to be able to stand up against the *entire Imperium* if it came to blows. That plan really had little to do with the present, because the friendship between Dahnai and Jason, and the alliance between Karinne and Merrane, was strong. Jason and Miaari were looking beyond the present, in a future where Jason and Dahnai were long gone and their descendents were in charge. By setting the precedent now, it would keep Karinne ready to protect itself if the alliance between Karinne and Merrane broke down. Karinne had to be a force unto itself, working within the bounds of the Imperium on its face, but prepared to defend itself against that same Imperium if they tried to repeat what happened in the Third Civil War.

To Jason, it wasn't *if*, it was *when* that happened. Jason knew that there was going to come a reckoning between the Karinnes and the Imperium over their technology. It wouldn't be between Jason and Dahnai, but it *was* coming. Some future Empress was going to demand the Karinne secrets, and that future Karinne leader was going to refuse. And when that happened, the house had *damn* well better have the military force on hand and available to defend itself if that Empress decided to try to use force to get what she wanted. Jason knew the Faey. He knew them well, understood them, and he used that intimate understanding of them to comprehend that fundamental truth, that the Faey were too aggressive, too violent, too power-hungry for it *not* to happen.

But God help him, how he loved them. He was married to a Faey, had two Faey girlfriends, *amu dorai*, Symone and Dahnai...though it was more formal with one than the other. Symone was a true *amu dorai*, which in Faey meant "courtly love," where his relationship with Dahnai was more distant now. She was smitten with her husband, and besides, he'd set foot off of Karis a grand total of five times in the last three years. He hadn't been to Draconis in three years, since Shya's religious ceremony kind of akin to a Christian baptism, some kind of ceremony held by a Templar of Trelle. Jason had been forced to bring his family to that, since it also entailed the formal signing of the marriage contract now that Shya had completed that ceremony. Dahnai had managed to sneak him away from his family and remind him of old times back in her apartment...and he certainly didn't object too much. Dahnai was *hot*, and sex with her was almost as good as it was with Jyslin and Symone.

"I don't think it's ever gonna get that bad," Myleena said. "But I can't deny that it's only smart to have an overwhelming military available, given how unstable things are in the Imperium right now."

"Why do you say that?" Jyslin asked as she handed Rann off to Jason, then worked a cramp out of her arm by rubbing her shoulder and rotating her arm in wide circles.

"Just the usual," Myleena shrugged. "I talked to my aunt last week, and she said there's some rumors going around that both the Shovalles and the Trillanes are either about to make a move, or are allying to try to break away from the Imperium. It's all nothing but rumor, of course, but my aunt usually can pick the truth out of the rumors with some decent accuracy. She thinks there's something major coming on the horizon." Myleena glanced at Miaari. "But I'm sure you've heard that."

"There is some truth to it," Miaari nodded. "My people are still trying to come to know the full truth of it. But the Trillanes are definitely about to make some kind of move."

"I guess it's about time. Five years shoulda been long enough for them to recover from the spanking Dahnai gave them when Jason took the house," Myleena noted.

Miaari nodded. "Though she is inscrupulous, you cannot deny that Maeri Trillane is cunning and dangerous," she stated. "Trillane has more than recovered from the setbacks handed to them by Empress Dahnai."

"Who is Twillane?" Rann asked.

"Some people I hope you never have trouble with, son," Jason chuckled. "You hungry?"

"Yah!"

"Then let's wrap up this tour and get down to the important business," he winked at Myleena. "Lunch!"

"Oh sure, how can my Gladiators compare with a grilled cheese sandwich," Myleena said scathingly, which made Jason burst out in laughter.

In order to prepare a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches—Rann's favorite—they returned to Foxwood. Foxwood was on the

far side of Karsa, on a very nice strip of land on the ocean. Jason loved the ocean, and Foxwood East, as they called it, sat on a gentle rise that overlooked the sea. There was a staircase that led down to the beach, and that beach was the communal area for the various nobles that lived along the shoreline. Tim and Symone lived on one side, and Myleena on the other, and all the Marines lived along that strip as well, allowing them to be close so he could keep in touch and visit his kids.

Dahnai would be scandalized if she could see his house, for it was very *ordinary*. It was a four bedroom three story Colonial, built in the Terran style, that would not look out of place on any street in an affluent section of an American city. The only parts of it that made it unusual were the two large paved landing pads behind the house, inland, and the small hangar that normally housed whatever vehicles he wasn't using. His Nova and a small dropship sat on one landing pad, and the hangar, which was the size of a barn, nearly as large as the house, held ships that Myleena sent over for him to play with, two more Novas, Jyslin's personal dropship, two hovercars, and four airbikes. The other landing pad was usually empty, for it was the pad that visitors used when they came to see him, but it currently held Miaari's dropship.

Every house along the strip was ordinary like that, making the strip look just like a middle class enclave, though a very multicultural one. Jason's house was the only one that was in the Terran architecture; the rest of the houses along the strip were Faey designs, which meant they were sloping and elegant, more square than rectangular, and they had flat roofs with stairs leading up to their tops. Faey architecture treated the roof like a Terran would a deck, a recreational area. But behind those houses was a reminder that these were *not* normal people, in the form of a security fence and roving patrols of Dukal guards. Jason hadn't wanted them, but both Myri and Miaari had been absolutely adamant that they be there...not to isolate Jason from the rest of Karis, but to protect the Dukal line. Jason had no fear of anyone who lived on Karis, but even he couldn't refute that there was always the outside chance that someone might flip out or go nuts, and that's what the guards were there to stop. Anyone could come see Jason at any time, but they had to go through security first, that was the only condition. That was the purpose they served; not to isolate the Grand Duke from his people, but to make sure that meetings between the Grand Duke and his people were safe.

This was his new life. Here, he was surrounded by friends and family, and all his children were only a couple minutes' walk down either side of the beach. Yana and Maya were the closest, living on the far sides of Tim and Myleena, then Zora and Ilia, then Sheleese and the twins Lyn and Bryn, who lived together, then Myri and Min on the outsides. Yana, Maya, Zora, and Ilia were the mothers of the four children he was forced to have outside of marriage, and they lived closest to him, so he could be near his children. Yana had born Kyri, who was probably going to be the most powerful telepath in the history of the Imperium. Maya had borne Aran, a bubbly little boy with lime green hair. Zora had borne Sora, naming her after the root of the entire line of the Generations, a little redhead girl with a major attitude. Ilia had born Zach, giving him a Terran name, a black-haired child with dark eyes and a mysterious smile gracing his face most of the time. Zora jokingly called them the Brat Pack because they were all rather rambunctious and a bit disobedient, but they expected no less from the seed of Jason Karinne. They ranged in ages from Rann's five to Zach's three, and they certainly had a gaggle of other kids to play with. The area outside the security fence was also populated with more Generations, and nearly three quarters of them either had kids or had fathered children. There was a veritable onslaught of toddlers, babies, and small children running around, and the kids never had to go far to find someone to play with.

That was the other reason there were guards patrolling the area...to keep the kids safe, if only from themselves. They never had to go far to find a patrol of two black-armored Dukal Guards that would give them a hand, or keep them out of trouble.

It took Jason quite a while to get used to the idea of it, but he had to admit, he was very happy with the thought of it. He was proud of his kids, and he loved them all...and the bonds between him and their mothers, through them, ensured that they would always be tight-knit. He didn't love them and no longer slept with any of them—it *had* been nothing more than a duty to him, and they didn't hold it against him—but he couldn't deny that the results of it made him very happy.

The parents certainly had started working on those kids in their own ways. Sora was already being taught how to fly by Zora, but Jason saw nothing wrong with that at all, given he too came from a flying family. Yana was teaching Kyri about her talent, Ilia was teaching Zach all about military things; though he'd probably never fight, Ilia would probably make one hell of a general out of him. Aram probably had it best, though, since he was just the youngest out of three, and Vell treated him like *he* was Aram's father. It really said so much about Vell that he was willing to be the father of a child that wasn't even his, and Aram was lucky for their love and affection. Aram had two fathers, Daddy Vell and Daddy Jason, and they both loved him deeply.

That was his new life, and he wouldn't have it any other way. While they were having lunch, Zora stopped by with Sora, walking up along the wooden walkways that ran along the beach that served as the private avenues by which those closest to the Grand Duke traveled. Sora immediately got handed a sandwich herself, and she was hefted up to the table by Jason's strong arms, chatting with Rann about things that truly only mattered to children.

Hey Zora, Jyslin sent as she came into the kitchen. A house servant, Amaya, handed her a glass of chilled *oye* juice, which she took with a nod and a smile. Amaya was one of two servants Jason kept, and only because he and Jyslin were so busy they often didn't have time to cook or clean. Amaya and Surin were the house's servants, but they were also integral members of the

family, often watching after Rann when Jason and Jyslin were either exhausted or busy. Miaari had spent nearly a year to find these two, both of them commoners from the Imperium, carefully combing through thousands of potential servants to find two with the right mentality and loyalty to be directly attached to the house of the Grand Duke. It seemed only natural to Jason that after they met here in the Duke's employ, they fell in love and got married. They were a good match, in his eyes. Amaya was a total sweetheart, gentle and kind, and Surin was training to be a teacher while serving in House Saenne as a house servant, so he was a terrific tutor for Rann, gently teaching Rann while not making it apparent to the spunky child that he was receiving an education. *What you up to?*

Not much, just dicking around right now, she answered. *Myli wants me to help her with some stuff later today.*

What?

Dunno, something to do with some engine modifications she made to one of her dropships. She wants me to fly it while she takes readings to see how good they were. Myleena was still tinkering with Karinne spatial engines to solve a power problem. She'd been messing with them for years, trying to adapt them to modern Moleculartronic technology, but she'd run into some major issues trying to bridge between the biogenic/cybertronic systems the engines used and adapting them to moleculartronic technology. She tinkered with it mostly, since Karinne engines were still superior, the power drain they dealt to a ship their only major drawback. Karinne engines were power hogs, and Myleena had been playing with solving that problem in her free time over the years.

She's still messing with engines?

It keeps her out of trouble, Jason sent with amusement. *As long as she amuses herself with tinkering with engines, it keeps her from taking my cars and planes apart.*

She still does that?

She always calls it preventive maintenance, but I know she does it just because she likes doing it. And the only Novas around are the three in my hangar.

Someday I'm gonna buy one of those from you, Jason, Zora sent with a laugh.

Myleena said she's going to have the shipyard build more of them, after they fill the quota for military production, Jason shrugged. *I'll make sure you get one of the first ones off the line, but you're not getting mine.*

Oh come on, you have three!

Yes, and I used to have four, he sent coolly.

Zora blushed. *That wasn't my fault, and you know it. Even Myli said it wasn't my fault.*

Jason gave her a sly smile. Zora flushed purple, then gave him a hot look.

I hate you sometimes, do you know that? Are you ever gonna let me live that down?

No. If I did, I wouldn't be doing my job, he sent with a grin.

Bastard.

"Mama, can we go play?" Sora asked, looking up at her mother. "I'm done, see?"

"Sure, sweetie," she answered. "Are you done, Rann?"

"Uh-huh, I'm all done," he answered. "Can we go to the beach? I wanna swim!"

“I can take them, your Grace,” Amaya offered.

“Not without me, you’re not,” Jyslin teased playfully.

“Fine with me,” Jason nodded. “I have some paperwork to do, but I’ll try and come down and join you after a while. At least I hope so,” he sighed.

“Okay, papa,” Sora said with a loving smile. “Mama said you have Duke things today.”

Jason laughed. “That’s about right, kidlet,” he agreed, scrubbing Sora’s blond hair with a hand. “I should be doing those Duke things right now, but I want to talk to Miaari first before we go over some of it.”

“Important?” Zora asked.

“Fairly,” he affirmed. “Important enough to want her opinion on some of it. She should be here any time now. She had some things to tie up at the Shimmer Dome.”

While Jyslin, Zora, and Amaya took the kids down to the beach, Jason retreated to his study, with its large bay window that overlooked the sea. This was his private domain, his office, where he did most of the work that being a Grand Duke entailed. It was panelled in rich mahogany, with a blue carpet and pictures of his wife, children, and friends all over the walls, and a holographic pictures of Jyslin and his five children on his desk. His desk had two panels on it, and a vidlink was on the wall facing his desk for video conferences. Behind his desk was the window, and he spent quite a lot of time with his chair swung around and his elbow on the sill, looking out at the sea, or watching his children and their mothers playing on the beach. There was a barbecue pit on a deck down on the edge of the beach behind the house, a volleyball net, horseshoe pit, and a little flat area for beach batchi. Down below, Zora and Jyslin had pitched towels while the kids ran towards the sea with Amaya watching on. Amaya was a tall, lithe Faey with sky-blue hair and a somewhat thin figure, narrow-hipped and a little flat-chested. She wore a black one piece, but Jason could see with some amusement that Jyslin and Zora had already shed their bikinis and were sunbathing nude on the beach. That didn’t bother him, nor anyone else, really. Faey modesty wasn’t the same as Terran modesty, and going around naked was entirely acceptable to a Faey girl at the beach. In reality, there was no law against nudity anywhere in the Imperium, and Jason wasn’t so much the prude that he’d change that here on Karis, when nearly 60% of the Karis population was Faey. He just wondered why they bothered putting them on, when all they did was wear them for like five minutes before stripping them off.

One thing was for sure...his boys certainly already knew what women looked like naked.

But he was here on business, so he put naked women out of his mind and concentrated on getting some of his work off the table. While waiting for Miaari, he combed through quite a few missives and communications, and did some of the tedious paperwork that came with the job. He would *not* allow a bureaucracy to form, he would not allow himself to become separated from the affairs of the house and the needs of its subjects, so he had some work on his desk that some Grand Duchesses would fire their aides for even putting on their desks, it was so *insignificant*. Yes, it made him busy, but he wasn’t about to allow himself to ever think he was above such duties. Yes, he had a staff that helped him with much of it, and they worked in the “official” Dukal government offices over in Karsa, but he always ensured that he had direct say in almost every decision. He preferred to work out of his study, so they sent it over to him, and he sent it back when he was done.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to do it like this for much longer. Karis was getting bigger and bigger, and it increased his workload every day, but he was resistant to the idea of allowing others to make decisions that would affect the daily lives of the Karinne commoners.

He managed to work through quite a bit of it, applications for land grants, service requests, some suggestions about terraforming, quite a few applications for Karisians to bring family members to Karis, even a couple of marriage application permits, when Miaari arrived. She strolled in scratching absently at her breast, and the move drew his eyes to that white band of fur that went from under her chin to her crotch. The white band of a Handservant, the most highly respected of all the Kimdori. They were Kimdori who had performed so admirably that they had earned the Denmother’s personal respect. It was like earning the Congressional Medal of Honor back home in America, the highest award a Kimdori could receive. “Jason,” she greeted when she came in and closed the door. She tapped on the keypad by the door, and caused the room to enter a secured mode that would prevent any and all surveillance. The window behind him shimmered, then turned dark as the glass entered secure mode, preventing anyone from being able to see in from the outside, but allowing them to see out.

“Must be serious to use that,” Jason said grimly as he finished up approving a land grant request, then sent it off. “Need me

to shut these down?”

“Please,” she nodded. “But leave the vidlink open. Denmother will be calling in a moment.”

“No problem,” he said as he shut down both his panels. “What’s this about?”

“I think it best to allow Denmother to explain it,” she answered, and while she answered the vidlink beeped with an incoming call. The red lights meant that it was a secured Kimdori channel, and that could only be Zaa.

She appeared on the monitor, a majestic gray-furred Kimdori with a regal bearing, and Jason had to resist the urge to stand in her presence. Never had he met anyone as *royal* as Zaa. Her very presence was awe-inspiring, but the smile she gave him was anything but haughty. “Cousin,” she greeted. “Are you well?”

“Outside of being busy as sin, well enough, Denmother,” he answered. “What’s so important that you’d use *this*?”

“This is information not yet available elsewhere, Jason,” she told him. “It is a very serious matter, and it does concern your house.” She looked down, and a handpanel flashed into view at the bottom of the screen. For some reason, Zaa wasn’t wearing a memory band. “We have received intelligence that the Trillanes intend to break away from the Imperium.”

“I’ve heard that rumor myself, Zaa.”

“This is not a rumor,” she said bluntly. “We have intercepted their schedule. They intend to make their declaration in six days. Trillane has called up all its military units and amassed them at Arctus.”

“They won’t stand a chance against the Imperial fleet,” Jason scoffed.

“Normally I would agree, but the Urumi have decided to take sides in this issue,” Zaa stated. “They have thrown in their lot with Trillane, and intend to support Trillane’s independence with a military alliance.”

Jason frowned, leaning back in his chair. “Are they nuts? Things are quiet now, why do they want to stir up this trouble?”

“The Urumi seem to have not taken Merrane’s attempts to atone at face value,” Zaa sniffed. “How this concerns you, Jason, is that the Urumi are returning the people they abducted from Terra to Trillane, as soldiers.”

Jason sighed. For five long years, he had been locked in a frustrating war of words with the Urumi over those people. Over three million humans had been abducted by Trillane and sent to Uruma, where the Trillanes used their talent to brainwash the people into being loyal soldiers of their house. Trillane had denied it, of course, and there was never any viable proof they could have taken to the Empress that might get Trillane’s charter yanked. Jason couldn’t even prove his people were there outside of Zaa’s intelligence, which the Urumi simply wrote off as so many lies. Getting those people back had been one of the failures of his tenure as Grand Duke, because it would have literally taken a war with the Urumi, and Jason couldn’t fight that war with the limited resources available to the Karinnes. The Imperium would *not* help, and he honestly couldn’t blame them for not helping in a political sense. Tensions between the Urumi and the Faey had been a knife’s edge from war for over a thousand years.

“Clearly, adding those humans to their own forces, it gives Trillane considerable military assets,” Zaa told him. “And for the last five years, Maeri Trillane has been building her military back up after the fines imposed and the ships lost in battle with you. Trillane believes that with what they have and the Urumi there to threaten all-out war with the Imperium should they not back off, that Trillane can successfully break away from the Imperium.”

“Maeri must be insane,” Jason sighed, glancing at the sober-looking Miaari. “She *knows* that Dahnai can’t just let her go. It could make the entire Imperium fly apart at the seams.”

“Perhaps that is what the Urumi desire,” Zaa noted. “A fractured Imperium would be an inviting target. And with her threatening to use your own people against you, perhaps she seeks to dissuade Karinne from aiding the Imperium in the war that would follow such a secession. Maeri is more than aware of your care for your people. To use them in such a manner is not above her.”

“I know, she’s a cold bitch,” Jason grunted, putting his head in his hands for a moment as he thought things through. Clearly, this was going to be a shitstorm no matter how things turned out. But he couldn’t come up with anything. “What do you think we should do, Zaa?”

“For now, nothing. Give me time to amass more intelligence. But the Empress must be warned, and you will have to do it. She will know that the information comes from us if you deliver it, and we cannot appear to be openly involved in this. You know our strictures.”

He nodded. “I know, and I can’t blame you for it.” The Kimdori never openly took sides, and only worked for those who paid them...that was how they appeared. But below that was another set of rules, and that was that they tried to keep a lid on things in this sector of the galaxy. The Faey were a powder keg, and the Kimdori worked to keep them from going off, but they did it without actively interfering. They were watchers, observers, trying to keep things peaceful, but also not interfering with other civilizations. The Kimdori couldn’t *actively* do anything, they had to be asked to do it. Them keeping an eye on things was active, but in this regard, to actually warn Dahnai wouldn’t be allowed. “I’d better get ready to go, then, unless there was more you wanted to talk about.”

“No, getting this to Dahnai quickly is vital. I’ll warn Jinaami to tell Dahnai you are coming, but nothing more.”

“That should be enough. Let me get my armor on,” he grunted. “I’ll call you back as soon as I get home and tell you what happened.”

She nodded. “Journey well, Jason Karinne.” And then her image vanished.

“Well, shit,” Jason sighed, standing up. “There went my day. Maybe even my month.”

“I could not agree more, Jason,” Miaari said grimly. “Trillane may cause the entire Imperium to self destruct...and that might be exactly what they want. I would not put it above Maeri Trillane to destroy her entire race over petty revenge.”

“Amen,” he said, pulling his shirt over his head and walking towards the door. *Surin.*

Yes, your Grace?

Go open the hangar. I’m going out.

Which ship are you taking?

The Raptor.

There was a long pause. *I, see,* came a much more serious reply. Jason wouldn’t be going in the Raptor if it was anything local. And if he was leaving Karis *alone*, then it had to be very serious. *I will have the guards bring the ship out onto the pad for you.*

Miaari cancelled the secure mode for the room, then opened the door for him. *Thank you, Surin. I’ll be down in a few minutes.*

What’s going on? Symone sent almost immediately. Jason had sent privately to Surin, but Symone could hear private sendings, and from the sense of her sending, she was at home, next door. That was within her hearing range.

I have to go to Draconis. It’s pretty serious, he answered. *But it’s not something I can discuss.*

Ah, I understand, hon. One of those secret Grand Duke things. See you when you get back, okay?

I’m not sure how long I’m going to be. Odds are, Dahnai’s gonna try to hold me over. I haven’t seen her face to face in like six months.

I don't think she's gonna be that horny, since she's so obsessed with her husband, came a reply with a naughty tinge. But she might want to bang you for old time's sake.

I can deal with it.

I know, fucking someone with a body like EmpressDahnai's is just such a chore, she teased.

I doubt I'll be in the mood, he answered with a very serious, almost grim undertone that forestalled any further banter.

There was a startled silence as Jason entered the bedroom, then put his palm on the reader by the bed that opened the armory. A metal door slid open, revealing two Crusader armor units, his and Jyslin's, and a rack holding several weapons of various makes and models, including the latest generation of his railgun. Jason sat down on the bed and started working out of his jeans. *Well, if it's like that, I'll let you get to it. Good luck, baby.*

Thanks.

It only took him about five minutes to armor up, since he did it so often. He came out of the room in his black armor with the Karinne crest emblazoned on the chest of his armor in shimmering gold, two waves whose crests faced each other with a phoenix and a star above the trough between them. *Jyslin, he sent openly.*

Yeah love?

I have to go to Draconis. It's business. I'm not sure when I'll be back.

Okay. Want me to go with you?

No, it'll be best if you stay here.

Sounds serious.

It might be. Myri?

She's down at the command center, Yana answered.

Fuck. Listen, get in touch with her and have her mobilize the fleet, get all military personnel in off leave. I want everyone in a state of readiness. And someone call Kosigi and find out when those new ships are gonna be finished with shakedown. Yana, go track down General Eyna and tell her to step up getting the infantry rated on the new Gladiators.

Jason, what's going on? Ilia called.

I'll explain it when I get back, he called as he went out the back door and towards the hangar. His Raptor was sitting on the pad waiting for him, a sleek black war machine with elegant lines and a deadly appearance, with its downsloped, triangular-shaped wings, double-tailfin in a V configuration, and angular cockpit glass. It was an Imperium design, but it had been refitted with Karinne technology and the cockpit controls stripped out to make way for the interface. The cockpit opened as Jason approached, and he used the Crusader drive system to float up to the cockpit. Within was a featureless cockpit with no controls, no indicators, just three pieces of black backglass facing the pilot's seat.

Jason settled into the pilot's seat, then felt the seat lock his armor into place, effectively immobilizing him. He closed his eyes and accessed the Raptor through his gestalt, and felt it respond. Using the mental communion with the Raptor's systems, he started the engines and brought up all systems. *[Cybi.]*

[Yes, Jason?]

[I'm going to Draconis, and it's pretty serious. I'd like you to do three things for me. First, I'd like you to coordinate with Myri and Jyslin as they follow through on the orders I gave. Second, please relay a message to Ayuma for me. Tell her to

increase security at the Academy, watch for anything unusual, and have Kiaari put extra people on the Urumi embassy.]

[I will relay the message,] she acknowledged. [What is happening?]

[I'll explain it when I get back,] he replied. [I know you surf Civnet when you're bored, so could you, look around and see if you find anything unusual or suspicious concerning the Trillanes or the Urumi?]

[I will start looking now,] she answered. [Since this seems quite serious, shall I schedule a council when you return?]

[That's a good idea. Tell Jyslin to have everyone at Kosiningi. We'll have this talk at your place, so you can participate.]

[That reminds me, Jason, the Kimdori finished your house here. Do you intend to move to Kosiningi permanently?]

[No, I wanted a place to stay when I come visit you that feels like more than a hotel room, that's all.]

[Well, I do appreciate your thoughtfulness.]

[You're a member of the family, Cybi. Now let me get to Draconis so I can get back.]

[Of course. I'll have a report ready on anything I find ready for you when you return.]

Jason felt the ship's cameras come online, and when they did, Jason saw in his mind's eye everything the cameras could see. A heads-up display superimposed over that image as the ship directly fed data to his brain through his gestalt and armor, allowing him to literally *become* the ship. Using that communion, the Generation ability to telepathically interface with biogenic computers, Jason had a control of the Raptor so effortless, so absolute, that he could fly circles around any pilot in a non-interface fighter. Though his fighter pilots weren't Generations and couldn't do what he was doing, the system Myleena had devised was very nearly as good. They too flew their fighters by interface, without manual controls, where their thoughts directed the units. But their control was only one way, from pilot to machine, forcing them to rely on their eyes for targets and instruments to receive information they needed to be effective fighter pilots. Even with those limitations, however, a Karinne pilot in an interface-driven Raptor would blow the pants off any other Faey fighter pilot. Karinne pilots reacted with the speed of thought and had utter control of their mecha due to the lack of manual controls, and that made them devastating.

Jason used the interface to emulate audio, which translated his communal thought into gravband signals that could be picked up as normal communications. *[Kosigi, this is Karinne One.]*

[This is Kosigi, Petty Officer Malla, go ahead your Grace.] came the response, translated into communal thought by the computer.

[Which ships are on standby?]

[The Liberty, with the destroyers Washington and Gora.]

[Get through to the Liberty and tell them to launch, but only them. I'll meet them outside the main doors.]

[This is the Liberty, Lieutenant Jeya at the conn. I picked that up, your Grace. I'll notify the Captain and get underway.]

[Very good, Lieutenant. Jeya...wait a minute. Pink hair? Tall?]

[That's me, your Grace. I'm surprised you remember me,] she said, her voice quite flattered.

[I saw your scores, Lieutenant. I thought we put you on your own ship.]

She laughed. *[Not yet, your Grace, but a girl can hope. Last I heard, I'm still under consideration, no official word yet from Central Command.]*

[I'll ask Myri about it next time I see her.]

[You don't have to go out of your way for me, your Grace.] she said as the massive outer doors of the lunar base opened. *[We're launching now, your Grace. We'll be exiting the doors in about two minutes.]*

[I'll be waiting. Kosigi, clear all traffic for my approach. Sorry to pull rank, but I'm in a hurry.]

[I've already cleared the lanes, your Grace,] the controller responded.

Jason skillfully swung the fighter around to the side as the Karinne cruiser exited the lunar station. It was a sleek, dangerous vessel, the same model as the *Defiant*, with its long triangular shape and slightly flared wing-like aft section. The Karinne crest was emblazoned on the bow in red, and the ship's name was written under it in both Faey script and English. *[Your Grace, Liberty here, Captain Meri commanding. You are cleared to dock in the forward port landing bay. The outer doors are already open.]*

[Understood, I'm on the way.]

Jason expertly navigated the fighter into the open docking bay and set her down with a gentle touch. He was already disengaged from the ship before the ship fully settled on its skids, and jumped down from the cockpit even as the canopy opened. Three officers were there waiting for him, including Captain Meri. Meri was one of his original conscripts, one of the non-coms among the Trillanes, a career servicewoman who had risen to the upper ranks of the enlisted. But when Jason captured her and she took his offer, she became an officer in his Navy, and it didn't take her long to get to the rank of Lieutenant Commander—though she was called Captain so long as she commanded her ship. Most of his other command-level officers were transplants, Faey that the Kimdori had located and recruited to serve Karinne in the years since they moved to Karis, but Meri proved that good people came both with and without noble titles. “Your Grace,” she said with a bow, then a salute. “What course?”

“Draconis,” he answered immediately as he lowered himself to the deck.

Navigation, set course for Draconis, Meri's sending boomed across the ship. Prepare for hyperspace jump.

Entering coordinates for Draconis, sir, a female sending answered.

Jason walked with Meri and her two junior officers towards the bridge. “I'm surprised to see you, your Grace. What's going on?”

It's a long story, and something I can't talk about right now, Meri.

Certainly, your Grace. Would you like to sit at the conn for the jump?

Actually, I think I'd like that. I haven't sat the conn on a jump for years. Captains always want to put me in their cabin for some reason.

Meri laughed. *Well, they want you to be comfortable.*

I thought Jeya was given command of a destroyer, he noted.

I haven't heard of it, but I wouldn't be surprised. She's certainly competent. I'll hate to lose her, to be honest.

Ah, so you sabotaged her hearing, eh?

Meri gasped, then laughed loudly. *I most certainly did not, your Grace.*

A short ride on a lift brought them to the command deck, and a walk down a long hallway brought them to the bridge. It was laid out exactly like the *Defiant*, so it was all very familiar to him. He followed Meri up to the conn, and she motioned for him to sit down. He did so, but looked over to her. *I'm not running this, Meri. I just want to sit in the chair.*

Of course, your Grace. Take us out, Jeya.

“Helm, bring us to bear,” Jeya barked. “Do we have a lock?”

“Aye, sir, coordinates locked for hyperspace jump.”

All sections report jump readiness, Jeya’s powerful sending reached through the entire ship. Jason listened as section officers reported in via sending. Once all of them did, Jeya and Meri quickly went to empty chairs and strapped in. Jason too strapped in as the bridge crew copied them. *Prepare for hyperspace jump in twenty seconds!* Jeya sent openly. “Take us through, Miss Suya.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” the pilot said, looking over her shoulder.

Suya was *good*. The ship swung around into position smoothly under the pilot’s deft control, as she used her interface to control the ship with a light touch that would have made Zora proud.

Someday one of you Navy types is going to explain why you call the captain sir but everyone else ma’am, Jason sent with light amusement.

It’s an affectation, since the captain is the voice of the ship, and the ship is naturally male, Meri answered as the cruiser slowed down in preparation of the jump. *It’s the only time a girl isn’t offended by being called sir*, she winked.

So you’d call a male captain ma’am?

Hell no, he’s be called sir too, Meri chuckled.

“Jump in five, four, three, hang on your Grace, here we go!”

Hyperspace was something one never really got used to. It was like he was both drunk and delirious, as sights, smells, sounds that were impossible assaulted his senses, as his limited mind tried to make sense of the higher dimensions of hyperspace. For long seconds he was assaulted by a cacophony of chaotic sensory input, and then reality seemed to snap taut, then shudder, and then there was a flash of light that heralded their return to normal space.

Jason shook his head and pinched his nose between two fingers as bridge personnel checked each other, looking for signs of hyperspace shock in their crewmates, a common minor condition for those who jumped hyperspace often. *All sections report in when jump checks are complete!* Jeya boomed.

Draconis loomed in the forward view, a blue marble hanging in space. Because of traffic concerns, the cruiser jumped in well outside the orbital track of the moons. “Make for Draconis, Miss Suya, full speed,” Meri ordered calmly.

“Full speed, aye sir,” Suya answered, and the ship turned slightly as Draconis centered itself in the forward view.

“Comm, send to Draconis control that the Grand Duke Karinne has arrived, and we request noble’s rights to approach Draconis,” she said, looking to her right.

“I’m already in contact with Draconis control, sir,” the communications officer answered.

How long til we get there? Jason asked.

“About thirty minutes, your Grace,” Suya answered aloud.

“All sections report normal, captain,” Jeya relayed when the last section sent in to the bridge.

“Very good. Take the conn, Lieutenant. Your Grace, would you care for a drink in my ready room?” *I’d like to speak to you a moment in private, if that’s alright, your Grace.*

“Sure, that sounds nice.”

In her stark ready room, a small office off the bridge that was something of a buffer room between the bridge and her private quarters, Meri sat down with him on a couch, and they talked briefly about Jeya and some other officers that Meri thought needed to be looked at for promotion. Then she broached the subject that was really on her mind. “I take it I should start doing battle drills, your Grace?” she asked soberly. “I could tell from the texture of your sending that it’s something very, very serious.”

“God, I hope not,” he said fervently. “I’m here to try to prevent that kind of nonsense. But a little preparation might be wise. I’ve already sent in the order to Myri for the fleet to mobilize.”

“Is it something you can explain, your Grace?”

“Not yet. I need to talk to Dahnai and get more information first. I’m sorry.”

“I understand completely. And for what it’s worth, I’m not really worried. When you took us in, you made it clear that you cared about us, and you never once did anything that made us feel any different. If whatever it is goes sour on you and we end up in some kind of fight, we all know that you did everything you could to prevent it. And hey, we’re in the most kickass navy in the Imperium,” she said with a sly smile. “We’ll be just fine.”

“I really appreciate that, Meri. Trust me, if things turn out as bad as they look, at least I know I have the best military in the Imperium to defend Karis.”

She put her hand on his armored shoulder, then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “We’re proud of you too, your Grace. Not a single girl you took in can look back on that day and regret it, and that’s Trelle’s honest truth.”

“Flirt,” Jason chuckled.

“Oh, no, not with the Dukal person I’m not. Jyslin would strangle me.”

Jason laughed.

As the cruiser moved in through smaller traffic and took up orbit around the planet, Jason launched from the cruiser in his Raptor as the cruiser relayed communications for him and he used Call of Council to gain immediate access to Dahnai. He landed on the north pad at the Imperial Palace and was out of the ship before Imperial servants could scurry out to greet him. He met them almost at the door, then pushed right past them and forced them to rush after him. “Your Grace, your Grace! The Empress is in court, you need formal robes!”

“No, I don’t,” he snapped over his shoulder. *Dahnai.*

I heard you came in, babes, she answered immediately. It’s good to hear from you! Kellin’s not home right now though. He’s on Prius right now. Go get in some robes and—

No. I need to talk to you in private. Now.

Now? What’s going on?

Tell your guards to let me in your apartment.

Umm, sure. There was a brief pause. Alright, they’ll let you in. What’s going on, babe?

Come to your apartment now, Dahnai. This can’t wait.

Babe, you just got me both real curious and a little worried. I haven’t seen you in months, and you show up making all these demands. I’ll be happy to see you, but something tells me this isn’t social. There was a pause. I see it’s not. Jinaami just got here, she just told me that you’ll be on your way, and you have something serious to talk to me about.

She's late, he growled mentally.

She must have been at home when the Denmother contacted her. I wasn't supposed to hold court today, this was a change in schedule. I'm going to Prius tomorrow to see Kellin. He's there on an archeological dig. I decided to hold this court to tie up a couple of loose ends before I go.

Less talking, more getting to your apartment.

Keep your dick in your shorts, I'm coming, she retorted.

Jason reached her apartment first, and in the company of four Imperial Guards, he waited. She'd redecorated since the last time he'd been there, a new couch, quite a bit of new art on the walls and on stands, and Terran recliner chair in the corner. He tossed his helmet on the couch, then unlatched his armored gauntlets and put them on the coffee table. The door opened, and Dahnai rushed in wearing her formal court robes, attended by three pages and a maid. She was just as lovely as he remembered, with her bronze colored hair that tumbled down her back in glorious waves, and her statuesque height making her look so regal when she wore her robes. "Alright, I'm here. What's so important that you'd drag me out of court? And what's with the armor?"

Send everyone out, he sent tersely. Even your guards.

Dahnai's eyes seemed to brighten a bit. *All this mystery just to fuck? I'm not sure I like this game, babe, but I'm not about to say no*

That's the last thing on my mind right now, he answered. I'll help you with your robe, but we have to be alone.

"Everyone out," Dahnai ordered crisply. "Me and the Grand Duke are going to be indisposed."

That's a new way of stating it, one of the Imperial Guards sent lightly as the servants and the armored guardians filed out with knowing grins. They all knew what happened when the Empress ordered a room cleared, because there was only one thing she would do that demanded complete privacy.

After the last guard left, Jason gave Dahnai a glance. *Bring up your security.*

Now you really got me curious, babe, she said as she went over to the wall separating her bedroom from the sitting room and typed in a code on the keypad there. The lights blinked red three times, then stayed steady. "Alright, the room's locked down," she said aloud. "Now come help me with the robe while you explain what the hell's going on."

Denmother Zaa stumbled across some information she couldn't just sit on, he began as he helped Dahnai start to undo the intricate ties and straps that held her ornate robes together. She has it on good authority that the Trillanes intend to declare independence and try to break away from the Imperium.

They've been thinking about that for years, ever since Maeri lost her chance to take the throne. I guess she figures she'd rather rule in hell than serve in heaven.

Yeah, well, Zaa says they already started, he told her. And they mean to make it public in six days. What's worse is the Urumi are backing them, and Trillane is going to use my people as part of their army.

Are they insane? They'll be crushed when I call in the military to reclaim Arctus! I wouldn't even need to use your fleet to do it!

Even if the Urumi enter the war on Trillane's side?

Babes, if the Urumi declare war on the Imperium, we could wipe out half their colonized worlds inside a week, she scoffed. Hell, I'd probably leave Trillane alone for the chance of taking a huge bite out of the Collective's territory. They have three arable planets along our border, and I'd be more than willing to have a little war with them to get my hands on those planets. They'd be insane to declare war on us.

Well, they're insane, because I don't doubt Zaa at all, Jason told her. Perhaps they think they can hold most of the Faey forces along the border and stall long enough for you and Trillane to reach an agreement.

If Maeri does this, the only agreement I intend to reach with Trillane is having that annoying bitch's head hanging on my wall as a trophy, Dahnai growled.

Jason was about to say something, but held his tongue. He considered that for a moment. Yes...that was *exactly* what the Faey would do if they went to war with the Urumi. They'd attack, come across the border between the Imperium and the Collective and fall on the border systems like vultures. Surely the Urumi knew that would happen...unless that was what they *wanted* to happen. But how would that aid the Urumi? They might lose their border systems, and three of them had temperate climates that made farming viable. Those were treasures as galactic civilizations reckoned planets, since so few could produce food. So, what gain was in it for the Urumi to support Trillane? He was fairly sure they weren't going to start another war over the atrocity committed over a thousand years ago, when Urumi civilians were killed in the Merrane attack on the original Academy. So, the question was...what was in it for the Urumi to fight a superior force and risk losing irreplaceable territory to the Faey when they declared war?

"What?" Dahnai asked as Jason knelt motionless, in the act of untying a strap.

I'm pondering what the Urumi might gain from entering a war that they'd be almost destined to lose, that's what, he answered. I can see no gain in it for them anywhere, which means there's more going on here than we can see.

I can agree to that. We'd crush them if they declared war. If it wasn't for the fact that declaring war on the Urumi would cause friction with the Alliance, we'd have conquered them hundreds—is that what they want? Do they want to bait us into war with the Alliance?

Possible. It sounds like I need to go have a talk with Kiaari, Jason sent evenly. She's the Kimdori to talk to when it comes to intergalactic chicanery.

*Because of the Academy, Dahnai chuckled as Jason untied a series of straps holding her outer wrap on, which she removed quickly. She untied her inner garment and pulled it open, revealing what many men went to bed dreaming about at night. Dahnai was, quite simply, one of the hottest Faey in the entire Imperium. She was tall, she was *stacked*, and her intense workout regimen gave her the tightest body Jason had ever seen on a woman. Ripped abs enhanced her sleek waist, and developed pectoral muscles just thrust out those large breasts that much more, giving them one hell of a base. Her developed back exaggerated her svelte figure, making her one of the most physically attractive women around. Jason could never look at Dahnai in any state of undress and not feel desire for her. Just *thinking* about Dahnai's body was usually enough to make him go look for Jyslin or Symone, but to be fair, thinking about Jyslin or Symone that way made him feel the same way.*

"You done staring at my tits, babes? As much as I love it, you can give me a hand with the chemise. I can't reach all the ties."

"Hold on, almost there," he said, staring right at her ample breasts for another long moment, then reached up and fondled each breast in turn with a single hand, which made Dahnai laugh lightly. "Okay, I'm good."

"Even with things so serious, you're still Jason," she giggled as he started working on the ties to the elaborately embroidered outer garment that went around her waist. "But you just made a big mistake. After we talk, you're getting out of that armor and reminding me how big your dick is. We haven't fucked in months, and now I'm horny."

"That might not happen."

"It *is* going to happen," she said adamantly. "You started this, babe. Kellin's on Prius, you got me horny, and now you're going to do something about it."

"If we have time."

"Oh, we're going to have time," she said flintily. *What else did Zaa say?*

That's about it. I hired her to take a deeper look into it, since you know, the Kimdori don't do things like that on their own. She brought me this information because of the Terrans, I hired the Kimdori to track them down for me, and since they're tangled up in this independence plot she told me about it. She's looking into it more seriously now, and she'll tell me when she finds out more, he lied, a bit artfully. Even Dahnai didn't know that Jason and Zaa's relationship was different. As far as the rest of the universe was concerned, the Kimdori only did things at the behest of another.

How much did she charge you?

I'm not going to tell you.

Well, just send me a bill. This matter isn't just about the Karinnes, this is a plot against the Imperium. I won't make you pay that bill on your own. So, it sounds like we just need to wait a couple of days to see what else the Kimdori find out. In the meantime, I need to talk to the General Staff and start getting the fleet mobilized.

I need to go talk to Kiaari. She's sure to have heard something around the Academy if this is some kind of plot to get the Faey and the Alliance into a war.

She can wait a while.

This is important.

Yeah, and it's also the middle of the night at the Academy, Dahnai sent, pointing at a clock on the wall labelled [The Terra Academy], showing it was 2:37 a.m. there. *So, you have a couple of hours to kill, Kellin's not here, and I'm horny. That sounds like a perfect combination to me.*

I take it I'm not talking you out of this? We're both really too busy right now.

What, I'm not sexy to you anymore? she challenged, a bit hotly. *What's with this resistance? You've never been like this before!*

I've never been looking at the possibility of all-our war before, he answered. *I'm a little worried and distracted right now, Dahnai. It's not personal. My mind just isn't there right now.*

Pft, then a little pussy pounding is just what you need, she sent crudely. *A good fuck does wonders for your state of mind.*

You're not thinking with your brain right now, Dahnai.

That's your fault. Don't go playing with my tits then expect to walk out of here without fucking me.

Then I'll be more careful next time, he sent with a chuckle as her desire, tainting her sending, began to affect him. Besides, he had to admit, even he would love a nice little romp with Dahnai right now. They hadn't had sex in months, and she still had a powerful effect on his libido.

Oh please, stop playing demure. Now we don't have much time, she sent, snapping a few straps as she pulled the lower robes off, then pulled the soft pajama-like trousers she wore under them down to her knees, baring her bronze pubic hair, *so get out of that armor and show me how much you love me.*

The tryst didn't do much for his state of mind, but it certainly did something for Dahnai's, for she jumped out of the bed and immediately got to work. As he put his armor back on, she called in members of her General Staff, and to Jason's surprise, the first one through the door was Lorna Shaddale. She wore the four diamonds of a full General, the highest rank an officer could achieve in peacetime, and she looked exactly as he remembered. Lorna was a war horse, a face that was rugged and with a few scars from her past action, a gruff, insightful woman who had a brilliant grasp of military tactics, but also was a savvy player of political games necessary for an officer of her rank.

“Lorna! You’re on the Military Council now?” he asked in surprise.

“You should look up from that hole you dragged my niece to, son,” she told him bluntly. “I’ve been on the Council for three years.”

“Huh. I heard you got a promotion, but I didn’t hear that you were on the Council.”

“Yup. Is that a new design?”

Jason rapped the chestplate of his armor meaningfully. “Yeah, a new design, based on my old ZPS system. Myleena named it *Crusader*. We got all the bugs worked out of it last year, and we’ve got it produced for our entire military. It’s much better than standard issue.”

“Someday you’re gonna tell me just where you have all this shit set up,” Dahnai said sourly.

“Not a chance,” Jason answered. “As long as we stay hidden, you don’t know where to send the spies.”

Dahnai gave him a dark look.

“Empress, don’t push him, you know he’ll just vanish for another six months,” Lorna warned. “But you do need to come visit more often, son. I haven’t seen Jyslin for over a year.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s just we’ve been real busy, that’s all. I’ll tell her to call you when I get home.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know, but for now it’s about the best we can do,” he said, locking the arm greave to the shoulder of his armor, and reaching for the bracer.

“Now then, what’s so important that you’d call in the Council, your Majesty?” Lorna asked Dahnai.

“We should wait for the others, but I’ll explain some of it to you while they’re getting here,” Dahnai answered. As Jason completed putting his armor on, Dahnai told Lorna what he told her. Lorna’s face darkened, then she leaned back on the couch and scratched her pointed chin. “There’s more here going on than what we can see,” she concluded immediately. “The Urumi *know* we can thrash them if they declare war on us, unless our intelligence on them is very wrong. So either we’ve badly underestimated their military power, or there’s something else going on that we need to find out. Six days, you say, your Majesty?”

Dahnai nodded. “Jason already took some initiative and hired the Kimdori to investigate, so hopefully we’ll have some more information before Maeri throws the entire Imperium on its ear. But we can’t wait for Zaa’s people to dig up the truth. We have to get ready.”

“Clearly so,” Lorna nodded. “We can’t allow Trillane to just walk away. The other Highborn houses might try the same thing the next time you do something that pisses them off, or vice versa. Besides, the Trillanes have two arable planets in their domain, we can’t just let those go. It would cause a food shortage.” She drummed her fingers on her leg for a moment. “Maeri must have gone insane. There’s no good outcome for this for her house, no matter what happens. Even if they do manage to gain independence, the Urumi will have a stranglehold on them, and I can name four different enemies that would fall all over them to try to capture their ships to get at our MPAC technology.”

“I hadn’t even considered that,” Dahnai frowned, biting a fingernail. “That means we can’t let them go, no matter what.”

“I think you can write that off already,” Jason said bluntly. “If the Trillanes are in bed with the Urumi, then they’d be nuts not to demand MPACs to use in the war that’s coming. And it doesn’t take a genius to take something like that apart and figure out how it works.”

“Well, hell,” Dahnai sighed. “Our MPACs are our edge against the others.”

“Not so much as you think,” Lorna said. “Since we fight each other more than other civilizations, our defenses are *based* on dealing with MPACs. All giving MPACs to others would do is make us not use our shields in combat. Our armor technology is still more advanced, if only because we had to come up with something to deal with MPACs.”

“Well, that’s true enough,” Dahnai admitted with a chuckle.

[Contact the Liberty. Tell them to get ready to pick me up, and plot a jump to Terra.]

[Relaying.]

“There’s not much more I can do to help with this, so I’m going to go do what I can,” Jason announced, picking up his helmet. “I’ll go to talk to Kiaari and see if she knows anything.”

“Jason, I *need* to be able to contact you,” Dahnai said urgently, looking in his eyes.

He shook his head. “If I did that, you’d have your people track me down, and I won’t risk it,” he said bluntly.

She sighed. “I already *know* where you are, Jason,” she told him heavily. “It doesn’t take a Black Ops engineer to piece it together. The only place you could have possibly salvaged so much equipment and recovered so much Karinne technology and data is from Karis. The only real question I have is how you’re managing to survive there, given it’s a radioactive slagheap. Hell, they can detect the radioactive corona from Karis from *here*.”

“I’m not going to confirm or deny anything, Dahnai,” he stated flatly, though he was a little crestfallen in his own mind that he’d been right about his suspicions. He had little doubt that several of those unmanned probes they’d detected at the edge of the Karis system were from the Imperial government, looking for him. Clearly, he had to talk to Myleena and Cybi. It was time for the techs to brainstorm.

If people were going to discover Karis, then they had to come up with some way to prevent them from flooding the planet with spies and surveillance equipment.

“I’ll send you a message if I hear anything worth passing along,” Jason told her as he seated his helmet and felt it seal. “Lorna,” he said with a nod of his head.

He left the palace feeling troubled on a new level. Dahnai didn’t just let that slip, she *wanted* him to know that she knew where he’d been hiding. But then again, he knew it wasn’t a secret they could keep forever. After all, anyone who knew *anything* of history knew that the Karinnes only had one planet, and it was only logical to assume that the new Karinnes had salvaged their ships from Karis. And since all the Karinnes left Earth, the only logical place for them to go and stay hidden was the same place where they recovered the ships...Karis.

Chapter 2

Chiira, 12 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 9 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 12 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The Academy of Terra, Norfolk, Virginia, The United States, Terra

It was just good luck that the Academy was in Saturday session, since that meant that the campus wasn't quite as crowded as usual.

Oh, the Academy wasn't ever totally quiet. Even on Sundays, when no classes were held, the boarded students were here, creatures of 37 different races. They studied, exercised, mingled, and did all the things that students do...including party and get in trouble. But, since this was Saturday, at least Jason didn't have to elbow his way through the crowd on the way to Kiaari's office. Despite the fact that it was a Saturday and many offices in the Administration building were closed, there were many students in the building attending to this or that business, since all the official liaison offices with all governments and races were in this building, and they were open seven days a week.

Most of them had no idea who he was, but a few could at least mark him as a Karinne. Only one in the whole throng recognized him, a huge nine foot tall simean creature called a Bari-Bari. It bowed to him with a flourish but didn't call his name, which was something for which Jason was grateful. Many in the Imperium knew from watching *Courtwatch* and other vidy shows that the Grand Duke Karinne was a very private, introverted person as far as nobility went, never wanting the attention that came with his title. Thank God for small favors, the Bari-Bari didn't announce him to the others in the hallway as he waited for he elevator.

At least he didn't have to go far to get from his Raptor to the building. There was a personal landing pad right by the building that was reserved especially for him and Ayuma...though it didn't say it. It only said [Reserved] and made no mention of just *who* it was reserved for. Ayuma had set it up for him. If any ship other than the ship broadcasting the Karinne Friend Or Foe code for the Grand Dean Ayuma or Karinne One, which was whichever ship that was carrying the Grand Duke, security was automatically summoned to tow the offender's ship out of the space.

Ayuma was here. Her personal dropship was also on the pad, which was large enough for two large dropships to park side by side. He hadn't called her, but he had the feeling that Kiaari had told her he was coming, and she'd decided to show up and see what was going on. Ayuma was a very hands-on president, but that was one of the reasons why the Academy ran as smoothly as it did. Everyone who worked there knew that though the dean's staff handled many matters, virtually nothing escaped the dean's personal attention.

Ayuma and Kiaari weren't the only close friends here right now. Temika was also at the Academy, but instead of working here, she was going to school here. She was in her third year in the Intergalactic Business and Accounting major, working to learn how business worked so she could help Kumi. Jason felt that Temika would be very good at it, since she'd spent much of her time in the preserve running messages and bartering back and forth between squatter groups. She had a nose for business, and she'd be an effective addition to Kumi's staff. She and Mike had moved back to Terra, with Mike also in the Academy in his second year of

a two year program for plasma technicians. Mike was training to be a plasma tech, with plans to apprentice with Myleena once he got his degree in the basics. Myleena basically demanded that anyone that wanted to work with her in the technical arm of the house had to have, at a bare minimum, the two year program certificate so she had a good foundation to build on when she trained them. Mike wasn't the only Karinne at the Academy doing that very same thing.

They were just two examples of how the founders of the house, the Marines and the survivors of the Legion and the Generations, were starting to adapt, evolve, to see needs within the house and training to fill them, though all the others except Temika and Mike were on Karis, taking satellite classes transmitted to Karis from the Academy via Civnet, where the teacher showed up in the classroom as a hologram and at the Academy the classroom and its students also appeared as a hologram to the teacher, in rooms that were absolutely identical. That allowed the teacher to walk around and check things, and interact with the students via sight and sound. It worked rather well, actually, but Temika's schooling couldn't really utilize the satellite system, and besides, she admitted she wanted the chance to come back to college and *finish*. She, like Jason, was pulled out of college at the beginning of the subjugation, and she wanted to experience college life at a college with multiple species, so Jason permitted it. Temika and Mike made Jason both proud and humble, that they would work so hard to fill needs in the house, and also that they were so devoted to the house that they would do such a thing.

The satellite program was only one reason why Karis had to be connected to Civnet.

Kiaari's office was within the "core cluster" of the offices of the highest-ranking officials in the Academy. In the cluster, the offices of Ayuma and the members of the Board of Advisors also resided, as well as offices for liaisons for other nations and races for direct interaction between the governors of the Academy and the rest of the galaxy. It also contained satellite cubicles the deans of the various colleges used when coming to see Ayuma; their offices were in their college buildings. He nodded silently to the human secretary that sat behind a desk facing the door into the reception area, and she smiled at him and said nothing as he passed by and went back towards the two doors holding the offices of Ayuma and Kiaari, side by side. Both doors were open, and he found both of them in Kiaari's office, talking about something, Kiaari sitting behind her desk and Ayuma in one of the two chairs facing it.

Kiaari's office was a spartan affair. It had the two chairs, the white stone desk, Kiaari's chair, a panel on the desk, and that was *it*. The walls were bare, the desk clear, and that was the way Kiaari liked it, because she was almost never *in* this office. She had another office, her *real* office, deep in the bowels of the Engineering building. That office over there was the office of the Gamekeeper of Terra. This office was the office of the Kimdori Liaison to the Academy, and Kiaari occupied both positions. In the rare instances when Jason came to see Kiaari face to face, they always met here, in this office.

"Jason," she said warmly, smiling that toothy grin at him, showing her canine teeth. "Close the door please."

He closed the door, and as soon as he did so, Kiaari reached over and punched a few keys on the holographic keyboard of her panel, which caused the window behind her to shimmer, and then go dark. She had just isolated the office from any surveillance.

You're looking a bit haggard, Jason, Ayuma noted as he came in and put his helmet on the desk.

"I feel haggard," he said, flopping down in the other chair, speaking for Kiaari's benefit. "I came in from Draconis."

"Ah, so the Empress got her claws into you," Ayuma said with a slight, mischievous smile.

"Just about," he admitted blandly, looking to Kiaari. "Did the Denmother or Miaari talk to you?"

She nodded. "Both of them did," she answered. "The short answer is no, I haven't heard anything unusual. The long answer is I haven't heard anything unusual *yet*, but now I'm going to start actively digging," she added. "I've already put the clan on it. They're digging through the Academy as we speak, focusing mainly on the Urumi."

"Have you got Ayuma up to speed on things?" he asked.

"Yes, she already explained what's going on," Ayuma answered. "I can't believe that the Trillanes are going to push things this far."

"Me either, but if the Denmother's right, then it's gonna get ugly in a little under a week."

“The Denmother is almost never wrong,” Kiaari said adamantly, clearly defending her leader.

“I know, that’s why I’m preparing for the worst,” he grunted.

“I wish you would have explained things a little better the first time, Jason,” Ayuma complained. “I got this order in from you to increase security at the Academy, but I didn’t get any *reason* for it. I’ve done it, of course, but that order left me a bit confused.”

“Sorry about that, but I was in a hurry,” he apologized.

“How do things look for us?”

“How do you mean?”

“Are we ready to fight if the Empress declares war?” Ayuma asked.

He nodded. “Myri’s mobilizing the fleet, and Myleena’s got the Shimmer Dome on triple-manned shifts to get the Gladiators done as fast as they can. It’s still going to take months to do them all, but they can crank out a hundred refitted Gladiators a day now, and that’ll give us a good regiment of Mark II’s to put in service by the time they’re needed, and hell, we can just use the old ones to fill the gaps. They’re still good units. The training for the pilots to fly the mark II’s only takes about twenty log hours, so they can get their ratings done on them before they have to do any real fighting.”

“Any problems?”

“None I’ve heard about so far,” he answered. “Kosiningi’s also in overdrive to get the shakedowns done on that last destroyer they finished, the *Steadfast*. I haven’t heard that they won’t be ready. I even have a captain in mind for it.”

“Who?” Kiaari asked.

“Lieutenant Jeya.”

“I thought she already had a flag.”

He shook his head. “She’s still first officer on the *Liberty*.”

“We need to fix that.”

“We just did,” Jason answered.

“Jeya, Jeya…pink hair? Tall?” Ayuma asked.

“That’s her,” Jason said. “I didn’t know you knew her.”

“I don’t, but I sat in on a couple of satellite classes back when they were shaking the bugs out of the program, and one of them was one of those officer classes we had going. You know, the naval tactical training classes you had them take. It was funny to see the holograms of fifty Ensigns and JG’s sitting in the rows as the instructor lectured at the vidboard. I remember her because she was one of the ones that didn’t look bored,” Ayuma laughed.

“Oh yeah. You have a good memory, Ayuma.”

“That’s what you pay me for, Jason,” she winked. “This Jeya must be good if you’re gonna put her in a chair.”

“You should see her scores. She is *very* good,” Jason said with a nod.

Kiaari's panel beeped, and she touched the keyboard. "Kiaari," she called.

"Gamekeeper, I have information," a voice called in Kimdori. "I'm out in the reception room. Might I enter?"

"Come in," she said, disabling the security in the room. A short Kimdori male came in immediately, with golden fur and amber eyes. He closed the door and waited for security to reactivate, then bowed to them. "I am Jeram Threxst, your Grace," he introduced.

"He's my age," Kiaari noted to Jason with a light smile. "One of the younger."

"I can only hope to make our parents proud, sister," Jeram said evenly. "You and Miaari have risen our father's expectations for the rest of the clan."

"I know, I'm sorry about that," she grinned. "What did you discover?" He glanced at Ayuma, and gave Kiaari an inquisitive look. "It's alright, Jeram," she said in measured words. "You can report what you discovered. Ayuma's been briefed on the situation."

Jason didn't miss the quiet command in Kiaari's words not to say exactly *how* he might have come by that information. Jason and Myleena were *still* the only non-Kimdori who knew the Kimdori's greatest secret.

"Yes. As you ordered, I investigated the Urumi for the possibility they're trying to get the Alliance and the Faey into a war, and I found no evidence of such a plot. *But,*" he stressed, "I did come across some information that hints that the Urumi are indeed working to destabilize the Faey Imperium. The missive I intercepted to the Urumi ambassador from the Collective ordered him to try to get an agent they're sending into the Imperium through Terra. Milady, it's a *Terran* they're sending, and this Terran is one of the telepaths."

Jason almost stood up. "How did they get him?" he demanded.

"This telepath is one of the Terrans abducted by the Trillanes during their occupation. It was before the Faey discovered that certain Terrans have talent. I can only conclude they discovered the Terran's talent after taking him and trained him."

"That would explain it," Ayuma nodded.

"Go on," Kiaari ordered.

"Yes. The missive made no mention of this agent's orders, but the missive told the ambassador to get the agent onto a transport to Draconis within four hours of his arrival from Uruma. There's a timetable at work here, one we don't know."

"That's all?"

"No. The missive itself didn't explain what the spy was up to, but almost immediately afterward, the ambassador ordered a hireling to pick up the agent at the Academy spaceport and then put him on a train to the Imperial Starport in Washington, with orders to help the agent get a transport ticket to Prius."

"When is the agent due to arrive?"

"Tomorrow morning, local time, Gamekeeper," he answered. "I would have investigated more to give a more detailed report, but given the urgency involved, I have our brothers and sisters still working on it while I brought what we have. It seemed quite important."

"It was the proper decision," Kiaari told him with a nod. "Return to the pack and dig up anything you can find. Bring anything you discover to me immediately, even if it's incomplete."

He nodded. "It will be done, Gamekeeper," he affirmed, then Kiaari disabled security and he left.

“Well,” Kiaari said quietly as she reactivated security. “Well, well, well, well, well. Isn’t *that* interesting?”

“What is this agent supposed to do?”

“A human telepath sent into the Imperium? I think this might be aimed at Karinne,” Kiaari said absently, tapping her fingertips together rhythmically. “Isn’t the Empress slated to leave for Prius today?”

Jason nodded. “She said she’s going to visit Kellin. He’s at a dig there.”

“It sounds like the Urumi are going to try to drive a wedge between Merrane and Karinne,” Kiaari said quickly. “After all, the *only* Terran telepaths are Karinne, and they’re sending one to Prius. They’re either going after the Empress or the Prince Consort, or both.”

“They’d never get anywhere near them,” Ayuma snorted.

“Who said the telepath has to *succeed*, Ayuma?” Kiaari said simply. “Actually, the agent *needs* to fail for this to work. They’ll never know the Terran was a telepath unless they *capture* him,” she said pointedly. “If they don’t, well, the Terran could just be some disgruntled Terran commoner with a grudge against the Empress, and tries to do something about it. But if a Terran *telepath* takes a swipe at the Empress, well, then that means that the *Karinnes* have to be involved, doesn’t it?”

“Dahnai would never believe I’d try something like that,” Jason snorted.

“Yes, *she* knows, Jason. But does the *Imperium* have the same inside knowledge she does? Sure, she could calm things down, but it would come at a critical time, when she’s dealing with the Trillanes...and it would make calling in the Karinne ships to help quell a Trillane rebellion rather hard if her own Navy starts shooting at the Karinnes because they tried to assassinate the Empress, wouldn’t it?”

Jason opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out. He leaned back in his chair, which squeaked slightly from his armor, then leaned forward and put his chin in his palm. After a moment of silence, he blew out his breath. “I think you might have something there, Kiaari,” he agreed. “It would fit, and getting Karinne on the bad side of the Imperium would only benefit Trillane.”

“Yeah. One way to avoid facing Karinne ships in battle is to try to ensure they’re not part of the fleet,” Ayuma agreed.

“I need to relay this to Denmother,” Kiaari said. “She wants any information involving this matter on her desk as soon as it’s collected. We’ll see if she thinks the same as we do.” She gave Ayuma a slight smile. “Ayuma, dear, I’m afraid this is where I have to ask you to leave. I’m very sorry, but this is a very secret matter between the Grand Duke and the Denmother.”

“I’m not offended, dear,” she grinned. “I do understand that sometimes only those at the top of the ladder can be privy to certain things. Mind opening the door for me, hon?”

“Certainly. We still on for lunch?”

“Of course.”

After Ayuma left the office, Kiaari contacted Zaa and gave her her report. But to Jason’s surprise, Zaa’s conclusion was much different from theirs. “I see,” she said evenly after Kiaari finished. “Kiaari, intercept the agent before he leaves Terra,” she ordered.

“It will be as you will, Denmother, but might I ask why I’m going to do this? Forgive my ignorance, but it seems more prudent to me to intercept the agent on Draconis or Prius, where the Urumi won’t see it and know they’ve been found out.”

“The idea that they would use a Terran telepath to attack the Empress seems an obvious conclusion on its face, but the conclusion beneath is that the attempt on the Empress as a means to instill derision into the Imperium is flawed. I believe there is something more going on here, something we don’t see. This telepath is being sent to Prius for some other reason, some reason unknown to us, but it *is* logical to assume that the Empress is in some way involved as a target or fulcrum of this plot. To ferret out

that reason, I *want* the Urumi to see their agent intercepted and know their plan is exposed. It might shake loose that piece of information that will make this operation make sense to us.”

“What shall I do with this agent?” Kiaari asked.

“After you have learned all he knows, he must be turned over to Karinne,” she answered. “He is one of them, and they must undo the programming and try to restore him.”

“I think Yana or Jyslin could do it,” Jason said.

“Then be ready to pick up this agent after Kiaari shares his knowledge with her,” Zaa told him.

“I’ll take care of it,” Kiaari told him. “I’ll give you a call when he’s all yours.”

“Works for me,” Jason nodded. “You can fill me in on what you find out when I come get him.”

“How are your defenses?” Zaa asked.

Jason knew what she wanted. “We should be ready,” he answered. “I haven’t gotten any reports, but I know my people. The only issue I see is getting all the pilots trained on the upgraded Gladiators in time, but we should manage it. We’ve got that one new destroyer in shakedown that we’ll have to man, but that’s about it.”

“No, Jason. How are your *defenses*?”

“Around Karis? Fine,” he said. “The inner ring is up, and as far as I know the automated defense grid doesn’t have any problems.”

“That is good. Keep them up, Jason. I have the unsettling feeling that somehow, in some manner, Karis is in danger.”

“Information we haven’t seen yet, Denmother?” Kiaari asked.

“No. A...feeling,” she said, closing her eyes for a moment.

“I’ll have Myleena go over things with Myri,” Jason said immediately.

“It would soothe my mind,” she said gratefully. “I will leave you now. Carry out your tasks, child, and it would please me for you to contact me later, Jason, to appraise me of your defense status.”

“I’ll take care of it, Denmother,” Jason told her.

“It will be as you command, Denmother,” Kiaari said respectfully.

Zaa’s image vanished, and Kiaari sighed. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Jason.”

“I’ve had one since I got wind of it,” he grunted in reply, shifting his attention slightly. [*Open a channel to the Liberty.*]

[*This is the Liberty, Yoeman Erra, go ahead, your Grace.*]

[*Get ready to pick me up, we’re going home.*]

[*We’re in low orbit over the Academy already, your Grace. We’re ready at your convenience.*] Captain Meri’s voice joined in, obviously supplanting the communications yoeman.

[*I’ll be up in a few minutes.*]

“I’ll send you anything else we get,” Kiaari told him. “And you’d better call Mika and apologize for not coming to see her. You know she’s gonna take it personally.”

“She’ll get over it,” Jason grunted.

It had been a while, and to be honest, Jason needed a little distraction.

Adjusting to the new Gladiator gave it to him.

Skimming over the calm seas off Karsa, Jason was entombed in the chest of a hulking black monstrosity of compressed Neutronium, Adamantium, datalines, and enough raw energy to vaporize a small island were it to be all released at once. It was one of the new Gladiators, and after downloading the changes into his gestalt, he was going through the changes to the unit, giving himself a “crash course” in getting his rating updated on the new mecha. Since the ship was flown via interface, there were no new controls to adjust to, but there were some computer changes that altered the way the computer presented data to the pilot on the blackglass screens arrayed before the pilot in the cockpit. This Gladiator was stock, not especially fitted for a Generation, so he had to rely on those displays for his data, but being a Generation did help in that he had a computer literally attached to his brain that allowed him to adapt almost instantaneously to the changes. When he didn’t understand what he was seeing, his gestalt filled in the gaps and explained things to his brain and allowed him to operate the mecha as if he’d already been rated for it.

Damn, but Myleena had scored a touchdown on this one. She upgraded the armor and stuck one of the weapons that they’d pulled out of Cybi’s memory on it, a Teryon Pulse Cannon, or just what the Karinnes now called a pulse weapon. It was a small-arms version of the Teryon cannons used on the naval vessels, their short-range weaponry, and this one worked exactly the same. It fired a pulse of white Teryon energy, which then ripped through whatever it hit and then exploded with extreme violence. Its operation was curiously similar to an MPAC in theory; the teryon pulse existed in higher dimensions when fired, which caused it to pass *through* the surface of its target, its passing through dimensional matter literally tearing space apart and disintegrating all matter within the spatial distortion, leaving a nasty hole where it made contact. But that contact with lower-dimensional matter destabilized the teryon field and then caused it to be released into the lower dimensions *inside* the target, and that caused a high-energy explosion.

The result was a round with a similar operational behavior to an MPAC round, which penetrated and then detonated, but what made pulse weaponry so deadly was the fact that *no amount of armor could stop them*. The spatial distortion had *absolutely nothing* to do with the armor, it had to do with *space*. The armor occupying that space made no difference whatsoever. It could be compressed Neutronium or it could be cotton candy, it made no difference at all as the pulse weapon disintegrated it on the way inside, where it then exploded.

The pulse weapon was utterly lethal, but its drawbacks were a short range and major power requirements. Myleena had had to upgrade the power plants on the Gladiators using another design in Cybi’s memory, a prototype singularity power plant that had been developed just before the Third Civil War. It took Myleena nearly a year to work the bugs out of it, but it worked, and it was the only power plant they could have used to power the new Gladiators. The pulse weapon only had a range of about two miles in the atmosphere, but in space they had an effective range of about fifteen miles, since contact with the air didn’t prematurely destabilize the teryon matrix. The atmospheric range of the pulses could actually be around three miles, but to prevent them from exploding on a miss, the teryon pulses were arranged so that the kind of degradation caused by contact with the air would cause a cascading implosion rather than an explosion, once the teryon matrix reached a certain critical decay state. The trick to it, Myleena had showed him, was how *long* it stayed at that critical state. If it came into contact with dense matter, as in anything but a gas, the matrix decayed past that threshold so fast that it caused an explosion. But if it remained in that critical threshold for a certain amount of time, some number of microseconds according to the specs he’d read, then the high-energy teryons caught up in the matrix escaped back into hyperspace, which caused a minor implosion as the breach into hyperspace formed and then collapsed.

Hyperspace physics in action.

For long range combat, the Mark II’s utilized the same weapons as the Mark I’s and most Faey exomechs, plasma cannons. But, both variants of the Gladiator carried an external weapon of Jason’s own design, a Gladiator-sized Railgun. The projectiles it fired were very large, and the weapon was just as powerful and devastating as the infantry version, capable of punching through just about any armor except the Imperium’s newest armor, crystalized Neutronium, but that armor took *major* damage when struck. The railguns were self-contained external equipment, a rifle attaching to the armor over the shoulder when not in use, which could easily be discarded or reseated to use the plasma cannon or pulse weapons in short-range combat. The Railguns carried ammunition in clips of 15, and a Gladiator carried 10 extra clips in storage nooks on the upper legs, 5 to each side. The

military service, called the KMS, figured that 165 shots was about all a Gladiator would need at long range before using its pulse weapons, and Jason had to agree. The fact that the weapon was external and could be lost didn't really mean much either, since Gladiators still had integrated plasma cannons for long range combat, they just weren't as powerful at long range as the railgun. It felt oddly...satisfying, somehow, that one of his own inventions was present on a Gladiator, his own little contribution to protecting the house, and it just made him relieved that his railguns were considered good enough for use in combat. They were powerful yet self contained, not draining power off the Gladiator, cheap to build, cheap to use, and very easy to manufacture ammunition for them. It took his army a bit to get used to the idea of such a *primitive* concept in a modern weapon, a weapon that actually fired a solid round and was limited by the amount of rounds one carried, but even they were impressed by the railgun's raw power and ease of use.

The shields were just as ingenious as the weapons, another Myleena miracle. She had found a way to miniaturize the teryon shield generators on the cruisers enough to stick them on the Gladiator, which gave it the ability to at least partially shield against MPAC weaponry. They still hadn't found a way to make the shields really hold against MPACS, they didn't last long, but protection from even a few shots made a difference in the long run.

What was amusing irony was that teryon shields were the only shields that *could* protect against pulse weapons, since they existed in the same higher dimensions as the pulse projectile, and protected much better than against MPACS. Even against Karinne shields, MPACS were damned effective, one of the most effective shield-piercing weapons ever devised. Myleena still hadn't found a way to stop MPACS from overloading the shield generators...but at least their armor could stop MPAC rounds, and all Karinne ships had fearsome teryon shields installed despite the MPAC issue. After all, *only* the Faey used MPACs, and there were lots of other governments out there that the Karinnes may have to defend themselves against someday.

That was why the Gladiators had shields too, really. Myleena hadn't designed them with *only* the Faey in mind. She designed it so the Gladiator could fight any foe, anywhere, and shields made the Gladiator much harder to kill.

Outside of that, there weren't many noticeable changes. The mecha had better computers installed, but they were designed to *feel* like the older computer, both in their responses and in how they processed data for the pilot, so the mecha had the same feel to the pilot. The engines were also an upgrade, but they still operated with the same parameters as the old ones, they just had more power and a higher top speed and more agility when flying, that was all. Myleena had done a good job to minimize the amount of training it would require to acclimate a pilot to the Mark II, it was really just a matter of adjusting to the new displays, getting a feel for how the new engines changed aerial and space combat, and learning how to incorporate shield use in battle.

He put the mecha through its paces, executing a series of high-G turns on the water's surface, weaving it back and forth, then plunged it under the surface. He dove it straight down nearly two thousand *shakra*, saw the pressure readings on the hull, then turned around and vaulted it back out of the water and into the sky in a matter of seconds, feeling the inertial dampers struggle to protect him from the crushing G-force. He rotated in the air and brought the pulse cannon mounted on the forearms to bear, firing a series of angry white orbs of energy towards the water's surface, hearing it inside the mecha as a series of *ka-THUK ka-THUK ka-THUK* sounds. They struck it and disappeared beneath the waves, then violent detonations of white-frothed water blasted hundreds of feet into the air behind the mecha. The unit came over land, and Jason had it land, then ran across the grassy plain abutting the sea at full speed, this seventeen foot tall mecha running at nearly ninety *kathra* and hour, or almost seventy miles an hour. He lunged to the left and the right, feeling the agility of the unit when on the ground and moving like a humanoid, then ran out onto a battle simulation field used to train Gladiators. He dove behind a large cement pillar, then lunged around so only the unit's head and arm were visible and fired on a practice target nearly a mile downrange. Three pulses sizzled down the range and hit the metal cube, causing it to explode violently, sending smoking shrapnel flying hundreds of feet in every direction. He then ran it through the obstacle course, jumping over obstacles, weaving between pillars, even crawling it through a tubular tunnel before flying up to the top of a sturdy pyramid and striking a metal plate set into the floor of its flat top.

"*That didn't take you long,*" Myleena's voice came in over the comm, highly amused. An image of her appeared on his right monitor, and he looked at her and grinned inside his helmet. "*So, how do you like it?*"

"I think the pilots that don't get a Mark II are gonna sulk," he answered. "Damn fine piece of work Myleena. How's production?"

"*I managed to get it up to hundred thirty a day,*" she answered. "*I had to go out and steal a bunch of commoners and put them on the line and in the bay doing the more menial jobs, but they didn't complain too much. Everyone knows what's going on now, so they know it's important. Given we have five more days before it's all official, and maybe two or three days after that before we really have to mobilize, that'll let us get about eight hundred Mark II's into service.*"

"Will the pilots be ready?"

“Shit yeah, Jayce, they don’t need the mecha to rate. I sent Myri the simulator software a good week before the first Mark II came off the line, we had rated pilots before I even had the first Mark II, thanks to the simulators. You’re the only one that’s getting rated on the real thing.”

“Yeah well, I have certain advantages they don’t,” he said dryly. “I’m keeping this one.”

“Why do you think I had it painted black? That was yours as soon as it came off the line, but you might have to let someone borrow it for a while.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. If we’re gonna be short on these, I can’t very well have one sitting in my garage while one of my pilots is flying a Mark I. They’d kill me.”

“I had Myri get our best Gladiator pilot for it, so the Dukal Gladiator keeps its prestige,” Myleena grinned.

“Our best, eh? I’m sorry, but I’ll be too busy on the command ship,” he said lightly.

“Push off, Jason. As if you were our best,” she teased. “You’ve had your fun, now bring it back.”

“Yes, mommy.”

“Jason, dear,” she called in a sweet voice.

“Yes?”

“Fuck you.”

Jason laughed so hard he almost made the Gladiator fall over, since he hadn’t disengaged his interface to control its actions.

He brought the Gladiator back to the barracks, and his helmet filtered out the bright light of the afternoon sun as the Gladiator’s chest armor opened, revealing the very tight cockpit, where the pilot literally was encased in armor and had absolutely no room to move. Then again, inside the Gladiator, where everything was controlled by interface, the pilot didn’t *have* to be able to move. It took a pilot a little to get used to that, but that was just part of being a Gladiator pilot. A complement of five Faey awaited him. Four officers in the blue Karinne uniform stood on the pad along with a lone armored Faey who was very tall and had flaming red hair, cut very short. Jason didn’t know this woman, but she had Sergeant’s stripes on the arms of her armor. They all saluted as he floated down to them and took off his helmet. The others he did know, for it was Myri and four members of the command staff, two of them ex-mercenaries and the other two were retired Imperial Marine Generals who had been lured by the Kimdori to come to Karis and help build the house military from the ground up.

“Did you have fun, your Grace?” Myri asked with a wink.

“Stuff it, Myri,” Jason told her. *You piloting it back to the armory?* he asked the armored sergeant.

“Yes, your Grace,” she said in a surprisingly soft voice. “I’ve been told he’s going to be my rig for a while, so I’m here to get used to him.”

What’s your name, Sergeant?

Sergeant Myka Doyalle Karinne, your Grace, she answered, and Jason was impressed. There was a very strong power lurking behind her soft, gentle sending. This woman was a *strong* telepath.

Karinne? Where’s the noble crest on your armor?

I’m married to one of your nobles, she sent shyly. *I aren Karinne. I haven’t really bothered to go in and have them put the crest on. It’s really not important to me.*

“Really? Congratulations!” he said sincerely. *I just signed that marriage form last month! How was the honeymoon?*

Too short, your Grace, she smiled. *I just got back last week and they put me right into a sim to get rated on the Mark II.*

“She’s the best exomech pilot I’ve ever seen,” General Juma said with an approving nod.

“Merc?” he asked curiously.

“Aye, your Grace. Not anymore, though,” she added with a shy smile. “I was an exomech rigger back then. They just put me where I do the best.”

I’m surprised you didn’t go for the officer program.

I thought about it, but I’m happy being a grunt, your Grace. Iaren thinks it’s a scandal, but he doesn’t understand. I don’t like all the shit that comes with a commission.

The generals laughed, and Jason smiled. “Well, she’s smart, I’ll give her that,” Myri agreed. “Sometimes I wonder why the hell I took this job.”

“Because you love me,” Jason told her blandly as Myka put her helmet on.

“With your permission, your Grace, I’ve been ordered to return your rig to the barracks,” Myka said, her voice tinny through her helmet speaker.

“Go ahead. And don’t you dare scratch my paint!” he called after her.

“I’ll treat him like he was you, your Grace. I’ll even pinch his butt.”

Jason did laugh then as she floated up into the formed depression where the pilot stayed, and then the armor folded in around her. The bowed head of the Gladiator raised as the lights of its eyes blinked on, and then the unit rose up off the ground and skimmed off the the south, towards the large exomech hangar on the edge of the training field.

How good is she? Jason asked curiously.

“She was the most feared rigger among the mercs,” General Sioa told him, who was herself once a commander of one of the mercenary companies that now formed the core of the house military. “I hired her some six years ago after she finished her conscription with the army. I never saw anyone who could pilot a mech with the subtlety she could, but she has incredible combat instincts. She was almost fuckin’ psychic about sensing danger and predicting how her opponent was gonna move, and she’s got some bloody strong talent to boot, so the enemy couldn’t even get her with mindstrikers. They had to *fight* her, and that’s her domain. And now that she’s using an interface, it’s like she *is* the fuckin’ machine. Nobody’s so much as landed a shot on her in wargames, and she rips through the entire enemy team by herself.”

Damn. Why haven’t you sent me a report on her?

“Because she doesn’t wanna be an officer, so why bother? Just put her in a rig and let her do her thing, that’s what I say.”

“Hell, if she’s that good, she can borrow my rig any time she wants.”

“Myleena wanted the best for that rig, so I brought the best.”

“That sounds like the best to me.”

“Yeah, that’s why I paid her nearly three times what I paid the other pilots back then.”

“Now, since you’re done playing, Jason, let’s go talk about where we are in mobilizing,” Myri said. She turned her head and sent for the driver of their car, which immediately raced up and came to a stop, hovering before them as the door opened. It was a limosine, and though Jason wasn’t the kind to indulge in that kind of luxury, he did have to admit that it was about the only way to carry the General staff in the same vehicle. He piled in and sat beside Myri, with Sioa, Juma, and the elderly and almost legendary General Navii facing him. Navii had been a major coup for Karinne, as they lured her out of retirement to come help build the KMS, and she was the true mastermind behind the military. Myri was the officer in charge of the KMS, but Navii was the quiet mind that advised Myri, and actually made most of the decisions. She was training Myri, though, and Navii had confided to him that in five more years, she would retire with complete confidence that Myri would be just fine.

As the limo skimmed over the lush grass of the Karsa plain, Jason was thoroughly briefed about the operational readiness of the KMS. Sioa was the commander of all ground forces and fighters attached to army units, Juma was the commander of the Naval forces and fighters attached to the naval units, Navii was assistant to Myri, and Myri was the overall commander. He heard Sioa first as she laid out the mobility status of the army, and was pleased to hear that the entire army was more or less ready to go. From Juma he got a slightly less rosy report, for the destroyers *Merrimack* and *Luna* were in dock for repairs, but the *Steadfast* had finished its shakedown and was ready to enter active service.

You have the crew manifest ready for the Steadfast?

Yes, your Grace. I’ve already sent down the orders. I’ve put Jeya Berinne in command. She was next in line.

I was going to suggest her anyway, Jason noted.

I thought you might. Didn’t you go to Draconis on the Liberty?

He nodded. *I hope we’re ready for this.*

We’re ready, your Grace, Navii sent reassuringly. Remember, over half of the KMS already has combat experience. The only thing different is that this will be their first action in Karinne ships.

That reminds me, ladies. I want the automated defenses thoroughly tested and kept on standby at all times. I also want the inner ring tightened, and, he sighed, I want any probes on the edge of the system destroyed.

Why, your Grace? Wouldn’t destroying those probes tip them off that there’s more here than there appears?

A feeling, he sent, his discomfort bleeding through. A feeling from a friend I trust. And as to Karis being a secret, I’ve found out we’re not as secret as I hoped we’d be. We all knew it was just a matter of time before they found us, and Dahnai came right out and told me that she does know where we are. And if she knows, it’s no stretch to guess that the rest of the Highborns and a few minor houses do as well.

Well, shit, Myri sent with an audible sigh. This is the mother of all bad timing.

Tell me about it, Jason growled. I’m going to go over to see Myleena right now. Last night we had a long talk about the problem, and I asked her to see if we can’t find a way to stop ships from jumping into the system, or deter them somehow.

There’s several ways, Navii sent. The Imperium uses hyperspace mines during wartime.

Yeah, but I’m looking for something a little more dependable, he grinned. I’m gonna go see where she’s at so far.

Myleena’s house was an extension of Myleena herself. It wasn’t overly large, done in the Faey architecture, but inside it was both clean and cluttered. There was equipment *everywhere*, stored in every room, but that equipment was neatly stacked and organized, and the rooms were kept spotlessly clean. She had three floors in her house. The first floor was mainly for guests, and was almost never used...and had evolved into a storage area. The second floor was her personal living space, and the basement, which was *huge*, was her workshop and office. Usually, Myleena could be found in that basement, working on something, and today was no different. What made today a little more unusual than the norm was that when he came in, Myleena was laying on the floor underneath a piece of equipment floating in midair, on a skimboard, and she was naked from the waist down, which was all he could see of her. Given the fact she had her feet on the floor to steady the skimboard, it left her legs open and showed him all kinds of interesting things that got him thinking about a little conjugal visit with his wife in a hurry.

Well, that's one hell of a way to greet me, Myleena, he sent with mild amusement.

Myleena laughed, but didn't bother to do much about it. She even opened her legs a little wider. *Sorry. I was about to take a shower, but had to take a shit. I was on the can, then I realized what I was doing wrong and rushed in here to see if I was right. Can you check and make sure I wiped?*

Jason laughed, but he also blushed just a little bit. *You look clean to me.*

Good. I hate bleaching skid marks out of my panties. She slid out from under the unit, and he saw that she was in fact totally naked, her skin almost chalky from lack of sunshine, her freckles even more pronounced. The only thing she had on was her gestalt, which neither of them ever took off.

“Good God, get some sun, girl,” he told her adamantly.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she grunted, sitting up. *[I think I found a solution to our problem,]* she sent via communion, which was one of the most secure means they could communicate. Not even people like Symone could understand them when they sent thusly, only another Generation could. *[I had a long talk with Cybi after last night, and she opened some of the secure files for me. I don't know if she told you.]*

[No, but she has the option to do it without my consent if it's important.]

[Good, at least she won't get in trouble.] He felt her uplink to her panel, a panel modified to allow her to commune with it through the gestalt, then she reached out for him in a manner that told him it was a gestalt connection request. He permitted his gestalt to link to hers, and she downloaded a very large file holding specs and schematics into his gestalt. *[That's one of the research projects left over from our ancestors.]* she told him. *[It's called a Hyperspace Interdictor. It's almost exactly what we're looking for. It destabilizes hyperspace in a huge area around a star system and makes it impossible for ships to jump into a system. The ships are forced out of hyperspace when they hit the edge of the effect, which is a whole light-year away from the focal point. That's way too far for any ship to get here, but it has a fatal flaw that made our ancestors abandon it.]*

[Let me guess...it can't be controlled.]

[Well, that's half of it. When it's on, no ship can jump in or out of hyperspace while it's running. The other half is it takes nearly two days to build up to full power. It can't just turn on and immediately protect the system. We'd have to turn it on and leave it on. But, there's a workaround for that.]

[I figured, or you wouldn't be recommending it. Let me guess again. The interdictor doesn't interfere with Stargates.]

[Bingo,] she sent with a nod. *[They designed the interdictor before stargate technology was developed, so they scrapped the idea. But I did some sims and yeah, the interdictor won't interfere with a Stargate. That's what I suggest, Jayce. We build the interdictor and buy two Stargates. We put one here, and the other somewhere that's totally secure. Someplace like, maybe, Kimdori Prime. Not only does that give us access to and from Karis, it gives us a direct fast-access link to our strongest allies. We'll just have to take some special precautions because of the radiation. You and me and the other Generations can stand up to it because of who we are, but the Faey and human elements of our house are vulnerable.]*

[I think that's our horse,] Jason agreed.

[Good, because I have Kosigi building it right now. It's a fairly complex unit, about the size of a corvette, and it's gonna take them about two months to get it done, given they've got sixteen ships on the board to finish building.]

[We don't have that long. How long would it take if we put the entire lunar base to work on it?]

[Dunno, maybe three weeks, if they do it right.]

[Do it. There aren't any ships in dock that will get finished before this insanity begins, so pull every single fuckin' worker off the shipyard and get them to work on that interdictor. We're going to need it. I'll go talk to Zaa and see if she'll permit us to link a stargate to Kimdori Prime. If she refuses, we'll have to think of something else.]

[I don't see why she would. It only helps both of us.]

[The Kimdori have been very kind to us, Myleena, but I don't want to push their hospitality. Let me go call her.] He looked her up and down boldly. *[And for God's sake, girl, go outside. There's a beach not a hundred shakra from your front door.]*

[Admit it, babe, seeing me all pale makes your dick wiggle. I can sense a little lust lurking in your sending.] she sent with a naughty wink.

[It's not being pale doing that,] he sent with a chuckle. *[It was the presentation. I've probably seen every woman's better half in a five kathra radius, Myli, but that was a new way to see a girl's equipment. I guess only techheads like us would see someone naked on a skimboard to be sexy.]*

[Oh,] she sent, then she giggled. *[Want to borrow my board? You can put Jyslin on it and have her slide halfway under the bed.]*

[I have my own board,] he sent with a grin.

[I'll call Kosigi and get them on the interdictor. You gonna be free for dinner?]

[We should be, come on over.]

[Good, I'm gonna be busy and I don't think I'm gonna have time to cook tonight. Trelle knows, I'm surprised they haven't come and taken Danelle away from me. The poor girl.]

Jason laughed. Danelle was Myleena's daughter, her first of the three she needed to bear as part of the breeding program. Myleena was very much unlike the others in that she wasn't quite as involved with the raising of her daughter as the Marines and other Generations were. She hired a nanny, named Sevi, and Sevi was the one that handled the major day-to-day chores caring for Myleena's daughter. But Sevi was on a short vacation with her husband this week, requiring Myleena to care for Danelle herself. It wasn't really that hard, though. Danelle was three years old, and she was surprisingly intelligent and mature. She didn't cause much trouble, and despite Myleena's distance, she loved her daughter very much, and Danelle adored her mother.

[Where is she now?]

[Lyn and Bryn took her down to Karsa. They should be back soon.]

[That's why you were gonna take a shower, eh?]

She nodded. *[But I got sidetracked.]*

[You always do.]

[I know, it's a bitch,] she laughed.

Calling Zaa was both a little letdown and a little relieving. When he asked about the stargate, she flatly refused. "Impossible," she told him. "The radiation here would cause more problems than you realize, cousin, because your efforts to protect your people against the radiation would upset *our* ecosystem, which depends on it," she told him. "It would be much more efficient and easier for both of us to choose a different site."

"Where can I put it that's as secure as Kimdori Prime?" he asked, in a bit of consternation.

"Approach this from a tactical viewpoint, cousin. You want the stargate to be close to Karis, but invisible to sensors and heavily defended." She touched something under her, out of view of the screen, and the screen split between her image and a graphical representation of the galaxy holding both Karis and Kimdori Prime. "Here," she said, as a blinking light highlighted a star system about one quarter of the way between Karis and Kimdori. "This is a quasar in unclaimed space between the Alliance and the Nine Colonies, in a dead zone. It's the only system within twenty parsecs of any border, and the quasar's radiation will

hide it from long range sensors. It is also in a line with Karis from the rest of the Imperium,” she pointed out. “The Faey will not be able to use simple headings when watching your ships jump to try to triangulate their destination using multiple jump points. They will all *seem* to be pointing to Karis. The minor angular differences when dealing with distances of this size will be ignored by the mathematicians when they try to calculate just *where* your ships are going. As far as they’ll reason, Karinne ships are immune to the effect of your defenses and are simply jumping home.”

“Zaa, that’s *brilliant!*” he said in admiration.

“I find your complement flattering, cousin,” she said with a modest smile. “Given this is a high radiation area, I would suggest you allow us to construct the Stargate and install the radiation shielding for you,” she offered. “Only the Generations are resistant to radiation among the species in your house.”

“If you don’t mind doing it, I’d accept your help gladly,” he told her gratefully. “Let me track down Kumi and get her to work buying what we’ll need.”

“There is no need. We already have the equipment. We will simply send you a bill for it.”

“That’s fine with me,” he agreed. “In the meantime, I still need to have her buy the Stargate for this side. Man, this is gonna be expensive,” he grunted.

“Yes, but it’s a justifiable expense,” she noted. “Stargates are *dreadfully* expensive, and you lack the time to simply build one yourself.”

“I know,” he groaned. “I might have to pay you back in installments, Denmother.”

“That is perfectly acceptable,” she told him with a gentle smile.

He called Kumi to his house while on the way back, and she reached him as he was in his bedroom, starting to take off his armor. She was wearing one of her swimsuits, either preparing for her daily swim or already done with it. “What you need, babes?” she asked, leaning against the doorframe.

“I need you to do something *big*,” he told her. “We’re installing a new defense at Karis, but it’s going to require us to go to using a Stargate.”

She winced. *Jayce, babe, those things are expensive.*

“I know,” he grunted, taking off his greave. “But we don’t have much choice. We don’t have much time here, Kumi. We can’t build one ourselves, we need one *now*.”

“Alright,” she sighed. “But it’s gonna break us.”

“I know,” he said grimly.

“What size?”

Big enough to handle the capital ship.

I was afraid you were gonna say that, she growled as he separated the chestplate from the backplate and pulled the breastplate off as the backplate flopped to the bed. *I’m sure that 2M probably has one to sell, but they’ll charge us through the nose for it.*

That’s alright, we’ll get it back. Like I said, Kumi, we can build them. Kosigi can easily crank out a Stargate. Once the ship backlog is cleared, that is what Kosigi’s gonna build in the spare cruiser bay. We’ll get our money back.

Kumi’s eyes brightened. “That’s a fuckin’ brilliant idea!” she said. *Vultech could undercut 2M and Seyalle Spatial and*

make a killing!

“Good, so don’t wince too much when you’re paying for the one we’re buying,” he said as he unlatched his legplates. *The main thing is, Kumi, we need it quick. So you’re gonna have to pull some strings and call in some favors. You know there’s not many spare Stargates laying around big enough for us.*

Yeah, I might have to lick some pussies to get what we need, she sent crudely, then she gave him a slightly predatory smile as he wriggled free of the codpiece of his armor and stood naked before her. Years of exposure to the Faey had deadened him to certain concepts of modesty where his close friends were concerned. *You’re looking a little thick there, Jayce,* she teased. *What, me talking about giving some arrogant supply clerk a little head get you horny? I can fix that for you, you know.*

So can my wife, who’s downstairs, he sent coolly.

The lucky bitch. I’ll get to work on this. I think I can track down something by tomorrow. After I’m done, we’ll talk about that little problem there. Or I should say that big problem, she sent with a wink, then sauntered out of the room.

God. Five years, and Kumi still kept trying. She had her chance, though. There was a point about four years ago when he gave in, because he realized that he was jeopardizing their relationship by refusing. It was a fun night, he couldn’t deny that, and since then she’d really backed off. There were times, though, when she teased him, propositioned him, and acted like the Kumi of old. But thankfully, those times were few and far between, usually only after she’d dumped whatever boyfriend she had at the time. She tended to go through a boyfriend every couple of months. But they were great friends, and probably always would be.

Kumi was never a girl that disappointed.

While Jason was having dinner with Myleena, Danelle, Zora, Sora, and his family, she rushed into the dining room. “I got it!” she screamed happily, almost running the wrong way, then coming a hair from bowling Surin over as he came out of the kitchen holding a plate of croissants and butter. “Jason!”

“Turn around, you nit,” Jason said mildly, which made Rann giggle.

“Aunt Kumi’s being silly,” he declared between bites of roast beef.

“Don’t ever doubt the pirate, babes!” she said with a laugh. “One Senalle Spatial MXK-378D Spatial Bridge!” she announced, throwing a handpanel onto the table. “Fully operational! We have to pick it up tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow?” Jason asked in surprise.

“You said you wanted it *now*,” she told him. “It’s being held on Menos IV.”

“Dorrane? Why would a Highborn house be selling a Stargate?” Jason asked curiously.

“Got me, but I got a decent price for it, given how big it is,” she winked. “We got it as-is, babes. It’s operational, but it’s assembled. We’ll have to send a team to break it down and move it.”

“That’s the hard way,” Myleena snorted. “Just send out the *Aegis* and tow it.”

“You think it can tow something that big through hyperspace?” Jason asked her in surprise.

“*Easily*,” she said scathingly.

“It means we’d have to reveal the *Aegis*, though,” Jesmind said seriously. “Nobody off Karis has seen him.”

“That time woulda been coming soon anyway,” Jason said. “May as well let Trillane get some pics of it to give them an idea

what's coming." He accessed his gestalt to link it to the planetary comm system, but spoke aloud. "Bring up the *Aegis*," he ordered, then activated the holographic vidlink projector on the far side of the room. He had one of those in every room, so he could have face-to-face consultations in an emergency.

A holographic image appeared in the open space near the door to the living room, which Ayama almost stepped through on her way in. A sleek, busy bridge appeared, bustling with Faey and human naval personnel, but the focus of the image was a white-haired Faey woman in a class A uniform standing in front of the helm. "This is Admiral Lyra," she intoned. "Go ahead, your Grace."

"What are you doing over there, Lyra?" he asked curiously. "Where's Captain Bren?"

"Just looking over her shoulder," she winked. "With the mobilization order, I decided to come aboard and observe. This *is* the command ship, after all. These sailors had better get things right. They have the honor of the entire KMS on them."

Captain Bren appeared beside her. "Your Grace," she said with a salute. "I was on my way back to the bridge when your call came in, so the Admiral was kind enough to stall til I could get here," she said in a deadpan voice which made Jyslin laugh.

Now *that* was Bren.

"Captain, I have a question for you."

"Sure, your Grace."

"You think the *Aegis* could tow something with nearly as much mass as itself through hyperspace?"

She didn't even blink. "Easily," she answered.

"Don't doubt me again, Jayce," Myleena chuckled.

"Alright then. Tomorrow, your ship is going to go out and tow a Stargate back to Karis. I'll have Myri send down the official orders in a little bit, but this way you know they're coming."

"He can handle that kind of job, your Grace. I take it you're not concerned with showing him off?"

He shook his head. "It's not an issue, Captain."

"Good. I hate having the biggest toy on the block but can't show him off and make the other kids jealous," she said in that deadpan voice.

"Why did we give her the command ship?" Myleena asked Jason casually.

"Because she's that good," the Admiral answered before Jason could say a word. "Don't let her insubordinate manner fool you, Duchess. Bren is the best captain in the KMS."

"I guess I'll find out. After I finish dinner, I'll be coming aboard with the engineering staff so we can work out how we're gonna tow that gate."

"I'll have quarters prepared for you, Duchess, and my engineering team put at your immediate disposal," Bren nodded.

"Well then, Myli can explain things to you when she gets there," Jason noted.

"Are you coming to oversee things, your Grace?"

He shook his head. "I'll be going to the Academy tomorrow. I'm sure you can pull it off, though."

“Of course we can,” Bren murmured.

“I’ll get on the line to Myri and get things arranged,” Jason told them. “You can pass the word down off the record through your regular task force. I’ll order all of them to go.”

“That’s prudent, your Grace,” Bren nodded.

“What’s a task force, Daddy?” Rann asked.

“It’s a group of Navy ships,” he answered with a smile. “I’m ordering our Navy to go out and do something, and it’s always best for ships to travel in groups.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Would my Lady and your son like to come watch?” Bren asked. “Since the Grand Duke will be busy tomorrow. We’d love to have you. I haven’t seen Rann since he was a baby.”

“Sure, I’d like that,” Jyslin answered. “What do you say, Rann? Want to go up to the ship and go with them?”

“Yeah!” he said with excitement.

“Oooh, can I go, mommy?” Danelle asked excitedly.

“Sure, kidlet,” she smiled. “I’m sure Ayama won’t mind watching after you while I’m busy with the engineers.”

“Not at all, my Lady,” Ayama said gently.

“I’ll make sure you have the best quarters and what you need for the children,” Bren assured them.

Jason rather liked the idea of Jyslin and Rann going along. Rann needed more exposure to the workings of the house, and it gave the house members and commoners a chance to get to know their future Grand Duke. It did remind him, though, that he had a very important appointment tomorrow, and he was going to need some help. “You’re going to be herding more than just two kids, Ayama,” he warned. “You think you can handle Kyri for a day or two?”

“Of course I can, your Grace,” Ayama said with a negligent wave of her hand. “Me and that little lady have something of an understanding.”

“Ayama spans her if she misbehaves,” Jyslin giggled. “Yana won’t do that.”

“Good, because I need Yana.”

“What for?”

“Something I can’t explain at the dinner table,” he said pointedly. “It’s a serious matter, that’s all I can really say.”

“Uh oh, sounds serious.”

“It is fairly serious, yes,” he agreed.

After telling Myri about what had to be done, Myleena left alone to fetch her team and go up to the command ship, leaving Danelle to stay the night at Jason’s. After putting Rann and Danelle to bed, which involved a great deal of tickling and giggling, Jason sat on the couch and explained what was going on in greater detail to Jyslin. *You know Yana doesn’t like doing that. It’s why she washed out of the secret police,* she reminded him.

I know, that's why I'm going to do it, he answered. I know how it's done. You taught me well.

I don't much like the idea of you exposing yourself like that,, love, she warned. Remember, your patient will have talent, and doing that will leave you open.

And that's why Yana is going, he sent reassuringly. Her job is to protect me while I try to undo the conditioning.

Jyslin pondered that for a moment, then finally nodded. *I think you should be okay, then, she declared.*

The ships on standby the next day were old friends of his, in a way. A standby rotation was always two destroyers and a cruiser, and that day, the cruiser on standby was none other than the *Defiant*.

Jason had a special attachment to that ship. He had sat in the captain's chair of the *Defiant* for four months, as Myri and his generals had organized the KMS, and the Kimdori recruited people for the house to flesh out the military's command positions; most of the middle and upper officers in the KMS were transplants, Faey, humans, and Makati recruited specifically for those tasks, people like Sioa and Bren. Once the Kimdori started bringing military people in, eventually Jason relenquished his captain's chair, and nine captains had sat in that chair since then. The *Defiant* was something of the launchpad for a captain to move up to one of the larger ships, since Jason had such an attachment to it...only the best captains were put on the *Defiant*, and they tended to get promoted up to the battleships and heavy cruisers once they were built.

Jason and Yana stepped onto the bridge, and found the bridge crew standing in respect, with the captain standing on his chair. The current captain of the *Defiant* was a Makati, a diminutive fellow with red skin, white hair cut in a crew cut, and small red horns over his temples. His name was Lieutenant Commander Travka Grumait, and he was the shining example that one couldn't judge everyone of a race by that race. Travka was a terrible engineer, couldn't build a lego castle even with instructions, but he was one *hell* of a military tactician, he understood Faey and humans, and did damn well as the captain of a naval vessel. *This* was his calling in life, not building things, and he had the wisdom to understand that and follow his dreams.

Travka was one of a handful of non-Faey upper-level officers in the KMS, and they kept the Faey on their toes. There were 9 Makati, 17 humans, and 3 Kizzik nobles who had the rank of major or lieutenant commander or above, and those were command ranks for the larger ships. Most of them were on Karis itself, part of the Karis Guard, the military arm devoted to the defense of the planet itself, but he had 3 non-Faey ship captains and one human officer on the command staff. Like the others, Travka wouldn't be on the *Defiant* for long. The next large-scale ship slated for completion was a heavy cruiser, scheduled for delivery in two weeks from the Kimdori shipyards, and Travka was already on the board to take command of it. In his place the current first officer would take command, a Faey woman with raven-black hair named Saiya.

As was the tradition in the KMS, the first captain of a ship had the right to name her. And for some odd reason, most of them had dug through Terran history and geography to find names for their ships, most likely because they thought that Jason would like that. Nearly two thirds of the ships in the KMS had Terran-origin names. Travka would be the first non-Faey captain with the chance to name his own ship, and Jason was curious as to what he was going to pick.

"Welcome aboard, your Grace," Travka said in his gravelly voice, as Jason ran a hand along a rail fondly. "We're glad to have you."

"I'm glad to be here," he said absently. "Me and this ship go way back."

"We know, your Grace," he smiled. "Duchess Yana," he said with a nod to her.

"You're looking well, Travka. Do you have my twenty credits?"

He laughed. "Not on me, but I'll send someone to my quarters and get it," he grinned.

Credits?

He lost a bet with me, she explained.

Ah.

“We have a Terra jump already plotted, your Grace. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Here, he can pay me back,” Saiya called, handing Yana a twenty-credit note.

“Thanks,” Yana laughed.

“No time like now, Travka,” Jason said.

Travka jumped down from his chair. “I’d be happy to let you sit in the big chair for the jump, your Grace,” he said. “After all, we all know we only keep it warm for *you* on this ship. This is *your* ship.”

“Thanks, Travka,” he said. “I do miss this old beast sometimes.”

“A captain never forgets his first command,” Travka grinned. “Mistress Saiya, if you’d be so kind.”

“Prepare for hyperspace jump!” she boomed in a barking voice, then sent throughout the entire ship. *All sections prepare for hyperspace jump, and report readiness!*

That was one of the little things that required a little difference for Travka. Since he couldn’t send, he relied on his first officer to handle some of the duties usually required for a captain on a Faey vessel. He had an intercom on his chair to address the ship directly, but sending was an integral part of military operations on a ship, so he had to have a subordinate handle that aspect of the way things worked. Despite that minor handicap in relation to Faey captains, Travka had managed to work around it quite well. There were absolutely no differences in his performance logs compared to other ships. His ship did not suffer in performance at *all* because her captain couldn’t send.

Jason listened as he took the captain’s chair, having to spread his legs around the booster step Travka needed to get up into it, and as the others on the bridge took seats and began strapping in. Each ship section sent in to Saiya that they were ready, and once all sections reported in, she turned to the helm. “Take us out, Ensign.”

“Aye, ma’am. Jumping in thirty seconds,” she called as she used her interface to urge the ship to turn.

Jumping in thirty seconds! Saiya sent across the ship.

After a dizzying hyperspace jump, the *Defiant* made way for Earth, smaller ships getting out of her way as they crossed a main lane leading to the Stargate. Jason drummed his fingers on the armrest as he thought about what was going to happen today. The Kimdori were going to pick up this agent and bring him to the Academy, and then Jason and Yana were going to do what they could to reverse the mental conditioning after Kiaari used her abilities to get at absolutely every scrap of useful information out of her. It wasn’t going to be pleasant trying to undo that damage, and there was a little risk involved, but that’s why he brought Yana. She was one of the most powerful telepaths in the entire Imperium, and if she couldn’t protect him, nobody could.

“Huh, your Grace,” the communications officer called. “I think you should see this. I’ll put it up on the screen.”

She did so, and one side of the main screen showed a different angle of the forward image, which immediately zoomed in. Sitting in orbit over the eastern seaboard was a small Kimdori ship bearing the two pawprint insignia of the Kimdori.

That was Zaa’s personal transport. The Denmother was on Terra.

She didn’t tell him she was coming, but clearly she felt the interrogation of this agent was important enough for her to be here in person.

“The Denmother? I had no reports she was going to be here,” Travka said worriedly.

“She knew I was going to be here, I guess she wanted to surprise me,” Jason said. “I don’t mind. I haven’t seen her face to

face in two years.”

Once they were in orbit, Jason launched from the *Defiant* in one of the special dropships that they kept for high-risk people. It was an original Karinne design dropship, sloped and wingless, looking like a flying rectangle with its front end squashed down into a wedge, but it was heavily armored, had Teryon shields, and was armed with pulse weaponry. It was more than capable of blowing massive holes in anything that attacked it, but nothing would ever get that close to it, for the *Defiant* hung in low orbit like a protective mother as the dropship descended towards the surface. On board the dropship were Yana, Jason, and four Dukal guards, but as was normal when Jason was on a dropship, he was the one who was flying it. The guards were here for only one reason, and that was because of the human they would be bringing back. Both Jyslin and Myri had demanded that Jason take additional protection, just in case, and he caved in. These four were very professional, very thorough...and very quiet. Sometimes Jason didn't like bringing them into public, for one might see the scars on their necks if they took off their helmets. All four were Imperial Guards, part of the arrangements between Jason and Dahnai. Rann was the future husband of a member of the Imperial Family, and that required that he and all other members of his family be protected. Jason had 36 Imperial Guards on his Dukal Guard retinue, the guards that defended his house and the grounds immediately surrounding it. Whenever they felt he was going to be going into a dangerous situation, he always had Imperial Guards with him for additional protection...and this was something even he admitted might be a dangerous situation. But, simply put, there wasn't really anyone else he'd let do this. The only telepaths with the power and training to do something like this were Jason, Jyslin, and Yana, and he wouldn't force the girls to do something like this, for it was something that both of them despised doing with all their hearts.

Of course it wasn't a secret that Jason had Imperial Guards, because the laws about protecting the Imperial Family were well known, but Jason didn't like to advertise it.

Where are we landing, your Grace? one of the four guards sent, the squad sergeant, whose name was Aya. Aya was a very professional woman, like Meya and Myra back when they were Kumi's bodyguards, but she was highly educated and refined, and he'd never won a single debate with her. Imperial Guards had to have the equivalent of Master's degrees before they could even apply to be Imperial Guards, for they often served as conversationalists, entertainers, tutors, and company for the Imperial family. Aya played the *tamorin* in addition to her two degrees in philosophy and history, and she was *very* good. Though Jason forbade them from posting guards inside his house, Aya kept eternal watch on the Dukal family from an office in the garage, and she was one of the official tutors of Rann, educating him in history and one of the women who would help shape the future Grand Duke to take the throne when Jason either died or retired.

These four were what one might consider his standard retinue of guards. Aya, the Captain of the Guard, who commanded the Dukal Guard, and her three best. Lovely Suri, with her gold hair and her violet eyes, who was the deadliest marksman he had ever seen. He had *never* seen her miss, with any weapon, at any range. Ever. Willowy Dera, the youngest of the Imperial Guard stationed with him, who could hear private sendings just like Symone. Tall, tall Shen, who was strong as an ox because she was born and raised on a heavy gravity planet, and crafty Ryn, who was the Guard's resident mechanic, technician, and general dabbler in all things mechanical. Ryn had been quietly soaking up a great deal of knowledge about Karinne technology just by hanging around when him and Myleena were talking or taking things apart, but he wasn't all that worried about it. Ryn was sworn to secrecy about what she knew about him, just as they were sworn to secrecy about what they knew of the Empress, and not even the Empress could make her divulge that knowledge. Besides, these four, and the Imperial Guards that were on Karis, were *Rann's* guards, and they would never return to the Imperial Palace unless the marriage between Karinne and Merrane ended somehow, by death or divorce.

That vow of secrecy was the only reason he brought them to Karis in the first place.

Where I always land, Aya, he answered.

You will let us disembark first?

This isn't a security risk area, Aya, he chided. *I've come here alone before.*

Yes, we haven't talked to you about that yet, but we will, she sent darkly, which made him wince.

They like to mother you, don't they? Yana sent privately.

Yes, and don't do that, he sent openly. *Dera can pick private sendings out of the air. It's one of her tricks.*

It helps keep the Grand Duke safe, Dera sent simply.

It also makes you the center of the Guard rumor mill, Jason added slyly.

Yes, well, someone has to know what's going on, she sent with a smile.

I didn't know you could do that, Dera, Yana sent in surprise.

How can I defend the Grand Duke if people know I can hear them? she asked simply. And we would appreciate it if you kept that knowledge to yourself. For others to know about me threatens the security of the Grand Duke and his family.

I'm part of that family, Dera. It won't ever go past me.

You can trust Yana, Dera, Jason told her as he descended towards the private landing pad he shared with Ayuma. She's not the kind to blab. Not with all the dirt I have on her.

"Jason!" Yana gasped aloud, which made the four guards laugh silently, for they had no voices.

Jason landed on the pad with a light touch, and the four guards immediately put on their helmets of their Crusader armor and stood up. Giving them Crusader armor was only logical, given they were the defenders of his person and his family. He wanted them in the *best*, and their armor was the best there was. It was the cutting edge, the prototype, even better than standard Crusader armor. The Guards helped Myleena by beta-testing the armor as she made changes, helping her work out the bugs, make improvements, and produce a better armor system. At any time, 6 of the Dukal Guards were wearing Myleena's experimental armor, testing it for her, while the rest wore the armor designs that would be the next production line once the manufacturing plant was retooled to produce the upgraded armor. What made their armor so much better was their Crusader armor was the first armor to carry pulse weaponry integrated into the weapon system. It had taken Myleena and Cybi four years to work out a way to miniaturize a pulse weapon to where it would fit on armor, part of the work she did when she miniaturized pulse weapons for the Gladiators, but the pulse weapons on their armor were much different. They couldn't generate a teryon charge strong enough to explode, so instead what they fired was a tiny pellet of teryons, the size of a pencil eraser, that basically disintegrated their way through anything they struck. Just like standard pulse weapons, the composition if the target made absolutely no difference to the charge, for it ripped apart the matter contained in the *space* that matter occupied, not attacking the matter itself. The pulse weapons had a very short range, only about 2,000 *shakra*, but given they only fought at close quarters, that limited range was a moot point for them. They, like the Gladiators, also had plasma weaponry on their armor for medium range, and could carry railguns or other external weapons for long range combat if necessary.

Jason sometimes felt jealous. Even *he* didn't wear their armor. His own armor was specially made for him to give maximum protection at a cost to offensive ability. It was *armor* much more than it was a weapon system for Jason, because Myleena felt that his protection mattered much more, and he wouldn't be doing any active fighting.

[Jason.]

[What is it, Cybi?]

[I have completed my search of Civnet as you requested. I found nothing unusual concerning Trillane or the Urumi, but I did unearth something unusual.]

[What is it?]

[I invaded the Collective's computer network to investigate from their side,] she told him, which surprised him a little bit. [I was unable to penetrate their top-secret systems, but I did manage to break into their medium security layer. It seems that the Urumi are preparing for war, my friend, and what is more, they are buying military equipment from a third party, the identity of which I cannot locate. That information must be in the top secret layer. What I have uncovered are large shipments of ground-based weapons, armor, and ship-mounted weaponry to place on their ships. The type and function of these weapons are also top secret, but the records of their deliveries are within the security layer I penetrated.]

Jason considered that a moment. *[Get in touch with Miaari and give her that. If the Urumi are buying weapons, I want to know what they are and where they're getting them from. Miaari can dig that data up. How did you manage that, anyway?]*

[I sent a probe to Collective space and used it as a relay,] she answered.

Jason's eyes lit up. *[You think you could get a probe to where they're building up their fleet?]*

[I already have, Jason,] she told him modestly. *[Miaari ordered surveillance, and I dispatched probes to collect that intelligence for her. She is going through that data as we speak, and will most likely be presenting her report to you soon.]*

[Why didn't she say something?] he fretted.

[You know Miaari, my friend. When she has all the information she needs, she will bring it to you. You know how thorough she is.]

[Yeah.]

Yana prodded him in the ribs. *Wake up*, she sent. Yana could hear it when he communed, though she couldn't understand what he said. He blinked and saw that the four guards were looking back at him from the hatchway, waiting for him to get out of the pilot's chair.

"Sorry," he said, standing up. "Let's go find Kiaari."

Kiaari was in her *other* office when they arrived, deep in the basement of the Engineering building. Ayuma directed him there before he even got into the administration building, and the six of them navigated confusing, dark passages deep in the bowels of the huge building. The office was palatial, nearly a hundred feet to a side, and it was filled with Kimdori. They sat at monitors, grouped together to share information, and scurried to and fro. This was the heart of the Kimdori intelligence network on Terra, where Kiaari kept tabs on everything going on in her back yard. Kiaari's desk was in the back, not separated from the other Kimdori, but it was on a raised dais so it was visible across the entire chamber.

"Nice," Yana said as they climbed up to Kiaari's desk.

"Just a little something I call the office," she winked in reply. "Yana here to try to deprogram the agent?"

"No, I am," he said. "Yana doesn't like doing that. She's here to protect me while I do it."

Yana nodded. "I can keep him safe."

"That's just as well, Yana," Kiaari said seriously. "Well, my people should be picking up the agent in about twenty minutes. It's a woman, and she's currently on a train to Washington. We're going to pick her up on the platform. She'll be back here half an hour after we got her." She gave Jason a look. "Jason. The Denmother needs to speak to you in private. There's something you need to know."

"Where is she? We saw her transport as we came in, I figured she'd be here with you."

"Come with me," she said, standing up. "I'm afraid the rest of you have to wait here," she added.

"We'll be fine," Yana told her.

Kiaari led him to a conference room with a black table and ten chairs around it, and standing in front of a monitor was Zaa, the Denmother. She was very tall and had charcoal gray fur, and when she turned around he saw the white band of fur that ran from under her chin to her crotch, the white band of station that only she and the Handservants were permitted to wear. "Denmother," Jason said fondly. "What brings you here?"

She said nothing. She reached out when he approached, and put her large hand on his neck. He felt her reach into him, merge with his mind in the way they did, that feeling of *expansion*, but instead of reading from him, she instead left something behind.

Her touch on his neck became a grip to keep him from unlocking his knees.

She conveyed to him through that touch that the human female that arrived in the Academy, and then was put onto a train by the Urumi consulate, was not just a human telepath.

She was a *Generation*.

Chapter 3

Koira, 13 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 10 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 13 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The Academy of Terra, Norfolk, Virginia, The United States, Terra

A Generation.

Jason spent quite a bit of time trying to wrap his brain around that. He thought he was the only Generation left on Terra, but now he knew that was false. It always *did* seem a little outlandish to him that his family had survived for hundreds of years as only a single unbranching line. He had to have *some* distant aunts or uncles that reproduced, and this woman was clearly the proof that he was right.

Kiaari showed him a picture of her, taken at the Academy, with a serpentine Urumi, its scales black, led her from the school's spaceport to a waiting car. She was petite, thin, pale, rather buxom, and had flaming red hair that was tied back in a single ponytail. She was rather plain, with a drawn face and thin lips, but that could have been a function of the aerial angle of the camera. She hinted that she was more handsome than that still image portrayed. She wore a severe gray jumpsuit in the image.

Still, it was quite a shock. She wasn't from his direct family tree, he figured. She had to be distantly related, descended from a branch of the family hundreds of years ago. He certainly had no knowledge of any other branches of his family, and since they'd found no other human Generations, everyone simply assumed that he was the last of his line.

It felt...relieving, to know that he wasn't alone. It had been a shock, but really, it was a *pleasant* shock to find out that he had some long-lost distant cousin. Who knows, maybe he had even more?

One thing was for sure, this made it absolutely *imperative* he get his people back from the Urumi and Trillane. There was no telling how many of them had talent, or if he had other Generation cousins among them.

One thing was for sure, though...he *really* wanted to talk to this girl. He paced back and forth in the cavernous intelligence office in front of Kiaari's desk as the reports came in. She was in Washington. The Urumi lackey had left. The Kimdori had picked her up, forced to sedate her because she attempted to resist, but quickly found that her telepathic powers were basically useless against Kimdori. She injured three with formidable telepathic power, though, but they had still captured her. They had her in a dropship on the way back to the Academy. He was nervous and impatient when word came that she was on the campus, and that was when Kiaari and Zaa took Jason from the office and down a long, dark passageway, to a room where they would be dealing with the girl.

She was there when they arrived. It was a featureless room with gray walls and a comfortable bunk built into the wall, almost like a prison cell, and a single chair by the bed, and looking at her made his spine shiver in that peculiar manner that told him exactly what she was, and proved to him beyond any doubt that she was a Generation. She was laying on the bunk when they entered, passing two Kimdori males who had brought her in, and Jason sat down on the chair as Zaa and Kiaari came in with Yana

behind them. She was rather short, thin, and very pale. Her red hair was very vibrant and bright, thick, and her face was in fact prettier than it appeared in that image, but she was certainly no beauty. She was simply cute.

Kiaari began. She leaned over the bunk and put her hand on that girl's neck, and the girl gave a ragged cry, her back arching. Kiaari's face was a mask of absolute concentration as she used her power to dredge the mind of the girl, looking for every single scrap of information that they might find useful. The girl writhed, muttering as if having a bad dream, as Kiaari shared with her, then the Kimdori pulled her hand away.

Zaa looked back to the Kimdori in the hall. "Bring Yana," she commanded.

"At once, Denmother," came the reply, and one of them rushed off.

"What did you learn, child?" Zaa demanded.

"Very little," she said grimly. "The girl's mind was erased of anything but her conditioning. All she had inside was what the Trillanes gave her."

"How bad?" Jason asked.

"I mean there's nothing left inside her of who she used to be. The Trillanes erased her memory," she told him bluntly. "She doesn't even have a name. Her mission was to get within sending range of the Empress and impart to her a message."

"A message? That's *it*?" Jason asked curiously.

"It was a message about the Karinnes, Jason," she told him grimly. "It told the Empress exactly where you were, and offered a deal to them. Their border systems in exchange for the equal sharing of Karinne technology between the Faey and the Urumi, if the Empress would turn on you during the upcoming action to quell Trillane. It seems that the offer was to have the Empress force you to commit the bulk of your military forces to the fleet, then allow Urumi forces to cross the Imperium to Karis to capture the planet while you were busy with Trillane. In return for that, the Urumi would permit the Empress to overrun Collective border systems and keep them, and Trillane would fold back into the Imperium peacefully after the Imperium took Karis back from the Urumi. That way it would appear as if nothing untoward had happened, yet the Urumi would have enough data to reverse-engineer much of Karinne technology, which they would share with the Imperium through Trillane."

"All of this was a *trap* against us?" Jason gasped.

"No," Zaa said. "It was a diversion. The Urumi have the same knowledge of your fleet the Faey do, and know they would stand no chance against them." Zaa paced back and forth. "And we both know that the Empress would have rejected such an offer immediately, and clearly would warn you about it. The result is that you would be much more reluctant to commit forces to quelling Trillane, given the threat of an Urumi fleet conducting a raid against Karis. This trick seems little more than a ploy to prevent Karinne from committing forces to the Imperium for the upcoming suppression. But there is more going on here. The Urumi have definite proof of Karis, so there is more to this than what we can easily see. Clearly, it is time to sift through the sand at the feet of the Collective and see what we find."

"I kinda have Miaari working on that right now," Jason told her. "Well, she's doing it on her own, really. She's been working with Cybi to investigate the Collective, even had Cybi invade the Urumi computer network to dig for information and use some of our hyperspace probes to collect surveillance."

"That is quite clever, clearly Miaari continues to prove her worth to wear the white bar," Zaa said calmly.

"There's something else too, something Cybi mentioned," he remembered. "The Urumi are buying weapons and equipment from a third party, but Cybi couldn't find out who it was. We thought there for a while that this was an attempt to get the Faey and the Alliance into a war, but if the Urumi are arming, then maybe they really do mean to take on the Faey themselves."

"Perhaps," Zaa intoned. "But there is more going on here. We will wait for Miaari to report. In the meantime, we will do what we can for her."

“What *can* we do for her?” Jason asked. “Kiaari said her mind was erased.”

“We will see. There might be something we can do, it will depend on Yana.”

When Yana did arrive, Zaa ordered her to assess the girl herself. She sat down in the chair and put her hands on the girl’s face, and was quiet for long moments while Jason felt on the edges of his consciousness her probing of the girl. She then took her hands off and frowned. “There’s something weird here,” she said. “They’ve erased her memory of who she used to be, and I can’t do anything to get that back. It was done too well. But that’s not what’s weird. There’s a block of memory in her mind that’s been purged from just last week. They’d have no real reason to do that, and that’s what so strange. They did something to her, or with her, or had her do something that they absolutely did not want anyone to find out, not even *her*.”

“How can you tell?” Jason asked.

“There’s a difference between erasing memory and purging it,” she told him. “Erasing it leaves nothing there, but it also leaves the chance that you might be able to recover some of it, depending on the resilience of the mind and the skill of the telepath trying to recover it. Purging it leaves what you might call a hole in her memory, totally excising that section of her memory by tampering directly with the neurons that retain memory, making it absolutely impossible to get it back. Purging is very hard to do, because you have to purge neuron by neuron, it takes a while, and you have to do it carefully or it’ll cause the victim to go psycho. It’s only really done when it’s like the messenger is carrying top secret stuff.”

Zaa frowned. “We are missing something here. The offer that this girl is to deliver is...incomplete. It is not right. It only makes sense at its face, but when one looks closely into it, given the current situation, it does not add up. The only possible use for it is to pin down the Karinne forces, but now that I consider the matter, that also makes little sense, because when one steps back and looks at the issue as a whole, one can see that the Imperium does not *need* the Karinne fleet to both quell the Trillane insurrection and defeat the Urumi in combat. And since the Imperium would not need the Karinnes to emerge victorious, then it means that there is some other meaning hidden within this message. And then there is the added mystery of why they would bother to *purge* this girl rather than simply erase her memory. That unsettles me greatly.”

“It doesn’t make sense because we don’t see the whole picture, just little pieces of it,” Jason reasoned.

“Or,” Kiaari blurted, “we were *supposed* to find this girl.”

“How so, child?” Zaa asked.

“An incomplete message that makes little sense? Purged memory? Maybe this was nothing but a test by the Urumi to see how effective the intelligence is at the Academy, and they purged segments of her that they couldn’t risk we could recover using Karinne telepaths. Half the galaxy knows we’re on very friendly terms with Karinne, and the power of Karinne telepaths is widely known.”

Zaa’s eyes narrowed. “Kiaari.”

“Yes, Denmother?”

“Bring a medscanner.”

“At once.”

A Kimdori returned with Kiaari moments later, as Jason paced and worried, who carried a large medical scanner. He bent to the task quickly, checking over the girl, then checked the display and turned to Zaa. “I have given her a thorough check, Denmother.”

“Your findings?”

“She is infected with a biogenic virus,” he answered. “It is still in incubation, but is not a threat to any other, it is not contagious. I will not know more without further analysis in a lab environment.”

“Have her cured of this virus immediately. Kiaari, inform Ayuma we are commandeering a section of the hospital. Grevix, report your findings to me immediately upon the completion of your analysis.”

“At once, Denmother.”

“Jason, Yana, abide with me in the analysis room while we await Grevix’s report.”

They waited up in the big room full of Kimdori, and Jason was quite confused. The message *seemed* to make a kind of sense, but Zaa was right in that it didn’t make sense in the *context* of what was going on. It was really confusing, and under all that was the concern for this girl. She had quite a rough road ahead of her, he could see that. Without her memory, she had to build an entirely new life for herself.

They got information, but it wasn’t what they were expecting. Jason was herded into a conference room off the main room by Zaa and Kiaari without explanation, and a hologram of Miaari appeared in the air before them. “I have news, Jason, Denmother,” she said brusquely.

“Report, Handmaiden,” Zaa called.

“I have uncovered some disturbing information,” she stated. “I am uploading a datafile with the pertinent data for you to review after this report.” She waved to her left, and a new hologram appeared, showing a planet and many long ships with wide, stubby wings. “I contacted the clans who watch Uruma and enlisted their aid, and Cybi helped gather quite a bit of critical visual and computer data evidence. The summary of this is that the Urumi do in fact intend to go to war with the Imperium, and that they are being backed by another government, who has supplied them with weapons and equipment that they believe will allow them to overpower the Faey and put them on even footing with Karinne.”

The image zoomed in, to a gun turret on the black battleship. “This is a new weapon called a *dark matter cannon*,” she informed them. “It is a combination mass driver and particle beam weapon, firing a stream of dark matter isotopes. This technology is far beyond the Urumi. It is advanced, even by our own standards.” The image zoomed back out. “Captured data on this weapon indicates it is capable of penetrating Karinne armor, but is resisted by teryon shields. The Urumi are also employing a *torsion wave generator*, much akin to the Karinne torsion shockwave equipment, but instead of a field, it generates a pinpoint stream of spatial distortion, like a beam, which can penetrate any known armor and inflict shock damage on the internal structure of its targets. The Urumi vessels are being outfitted with harmonic tetryon shields, a rather unique design that seems to be able to at least partially resist MPAC weaponry, much akin to teryon shields. They too cannot hold up against MPACs for long, but they will provide the Urumi brief protection before their shields are brought down.

“The infantry is being supplied with weapons called *omega weapons*,” she continued, showing a serpentine Urumi and a human wearing black combat armor, and carrying a weapon that looked like a rifle with a tuning fork at the end. “It fires a compressed charge of omega energy, which is encased in a phased matrix that prevents its explosion in real space. For your benefit, Jason, omega energy is an upper-dimensional energy source similar to teryons, but is much more unstable. Karinne studied omega energy briefly before moving on to teryon technology. These omega weapons are capable of penetrating any known armor, but they too are subject to resistance by teryon shields.

“The Urumi were also provided armor technology, but reports indicate that they have not had time to refit their vessels to upgrade to this armor. It is an artificial isotope of Adamantium that is considerably more durable, almost on par with compressed Neutronium.

“The supplier of these technologies is unknown to us,” she said. “We have only a single picture, and a name. They call themselves the Consortium,” she said, and a picture of an ethereal energy pattern encased in a transparent skin appeared, floating beside a trio of Urumi as they moved from a dropship towards a building. “As you can see, they are energy-based beings, and we have no information or contact with them. Judging from the weaponry they are supplying to the Collective, they are much more advanced than the galactic norm, but have not yet reached the technological level of Karinne. Their weaponry would be considered outmoded by Karinne standards, but it still poses a viable threat, to both the Imperium and to Karinne.” She glanced at Jason. “Thus far, reports indicate that the Urumi Collective has *not* shared this technology with the Trillanes. The alliance between the Trillanes and the Urumi seems to be for no reason other than to permit the Urumi to engage in war with the Imperium without fear of any other government getting involved. It was discovered that they feared that other governments may ally with the Imperium should they attack without provocation, because of the perceived threat to the Terran Academy. They needed a *reason* to go to war, and the Trillanes have given them one.

“There is one other matter to address,” she continued. “The computer data supplied by Cybi, combined with intelligence reports, indicates that the Urumi have a more detailed knowledge of House Karinne than the Imperium. They know that Karis is repopulated, and have a very accurate assessment of Karinne military forces and disposition. Going on surveillance images plundered from Urumi computers, we have discovered their means of spying and eliminated it. Denmother, it was a *hyperspace probe*. Again, this must have come from this Consortium, for *only* we and the Karinnes have that level of hyperspace technology. It went undetected because, I must admit, I did not cover local hyperspace in my security network, and a probe was placed with the ability to look into normal space, which has gathered intelligence against Karinne. That is my responsibility,” she said with a grim face.

“I see no reason to rebuke you, daughter,” Zaa said. “I would not have covered hyperspace either. As you said, no others but us and Karinne have that ability that we knew of, but now we must take that into consideration.”

“I will endeavor not to make such an error in the future, Denmother,” she said contritely. “My assessment of this information is thus, my Denmother. The Urumi will attack, and their attack will devastate the Imperium, for they will be armed with weapons and shields that will give them a decisive advantage. The Urumi probably understand that the Karinne segment of the fleet will be their major threat, and we have information leading us to believe that several diplomatic and clandestine plots are under way to either dissuade Karinne from entering the battle, sabotaging their ability to do so, or fomenting discord between Karinne and Merrane. I highly suggest you warn Empress Dahnai to take precautions and be wary of plots both within the *Siann* and without. And Jason, I highly suggest you issue a security alert on Karis and initiate martial law until the Trillane matter is resolved. What we have discovered may not be all there is, and we must be careful.”

“You have done well, daughter,” Zaa told her. “Things are clear now. On the Academy grounds, we hold a *second* Terran Generation, one of the Terrans abducted by Trillane. This one was sent by the Urumi with orders to reach Empress Dahnai on Prius. She may very well be one of the attempts by the Urumi to stop Karinne from entering the war, but how she was to do this will not be clear until further information is made available to us.”

“It would be logical to assume so, my Denmother,” Miaari nodded.

“I would speak to Dahnai,” she announced. “You will remain on Karis and see to the defense of the planet, daughter. Know that I am pleased with you.”

“It will be done, Denmother,” Miaari said with a nod of her head, then her holographic image dissolved.

“Now things are starting to make sense,” Kiaari grunted, scratching her chin. “Now we *know* the Urumi aren’t really stupid, or crazy. They’re gonna blindside the Imperium using weapons given to them by this Consortium.”

“But what does this Consortium gain from the deal,” Zaa pondered, tapping her muzzle with a finger. “I must consider it. But important things first. I would speak to Empress Dahnai,” she ordered.

Jason had no idea how that worked, because a Faey wearing Imperial livery appeared as a hologram before her. “Denmother Zaa,” the woman said with a graceful bow. “I am Duchess Shey Merrane. You wish audience with the Empress Dahnai?”

“Immediately,” she stated bluntly.

“I will put you through at once, Denmother,” she said, and her image dissolved. What replaced it seconds later looked like a vidscreen monitor image projected into the air before them as a hologram. Dahnai was there, wearing a billed hat, with thick vegetation behind her. She was obviously in a tent, and Faey milled about behind her. “Denmother, it’s an honor to speak to you,” she said with a nod. “What can I do for you today?”

“Remove yourself to Draconis immediately, your Majesty,” Zaa ordered. “Your life is in danger.”

“Really? What’s going on, Zaa?” she asked.

“Expand her view. Show her,” Zaa called, and Dahnai’s eyes widened.

“Jason! You’re with Denmother? What’s going on?”

“We have uncovered grim news, Dahnai,” Zaa told her. “We have uncovered a deadly plot against the Imperium, and for your own protection, you must return to the palace immediately.”

“Can you elaborate a little, Denmother?”

“Only in person. Jason Karinne and myself will be en route to Draconis shortly to explain the matter in detail, for a matter of dire importance remains where we are and we have no choice but to await information being processed for us as we speak.”

“A warning like that coming from anyone but you would have been rebuffed, Zaa,” Dahnai said soberly. “I’ll get Kellin and return home immediately. I’ll have my people contact yours with regular status reports as we move, so you can keep track of me and know where I am and how it’s going, alright?”

“That is prudent. I suggest you call in a sizable task force of vessels to escort you back to Draconis. Now is the time for exceptional caution.”

“I’ll handle that right now,” she nodded. “I’ll bring everything I can get here in the next half hour to take me home. Is that acceptable?”

“Almost. Jason, jump your standby ships and the *Aegis* task force to Prius. This matter has more precedence than their current mission.”

“I’ll have it done, Denmother,” Jason told her. *[Cybi.]*

[Yes, Jason?]

[I want the Aegis task force and every ship that can launch in the next five minutes to jump to Prius and defend Empress Dahnai as she returns to Draconis. Give it as a direct Dukal order, and tell them to take orders from whichever Imperial admiral has authority over the scene.]

[I am relaying the order.]

“It’s done. I ordered my ships to take the flag of your commanding admiral, Dahnai.”

“How are they going to get here that fast?” Dahnai asked curiously. “I didn’t know you had a Stargate.”

“Do not worry about how they will get there, and stop chattering, girl,” Zaa told her shortly. “We will cease this transmission, and you will return home immediately.”

“Alright, alright, I’m on my way. For what it’s worth, thank you, Denmother. I’ll speak to you again as soon as I’m on my transport and on the way.”

“Go quickly and carefully, Dahnai,” Zaa ordered, then the hologram dissolved. “Jason, contact Myri. Explain the situation.”

He nodded, and touched his gestalt with a finger. *[Cybi, I need to talk to Myri. Can you connect us?]*

[She is already in contact with me. One second.] A new voice sounded in his mind. *[This is Myri, Jason. What the fuck is going on?]*

[Listen carefully, my friend. Things are getting really nasty. I’m giving you a direct order to bring the house to a full state of readiness. I’m declaring an emergency and instituting our emergency plan effective immediately. Do you understand?]

There was a long silence. *[I understand, Jason. I’ll send out the orders and bring the KMS up to full alert.]*

[Good. I want you to collect up my wife, Symone and Tim, and all the kids and take them to Kosiningi, and put them with Cybi in the bunker. I want a company of Gladiators on the island with them.]

[Gladiators? What the fuck?]

[The Urumi have been spying on us, Myri. Karis is compromised.] he told her grimly. [Prepare the planet for a possible land invasion in addition to the normal defense preparations. I want everyone ready, just in case.]

[How the hell did they manage that?]

[In a way even Denmother Zaa didn't think possible.] he answered. [Now stop arguing with me and get the planet locked down.]

[We're on it, Jayce. I want you to keep a constant link with Cybi.]

[I will, I promise. Cybi, maintain a constant link with me.]

[I will ensure it,] she answered.

"I'm done, Denmother," Jason told her.

"Very good. Now, I wish for you to call together all the ambassadors at the Academy," she told him. "It is something that only the Grand Duke Karinne could manage. They will listen to you."

"Why?"

"It is simple, my cousin. The Urumi are attempting to declare war on the Imperium without involving the other governments. Let us tell them what is going on, and reveal to them the secrets that the Urumi have been keeping from the rest of the galaxy," she told them simply. "I am sure that the other races would be most interested to know about this Consortium and the weapons that they have sold the Urumi."

"But—ohhhhh," he said, his eyes widening as he understood. "Zaa, you are a *genius!*" he laughed.

"I am but the servant of my people," she shrugged, then she started when Jason reached up, grabbed her by both sides of her muzzle, pulled her down, and kissed her solidly on the nose. "Not in front of the children, Jason," she told him, glancing at Kiaari.

Kiaari almost fell over laughing.

Grevix's image appeared in the hologram. "Denmother, I am finished."

"Report."

"The virus was a biogenic product that was designed specifically for this human," he reported. "It was engineered to bond to segments of her brain and stimulate them in an unusual manner. I am no expert, but I would hazard a guess that it would provoke some kind of action or create some kind of induced state. But the puzzling thing is that the segments of her brain the virus was designed to attack deal with *memory*, not her motor control functions."

"Memory? Grevix, if this virus bonded itself to a section of her brain that had been prepared for it, what effect would it have?"

"Prepared? How do you mean, Denmother?"

"Telepathically purged."

"Purged? Hmm," he said, tapping his snout with a finger. "I dare say it would insert memory. The virus would write to those neurons, the same way biogenic memory cells write data to their cores. And since there would be no data there to interfere, the information would copy properly."

“So, the virus was the second half of the instructions she was given—“

“And what we got from her was just a decoy!” Jason gasped, to which Zaa nodded in confirmation.

“Held in utter secrecy until the virus activated, which would have installed into her her true mission,” Zaa completed. “Grevix. Create a synthetic environment to which the virus will react and see what it does.”

“That is a delicate operation, my Denmother. It will take some hours to accomplish.”

“Then begin. I would know what this woman was sent to do.”

“It will be done, Denmother. What shall we do with the female?”

“Is the virus removed from her?”

“Yes, Denmother. She is perfectly healthy.”

“Return her to the holding cell from which she was taken. A Karinne will arrive presently to attempt to reverse the programming done to her by the Trillanes. Kiaari, send Yana to perform the task.”

“I was going to do it, Denmother,” Jason told her.

“You will be busy, and Yana is more than capable of the task,” she said pointedly. “I asked you to assemble the ambassadors. Why is this not complete?” she asked pointedly.

Jason actually laughed. “Umm, because I haven’t had a chance yet?”

“Then hop, cousin,” she told him with a slight smile.

He could see she was feeling better, that was almost banter. “Have Kiaari point me to the nearest vidlink you’re not using, and I’ll get to work on it.”

Kiaari took him to another small conference room with a vidlink, and he sat down and got busy. He contacted Ayuma and told her to get every single ambassador on a party link, including the Urumi. As each one answered the private line that only Jason and Ayuma could call, he had them wait, until he had all 37 of them. “Ambassadors, I need to address you,” he told them. “It’s a matter of grave importance. If you would be so kind as to assemble in the V.I.P. conference room on the sixth floor of the Administration building in fifteen minutes, we can get started. This is a serious matter, ambassadors, so please don’t think you need to be properly dressed. I need you there quickly, so throw on whatever you have handy and get there.”

“But I am not dressed, your Grace!” the Jakkan ambassador protested. “And in my case, that could be hazardous to the rest of you!” he added with a chalky smile, his pallid gray skin making that smile a little ominous.

“This is *really* important, Ambassador. How soon can you be ready?”

“Give me thirty minutes, if you would. I can be in my suit and present by then.”

“Alright, thirty minutes. All of you please try not to be late. The Denmother Zaa has asked for this conference, and she will be addressing you.”

That got a reaction. They all quickly told him they’d be there, and some of them even started running around, calling for their aides, without cutting their vidlinks.

As he went back to Zaa, he pondered the girl. How sad...they had taken *everything* from her. She would have a very hard road ahead of her, as she tried to figure out where she belonged in the scheme of things, and living with the knowledge that she would never know who she was or where she came from. But, she was family to him. She was a Generation. It was his

responsibility to help her, take her in, give her a home and a place and a goal since the Trillanes had stolen her own. What they did to her was what he once feared the Imperium would do to him, back when he first got his talent, turn him into a zombie that did only what he was told, and used his powers like a machine, or a slave.

They knew she was a telepath, and from what he heard, they knew she was telekinetic. He could only wonder what they were going to have her do on Prius, now that they knew that the cock and bull story about the message was nothing but a diversion.

But it told them much, he saw. It told them that the Urumi knew about Karis, and they didn't care if the Karinnes knew, since they'd planted it in her as a decoy if she was captured before the virus triggered and she got her true orders. Why would they give that away? It was like they were announcing their intentions. It was like they were *daring* Karinne.

He returned to Zaa's room and nodded to her. "It's done, Denmother. Thirty minutes, the Jakkan has to get his radiation suit on."

"I hope you told them I would address them?"

"I made sure to mention it."

"Very good. Kiaari, upload that datafile Miaari sent into the Academy computer network under Jason's passcode, so that we may access it. Jason, go with her so you know exactly where that file is, so you might access it immediately upon my request."

"I'll do it right now, Denmother. Come on, Jayce."

They went back out to her desk, and Kiaari sat down and started typing on the keyboard. "What do you think about all this, Jayce?"

"I think things are getting ugly."

"Amen. I hope Yana can do something for our cousin. I hate seeing her that way, and it chafes my fur to think they were going to *use* her like that."

"Just another reason to take a pound of flesh out of Maeri Trillane's scabby hide," Jason growled. "I'm almost looking forward to a war with Trillane."

"Don't get like that, cousin," Kiaari sighed. "All the revenge you'll ever need is getting your people back. Let Dahnai handle the revenge, it's just not a part of you."

"I'm not above a little vengeance, Kiaari."

"I know, but don't let your emotions cloud your common sense, cousin," she told him. "Alright, where do you want this?"

Jason reached over and touched the icon of the file on the screen, then slid his finger to where he wanted it, which placed it there. "That'll work."

They returned to Zaa, who nodded to them. "Very well, let us go, Jason." She reached out his hand to him, and he took it, and in that touch, they shared.

As they walked, with his Imperial guards close behind, Zaa instructed him about how she wanted this meeting to go. He made sure to warn her that he invited the Urumi, but she told him that was actually for the better. She explained how she wanted the information arrayed, and that he would be doing the actual presentation after Zaa explained certain things to them. That didn't bother Jason, for he wasn't afraid of public speaking. She explained how to trample the Urumi ambassador's objections when he raised them, and then told him to make sure not to make any accusations, demands, or requests. He was to let the ambassadors simply hear what he had to say, then communicate it to their governments, no more, no less.

He was calm as they reached the conference room, which already contained 14 ambassadors of 9 different species, who all stood and bowed when they saw Zaa. It was a riot of different appearances, from the slender Sheega to the huge Skaa, and he

greeted them with calm, cordial words when he and Zaa arrived. He waited by the podium while more and more ambassadors entered, bowed to Zaa, then took a seat among the raised rows. The last to arrive was the Jakkan, in his radiation suit to protect everyone else from his radiation aura, who took a seat in the front.

“Alright, we’re all here. I hope there won’t be too much delay for those of you using translators,” he addressed them in Faey.

“We all speak English, your Grace,” the Bari-Bari ambassador said to him. “It would be easier to use it.”

“That works for me,” he said in English. “I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on, so please listen. Denmother,” he said, stepping aside.

“Grand Duke Jason Karinne contracted us to investigate certain matters pertaining to members of his race being abducted and held against their will by House Trillane of the Imperium,” she began. “During the course of this contracted investigation, other information was discovered that impacts everyone sitting in this room. Usually, the Kimdori do not concern themselves with the goings-on of the other governments unless we are paid, but this is a matter too grave to be left alone, and so for the first time we have violated our strictures to bring you this matter. I believe you might understand how serious it is now,” she said, her eyes sweeping across the room. “I will attest right here, right now, that everything the Grand Duke says to you is the truth. This information was either collected or verified by the Kimdori. Continue, your Grace.”

The Urumi ambassador looked a trifle uncomfortable.

“I’m a simple man, your Graces,” he said calmly. “I’m not going to stand up here and throw flowery, elegant paragraphs at you. I’m also very busy right now, so this will be straight to the point.” The lights dimmed as his hands danced over the keyboard at the podium, and an image of an Urumi battleship appeared as a hologram beside him. “The Kimdori have been trying to find the people that Trillane stole off Terra when they occupied it, and that search led them to the Urumi Collective,” he began.

“You have no proof of—“ the Urumi began, but he found himself suddenly against the ceiling, held against it by Jason’s telekinetic power.

“This is not the question and answer segment of the presentation,” Jason said bluntly, looking up at him. “If I hear another word out of you, I’ll drop you on your head. Do I make myself clear?”

“You can’t—“ he screamed, but what Jason couldn’t do was never revealed, because the ambassador’s head impacted the conference room floor, and then he swooped back up to the ceiling.

“Put a sock in it, Ambassador,” Jason snapped at the Urumi, whose eyes were dazed and vacant as he recovered from the stunning impact. “Now, as I was saying, the investigation led to the Urumi, who we discovered were holding my people on Collective planets through an agreement with the Trillanes, where the Trillanes have been using their telepathic abilities to turn my people into loyal lapdogs of the house. While the Kimdori were hunting down my people, they came across this.” The image changed to show the energy being. “This creature is an unknown species to us, but it represents a group called the Consortium. This group has entered an agreement with the Urumi where they’ve been selling them highly advanced weapons and military equipment, which the Urumi have armed on their ships.” The Urumi ship returned to the image, and Jason came over and pointed at it. “Here, and here, and here. I’m sure the ambassadors here have a passing familiarity with most standard weapons, so you can attest that this is a weapon design never seen before. The Kimdori discovered this weapon is called a *dark matter* weapon, firing a stream of dark matter at a target. This weapon makes the Imperium’s MPAC look like a slingshot,” Jason said bluntly. “The data the Kimdori collected about this weapon puts it hand over fist above weaponry used by the common spacefaring governments. The Collective also received armor, shields, and infantry weaponry to go along with this weapon.

“Now, I’m sure most of you are wondering why this matters. After all, the Urumi do have the right to conduct business with anyone they please, and if they’ve managed to make contact with some outside group that sells them superior weaponry, that’s their bonus for pulling it off, and I agree,” Jason continued. “But this matters because, if most of you haven’t heard, the Trillanes of the Imperium are preparing to try to break away from the Imperium, and the Urumi have allied themselves with Trillane. All of this was done for only one reason, and that was to give the Urumi a viable excuse to go to war with the Imperium in a way that wouldn’t draw the other governments into the dispute,” he said, which caused a rumble to roll through the ambassadors. “They were afraid if they just declared war on the Imperium without justification, your governments might fear that the Terran Academy would be threatened and move to intervene.

“This is a direct threat to the Karinnes as well as the Imperium,” Jason said seriously. “After this information came to light, we tightened security here at the Academy, and that unravelled another plot. We intercepted a Terran telepath that the Trillanes and the Urumi smuggled into the Academy who was on her way to Prius, where the Empress is currently on vacation. This telepath is one of the Terrans the Trillanes abducted when they had control of Terra, who they trained and sent back as an agent. We have no idea what her mission was going to be there, since her mind was wiped by the Trillane mindbenders and it’s pretty clear to us she was going to get her orders later on, but it’s a pretty fishy setup, if you ask me. Sending a Terran telepath to Prius, where the Empress is? I think they tried to set us up, since everyone knows that all Terran telepaths are Karinnes. We think that they tried to either discredit us or turn the Imperium against us to keep Karinne out of the upcoming war, so they could completely plow the Imperium under and conquer Draconis before anyone could really do anything about it. But that’s just conjecture and has no place at this briefing, so please ignore it. The fact is we caught her, but since we can’t prove what her intent was, I’ll leave that up to you.

“So, that’s basically it,” he concluded. “That’s why we called you here. We won’t ask for any help or ask you to do *anything* about this, esteemed ambassadors. I only wanted you to know what was going on, and the reasons for the war that’s going to erupt in just a few days. I’ll make a copy of all the pertinent intelligence data the Kimdori gathered available to you so you can include it in your reports to your governments, so they can look it over. Now, are there any questions you might want to ask?”

There was dead silence. The speed of his presentation left them quite dumbfounded, and the Urumi ambassador hadn’t quite recovered his faculties to speak.

“Very good,” he said, putting the Urumi ambassador back in his chair, with surprising gentleness. “I’m glad, because I’m quite busy right now preparing my house for war. So if you’ll excuse me, this conference is over. Good day to you all.”

Jason and Zaa left them in there and marched down the hall, Jason’s guards keeping close pace with them, two in front and two behind. “Was that what you had in mind, Denmother?”

“It was quite acceptable,” she smiled down at him. “You put all the facts out, and now those ambassadors will run back to their offices and inform their governments that the Urumi are armed with superior weaponry and spoiling to get into wars with their neighbors so they may expand. And now the Urumi will have *much* more to worry about, for they have been found out, and now they risk a war with *everyone* should the other governments feel too threatened by them.”

“I love you, Denmother,” Jason chuckled.

“I know,” she said gravely, patting him on the cheek as they walked.

When he returned to the holding cell holding Yana and the girl, he felt a little better. Zaa’s idea to go public with what they had was a master stroke, in his opinion, for it put the Urumi in a major dilemma. If they went to war, they threatened to turn it into a general war through the entire sector, for the Alliance and the Nine Colonies and the Skaa certainly would not be happy with the idea of a technologically superior government that was engineering wars with its neighbors for the sake of conquest, and that eliminated the advantage they gained by buying those weapons from this mysterious Consortium, a group that Zaa was already trying to bring out of the shadows. The Urumi were pulled into the spotlight, and now they had to decide if they were going to back off, or risk a war with everyone in the entire neighborhood.

Yana was seated in the chair when he got there, hands on her face, her eyes closed. He could feel Yana’s power as she probed the girl’s mind, so he remained quiet and hopeful as he waited for her to finish. “There’s no need for that, Jason,” she told him quietly, opening her eyes and looking at him. “I’ve been done for a while.”

“That fast?”

She nodded. “What I had to do wasn’t really that hard,” she said. “The main danger was always going to be the possibility that she would fight back. Well, she was conditioned to submit to Faey talent, and that allowed me to do what I had to do without resistance.”

“What did you do?”

“I removed the conditioning the Trillane mindbenders put in her,” she answered, “but there wasn’t much else I could do, really. Everything about her was erased, and it was done too well to get it back. She can speak, and has a basic understanding of technology and society, but not much else. She can read and write in Faey and in English, she could operate a vidlink, maybe even surf Civnet, but she has absolutely no memory of her past at all.”

“And since she’s one of the abducted, that means Trillane erased all her records,” he sighed. “About all we can do is put her picture on Civnet in the missing persons section and see if anyone recognizes her.”

“I know, but that’s better than nothing,” Yana sighed. “I’ve been triplechecking things. I don’t want to miss anything inside her, Jason. If she’s still carrying some programming, she could do some catastrophic damage when she gets home.”

“Yes, that is why I will have her thoroughly scanned and tested before we release her to you,” Zaa stated from the doorway.

“Denmother,” Yana said, standing up respectfully. “I did my best.”

“I am sure you did, child,” she said evenly. “That could not have been easy for you, so return to the dropship and rest. Jason will be joining you very soon.”

“I wouldn’t mind a quick nap,” she agreed. “That’s always very tiring, and I don’t really like doing it.”

“I’m sorry, Yana. I would have done it, but I had something that really had to get done.”

“That’s fine, Jason. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Yana filed out, and Zaa sat down by the bed, looking down at the girl. The door closed, and the Denmother reached out and put her hand on the girl’s neck. Jason was quiet while Zaa shared with the girl, then she nodded. “Yana was very thorough. The girl is completely purged of all Trillane programming. She is clear for you to take home, Jason. What do you intend to do with her?”

“I really don’t know,” he sighed. “I just feel sorry for her. The next few weeks are going to be very hard on her.”

“Just treat her with kindness. That goes a long way, cousin.” She glanced down. “The sedative has worn off. I will wake her.”

In seconds, the girl opened her eyes. She blinked and looked at Zaa, not with fear, but with wonder. Then she looked at Jason when he leaned over her. “How do you feel?” he asked gently.

“I dinna’ know,” she said in Scottish brogue. “Where am I? Who are you?” She pursed her lips. “And who am I?”

“I can’t say it in any way that makes it easy, ma’am,” Jason told her gently. “But we don’t know who you are. For right now, let me tell you that you’ve lost your memory and we currently aren’t sure how to help you get it back. I’m sorry.”

She was quiet a long moment. “Where are we?”

“We’re at the Academy of Terra. Do you know where that is?”

“Nay.”

“It’s a very large school in America.”

“Where is this America?”

Jason sighed. Yana wasn’t kidding when she said they erased *everything*. All she had was her language skills and working knowledge of certain technologies...but perhaps they could help her there. Telepathy could impart *knowledge* easily, and maybe he could convince Miaari to use her gifts to share what couldn’t be granted with telepathy. “Well, let me just say this. I’m going

to take you home with me. You're a distant relative of mine, but I'm the only family you've got right now, and I'm going to take responsibility for you while you recover. Can you understand that?"

"Aye, that I can ken."

"Good. We live on a different planet from this one, so I need to take you to my ship, so we can go home. Do you think you're well enough to walk?"

She sat up. "I feel fine, uh, what's yuir name?"

"I'm Jason. This furry lady here is the Denmother Zaa, the leader of her people."

"Greetings, child," she said with a nod.

"I get a funny feeling when I look at ye, lady," she said curiously. "And ye too, Jason."

"That's just the proof that we're related," Jason smiled. "I'm afraid we don't know your name, ma'am, so would it offend you if we called you Rahne for now? Until we can find out who you are?"

"Nay, Rahne is fine with me."

"Rahne?" Zaa asked curiously.

"It's the only Scottish name I know," he shrugged. "And she's *definitely* a Scot."

"What is a Scot?"

"Scotland is the country where you were born, judging from your accent, Rahne. The people from that country are called Scots."

"Ah."

"Now, if you'd be so kind as to get up and follow me, my guards are waiting just outside. They'll take us back to my ship."

"Guards?"

"Jason is the Grand Duke Karinne, child, a person of very high stature and importance," Zaa told her. "It would please me if you would listen to him and follow his orders, for he only seeks what is best for you."

"A-Aye, milady, I'll do me best," she said after staring at Zaa for a moment. "If I've truly lost me memory, then I'd only be a smart lass to trust someone."

"That is a good attitude, child," Zaa told her, holding her hand out to the redhead. She took it, and Zaa helped her to her feet. "Now, a certain truth must be made clear to you before we leave this room. Rahne, child, you are a telepath, and that is memory you have *not* lost. Jason," she called, looking to him.

That means you can communicate like this, Jason sent to her.

I—I can do this, she replied reflexively. *What an amazing thing!*

Just one of the many amazing things in store for you, Rahne, Jason sent reassuringly, holding his hand out to her. *I don't know who you are or where you come from, but I can show you who you can be. Would you like that?*

I would like that, very much, she answered, taking his hand shyly.

Just don't get any ideas. I'm married, he winked.

Rahne blushed.

Aya, we're going to the dropship. [Contact the Defiant and tell them we're returning.]

What was that? Rahne sent curiously.

[This is a part of your heritage, Rahne. It's a special way to use your power that only a very few can do,] he explained. *[You can send the same way I am, just think the way you hear me and send it out.]*

[Like this?]

[Perfect,] he nodded. *[This is your first test, Rahne. What we're doing now, it's the most secret of secrets. Until we have time to explain things to you, this is something you can't tell anyone about, alright?]*

[I understand,] she communed with a nod.

“Denmother,” Jason said. “I’ll hear from you soon?”

“I will contact you on your return home,” she told him, standing up. “Take good care of her.”

“I will,” he promised. “She’s family.”

“She is indeed.”

Rahne was going to be just fine.

After returning home to drop her off on the way to Draconis, he introduced her to everyone, and they took an immediate liking to her. Jason handed her off to Jyslin in Kosiningi, who promised to take good care of her. When he boarded the dropship to go to Draconis, Cybi had taken charge of the girl and began communing with her. Jason felt the edges of it, and realized that Cybi was going to use communion to give the girl an education, but he could also feel that Cybi was going through her mind to make *absolutely* sure that neither Yana nor Zaa had missed something and left something dangerous in her mind.

That made him completely comfortable. *Nothing* could hide from Cybi.

Zaa and Jason returned to the *Defiant*, and they jumped to Draconis...and it was quite a shock. The planet was *surrounded* by military warships, and Jason saw with more than a little pride a complement of nearly 30 Karinne warships, almost half his fleet, including the nearly two mile long behemoth that was the *Aegis*. He wasn't larger than the two other capital ships present in orbit, but since he was *his*, in Jason's mind he was the grandest of them all.

They were escorted down to the palace by four Raptor fighters, two from the Empress and two from the *Defiant*, and a complement of Imperial Guards met them at the landing pad. Aya and her squad saluted the other Guards smartly, and Jason was sure they were sending among themselves in greeting, but they also brought Jason and Zaa directly to the Empress' private apartments, Aya carrying a case holding Jason's panel. Kellin was changing clothes when they entered, Dahnai handing him a pair of underwear as he shrugged out of some rugged outdoor clothes he'd been using at the dig. “Jason, Denmother,” Dahnai said, coming up and taking their hands. “I'm home safely, as you can see,” she added with a smile.

“I'm sorry if we scared you, Dahnai, but it was really the smart thing to do,” Jason said. “Thank you, Aya,” he said as she handed him his case. “We've got a lot to talk about.”

“I'm almost crossing my legs in anticipation,” she said with obvious banter. “Let's sit down and you can go over this with me.”

They did just that. Kellin joined them on the couch as Jason and Zaa explained what Miaari had uncovered, and the panel Jason brought held the datafile that had all the technical data they'd collected concerning the weaponry and equipment. "Well, fuck," Dahnai breathed after they finished. "I guess this tears it," she growled. "It's gonna be war."

"No," Zaa said calmly. "There is a way out of this, Dahnai, a way that the Urumi might not understand until it is too late."

"How do you mean, Denmother?"

"Child, the Urumi seek to enter war with you using the Trillanes as justification. Remove that justification. Force them to declare war on you in the name of aggression, which will sway others to your cause when they attack."

"How am I going to do that?" she asked.

"Simple, child. When Trillane declares independence, do nothing."

"What?"

"Do nothing," she repeated. "Allow it. Issue the usual protests, but make no aggressive moves. Make it clear you want to settle the dispute through *diplomacy*, not *force*. Do this, and the Urumi have absolutely no viable reason to attack you. And what is more, it will buy you precious time to research the data we have given you to better prepare yourself for the Urumi when they *do* attack. The weaponry and shields given to them by this Consortium are powerful, but they are not unstoppable."

Dahnai furrowed her brows. "Denmother, that might not work. If I let the Trillanes go, then my empire might disintegrate."

"Not if you explain to the Imperium *why* you are not using military force," she said calmly. "We have revealed this information to every government who keeps a consulate at the Academy, Dahnai. This is now common knowledge. By letting Trillane go, your nobles will not see it as weakness, but as cunning, and they will know that the Faey *must* remain together, must remain united, in the face of the Urumi threat. Any house that tries to break away from the Imperium would be swarmed under by the Urumi before the declaration reached your desk. They will see this, they will know it. They will not try to rebel."

Dahnai leaned back, rubbing her chin in thought, but Kellin put his hand on her shoulder.

"I think it's got merit, love," he told her. "Think about it. You'd be backing the Urumi into a corner by making them risk war with the Alliance and all the others if they come after us."

Dahnai looked to her guards, and all of them nodded silently. She blew out her breath, then she laughed. "That's just crazy enough to work!" she declared. "Denmother, have I told you lately that I love you?"

"It is always nice to hear, child," she said with a slight smile.

"I think that's the way we'll play it," she announced. "I think it's time I made some calls to the Grand Council of the Alliance and the Emperor Sirzza of the Skaa," she said. "They're the ones bordering Urumi space, they have the most at stake here."

"That is a wise beginning," Zaa nodded.

"If you'll excuse me then."

"I will be returning to Kimdori Prime, Empress," Zaa told her. "My work here is now complete, and it is time for the Kimdori to return to their place in things."

"I should get home as well," Jason said. "I have a lot of work to do to get ready."

"Aww, you just got here!" she complained.

“You’re going to be busy, I’m going to be busy,” Jason told her. “We can have a social visit some other time.”

“You never pay me social visits anymore,” she accused.

“I’m rebuilding my house,” he said bluntly. “That keeps me just a *little* busy.”

“I’d say you’re about done, given that fuckin’ huge flagship you have parked in orbit,” she winked. “How’d you build that so fast?”

“Who’s to say it wasn’t built already?” he shrugged.

“Riiiiight,” she drawled.

Jason stood up. “I’ll call you later, Dahnai. I need to be kept up to speed on what’s going on.”

“That’s fine.”

“Are you alright to get home on your own, Denmother?”

“Yes. I will have Jinaami summon a transport to take me home.”

Jason moved quickly to extricate himself from the apartment, even before Zaa, and his four guards followed him as he went back to his dropship. *That was, brief, your Grace.*

I didn’t want to get trapped in there, he answered. *We have a lot to do, and not much time.*

Do you think the Urumi will attack? Shen asked.

They didn’t go to all this trouble to pack up their new toys and go home without a war, he sent grimly. *That much I’m sure of. And now that the Urumi know we know what they’re doing, they might launch an attack without bothering to wait for the Trillanes to declare independence.*

That is a possibility, Aya nodded.

Our only trump card is they have to jump, and hyperspace is our domain, he sent as they left the palace and moved towards the dropship waiting for them. *We’ll know where they are and how long we have. All those hyperspace beacons we seeded through the sector are going to be handy now.*

The hyperspace beacons. At the time, Jason didn’t think much of them, thought they were kinda silly. But now, now he understood why Miaari wanted them. They were seeded through the entire sector, automated devices that lurked in hyperspace, powered by teryon technology, which allowed them to function...and since they were machines, hyperspace had no effect on them. Hyperspace and real space worked in different ways, but by *anchoring* those beacons to positions in real space, bridging them between hyperspace and real space, they operated in the temporal frame of real space, not the temporal frame of hyperspace, but remained in hyperspace, which made them invisible to every scanner, probe, and camera ever made. There were no relativity issues with them, so they reported movements through hyperspace in real time, and now those beacons were going to be critical. If the Urumi jumped their fleet, they would know where they were going and how long it would take them to get there.

At least he hoped to God they would. Miaari made no mention that the Urumi got upgraded *engines* in their deal with the Consortium, and if these Consortium fellows could build hyperspace probes, then they clearly would know how to build jump engines that did not suffer the relativity delay. If they did get those engines, then they’d have no idea where they were going to show up until it was too late.

And they had to plan for that eventuality.

The Urumi knew about Karis, and knew how many ships Karinne had. That put them at a major disadvantage, for Karinne’s

fleet was actually rather small, and would not be able to repel the entire fleet of another civilization.

But the Urumi only knew about what they could *see*. Odds were, they only had a vague understanding of the extent of the automated planetary defenses around Karis, which were rather extensive. Building those defenses was the first project Myleena tackled once they were ready to do it, and she had consulted many military experts to design what she considered to be the optimal system for planetary defense. The defense grid included automated satellite-based weapons, drones, the virtual onslaught of weapons based on Kosigi, ground-based weapons and missiles on the planet, and their trump card, the planetary Teryon shield.

Karis was the only planet in the Imperium that had a planetary shield. It was the first major piece of hardware they built on Karis, a series of 117 shield generators placed at locations around the planet that worked together to generate a shield that protected the entire *planet*, powered by a *massive* singularity power plant that was buried in the mantle of the planet, and had not been destroyed when the Merranes attacked Karis. It only took about two months to repair that power plant to bring it back online, and it was so large and generated so much power that it was the power source for virtually everything on the entire planet. Only Kosiningi was not connected to that power plant, for emergency and security reasons. And because of the sheer size of the shield and the power it took to generate it, the shield was very, very strong.

If they ever raised the shield, it would cause quite a bit of power shuffling. The shield would take all the resources of their planetary power plant, causing their planetary power grid to shift to its backup power, which was a series of singularity plants built on the surface, each responsible for a sector of the planet. Those plants would also be powering the weapons, though, so the civilian power systems would be going on conserve mode.

They were going to be relying on that now.

Raira, 14 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 12 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 14 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Kosiningi Emergency Response Center, Kosiningi Island, Karis

Jason had never had a more nervous two days in his life.

The entire planet was swarming with activity as the Karinne house members prepared for the possibility of an attack on Karis, and everyone was pitching in, even the Parri. The population responded calmly and well to the martial law declaration, for they were people chosen by the Kimdori for their independence and temperament for handling unusual situations. There was no panic, no chaos, no hoarding. People asked what they could do to help, the Karis Guard told them what they could do to help protect the planet...and it got done. And what was more, nearly half of the population started going out and about wearing old or second-hand armor and carrying weapons, showing that if it came down to it, they would *resist* any attempt by a hostile force to invade the planet.

That made Jason unbelievably proud. These people were civilians, not soldiers, but they had used a replicator pattern distributed by the Karis Guard and built armor for themselves, and had checked railguns out from the armories, proving their determination and making Jason almost explode with pride that his people would be so selfless and brave. The Kimdori had chosen most of the civilians in his house to come to Karis, and they had chosen *so well*.

He was going to kiss Zaa again next time he saw her.

Even the Parri were getting involved, which was a shock. The *shaman* had been brought to Kosiningi by her request, and though the Parri wouldn't fight, what she did was perform a ceremony on the island, a prayer and ritual asking her gods for good luck, their blessing, and the strength to see through this crisis to a favorable outcome. Jason didn't believe in her religion, but he wasn't about to make her stop, either.

Things were busy everywhere. Songa, who ran the medical service on Karis, had prepared all hospitals and clinics for possible combat injuries, but was now on the island to personally take up residence in the clinic. If there were any injuries among the Dukal family, *she* was going to be the doctor in residence to treat them. The Kimdori prepared everything as best they could, and then the non-essential Kimdori withdrew with Jason's blessing. They had never been put on Karis to hold Karinne's hand, only to fill holes until Karinne could fill those positions themselves. There were still many Kimdori on Karis, but they were technicians, engineers, people whom Karinne had not been able to replace yet, and they would not fight.

Jason spent most of that time in the vacation house had built there, sitting in front of a vidlink hearing reports, giving orders, and basically overseeing things as the KMS locked down the planet and prepared for war. The automated defenses were brought online and made active, and the planetary shield generator was brought into standby mode, meaning the shield could be brought up in four minutes after it was engaged. The entire Karinne fleet was recalled, and they were staged near Kosigi, ready to respond at a second's notice to any threat.

Things got wild out in the galaxy as well. As Zaa predicted, the other governments had a fit when they found out about the Urumi, and the space between Uruma and everywhere else sizzled with angry communications as the Urumi tried to explain themselves to their neighbors.

Dahnai did her part. She made Trillane's intent to secede public knowledge in an open address to the Imperium, then boldly revealed the Urumi complicity and their deal with the Consortium. Then she declared that she would not attack Trillane with force if they carried through with their plans, but would instead send emissaries to Arctus to try to bargain a diplomatic solution to the crisis, one that wouldn't give the Urumi any opportunity at all to launch any kind of attack that wouldn't be seen as anything but hostile.

The Trillanes clearly realized what was going on, and much to everyone's shock, even Dahnai's, Maeri Trillane requested an audience with Dahnai to discuss the situation that morning, which would be taking place in about a half hour, if he read the clock right. Clearly, Maeri had taken a day to think things through, and realized she was in a *very* dangerous situation here. She was looking at getting caught between an angry Empress and so-called allies that were only using them to try to engage in war.

That set the stage. Now, the ball was in the Urumi's court, and everyone was basically waiting to see what they did. The Skaa and the Alliance had not yet made any public declarations about what they would do if the Urumi declared war, but from what Miaari told him, they were *very* angry, and *very* worried about this new Urumi aggression.

He couldn't help but pace. What was Maeri going to do? He should have gone to Draconis, he should have been there, but it was just not a good time. He needed to be here, he needed to make sure his people were going to be alright. He glanced out the window, and saw his Gladiator standing on the grass near his house. Inside that black exomech was Sergeant Myka, and three other Gladiators stood nearby, part of the personal retinue of defense for the Grand Duke and his family, standing silent guard with railguns in their mechanical hands, watching as the kids played tag out on the field. That was just one example of what was going on in his mind. His kids were being defended not just by the Dukal guards, but by Gladiators, with Raptors circling the island defensively and the *Aegis* sitting in synchronous orbit right over the island, visible to the naked eye in the daytime sky high overhead as a bright white spot in the red-tinted sunrise.

He made another circuit in his study, then went down the hall and went into the bathroom without knocking. Jyslin was there with Rann, both nude as she was both bathing their son and getting a bath herself, in a Faey tub, which was very shallow and rather long. There were two tubs in a Faey bathroom, a shallow basin tub for washing, which included a shower, and very deep tub for soaking and relaxation. Rann was giggling as Jyslin washed his hair. They'd just gotten up not long ago, and part of the ritual in the Karinne house was the morning bath... which usually involved all three of them. "Did you sleep at all, love?" Jyslin asked. Since Rann's birth, they spoke aloud for his benefit, both so he could understand his parents and also to help him build his language skills.

"Not really," he answered as Jyslin dumped a large bucket of water over her son's head, which never failed to make him squeal and laugh.

"Well, why don't you join us? You could probably use a bath, and it might help you relax."

Jason sighed, then nodded. "I'm so tense right now you could bounce a credit off my back," he admitted.

He undressed and joined them in the wide, shallow basin, with water that only came up to his shins, then sat down beside his wife and helped her finish cleaning Rann up, rinsing the soap off of him. She then turned and began scrubbing his back while

Rann ran around on the soft tiles of the bathroom floor, then climbed over the side of the soaking tub and splashed in. It wasn't over his head, but it did come up to his neck. He put his hands on the side and watched as Jyslin both washed Jason and helped him relax, her sensitive hands and her talent guiding her as she soothed his knotted muscles, and her presence calmed his whirling mind.

"Where were you last night, Daddy?" Rann asked.

"I was making sure everything's all good to make sure the planet is safe, son," he answered. "It's one of the jobs I have to do as the Grand Duke."

"Oh. Will you be done soon?"

"God, I hope so," he breathed. "How was the picnic?"

"Oh, we had lots of fun!" he said excitedly. "Kyri fell in the water, though. You shoulda heard her yell!"

"Why would she yell?" Jason asked curiously.

"The water is cold here, Jason," Jyslin told him. "Colder than at Karsa."

"Ah, that'd do it," Jason chuckled. "You know, I've never gone swimming here. I didn't know that."

"It's not that bad, but it is a bit chilly when you first jump in," Jyslin added, dumping water over his back to rinse off the soap. "There's some good waves on the south side, though. Iliia's been teaching people how to surf."

"I wondered what they were making at the replicator that was so big it couldn't come out in one piece," he chuckled. "What kind of board did she make?"

"Foamed silicon," she answered. "With lots of air pockets to make it bouyant."

"Wow, that's pretty clever," Jason said appreciatively, as Jyslin turned him around, and he had to take a moment to admire his wife's nude form. She gave him a light smile when she saw where his eyes were going.

It's nice to know my husband still loves to ogle me, she sent impishly.

It's such a lovely body to ogle, he sent in reply.

You know, I can think of something else that might help you relax, she sent, her thought tinged with desire.

I'll certainly be taking you up on that later, but right now I need to be available if something sudden comes up, he answered with a little regret.

She put her hand on his cheek, then leaned in and kissed him lovingly. *Whenever you want, love, whenever you want.*

"Ewww, stop kissing!" Rann demanded. "That's icky!"

"Is that so, little man?" Jyslin said archly, standing up. "Then it's time to make my Rann all icky!"

Rann squealed with delighted laughter as Jyslin invaded the soaking tub and smothered him in kisses as he squirmed and struggled. Jason lathered up his hair and watched as his wife continued to torment their son with kisses, then she laughed and threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. Then she winced. "Rann honey, take your foot out of mommy's crotch. That hurts."

"Sorry mommy," he apologized.

“What’s going on out there right now?” she asked him.

“Right now the Trillanes are having a conference with Dahnai, or they’re about to,” he said. “That’s what’s got me so nervous,” he admitted as he rinsed his hair, then reached for the shampoo. “What happens in that conference is going to influence everything else. If the Trillanes break away, then it’s all on the Urumi. If they back out, then who knows what’s going to happen. It’s just a big headache,” he groaned, dumping a bucket of water over his head, which made Rann laugh when he spat a stream of soapy water out of his mouth.” He stood up and moved to the soaking tub, and while Jyslin massaged his shoulders, he sat Rann up on the lip of the tub and started drying his hair with a towel. Jason found it hard to concentrate on that when Jyslin leaned up against his back and put her arms around him, feeling her breasts pressing up against him in a very sensual manner, that triggered a response out of him that he was glad Rann couldn’t see.

You’re really pushing it, aren’t you? he sent with wry amusement, conveying just what he was feeling on his back to her.

She laughed. *I wasn’t doing that on purpose,* she assured him. *Do you want me to move?*

Yeah, I do. He pulled her into his lap, which made her gasp and laugh, then she made a cooing sound when he put his hand on her breast and fondled her in a very intimate manner. *There, that’s much better.*

You are such a tease! she accused, then her eyes widened slightly, and she grinned at him. *Oh, baby, now I know how much you care,* she sent, wiggling her hip against his erect penis. *Let me do something about this big problem you have down here, baby,* she offered, assaulting him with graphic sexual thoughts.

“Rann.”

“Yes, daddy?”

“Go dry off and get some breakfast,” he told him, setting him on the floor. “Your mommy and me want a little private time.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Can I have pancakes?”

“You can have pancakes,” Jyslin said to him, then she started nibbling on Jason’s ear in a highly erotic manner that never failed to get his undivided attention. *How much time do we have?*

Not much. Ten minutes, maybe, Jason answered as Rann ran out of the bathroom without a towel. Jason wasn’t too worried, it wasn’t the first time he’d run naked through the house. Ayuma would corral him and sort him out.

Not a problem, she sent lustfully as she slid a leg over his lap and straddled him, her hand sliding down to gently hold his genitals. *I think we can both manage to come in ten minutes. And if I don’t, well, I can always just get you off then go see Tim. What matters is what you need right now, baby. And there’s something down here that needs my attention.*

Ten minutes was a very short period of the day, but it was inevitable that no matter how little time he allowed himself a little good old fashioned physical pleasure, life was going to find a way to interrupt at that exact moment. As he and Jyslin had sex in the bath, right as he was about to climax, there was a sudden and loud knock on the door. *GO THE FUCK AWAY!* Jyslin sent angrily, gripping his shoulders as she did nothing more than try to make him climax as quickly as possible, but she suddenly stopped when the door opened despite her angry warning, and Miaari entered.

“Miaari! A closed door is closed for a reason!” Jyslin snapped at her. “We’re busy!”

“You can finish mating later,” she said brusquely, without batting an eye. “This is important.”

“I don’t think I can,” Jason said breathlessly. “It just doesn’t work that way with us, Miaari. Wait for me in the study. I can’t stop now.”

“You must. This cannot wait.”

“It’s going to have to,” he said adamantly. “Give us a couple more minutes.”

“Very well. But be quick,” she said.

“We might have been done by now if you hadn’t bothered us!” Jyslin growled. “Really! Can’t we get five minutes alone?”

“Less talking, more finishing,” Jason said urgently as Miaari backed out the door and closed it.

“Finish. Yes, finish,” she agreed, lunging down and giving him a hungry kiss.

After they did indeed finish, Jason marched into the study wearing a towel and carrying his clothes. Miaari was sitting in the chair by his desk patiently. “I think you really pissed Jyslin off, Miaari,” Jason told her, pulling the towel off and scrubbing it through his hair, trying to get his breath back. “You might want to apologize after she cools off.”

“I would not have disturbed you if it were not important,” she said defensively.

“I know, but she was—well let’s say she was being very accommodating to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She didn’t orgasm,” he said bluntly. “She knew we didn’t have much time when we started, but I was in the mood. It was all about her giving me an orgasm. She didn’t manage to orgasm herself because you barged in and she knew we were out of time. She’s all hot and bothered now, so she’ll probably go track down Tim and have sex with him so she can orgasm,” he explained, and he didn’t feel self-conscious at all about using such language about something so intimate with her. He was very close to her.

“I apologize for that.”

“Eh, she’ll be alright once she gets off,” he shrugged. “Now what happened?”

“Hyperspace sensors have detected a large-scale jump out of Urumi space, Jason. They are on the move.”

“Where are they going?”

“Their fleet is jumping to three locations, Jason. The first is Arctus. The second is Draconis.”

“Where’s the third?”

“Here. They have jumped an attack fleet to Karis, Jason. They are coming.”

“Well, fuck,” he sighed. “How long?”

“They have staggered their jumps so they will all arrive simultaneously at all three locations in six days,” she answered. “the Arctus attack fleet numbers 73 vessels. The Draconis attack fleet is 385 vessels. The force coming here is 184 vessels.”

“Did you warn Dahnai?” he asked, putting the towel on his shoulders.

She nodded. “I still have her on the vidlink, and she wishes to speak to you,” she said. “Shall I wait for you to dress?”

“She’s seen me naked before,” he shrugged.

Miaari chuckled and went over to the panel, then activated the holographic emitters on the far wall. A rectangle appeared, like a panel monitor, and Dahnai’s face appeared within it. “*Well, I think I pulled you out of something important...or out of some important girl,*” she said with a wink. “*Your dick has that freshly fucked look about it, babe. You’re still half hard.*”

“This isn’t the time to be nasty, Dahnai,” Jason said with a slight blush. “Did Miaari tell you what she just told me?”

She nodded. *“The sizes of those fleets are going to help a lot, but as you can imagine, this is not going to be pretty. I barely have the forces to repel what’s coming at Draconis. The Urumi didn’t hold anything back, babe. They’re sending everything. They don’t even have any ships left to defend their own planets. And with them set to all arrive at the same time, we can’t move reinforcements to shore up any one point. I’ll have to divide my forces and slug it out with them.”*

“Do you think you can manage it?”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be touch and go, but I think we can repel them. I just finished a little chat with Maeri Trillane, and she’s decided that she doesn’t want to declare independence after all. I think that might be what caused the Urumi to launch, since they lost the Trillanes...and they’re sending a fleet to Arctus to punish Maeri for backstabbing them. So, I have the Trillane fleet added in with the rest of the Imperium for defense. Black Ops is going over the specs you sent, and they might have some hot fixes by then. If not, well, we outnumber them five to one shipwise. We can overwhelm them with sheer force of numbers so long as we fight near the planet, so the planetary defense grid can add to it. Miaari said they’re attacking you too, and you may not be able to help us. Is that right?”

He nodded. “They’re sending nearly three times as many ships as I have,” he admitted. “It’s going to be ugly. But despite that, I’m going to send a cruiser and three destroyers to Draconis and Arctus. They’ll help you. We analyzed the Urumi’s weapons, and our ships can stand up to them. You’re going to need that kind of defensive option to help you.”

“Babe. Jason. Do you need reinforcements? If so, then don’t send those ships, and I’ll send you what I can.”

He shook his head. “We have the same situation you do, hon. As long as planetary defenses assist, we should be able to repel them, so I’m willing to lend you those ships. They help me by helping you. You *are* rather important to me, hon, and I’d rather not see that pretty ass of yours parked in an Urumi prison.” He grabbed the end of the towel on both ends and held onto it. “Did you tell the other governments about this?”

“I just got this. I’ll spread the word as soon as we’re done. If we’re lucky, they’ll declare war on the Urumi and help us, but I’m not going to depend on that.”

“We can always hope,” he said.

“Well, let me get to work here, babes, and let you get back to whichever lucky girl it was you were fucking,” she said with a little leer.

“We were just finished,” he said dryly. “Besides, after this news, I’m not sure I’d be in the mood anyway. I’ll dispatch those ships to you by the end of the day your time.”

“If you think you’re going to need them, hon, please, don’t hesitate to call them back. I don’t want you to risk the safety of your house over this.”

“We should be alright, Dahnai. Right now, the safety of *all* of us is what matters.”

“If only we could all think that way,” she sighed. *“It truly does say much of you that you’re willing to send ships to help Trillane. I’m not sure if Maeri will kiss you or curse you for it.”*

“She can decide after we beat back the Urumi.”

“Amen. I need to go, hon. Please, give me some way to contact you.”

“I’ll call you in a while with a number you can use,” he told her. “In the meantime, I’m going to be busy.”

“I will too. Talk to you soon.”

Dahnai's image dissolved, and Jason could only sigh. Well, now they knew what the Urumi were going to do. There was no doubt that it was meant to be a surprise attack, but now that surprise was going to be on the Urumi. The hyperspace beacons had ferreted them out, and now they knew exactly when they would be here. But Jason wasn't so sure they left their territory as undefended as Dahnai believed. He'd almost bet they had defenses there, they wouldn't gamble everything on this attack. If it failed, then the Urumi would be annihilated when they were invaded on all sides by the Faey, the Skaa, and the Alliance.

The door opened, and the generals all started to file in, though Myri pulled up short when she realized Jason was nude. *We shoulda knocked*, she apologized. *But Miaari summoned us and said it was urgent.*

"What the fuck, come on in," he said with a sigh as he walked over to the desk and pulled his underwear from the wad of clothes he brought in with him.

"Well, I must say, your Grace, you've made an old woman happy," Navii said with a naughty grin as he pulled on his underwear.

"Keep that happy feeling, Navii," Jason grunted. "You're going to need it."

"That sounds like it's on," Myrii said grimly.

He nodded. "Miaari just brought me the news. We have six days to prepare."

"I have a ship count of 184 vessels en route to Karis," Miaari said. "I cannot give ship classes in that, however. The hyperspace sensors are not quite that refined."

"Well, we knew it might come to this," Navii grunted.

"Three to one odds...that's not quite an even fight with our planetary defenses added in," Juma noted. "We have a tactical advantage."

"Not quite. I want two cruisers and ten destroyers deployed to Draconis and Arctus, half at each planet. Dahnai is going to need them. The Urumi have also deployed attack fleets there."

"Still, we can afford to give up twelve ships of those classes," Juma surmised after thinking a moment. "And since they have sufficient armor and shields to resist these Urumi weapons, they'll be very useful to the Imperium."

"That's why I promised them to Dahnai," he answered.

"We'll be ready, your Grace," Juma assured him. "I have all naval forces at ready, and now that we know they're coming, we can prepare some extra surprises."

"What kind?"

"Mines, your Grace," she answered. "We took a page out of your old Legion playbook, I think the human expression goes. Myleena designed some very effective mines for us, and we can build about a thousand of them in five days. We know where they're coming from, so it's just a simple matter of spreading them through the most likely jump destination points and in the path they have to take to reach Karis."

"That should work," Jason nodded. "Ground forces?"

"They're ready, your Grace," Sioa answered.

"I want to evacuate most of the civilians to hardened shelters," he said.

"Most of the civilians have enlisted in a defense militia," Sioa told him. "I'm deploying them to areas that need additional protection."

“You don’t need all of them.”

“Of course not, but they’re going to be very helpful defending critical tactical assets, like our power plants and our communication nodes. I had to hold a lottery about it.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone wanted to go,” she told him. “The winners get to serve in the militia.”

Jason chuckled humorlessly. “Usually people don’t want to be drafted.”

“Well, being in house Karinne isn’t about being *usual*.”

“Well said,” Navii grinned.

“Alright, is there anything else we need to talk about right now?” he asked. “So I can get dressed and make some vidlink calls.”

“Not really,” Myri said. “We’ve been ready for this for quite a while, Jayce. Now that we know they’re coming, there’s not much more we have to do except wait.”

“And that’s the hardest thing,” Juma grunted.

Chapter 4

Vesta, 19 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 17 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 19 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Kosiningi Emergency Response Center, Kosiningi Island, Karis

He was dead tired, but he was just too nervous, too worried to sleep.

Jason paced in the room where Cybi's mainframe was located. This was the most hardened, most heavily defended building on all of Karis, and this was where Jason would be stationed during the battle. From here, through communion with Cybi, Jason would observe the battle, able to see everything via the innumerable cameras and sensors scattered around the planet and in various orbits. If anything looked out of place, which he could identify thanks to the tactical naval combat knowledge imparted to him by the Kimdori, he'd warn the general staff. He would also play his own part in the battle, for he had unique abilities that would allow him to directly contribute in a way the Urumi could not defend against.

The KMS was on standby right now, with only about 25% of the personnel on active duty. Everyone else was off duty but still on alert, letting everyone get some sleep and some rest before the battle. The hyperspace beacons close to Karis had detected the incoming fleet, and now that they were closer, they had a more precise timeline for their arrival. They'd exit hyperspace in— Jason looked at his watch for the third time in ten minutes—exactly 17 hours and 37 minutes, *if they exited where Navii predicted they would*. If they entered normal space further out, then it would be shorter, but Navii had predicted that they would come out of hyperspace as absolutely close to Karis as was possible to minimize any attempt to intercept them on the way to the planet, and that was the reference point that Myleena used to calculate how much time they had.

But, since they didn't know *exactly* where that was, what Juma had done was deploy the fleet in an arc along that line facing the physical direction of Urumi territory, with just a few ships stationed at the far side of the planet in relation to the Urumi's course. It was certainly possible for them to jump in on the far side of the planet from Urumi territory, but Kosigi would be on that side of the planet along its orbital track. That would take Kosigi and its armory of weapons out of the battle, but what it *did* do was put Kosigi in a position to cover the far side of the planet should they do that. Kosigi's weapons could bombard the surface of the planet from its orbital track if it was necessary, so no matter where the Urumi appeared behind the planet, if they did do that, they would be in range of the surface-mounted weapons on the artificial moon. Kosigi would give the Urumi one hell of a surprise, and make them scramble around in confusion until the fleet could get there.

That was the shock they'd get after the mines hit them. The arc of closest entry into normal space from the planet was seeded with mines, as was the approach to the planet. They only had about two thousand of them, but those mines were actually more like missiles, and they would lock on to any hostile ship, then explode just outside their shields. The mines weren't conventional explosives, they were torsion mines, and those explosions would create a spatial shockwave that shields and armor could not stop, which would deal spatial damage to the ships.

Cybi had an image manifested, and it floated alongside him as he paced back and forth. The last five days had been busy, on more than one front. The first matter that had taken up his time had been the virus they'd put in Rahne. It had taken Grevix a while to manage to make it activate, longer than he thought, and what they discovered from that didn't surprise Jason *too* much. Rahne was definitely meant to be an assassin, but it wasn't the Empress she was sent to kill.

Her target was *Kellin*.

That made just about everyone's eyebrow raise. It would be much more useful to the Urumi to kill the Empress...and if she could get close enough to kill Kellin, then she was close enough to kill Dahnai. Killing Kellin might unhinge Dahnai, but it wouldn't do much else, and upsetting the Empress wouldn't really do much from a military point of view, since the Empress didn't command the military. That's what her command staff did. It really just didn't make much sense. The only reason Jason could think of was that it was personal somehow, but that wasn't Maeri's style. Maeri was a cold, unemotional woman that didn't let her grudges get in the way of her ambition. She wouldn't throw away a perfect opportunity to kill *Dahnai* just to kill her husband.

The means by which Rahne was to kill Kellin was also surprising. The Urumi had trained Rahne, not the Trillanes, and that training revolved around her telekinetic powers. Rahne was trained to kill with her telekinesis, stopping the heart. That training had been excised out of her by Cybi when she came across it during the girl's education, but in something of a grim twist, Cybi taught *him* how to do it, so he had a powerful defense if he ever came under personal attack. It wasn't easy, that was for sure. Telekinesis was very visually keyed. If he couldn't see what he was trying to move, it was much harder to move it. So, trying to affect someone's heart was *extremely* difficult. The trick of it, he'd learned from Cybi, was *knowing it was there*. That was a very critical distinction, one that required him to memorize detailed anatomical holograms to come to intimately know the layout of a human or Faey's upper body. Using that memorized knowledge of the layout of the internal structure of a human or Faey, Jason could attack the organs within without being able to actively see them.

It was a use of telekinesis that Jason had never considered, but it was utterly undetectable. To kill with telepathy left telltale traces in the mind of the victim, damage to the brain. Even taking control of someone and making them jump off something or drown themselves and such also left a trace behind that could be detected in medical scans. But to kill with telekinetic power left no trace behind. Rahne had been trained to be the ultimate assassin.

His people. That was one of the conditions demanded by Dahnai when she met with Maeri. All his people Trillane abducted were on Arctus now, *all* of them, and one of the conditions by which Maeri could return to the Imperium without losing her house was she had to give them back. When this was over, he'd recover all the people they'd taken. It was going to take a long time to remove the Trillane conditioning from that many, but it would be worth it. Those humans would help Trillane defend Arctus in the coming battle, what they were *trained* to do, but after that they would go home.

That was just one of the conditions. Maeri would be recovering from this for *years*, because Dahnai was pissed at her, and Maeri really had no choice. She had thrown her lot in with the Urumi, but their duplicity gave her nowhere to go but crawl back to Dahnai and beg to be let back into the Imperium. If the Trillanes were thrown out, they'd be conquered by some other government...maybe even the Urumi themselves, since the Urumi had done nothing but try to use them to conquer the entire Imperium. It was no stretch to think that the Urumi would backstab the Trillanes and attack them after they had control of Faey planets, or perhaps use political pressure and threats to force them to join the Collective once the Imperium was conquered. Maeri would be paying some pretty hefty fines, and had probably lost any allies she had in the *Siann*, which basically sealed Trillane's fate in a political sense. Trillane was scorned and despised now, without allies, without friends, and their political clout in the Imperium was dead. They were a Highborn house, but if Trillane *ever* sat on the Imperial throne, it would be a miracle.

It wasn't about breaking away, oh no. The other Highborns could admire Maeri for her boldness to try to forge her own empire. It was about allying with the Urumi and then putting the Imperium in this mess, where they now faced a fleet with superior weapons that, if the Imperium defeated them, would severely cripple the Imperial fleet. The Faey had a five to one advantage over the Urumi, but the Urumi had weapons that would make that basically an even fight. When planetary defenses were added in, the Faey had an advantage, but the battles would weaken the Faey navy.

The *fucking* Alliance and Skaa. They refused to help. They'd done the math too, they realized the Imperium could beat back the Urumi, but at a cost of most of their fleet, which would leave the Imperium in a vulnerable position...which might very well be what this entire attack was about, as far as he was concerned. The Urumi had to know they were at a disadvantage as well, but they were coming anyway, and that led Jason to believe that there were more dealings going on than they could see, or the Kimdori had discovered.

But the battle wasn't fought yet. The Urumi, like every other race around, were vulnerable to talent. The Imperium and the Karinnes both utilized a rather effective tactic when fighting non-telepathic races, and that was to put highly trained telepaths in

fighters. Naval ships didn't get close enough for the Faey to attack with talent, but fighters *could*. Those mindstrikers, escorted by other fighters, would try to get close enough to enemy ships to attack the crew with talent. Given the right combination of tactics and luck, a single telepath could cripple enemy battle plans by disrupting ship operations of the right ship at the right time. It was a battle-tested tactic that was very effective, and that was the main reason why most other governments maintained large fighter complements and anti-fighter weaponry, to prevent a telapath from getting close enough to disrupt things.

That was also why the Faey always had the most cutting-edge fighters, in an era of massive ships and large-scale naval combat. It was also why the the Trillanes hadn't used fighters against Jason when they attacked Terra...because it would have been a moot point. The only reason other governments employed fighters was because of the Faey, to try to destroy telepaths before they could get close enough to do any major damage. A Faey telepath could attack a single pilot in a fighter and not do much in terms of the overall battle, but that same telepath attacking the captain, helmsman, or gunners of an enemy battleship *could*. Fighters weren't very effective against naval vessels except in the Imperium, because of the plasma weaponry they employed. So other governments had a *vested* interest in stopping Faey fighters, both because of the telepaths and because the weapons on the fighters were shield-piercing and could do damage to naval vessels.

Armed combat with the Faey was *much more* than just shooting at each other, for the greatest weapon the Faey possessed wasn't technology, it was telepathy.

He too was going to use that tactic, but Jason himself was a weapon, and he would be used as one. When in communion with Cybi, he had the ability to use the biogenic relays all around the planet, and that gave his telepathy a *massive* range. When the time came, if the Urumi broke the planned line of defense and approached the planet itself, Jason would be striking at the Urumi with his own talent, and doing it from behind the safety of a planetary shield. It wouldn't be quite the same, since he could only really use communion effectively through the relays, but if he really focused, he could do what Yana did when they rescued the Legion, blast noise through the Urumi that would make it hard for them to think, like bullhorns going off inside their heads. Now *that* would be within his capability, since it was a very simple trick. The main difference is that Jason would have his power boosted by Cybi, so that would let him reach far out from the planet to do it.

Jason paced in circle around the primary core of the round chamber, his earth shoes making very little sound, hands behind his back as he worried, and worried, and worried some more. The lives of his people were at risk, and some of them were going to die tomorrow. That pained him. He was personally involved in the lives of many of his military people. He attended every graduation ceremony. He attended every promotion ceremony. He had attended every christening and flag transfer ceremony of his ships except for one, and that was the *Steadfast*, and only because he was on Draconis at the time because of the Urumi mess. He attended marriages, childbirths, and the initiation ceremonies of Trelle for every child. He knew most of the officers in the KMS *personally*. He was intimately involved with his people, and knowing that some of them were going to die for him was both very humbling and very painful.

No. He couldn't let that lie.

He stopped. "Cybi," he said aloud.

[Yes, Jason?]

"Have them ready my dropship. I'm going out."

[Where are you going?]

[I'm going to the Steadfast. I didn't attend its christening. I need to talk to Jeya.]

[I will make arrangements.]

Twenty minutes later, a quiet, grim Jason Karinne was on a dropship with his four guards, escorted by four Raptors, en route to the newest destroyer. The ship, being the newest destroyer off the line, was attached to the *Aegis* escort task force, one of the skirmish ships that both supported and protected the behemoth. Jason was quiet, and his guards were also silent, in full armor, helmets on, and their pulse weapons armed and ready. Aya was unhappy that he wasn't in armor, but he didn't want to waste the time to put it on. As usual when it was Jason, he flew the dropship himself, with Aya in the copilot's chair and Shen, Suri, and Ryn in passenger seats behind. Because of the upcoming battle, fighters were thick in space around the ships, flying patrols, and they would come up along and escort his flight of ships through their patrol areas and then hand him off to the next patrol.

He arrived in the landing bay some ten minutes after taking off, landing lightly near a throng of about fifty uniformed crewmen. Unlike any other Faey military, both men and women served on naval vessels in combat roles, and there were more than just Faey. Nearly 35% of the KMS was human, both male and female, and his military had integrated with their non-telepathic elements very well. So when he opened the hatch of his dropship and stepped down to their coordinated salute, he saw Faey women and both male and female humans staring back at him, saluting him. Jeya and her command staff of nine officers, one of them a human male, stepped up and saluted him sharply.

“Permission to come aboard?” Jason asked in the ages-old naval ritual.

“Granted, your Grace,” Jeya smiled. She was a Lieutenant Commander now, promoted when she was given command, and she looked quite smashing in her Captain’s uniform and her shocking pink hair. Nobody in that landing bay was wearing a Class A; Jason’s visit was too abrupt. They were wearing their daily duty uniforms, which was Crusader armor for all humans—whose armor helped cover for their lack of ability to use an interface—and anyone in any job that might expose them to danger, and duty uniforms for bridge crew and support personnel, like cooks and such. When the time came for battle, though, *every single member of his military* would be in a Crusader armor system, even him. That gave every one of his people a personal suit of armor that might help them survive if their ship was damaged in combat. *If you don’t mind my asking, why the sudden visit?*

I didn’t get to attend your promotion ceremony and the christening, he sent apologetically. *I didn’t want to jinx your ship.*

She gave him a light smile. “Well, would you like a tour, your Grace? I know this is the first time you’ve been aboard.”

“Among other things,” he told her.

Jeya took him on a tour of the ship, showing him every major section, from engineering to the galley, from the bridge to the entertainment center. He shook hands with the crew, received some kisses from both Faey and human women, and was even given a few cards, presents, and little trinkets, including a little stuffed bear to give to Rann. His guards carried the gifts, for he kept things like that out of respect for the givers, but he decided to keep the teddy bear himself, carrying it like a child in the crook of his arm. He was introduced to Jeya’s command staff in a private briefing after the tour was over, then he went back to the bridge with Jeya and addressed the ship via intercom.

“This is Grand Duke Karinne,” he began. “First off, I’d like to apologize for not being there for the ship’s christening and the flag ceremony. I was on Draconis at the time, and things were rather messy and it was impossible for me to get away. Now, that being said, I’m here to make up for that. No ship in the KMS serves that I haven’t personally toured, and now I’ve taken care of that little oversight. I’m sorry it took so long for me to get here, but I’ve been a little busy, and worried the last few days.

“I know you’ve been briefed on what’s coming. The Urumi have weapons and shields that’s going to turn this into a real battle, not the usual trouncing the KMS expects to dish out on everyone else because of our advantages. But, we still have an advantage, and we have a good command staff. I have every faith in my people to serve the house faithfully and well, and I believe that we’ll prevail. All I can say to you is that I’m sorry it’s come to this. I promised you when you signed on that I’d do everything I could to keep you from ever having to fight. I tried to prevent this and failed, and I can only hope you’ll forgive me for it. But since we do have to fight, all I can ask is that you do your best, watch out for your shipmates, and let’s all pray that we get through this together.

“Now, since I wasn’t here for the christening ceremony, I’d like to kinda have a second one. It just doesn’t feel right to not christen a ship, so let’s kinda wing it here. First off, as you know, the first captain of a KMS ship is given the right to name that ship. This ship was designated *Steadfast* in drydock as its interim name, and since I wasn’t here for the christening, for some reason Captain Jeya didn’t exercise that option. But, I’m here now, so let’s go ahead and get that done. After the battle, we’ll give the captain the privilege I kinda robbed her of,” he said with an apologetic smile at her. “So, Captain Jeya, what will it be?”

“It’s bad luck to rename a ship after he’s been christened,” Jeya told him with a wink. “I think *Steadfast* is an excellent name. I’d rather not change it.”

“Alright then. I *officially* declare that the KMS *Steadfast* is commissioned for active service, with Captain Jeya Denalle commanding. May he serve long and well,” he said, patting the captain’s chair.

The bridge crew applauded, and Jeya took his hands and kissed him on each cheek. “What are your orders, Captain?” Jason asked her with a smile.

“Let’s see. Why don’t we beat the shit out of the Urumi tomorrow, then have a party to celebrate our victory?”

Jason laughed. “Those sound like my kind of orders,” he told her. “I knew we put a good captain in this chair.”

“You’re not done yet, your Grace,” she teased. “Sit.”

He did so, sitting in the captain’s chair, then he stood up and offered it to her. She sat down in it, leaned back, and crossed her legs. “Alright, now that the Grand Duke’s ass has warmed this chair, it feels *right*,” she said as she wiggled her bottom in the chair, which made Jason laugh delightedly.

“I’m not sure how warm it got since I wasn’t in it very long, Jeya,” he teased.

“It’s the principle of the matter, your Grace,” she said primly, which made him laugh again.

Aya gave him a stern look. She *did not* like him out of a hardened facility, and she was making it clear she wanted him back at Kosiningi, where he was well protected and heavily guarded.

“Yes, mommy,” he sighed as he looked at her. “My nursemaid wants me to go back to Kosiningi now,” he told Jeya.

“She’s right,” Jeya said simply. “This isn’t the time for you to be roaming around, your Grace. I do truly appreciate your thoughtfulness in coming to see us, but now that you’ve unjinxed my ship, it’s time for you to get back to where you’re safe,” she said with a smile. “We all love you, and we’d be devastated if you got attacked, or hurt, just because you came to see us.”

“That’s nice to say, Jeya,” he said as she stood up.

“It’s the truth,” she shrugged. “You’re much more than a Grand Duke to *us*, your Grace. You care about us, and we care about you. That’s why we’re willing to fight for you. We *believe* in you.”

Jason put a hand on Jeya’s shoulder, leaned down, and kissed her fully on the lips. Jeya squeaked in surprise, then kissed him back, and not very chastely. “I believe in you too,” he told her, though everyone on the whole ship heard him, because the intercom is still on. “*You* are what makes Karinne great. Not me, not our technology, not our history. If not for you, the wonderful people of this house, this house would be no better than any other. It’s more of an honor than you’ll ever know that you allow me to serve you by being your Grand Duke.”

“We would follow you into hell, Jason Karinne,” Jeya breathed, looking up into his eyes.

“Well, let’s hope we don’t really have to go there,” he said with a grin, which made Jeya blink and recover herself. It seemed to him Jeya had something of a crush on him, going by that kiss.

Aya herded him back to the dropship, and he put them on a course back to the island. Aya was staring at him the whole time, and he kept glancing at her. “What?” he asked irritably.

That one would do more for you than follow you into hell, Aya sent naughtily.

I noticed, he sent dryly.

You’ve been tense for days now, Jason, she sent more familiarly. I think it’s about time for you to go home and rest, she told him. There’s nothing more you can do, and if you keep stewing on it, it’s going to wear you down before we even start the battle. So when we get back, you’re going to go home, get something to eat, and spend some time with your family.

I’ll be alright, Aya.

I wasn’t making a suggestion, your Grace, she sent formally. I was telling you what’s going to happen. You can fight with us about it all you want, that’s fine. But in the end, you will do as we say, because you know we’re right, and we’re only looking out for you.

Don't start pulling rank on me, Aya, Jason sent with a little amusement.

We were charged with the defense and well being of the entire family of a future husband of an Imperial Princess, Aya told him flatly. That includes your health, your Grace, and you're not doing your health any good by brooding and not getting any sleep. They're going to need you at your best tomorrow. Don't let the house down, Jason.

Jason knew a dirty blow when he saw it, and that was dirty, he trying to attack him through his loyalty to the house. *I take it you're going to insist?*

Yes.

And here I thought I was the Grand Duke around here, he sent ruefully.

Sometimes even the Grand Duke needs people to tell him he's pushing himself too hard, Ryn sent seriously. That is one of the reasons we're here.

You guys are as bad as Meya and Myra, he sent sourly.

We'll be sure to tell them you said that when they get back from the nebula, Shen teased lightly.

The nebula. Meya, Myra, and 14 others were at Nebula GF1848, aboard the *Scimitar*, which had been restored to being a true scout ship and was now trying to retrace its course, to try to find out what happened to the Karinnes who had been aboard it. Nobody really held any hope that they'd find any descendants, but they certainly had to try, they had to look for them. They'd only been gone for two weeks, and were due back in another two. They'd wanted to return after Cybi told them what was going on, but they were busy, and 16 more Karinnes and an unarmed scout ship weren't going to make much of a difference, so Jason told them to continue with their mission.

I miss those two, Jason sighed.

I'm sure they miss you too, Aya sent. But I'm sure Jyslin doesn't miss them.

Jason laughed. *Jyslin didn't mind them. She knew they were just playing.*

Jason, if you were my husband, I would have been angry.

You're possessive, Aya, Jason told her. Jyslin isn't. The games between the twins and Kumi go way back to when they were her bodyguards. I was just helping them score another point.

I certainly wish I could have gotten a copy of that vidy, Suri sent impishly.

The recorder wasn't actually recording, Jason told her. And Jyslin knew what we were doing. They asked her for permission before they set it up.

You mean there's no vidy? Suri sent in surprise, then she gave one of those silent laughs, a laugh with no voice, a wheezing sound. Kumi tore Karsa apart looking for something that didn't exist? Oh Trelle's garland, that's classic!

That was the idea, Jason sent lightly. The twins wanted to record it, but I didn't want a vidy of the Grand Duke Karinne having sex with a set of twins floating around on Civnet.

So, was it any good? Shen asked mischievously. Men have these fantasies about twins, you know.

We didn't actually have sex, Shen. It was fake. Kumi couldn't tell from the angle she could see when she walked in the room. All she could see was me on top of Myra. She couldn't tell we were faking it.

I'm very disappointed in those girls, Shen sent seriously. They get you naked and between their legs, and they didn't even try

to get you inside them?

MeYa and Myra have great discipline, Jason sent dryly. Besides, they've never asked, I've never asked. The three of us just don't seem inclined to take it there. They have their boyfriends, and I have my wife and Symone.

And Dahnai, Suri added.

And Dahnai, Jason agreed.

How long did it take Kumi to get over that? Ryn asked.

About six days. She didn't talk to the twins for almost a month. She accused them of stealing her idea, that was what she wanted to do as revenge for what I did to her.

Oh, I've never heard about that. What did you initially do?

It was long ago, when I first fled from New Orleans and into the nature preserve back on Earth, he related as they entered the atmosphere. Kumi demanded a nude picture of me as part of the payment for delivering some stuff to me, back when she was in Trillane. Well, I found out she showed it around to her friends, and that got me a little ticked. So, when Symone came to join us, we did basically what me and the twins did to her. When she delivered the stuff to us, we pretended to have sex right in front of her to get her horny, then we just stopped. At that time she didn't know I was a telepath, so what I was doing while me and Symone was pretending was leaving my thoughts unguarded, and thinking of the nastiest, kinkiest, dirtiest things I could think of. So, I get off Symone and I come up to her, like I was gonna have sex with her, then I just stop. Then we left. It was like a hammer on her.

All four of them erupted into silent laughter. *Oh Trelle, you got her horny, then you just stop?*

We just stopped dead, he nodded. She realized we were pretending, and she had a meltdown while we were leaving.

So that's what the whole business with you rebuffing her for those months after we first got here were about?

Yeah, he affirmed. I was still punishing her for showing that picture of me around. I did that to her for like two years, then I finally showed mercy on her. But after I gave in, she lost interest. After all, for her it was always about what me and Symone did to her, and she wanted to have sex with me just to make me carry through with all those things I was thinking at her when we did it to her. So, when the twins were getting her back for whatever it was Kumi did to them, it was like the sequel of what me and Symone did to her, but this time with the video equipment she always wanted to have when she finally got revenge on me. That was her thing, you see. She didn't just want sex, she wanted to record it. Well, she never got that recording, so it was like a tweak of her nose to see me and the twins and that viddy camera. She screamed for two days, Jason sent with a fond memory of that prank.

Oh Trelle, we never saw this side of you before! Aya sent with great enthusiasm, and a newfound respect.

Well, I try to act more, you know, Dukish, he told them. But every once in a while I have to let the inner spoiled brat out. The twins and Kumi let me act like a teenage asshole from time to time, and it keeps me happy. They keep me young. We're all good friends who are more than willing to do all sorts of things with each other, and to each other, to keep the jokes going.

This is a new side of you, your Grace, Aya sent with amusement.

Well, I have all these responsibilities now, he sent soberly. I love to play, but you know, sometimes I just don't have the time.

Well, if you ever need any partners in crime, just let us know, Shen told him. The Imperial Guards adore games like that. And I for one would be more than willing to lay naked under you so you can play a joke on someone.

Shen, that's not professional! Aya chided. *Well, I wouldn't either, but still, remember who you are!*

You are such a fraud, Jason sent to Aya with vast amusement.

Jason, you have no idea what goes on behind closed doors at the palace, Aya winked. The Imperial Guards are very formal, very disciplined, and very professional, but we need release too, and practical jokes are one way we keep our perspective. We love jokes, just like any Faey.

Faey, as a race, were very...jokish. They didn't mind jokes, even when they were the butt of them. Jason remembered his battle with Jyslin's Marine squad so long ago, where they seemed to enjoy his tricks, even when he did it to *them*.

Aya leaned over and put her gauntleted hand on his shoulder. *There, now, do you feel better now that you haven't been obsessing over things?*

Actually, I do, he admitted freely. *Thank you girls, you did make me feel a little better.*

That's why we're here, your Grace, Shen sent seriously.

They returned to Kosiningi, and with the four of them basically pushing him from behind, he returned home. He decided that they were right, he needed a little calm before the coming storm, so he sat in the living room and read Rann a story, then played a game of Candy Land with Kyri, Aram, and Zach, then just sat in front of the vidy for about an hour watching *Terra TV*, which was showing an episode of *Bounty Hunter*, an action series about a Faey bounty hunter and her human partner who was a computer genius, who hunted down bounties across the galaxy...proof that Earth really had fully integrated into the Imperium. The star of *Bounty Hunter* was a Faey actress who was pretty famous in the Imperium, Zayn Mahdane, who got wooed into contract with 20th Century Fox to produce two movies and a TV series. Both the movies, *Fatal* and *The Chronicle* were blockbusters, and Zayn Mahdane was the hottest star in Hollywood right now because *Bounty Hunter* was the biggest show on TV on Earth and one of the most popular shows in the Imperium, so big that Terra TV bought rights to simulcast the show Imperium-wide.

Of course, that was the family friendly Zayn Mahdane. Zayn, like many Faey actresses, also did porn, but unlike the Terran movie industry, the Faey movie industry didn't differentiate between porn and non-porn, because of the peculiarities of the Faey culture and its very open and permissive views on sex. A Faey actor did "dramatic" roles and sex roles, which were the classifications in the Faey system. Not every Faey actor did work on the porn side, but many of them did, and if you wanted to be a full-out Faey movie star, you *had* to work on both sides. True, there were successful actors who dedicated themselves to one side or the other, but they were a small minority compared to the biggest names in Faey acting, who all did work on both sides of the line. Zayn Mahdane was no exception, but she was much better known for her porn work than she was her dramatic work. Her breakout in Terran entertainment had catapulted her to the level of blockbuster star, proving she was just as good a dramatic actress as she was having sex on camera.

The reason why a star had to do both sides was because of the popularity of porn in the Imperium. The Faey treated it just like regular entertainment, and it was a *huge* industry. For an actor to get maximum exposure—sometimes literally—he or she had to be well known, and one of the ways an actor gets that kind of exposure was by doing what was currently popular. And in the Imperium, porn was just as popular as dramatic acting. Porn stars were treated like humans would a Hollywood movie star in the Imperium. Not every porn star had the acting skills to be dramatic, but the vast majority of dramatic actors were good enough actors to be successful porn stars. And the large numbers of dramatic actors that did porn gave Faey porn actual plots and good acting, which was a major difference from human porn.

Zayn Mahdane was Symone's favorite porn actress, but that was her flavor of the month. And to Jason, it was weird seeing her with her clothes on, because Symone, like a vast majority of Faey women, enjoyed watching porn, especially before sex. It got her really going, and made her a wildcat in bed. *The Chronicle* was the first work Zayn starred in he'd seen that wasn't porn.

That was one thing that made Faey different, he supposed. In Faey culture, porn wasn't taboo. It was wildly popular and watched by both men and women, with a porn industry that had a yearly profit margin that would make a Highborn house jealous; hell, some noble houses, like the Trefanis, were heavily invested in the porn industry. Symone was a porn junkie, and she was proud of it. She owned a huge library of porn of every legal type (and a few illegal ones), but her library was *nothing* compared to Kumi's. Kumi collected porn as seriously as a human might collect coins or stamps, with some of her collection being very rare or hundreds of years old, as well as every kind of porn one could imagine, from the most erotic you'd ever seen to things so disgusting they'd make you puke. Pictures, holograms, videos, viddys, paintings, sculptures, you name it, Kumi had it. Walking into her house was like walking into the history of sex. And it was all carefully catalogued, with some of her rarer and most valuable pieces even insured against damage like a work of art.

And Jason's picture was in that collection. She kept it in a frame on the wall facing her bed, enlarged to the size of a movie poster, and she always loved to joke that it was always right there and ready for her when she wanted to masturbate, so she had something to look at that would get her horny.

And that picture was why he still pranked her from time to time. So long as she wouldn't let it go, he was going to continue to get her.

Jyslin, Tim, and Symone came in and flopped down on the couch with him, and saw he was watching TV. *I'm glad you're taking it easy, Tim* sent seriously. *You've been so tense the last couple of days. Not that I can really blame you, that is. I've been pretty worried too.*

I know, but Aya basically forced me at gunpoint to relax a little.

Well, she was doing the right thing, Symone agreed. *Is that Zayn Mahdane?*

Yeah. I'm watching Bounty Hunter.

She looks better naked, Symone scoffed.

You know, Symone, what's with this thing lately about women? Jason asked.

I've been curious, she answered honestly. *Curious enough. Last night, I tried it with Jyslin.*

Jason looked at Jyslin with some surprise, but she just smiled and nodded. *I've been a little curious too, she* admitted. *I mean, she's right there when we group with them. I finally decided to see what it was like to touch her on purpose.*

Well, don't expect me to get curious about Jason, Tim announced adamantly.

The women laughed. *No, human men aren't like that, Symone* agreed.

So, was it good? Tim asked curiously

Good enough to try it again, Symone answered, and Jyslin nodded.

At least after we got over being nervous and having no idea what we were doing, she added.

Shit, ain't that the truth. We weren't very good at it, she admitted with a laugh. *I swear, I felt like a titless virgin. I was kneeling there, staring at Jys' pussy, and saying to myself, "okay, I know I need to lick her the way the boys lick me, but I never really watched when they go down on Jys...so how do I do this and not look like an idiot?" I look up at her, she looks at me, and says "Shit, Symone, I don't have any idea how to do it either. Just wing it." Jason had to blurt out in laughter at the image of that, and Symone smacked him on the shoulder. Why don't you try kneeling in front of Tim and wonder how you suck a cock, Jayce?* she demanded archly.

No thanks.

Coward. Anyway, I floundered around a while, then we calmed down and took a break, then tried again. It went better. Jys actually got me to come, she sent with a little pride. *Now that we won't bite each other's clits off by accident, we want try some threesomes.*

We've done threesomes before, Jason stated. *We did one just last week with Jys, and me and Tim did a threesome with you just a few days ago, Symone.*

Not when me and Jys would do it with each other, she amended.

Oh. I wouldn't mind that.

Me either, Tim agreed. *A lot of human men have fantasies about doing it with two women that way.*

Yeah, I've heard about that, Jyslin sent with a smile at Tim. *It wasn't bad though,* she added, leaning over Jason and touching Symone on the waist fondly. *You're going to have to teach us to do it the right way, boys. We need some practical training. It took me like nearly half an hour to make Symone come.*

Well, I sure as hell didn't mind her trying, Symone sent with an audible laugh. *I got to lay there and get licked, and it felt good while she was learning.*

That sounds like it was terribly one-sided, Tim sent blandly.

No, it wasn't. Symone went first. While she was down there trying to figure out what to do, I was laying there with my legs spread, and all I could think was "holy Trelle, right now there's a girl down there licking my twat, and when she's done I'm gonna do the same thing to her," she sent ruefully. *I was really nervous, but I was enjoying it towards the end, once Symone figured out what she was doing. We stopped to drink more wine, and when we started again, it was my turn. I was calmer by then, and the wine was getting to me a little, she admitted, and I was able to perform. For the strangest reason, I found doing it much less nervewracking than having it done to me. Isn't that odd?*

It was probably the wine, Tim teased.

Possibly. Now that that awkward first time is out of the way, though, I have to admit. I don't feel too nervous at the idea of a second try.

Me either. So...talking about it has me up for another try, Symone sent, her sending saturated with sexual innuendo, as she reached over and slid her hand up and down Jyslin's leg. *Want to watch us, boys?*

Actually, want to show us what the hell to do? Jyslin asked. *You can teach us how to do it the right way, then we can thank you properly,* Jyslin sent with a dirty image under her thought.

As fun as it sounds, I think I'm going to have to take a pass, Tim sent. *You mind flying solo, Jayce? I'm still working through those reports Miaari sent me. I'm just taking a break.*

Well, Aya wanted me to relax, Jason sent wryly. *And I could never say no to my two favorite ladies.*

Good, you can show me how to make Jys come, Symone sent brightly.

That's easy, Symone. You just take your dick out, get it up, stick it in her, slide it out, then repeat as necessary.

Symone and Jyslin exploded into laughter.

That. Was. *Unbelievable.*

Jason drifted awake some hours before dawn, and saw that it was still eight hours and some change before the Urumi arrived. Jylin and Symone were sprawled on top of him, tangled together, and all he could do was dreamily reminisce about a very sexually charged, very erotic, very intense evening.

One thing was for sure, and that was those two were *not* nervous about their second time. It was an intensely erotic thing, he admitted, basically teaching his wife how to perform oral sex on another woman, then *watching* her perform oral sex on his *amu dorai*. Then teaching his *amu dorai* and watching her perform oral sex on his wife, basically watching the two women in his life go down on each other.

God, that was *erotic*. He never thought he'd get so excited, so aroused. He'd seen lesbian sex acts on porn tapes before, but he'd *never* been that excited by watching it as he had last night. He'd had sex with both of them at the same time before, but it was nowhere near the same. Before, they wouldn't touch each other, and he had intercourse with them by turns, but that time they were touching him and each other with equal fervor, performing sex acts on each other in addition to him, and it was one of the most erotic experiences of his life.

He blew out his breath when he felt his penis twinge at just the memory of it, and forcefully pushed it out of his mind. There was no reason to get himself hot and bothered when there was nothing he could do about it. They were asleep, and he wasn't going to bother them. Besides, he'd been out of communication for nearly eight hours, and he needed to talk to some people and find out what was going on. The fun—*God* was it fun—distraction was over, and now it was time to get back to reality.

He moved carefully to extricate himself from the girls without waking them, and he just had to look down at them and marvel at their beauty and the memory of what they'd done last night. Jyslin murmured and reached out, found Symone, then pulled her close and snuggled up against her back, an arm draped over her. Symone sighed and rolled over on her back towards Jyslin, who threw a leg over hers and gripped her shoulder with the hand already across her body.

God, they were *beautiful*.

But it was time for the unpleasantness. He grabbed a robe and pulled it on but didn't belt it as he used his interface to call Myri. He didn't get Myri, though, he got Admiral Shey Zibanne, who was Myri's primary aide. She was like Navii, a retired Imperial Navy officer who specialized in tactical naval combat, and she assisted Myri in that regard on top of being a fantastic administrator. She ran Myri's office, and that office ran with perfect efficiency.

"Where is Myri, Shey?" he asked in a low voice, belting his robe.

"Asleep, your Grace," she answered, and Jason quickly turned the volume down. "It's three in the morning."

"Heh, and I looked at the clock," he grunted. "I guess I'm too worried to go back to bed. What's our status?"

Our status is the same as it was when you retired with your wife, your Grace," she told him with a gentle smile. "The fleet is deployed and at the ready. All planetary defenses are online and ready. Hyperspace beacons are tracking the Urumi, and thus far they are exactly where we expect them to be, and they'll be here in eight hours and seventeen minutes. The planet is under martial law, but no instances of unrest or disturbances have been reported. Everything is quiet, your Grace, as it should be. As far as the KMS goes, the personnel are on standby right now so they can get some sleep and be ready for tomorrow, though I doubt that everyone is sleeping. I would hazard to guess that quite a few are working off some nervous energy right now," she said with a quirky smile.

"So I'm a bad boy, I admit it. You caught me sleeping with my wife," Jason shrugged, which made her laugh.

"I must confess, I'm also a bad girl. I finished doing that with my husband some hour or so ago," she said freely. "Faey women are, anxious you might say, before combat, and we always seek out our men when we feel that way. They calm us down, burn out the nervous energy, and help us focus on the battle to come so we may do our best. A night with your husband before a battle reminds you just what you are fighting for," she said pointedly. "And it bolsters you to be the best soldier you can be."

"I can't argue with that," he said, glancing behind him. He'd fight tooth and nail against a *giruzi* for those two women laying in his bed. "So, is that about it?"

She nodded. "I suggest you go back to bed, your Grace. Rest if you can, and we'll brief you fully in the morning, when the General Staff is back on duty. But I'll be sure to call you if there's any change."

"I appreciate that, Shey."

"I know you worry for us, and that makes us feel very pleased with you as our Grand Duke, your Grace," she told him simply. "I am sure that Maeri Trillane or Semoya Dorrane wouldn't bat an eye over the well being of their troops."

"May God strike me dead if I *ever* do that," Jason said with total conviction.

"And that is exactly why we follow you, your Grace," she said to him seriously. "You worry for us, so now let us worry *for* you. Go back to bed. Rest. If you can't, wake up her Grace and have her put you to sleep in the ways only a woman can."

"I think I kinda wore her out," Jason said with a slight smile.

“Wake her up and find out how wrong that statement is,” Shey challenged with that same quirky smile. “Now go to bed, your Grace. We’ll still be here in the morning.”

“Alright, Shey,” he sighed. “I’ll check in later.”

“I will be here.” Her image vanished as she cut the transmission from her side, quite pointedly.

He went over and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the clock. Eight hours and fourteen minutes until the Urumi arrived. Eight hours, fourteen minutes, and sixteen seconds.

Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen.

He blinked and scrubbed his face with his hands. If he was going to sit there and count every second, he’d drive himself crazy before he got to six hours. He looked back at the girls, and realized there was no way he was going to be able to go back to sleep.

Take off that robe and get back in bed, Symone sent softly, to avoid waking up Jyslin.

I can’t sleep, he answered. *And you should go back home. Tim’s probably lonely.*

Tim’s still in his office working, she answered, opening her eyes and looking at him. *You know something?*

What?

I’m totally spoiled now. I just hope it’s just as intense with Tim as it was with you.

Tim’s braver than I am, I’m sure he’ll live up to your expectations, Jason admitted, since it was the truth. Tim was *much* braver when it came to their sex lives, more curious, more willing to try new things. *And I’m the one that’s spoiled, honey. That was—just wow.*

I’m so glad you liked it, love, Jyslin sent gently, as she stirred and raised up a little, looking up at him. *We did it for you.*

Pardon me?

We knew you were tense, nervous, and upset, Symone told him. *We know how hard this is on you. We wanted to give you something very special, something to completely take your mind off today. We knew you had a secret fantasy about us like that, so we decided to give you that fantasy, give you something really special. So, did you like our little present?*

That’s a stupid question, Symone. And how did you find out?

Tim told us. He was in on it with us, Jyslin confessed. *That’s why he backed out last night.*

Why that dirty bastard, he promised never to say anything, Jason growled, then he laughed audibly. *I don’t know if I want to punch him in the nose or give him a hug for being so thoughtful and understanding.*

Well, it may have been done for you, but I really enjoyed it, Jyslin sent honestly. *After we got over being nervous, that was fun.*

I’m, well, girls...I don’t know what to say. You did that just for me?

Just for you, love, Jyslin told him.

Just for you. I hope you don’t mind that I started really getting into it, though, Symone sent, which made Jason laugh.

That just made it better.

Oh, that's nice, then. We need to work on a few things, though, she sent, giving him a critical look. *Really, hon. You've had sex with us for years, and you pop seconds after burying the bone in me? I was totally floored. I think I bit Jys somewhere girls really don't like to be bitten, I was so surprised.*

You did, she sent with an accusatory undertone.

He blushed a little. *I was looking at the most erotic thing I'd ever seen in my life, Symone. I'm sorry. I made up for it, though, didn't I?*

I'll have to think about that, I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive you yet, she sent with an outrageous grin.

He just needs more practice, that's all Jyslin sent with a wink.

I think we can give him some more, Symone sent, reaching down and carassing Jyslin's butt, then sliding her fingers down out of sight, which made Jyslin's breath catch a little. *And if he's too tired, well, he can always watch.*

No, he's not too tired, Jyslin sent with a giggle as the front of his robe rose noticeably. Symone and Jyslin both reached over and untied his robe and pulled it open. *Now get over here,* she commanded huskily.

He had to admit it.

He *loved* those two women.

It said a lot about them, really. That they would be willing to do something like that just so he could fulfill a secret fantasy, something he'd *never* bring up, well, he wasn't sure that was something *he* could have done.

Tim, though...first Jason was going to punch him, then he was going to shake his hand.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, staring at the clock. 6:23:47am. They'd managed to keep his mind off today for another three hours and two minutes, so he was looking at 5 hours, 9 minutes, 37 seconds until the shit hit the fan. Symone was in the shower, and Jyslin stirred, sat up, and then wrapped her arms around him from behind, kissing his neck lovingly. *Good morning,* she sent with a playful tilt. *Happy birthday.*

Jason had to laugh. *I think I've burned up every birthday, Christmas, and New Year present I was due for the next ten years,* he told her. *Jyslin, I love you.*

It was nothing, hon.

Yes, it was. You've never had a single homosexual thought in the entire five years we've been married, and you go and do something like that just for me. I can't tell you how honored I am..

Well, I've had a couple, she admitted, *when we threesome with Symone. I've caught myself wondering what it would be like to be with her while watching you make love to her. You know, touch her and be touched by her. So I wasn't entirely repulsed by the idea when she brought it up. She didn't have any problems at all,* Jyslin sent, a bit jealously. *All the problems we were having at first were because of me. She was very patient and very gentle.*

Symone is Symone, love. She's hard to shock, harder to control, and you don't really want to do that anyway.

Demir's sword, no, Jyslin agreed impishly. *She's been having those kinds of thoughts for a while now, and she's been acting on them the last couple of months.*

Yeah, Jason realized. Now that I think of it, she's been awfully...grabby with you lately. Grabbing your butt, squeezing your tits, and I saw her stick her hand in your panties last week. There was something different about it. I've seen her grab all kinds of things on you during threesomes in play, but it never seemed, well, sexual, even when she'd grab your pussy. She was just playing, being herself. But when she stuck her hand in your panties, it was like she was being sexual.

That was both teasing and her acting on some impulses she's had lately, Jyslin corrected. I noticed it and was just laughing it off, but I think that's when I started thinking about it. So, when all this Urumi shit started and you got so tense, she came to me and told me about your fantasy, and I agreed to do it. I'm not unhappy about it. I did really enjoy it, and I'd like to explore this and see where it goes.

Well, be careful, he told her. If you and Symone have some kind of lover's spat, it's gonna disrupt things.

Oh, Jason, don't be silly, she sent with an audible laugh. If you didn't know, this is kinda normal. Me and Symone have had intimate contact for years, sharing our men, doing threesomes, so on and so on. We've reached a point where we're getting sexually attracted to each other, because of your attraction to us. This kind of thing happens among telepathic women, because of all the sending we do. I've gotten to where your attraction to Symone has imprinted on me, and I'm developing attraction to her too. It's not too much of a shock to me. Like I said, this does tend to happen between couples who have been together a long time.

I didn't know that.

It happens often enough for it not to be a big deal, she told him. And it's not entirely permanent. If your desire for her changed or faded, it would change in me as well. My attraction to her is actually based on your attraction to her. And it might just fade on its own, you never know.

Why doesn't that happen to me and Tim?

Because you're men, she answered. Men are wired much differently than we are. This kind of thing is very rare in men. Anyway, if this fades on its own and I decide I'm finished with girls, we'd never punish you two for what's between us. We'd just go back to the way things were...though I think Symone would keep at me in her own way. She's much more interested in me than I am in her. For one, she's not as straight as I am, and she never has been. For the other, she's a much weaker telepath than we are, and the attraction you and Tim have for me has really embedded itself in her.

What would happen? She'd still be trying to have sex with you? He looked back at her, and she nodded. What would you do?.

I'd let her, she sent with a shrug, which slid her breasts against his back sensually. I'd be done with sex with her, but it doesn't cost me anything to lay there and let her do whatever she wants.

And if she wants to sit on your face?

We'd have to negotiate over that part, she sent primly. But I don't think it's going to be an issue. The idea of Symone sitting on my face gets me excited right now. As long as it gets me excited, I don't see a problem with it. Symone will just have to keep me interested in her...and if you didn't notice, she's very good at that kind of thing.

Too true, he agreed. Symone could make a rock horny.

Symone sauntered into the bedroom, with a towel wrapped around her wet hair, but not wearing much of anything but a grin. Morning, lovers, she sent with utter contentment. So, how do you feel?

Worn out, Jason answered, which made her laugh. But, besides that, thank you, Symone. I really, really appreciated it.

No prob, baby, she grinned.

Jason stood up. Well, ladies, as much fun as this has been, I'm afraid this is pretty important day. Let me get a shower, and then we need to get moving.

Move over, Symone sent, sliding into bed with Jyslin, sitting on the edge. Now what was this I heard about you letting me do whatever I want?

We were talking about what might happen if I wasn't interested in you anymore, Jyslin told her. I was explaining what happens when two women have been sharing husbands as long as we have.

Yeah, I figured. I'm just glad it happened to you too. I was really nervous, cause I wanted to have a go at you, and I wasn't sure if you'd slap me.

I almost did a couple of times, Jyslin admitted. When you stuck your hand in my panties and tried to finger me, I almost slugged you.

I couldn't help it, she sent honestly. The last month or so, it's been all I could manage to keep my hands off you. That's why I kept wanting threesomes. I wanted you naked in bed with me, so I could steal feels while you were busy with one of the boys.

Why didn't you say something?

I didn't want to risk changing things between us, she admitted. It's not just us, Jys. If I pissed you off, well, you might stop letting me see Jason. I was afraid if I admitted I was having lesbo thoughts about you, you'd back away from me. It took Tim telling me about Jason's fantasy for me to work up the nerve to break the idea with you.

Well, you don't have to hold back now. And you've got your work cut out for you to keep me interested enough in you to fuck you, Jyslin challenged.

It's going to be such a chore keeping you horny, Symone sent wickedly as Jason picked up a towel, then she leaned back and laid back across Jyslin's legs. Care to help me armor up?

Sure, honey, Jyslin agreed. You can help me when I get out of the shower, think I'll go jump in with Jayce. Where's your armor?

Tim brought it last night. It's downstairs. I'll go get it. She got up and went out the door without bothering to put anything on, but that wasn't anything new or different in this house. Jason's house was a Faey house, and public nudity was perfectly acceptable within his home. Symone and Jyslin weren't the only ones that tended to wander the halls naked. Jason had caught Ayuma more times than he could count as she raided the fridge in the dead of night, naked as a jaybird, and Surin had a habit of going down to the laundry room naked so he could wear what was in the dryer. Then there was the fact that back home in Karsa, Sheleese tended to go everywhere naked...that girl was a born nudist. The truth was, Jason was the only one that really didn't wander the house naked at some time or another during the day. He was so conditioned to put on a robe or some shorts or something before going out, it was automatic.

Jyslin joined him in the shower, so they scrubbed themselves clean, he helped her wash her thick auburn hair, and they took turns drying each other off when they were done. Symone had her armor scattered all over the bed when they came out, and Jyslin helped her sort through it. I should have paid more attention when they gave us this armor, Symone admitted. I haven't practiced with it as much as I should. I'm sorry for being a pain.

No problem, hon. You're not really a soldier anymore, you know.

I'm not anything anymore, Symone admitted. I'm a housewife. Tim's on Miaari's staff doing whatever he does.

He's an analyst, Jason told her as he pulled his armor out. He goes through the information that Miaari brings him and tries to puzzle out the truth. He's very good at it. Miaari tells me she'd be lost without him.

You spend all your time studying engineering with Myleena and Jason, Symone sent, looking at Jyslin, but I kinda don't do anything.

Well, pick something you want to do, tell me about it, and I'll set it up, Jason told her cheekily as he stepped into the codpiece of his armor.

I'll have to think about it. Okay, so we start with the bottoms. Which part's next?

The door opened, and Rann, Kyri, Aran, Zach, and Sora ran in, all of them naked. Ayuma was behind them, wearing a frilly see-through robe that really didn't hide anything at all, and behind her was Ilia, Sheleese, Min, Yana, and Zora. All of them were already armored up. "Daddy, mommy said you have *armor* just for us!" Sora said breathlessly. "Where is it? I wanna try it on!"

"Woah there, pumpkin," Jason laughed. "It's over in Cybi's bunker. You're going to put it on there. So go get dressed, all of you."

"Aww, I wanted to wear it *now*," Rann sulked.

"I can see that," Jason told him, eying his naked little body critically. "Now go put on your jumpsuit. Ayuma, can you make us some breakfast?"

"I already have it in the oven, your Grace," she told him calmly, picking up Kyri. "I'm making breakfast burritos."

"Oooh, I love burritos!" Kyri squealed.

"Then come with me, kitlings," Ayuma called. "Let's get you in your jumpsuits and get some breakfast, then we'll go once your father's ready."

Ayuma herded the children out, and the ex-Marines came in. Yana started helping Jason with his armor, while the others started helping Jyslin and Symone. *So, you manage to get any sleep last night?* Zora asked.

Some, after I wore them out, Symone sent with a dirty tilt to her thoughts. Then again, that's why I was here. I didn't want Jason to have a nervous breakdown, so we were keeping him busy by giving him something new. He said it was the hottest night of his life, she sent smugly.

She's good at distracting me, Jason agreed blandly.

It sounds like I'm gonna be dredging for gossip, Sheleese grinned as she held up the backplate of Symone's armor and helped her lock it to the breastplate, then she put it over her head and settled it on her shoulders.

Wasn't much to it, hon. He had a secret fantasy about two women who'd touch each other, so me and Jys gave it to him.

Oh, that's all? That's not so big a deal, Sheleese sent, a little disappointed.

This from the squad's bi, Zora taunted. It's a big deal to us straight girls. It would take something pretty big to make me stick my face between another woman's legs.

Jason was worth it, Symone declared.

Was it any good? Sheleese asked, giving Jyslin a sidelong glance.

That's not your business, Jyslin sent primly.

Cheater.

I need to call in to Shey and see what's going on, Jason sent as he looked at his panel's monitor as Yana helped him lock his breastplate and backplate together around him. She didn't send me a single status report.

Myri gave orders for no one to bother you unless it's an emergency, Min explained. We all saw how stressed out you were yesterday, so Myri didn't want anyone disturbing you. You needed some rest.

I swear, this is starting to sound like a conspiracy.

When your sanity's at stake, yeah, we'll plot against you, Symone told him.

Alright, alright, I get it, he acquiesced. I love you guys too.

After the girls helped them get into armor, they went downstairs. Nine kids were around the kitchen table, his five and four from the squad. Lyn and Bryn's girls, Meza and Zin, stood next to burly Yon, who was the son of Myri, and beside them was Sheleese's daughter, the mischievous Irri. Jason greeted them all when he came in, both his kids and the children of the other Marines, and took the plate Ayuma offered him while she took his gauntlets. There were no chairs in the kitchen, so they all stood and gathered around the serving table. The kids were all chattering excitedly, because to them this was not something to be afraid of. It was almost a game to them, something new and different.

If only he could feel that way about it.

"What's the plan, Jayce?" Sheleese asked.

"Not much of one. Everyone stays in the bunker until it's over. Did they stock it?" he asked Ayuma.

She nodded. "Everything on the list, your Grace. I doublechecked this morning before the kids were up."

"Good."

Jason hurried everyone along and into the bunker. The Kimdori had heavily reinforced the control building holding Cybi, and done some extensive remodelling and construction around the underground compound beneath it. The bunker was now a shelter for the children and the important people in Jason's life, as well as the emergency command center. Myri and her command staff were already inside, and had been since they had confirmation of the Urumi attack.

The bunker was separated into four sections. The first section was the command section, where Myri commanded the KMS from within a heavily armored facility to protect the chain of command. The second section was the hardened storage facility, where the most important objects and computers were held that contained items and data that they absolutely could not afford to lose. The third section was the living area built for the Grand Duke and his extended family, and that was the mothers and the children, Symone, Ayuma, and his guards went once they finished the five minute elevator ride down into the bunker. Jason didn't go with them, though. He went to the fourth section, the core holding Cybi's mainframe. He entered the circular room and found a single chair sitting by the biogenic core, a chair for him, waiting for him. He sat down in it as Cybi manifested her hologram, and she floated around the chair and in front of him. *[Is all ready, Jason?]* she asked.

[We're ready. Let's do it.]

[Very well. Commencing core evacuation.]

And so, Jason Karinne rode with Cybi as the CBIM executed its most serious task, and that was to evacuate the core that *was* Cybi into the upper mantle of the planet itself. He felt it in his stomach as the room began to descend after several heavy *clangs* that heralded the shaft below opening and the clamps releasing. The room descended for nearly fifteen minutes, for it descended rather slowly compared to an elevator, and then the whole room shook as they hit the bottom, and the fifteen separate sets of heavily reinforced blast doors and ten independent teryon shield pods in the shaft above activated, placing a powerful barrier between the core room and any possible attack coming down the shaft from above. Cybi put a ghostly hand on his shoulder, and three separate holograms appeared before him, three windows into the activity above. The left window held Myri's face. The center window was a three dimensional representation of Karis and all Karinne military assets, represented by dots, triangles, squares, and flashing stars. The right window currently showed the living room of the bunker holding his family, where his wife, Ayuma and Surin, Symone, and the ex-Marines were helping the children dress in the armor he had made for them, an additional layer of protection to keep them safe. They couldn't see him, but that window wasn't for them. It was for him, so he could *see* his wife, *see* his children, *see* his *amu dorai*, and know they were safe.

"I'm in position, Myri," Jason said as he gripped the arms of the chair in his gauntleted hands. "Time?"

"A little over two and a half hours," she answered. "The Urumi are right where they should be. The fleet is going through

drills right now and making sure everything is operational. We had a breakdown on one of the defense satellites on the expected combat side of the planet, but the techs are on the job right now and they estimate it'll be back in operation in thirty minutes. The mines are all in place and are waiting to be activated. There's not much to do now but wait," she admitted.

"God, I hate waiting," he sighed.

"That's life. Are you ready?"

"*All biogenic relays are operational,*" Cybi said aloud. "*I have full coverage. When the time comes, his Grace will be able to use my network to attack the Urumi with his talent. But the range of the attack will be fairly limited. The Urumi will need to be within the second perimeter for him to affect them.*"

"Good. We're counting on that, if they break the outer defense," Myri nodded.

"Cybi, bring up Dahnai," he asked.

After a moment, a fourth window appeared in front of the other three, and Dahnai's face appeared. She was wearing armor, for some strange reason, and in what looked like a command center. "Dahnai, how are things on your side?"

"Right now on schedule," she answered. "We have our forces deployed and ready. The Urumi are gonna be in for a shock when they drop out of hyperspace," she grinned. "There's a little news for you."

"Oh? What?"

"Well, it seems that after you warned the other governments, the Urumi ambassador was sending some pretty desperate messages back to the Collective. From what Denmother told me, after the news that we knew they were coming got there, that energy thing that was representing the Consortium left."

"Left?"

She nodded. "Packed up its office, fired its staff, got on its ship, and left. And the Urumi did *not* want it to go. Zaa managed to get her hands on a secret communication between the Hive Elders and the Queen. It looks like the Consortium is abandoning the Urumi. They're not coming back, so no more arms. They have to build them if they want more, and that takes time."

"Well, that's good news, I suppose," Jason grunted.

"It'll be better news when I get my hands on those weapons," she said hungrily. "I have troop pods set up and ready. When they get here, I'm going to try to board and capture as many Urumi ships as I can."

"Dahnai, don't get people killed over something that trivial," he protested.

"It's only trivial for *you*, babes," she snorted. "Those weapons are a cut above our MPAC technology. And if this Consortium ever shows up with its *own* fleet looking for a fight, I want to be ready for them."

Jason had honestly never considered that possibility before. If the Consortium sold them, and sold them to a government that was trying to conquer the Imperium, then he guessed it was a logical conclusion to think that the Consortium might try to attack the Faey themselves using ships that were at least similarly armed and armored to the technology Miaari had uncovered. In fact, it made a kind of sense, now that he thought about it. Send the Urumi in so the Consortium could get an idea of Faey tactical ability, weaken them in a fight with the Urumi, then march in and attack themselves once the Urumi were beat back.

He'd considered that the Alliance and the Skaa might be doing that very same thing...letting the Imperium and the Collective fight it out, then swoop in and attack them when they were weakened.

"Alright, I'll concede that one," Jason deferred.

“You know, none of this would be *necessary* if you’d have helped us,” she told him with a stern look.

“Are you ever gonna give up on that, Dahnai? No. You know damn well why I won’t share Karinne technology, we’d had enough fights about it in the past. I will help you as much as I can, but I *will not* give you our secrets.”

“Once we get the Urumi tech, it won’t matter.”

“It will matter to *me*,” he said adamantly.

“Alright, alright, don’t get your shorts bunched,” she said in a mollifying tone. “My command staff predicts a victory with roughly 47% loss on our side. The Urumi shields won’t stand up to plasma weapons for long, and they don’t advanced armor. Once we bring down their shields, we can take them out. The only issue is their weapons will be able to go through our armor, so we expect some significant damage.”

“Well, be careful, and be safe.”

“We will be. Anything to report on your side?”

He shook his head. “We’re basicly on schedule.”

“Care to introduce me to that hologram there beside you?” she asked with a wink.

Jason silently swore. He didn’t realize Dahnai had a camera angle wide enough to see her. “It’s called Cybi,” he said. “A hologram our computer uses as a user interface.”

“*My designation is Cybi, an interactive interface of the tactical command computer,*” Cybi stated in a surprising monotone.

“Ah, we have some mainframes that use that too,” Dahnai said with a nod.

[Nice cover.]

[Thank you,] Cybi communed, maybe just a little proud of herself.

“Well, I think we’re both busy. I’ll call you if anything major comes up. Contact us when it’s over, I might need you to back us up.”

“I’m already planning on deploying my ships to you if you need them,” he assured her.

“Then I’ll make sure to call you. Keep a line open.”

“They should have one down in the command center.”

Her face vanished from the screen, and Jason had nothing to do but wait.

But his time was kept busy. Myri and Miaari gave him constant status reports, and he decided to contact each and every ship captain and wish them luck, thank them for their service, and remind them that he was thinking about them. Then he just made a general transmission to the entire house, thanking them for their hard work and wishing them luck in the coming conflict. Then he talked a while with his wife and children, then he was interrupted by Myri as she reported another problem with a defense satellite. They ran a repair team out there quickly, and the problem was fixed in twenty minutes.

He was so busy, he was honestly surprised when Miaari’s face appeared on his right window, replacing his family. “Jason,” she said. “The Urumi have arrived.”

“But it’s another thirty minutes til they get here,” he said in surprise, checking the timer under his tactical display.

“They exited hyperspace prematurely, just inside the orbital track of Karis II. They are now moving under standard engines. It will take them eighteen minutes to get here.”

“But that’s *faster* than hyperspace!”

“Do not forget, Jason, they were jumping hyperspace with the relativity delay,” she reminded him. “When they exited early, they broke the delay. They can get here faster under standard engines from where they are than it would have taken for them to get here if they remained in hyperspace.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Why did they come out so far out?”

“They are sweeping with sensors, determining our disposition and state of battle readiness. They will not jump in and get surprised, but given they are so far out, we can begin defensive measures. They jumped out so far that they are inside the range of the hyperspace missiles based on Kosigi.”

Damn right they were. Those missiles were actually for the defense of the system’s perimeter, the missiles they fired to destroy probes that appeared on the edge of the system. They were missiles with a hyperspace jump engine on them, but that kind of engine wasn’t very precise and could only be used once. It had a *minimum* range, since the engine couldn’t drop out of hyperspace immediately upon entering, so the missiles had a minimum and maximum operational range. They would have been useless against the fleet if it jumped in as they thought it would, but since they jumped in far out, inside the orbital track of the next furthest planet from Karis—which was really officially called Karis Prime, they just didn’t bother—that put the Urumi inside the operational range of the missiles.

Myri appeared on the left window. “Jason, they’ve dropped out of hyperspace just inside Karis II,” she told him quickly.

“Miaari just told me,” he said to her. “If they’re going to give us that much space, then we have to make them pay for it.”

“You bet your ass we will,” she said with an evil grin. “They’re in the strike range of the hyperspace missiles, so let’s send them a little greeting. Juma, let’s start pissing them off! Launch the Kosigi missiles!”

“Aye, Myri!” Juma said with a nasty tilt to her voice. “I’ll send down the order!”

Jason saw it on his tactical. Kosigi, which was behind the planet in relation to the incoming fleet, had a swarm of white dots appear around it. Those were the missiles, armed with a teryon warhead and a shield puncher, a nasty little device on its tip that disrupted coherent energy patterns it struck for that split second necessary for the missile to penetrate. His tactical display zoomed out, and his right window picked up a visual image from a hyperspace beacon nearby, as it looked into normal space. It showed a huge fleet of Urumi ships of every class, including three massive behemoths that had to be command ships, all of them moving visibly.

Then the missiles appeared.

They jumped out of hyperspace in a sudden swarm, *hundreds* of them, and they immediately locked on to the Urumi ships and dove on them. Urumi guns opened up in every direction, firing on the missiles, who actively tried to evade that fire. Explosions erupted all around the fleet as missiles were destroyed, but they were coming too fast and there were too many for them to get them all. Shields bloomed to visibility as the missiles struck then drove through, and violent gouts of flame and flashes of light erupted on many ships as the missiles struck and damaged Urumi vessels.

The Urumi fleet pulled in, began to tighten, just as the next wave of missiles appeared. Another salvo of fire and blossoms of light, and then another round of fiery detonations as a good quarter of the missiles got through and struck Urumi ships. Jason watched as a destroyer suddenly detonated in a savage fireball, spraying debris against the shields of nearby ships, and two other ships fell out of formation, one sagging into the formation, forcing ships to scramble out of its way, as the other began to slow, falling behind as the ships around it began to increase speed.

Then came the third and final wave. Again the Urumi tried to shoot down the missiles, but they were unable to get them all. Their formation was rocked as more ships were hammered by explosions, and much to Jason’s delight, he saw one of their battleships have its entire aft quarter explode, as a missile must have hit something rather important, and the remaining ship was driven forward by the force of the blast, ramming into the smaller cruiser that was leading it, shredding its aft quarter and twisting

it sideways, then grinding it amidships. The cruiser drifted away from the battleship as the other ships evaded it, fires erupting from hull breaches and white streaks from other breaches. That cruiser was basically dead.

After the smoke cleared, Jason took a tally. He saw 14 Urumi ships that had either been made dead in space or were out of formation with major damage; the battleship, a heavy cruiser, 2 cruisers, and 10 destroyers. That whittled it down to 170 ships they had to face, and nearly a quarter of the ships that he could see had damage of some kind. Fires, pitted, burned holes in their hulls, and one destroyer's bow had been blown off, but it was still operational.

Then, to his shock, he saw the *Aegis* jump in behind the fleet!

Before he could even scream at Myri about what the hell was going on, he saw the *Aegis* open fire, unleashing an onslaught of missiles. There was a virtual *cloud* of them, and behind that camouflage of death, Jason saw that the *Aegis* had jumped right back out, before the Urumi could even bring their weapons to bear against it. That was *brilliant!* It had jumped in outside of the range of its beam weapons, fired missiles, then jumped back out before the Urumi could bring their weapons to bear against it! The Urumi opened up against this new barrage of missiles, but these missiles were much smaller, much faster, and they were much less able to destroy them. There was a savage wave of explosions that went across the entire Urumi fleet, but those explosions were against the *shields* of the Urumi ships; these missiles weren't equipped with a shield-piercing device. But Jason realized that that was the point, those missiles were equipped with plasma warheads, and those shields were suddenly assaulted by the same metaphased plasma fired from MPACs and used in plasma torpedos, a type of plasma energy that overloaded shields.

Jason saw ship after ship lose its shields, as shield generators were overloaded. He even saw a couple of sudden puffs of red on some Urumi ships as those shield generators exploded from the shock.

Damn clever, ladies! By blowing shield generators, they were forcing some of the ships to engage without shields, because he'd bet money that some of those ships would *not* get their shields back up in the sixteen minutes it was going to take them to get to Karis!

But those were the only tricks that Myri threw at them. The Urumi fleet put on even more speed, and to his delight he saw three more ships fall out of formation. Then he saw on his tactical display the sudden appearance of a friendly blip behind the Urumi. He quickly changed views, and saw a single destroyer back where they had first appeared, where the damaged Urumi ships sat, obviously trying to get repairs done and get moving.

It was the *Steadfast!*

It turned and opened fire on the crippled Urumi ships, shearing through one of the crippled cruisers with its particle beam. One of the destroyers fired back at it, a beam of glowing blackness, but it struck the *Steadfast's* shields and was repelled. The destroyer swung about quickly and hammered the destroyer that fired on it with white blasts from its pulse weapons, blasting massive holes in it, then the ship exploded just aft of amidships, its two pieces spiralling away from each other. The *Steadfast* drove right through more fire from the cruiser, its shields still strong, and unleashed its particle beam against the cruiser. The Urumi cruiser's hull melted away under the devastating assault, as the beam cut into the bow and halfway up the keel before it winked out. Fires and explosions fountained out of that lethal cut through its hull, atmosphere venting into space. The other two destroyers turned and tried to flee, firing strange reddish blasts at the Karinne destroyer that went right through its shields and struck the destroyer on its port wing, but the *Steadfast* cut the further ship in half with its particle beam, then closed and devastated the nearer ship with a barrage of pulse weapons fire, causing nearly a quarter of the destroyer's starboard side to blow out into space. The lights on the vessel shimmered, and then went out, leaving the vessel dead in space. The *Steadfast* then closed on the battleship, turned, and drove a lance of particle beam into it like a fisherman throwing a spear, hitting it expertly and precisely. The emergency lights on the battleship went out instantly, leaving it dead in space. That done, the destroyer jumped out, returning home.

[The Steadfast is uploading logs to me, technical data about those torsion weapons. Jeya reports moderate damage to Steadfast's port wing, loss of primary power, and the port wing pulse batteries are down. No fatalities reported, but 16 casualties are in the infirmary. As we feared, our shields and armor cannot stop the torsion guns, but it seems they have a limited range, shorter than the range of our particle beams. Relaying that to Myri.]

[Well, thank the Lord for small favors,] Jason sighed.

The Karinne fleet massed in the path of the Urumi, and they approached at full speed. Jason watched the progress as they closed on Karis, as the KMS shifted the mines so that they had to go through them to get to the fleet behind, and he could only watch with his heart in his throat as the Urumi fleet became visible to planet-based cameras. It was a huge, formidable fleet, three

times the size of the Karinne fleet, but the Karinne fleet hugged the planet, daring the Urumi to approach, forcing them to come within reach of the planetary defense grid in order to engage the defending fleet.

Then the pulled up and stopped.

Jason wasn't the only one that was a bit surprised by that. Myri looked confused, and Cybi had a blank look on her face. "What the hell are they doing?" Jason asked. "They have no reason to wait, unless they're trying to get their shields repaired."

"Maybe that's what they're doing," Myri grunted. "No biggie, the *Aegis* has enough missiles to bring them back down," she chuckled.

Cybi looked back and to her right reflexively, then she swung around and got in front of him. [*Jason, hyperspace beacons are picking up ships moving through hyperspace in real time.*] she stressed. [*They are moving this way.*]

"Real time?" Jason asked quickly. "What ships do we have out? Is it the *Scimitar*?"

Jason didn't hear Cybi answer. His left window replaced its image of Myri with a view of the planet, Kosigi taking up the left side of the image. Beyond the moon, a series of flashes heralded the appearance of ships dropping out of hyperspace.

They were of no design Jason had ever seen before. They were black, with a crescent-shaped bow facing outward, like bull's horns, a log neck, and a heavy, blocky aft section, with thick spine-like wings protruding from the aft sections. They all had the same basic design, and all of them were the size of a Karinne heavy cruiser.

Cybi put a count up on the screen. There were 317 of them.

"Jason," Miaari said, appearing on the center screen. "Jason!"

Miaari was *afraid*.

He didn't have to hear from her, he already knew the truth. There was only one way those ships could have moved in real time through hyperspace.

They were from the *Consortium*.

Now it was clear. The Urumi had come out of hyperspace far away and drew the Karinne fleet to one side of the planet, and then the Consortium, who could move in real time through hyperspace, jumped in once the Karinne forces were deployed to stop the Urumi and had a clear path straight to the planet.

It was a trap.

Jason summoned up exactly the look on Miaari's face with two words.

"Oh, *shit*."

Chapter 5

Kaista, 20 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 18 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista, 20 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The planet Karis, capitol planet of House Karinne

It was insanity.

Jason was shunted aside as the command staff erupted into action, and he could only watch and listen and nearly have a seizure. With a force nearly seven times bigger than the Karinne fleet appearing behind the planet, on the daytime side, and an Urumi fleet still threatening on the nighttime side of the planet, Myri, Juma, Sioa, and Navii quickly assessed the situation and took quick and decisive action.

“That fleet is hostile, people, they’re raising shields and charging weapons! All forces converge on Kosigi and repel the second fleet!” Myri barked. “Planetary defenses prepare to repel the Urumi! Raise the planetary shield *immediately*! Recall our ships attached to the Imperial fleet! Bring the Kosigi GRAF cannon online! Ground forces on full alert, prepare for a possible land invasion! Jason, warn Dahnai, then get ready to attack when the Urumi get in range!”

Jason blinked, then realized Myri had ordered *him*, and he obeyed. Cybi got Dahnai back on his right window, and she looked relieved and happy. “Jayce, I was about to call you! The Urumi *retreated*, babes! They jumped—“

“I need my ships back *now!*” he told her, almost hysterically. “We’re under attack by the *Consortium!*”

Dahnai paled, then she turned and looked to her left. “Get on the comm and tell the Karinne ships to get back to Karis *right fucking now!*” she screamed. “Jason, is there *any* way we can help you? Any at all? You bought a stargate, is it up? Can you link it to us and let us gate in?”

“No, it’s not up, and there’s no way you can reach us, Dahnai. Just *pray.*”

“I will pray for you, my love,” she said with a stricken look, kissing her armored fingers and holding her hand out to him. “How long will it take to jump a fleet to Karis?” she demanded, looking at her left.

“Two days if they jump from Makan,” came a reply. “That’s the closest point we can reach by stargate.”

“Then *do it,*” she shouted. “They may need reinforcements by then!”

Jason cut the transmission as Cybi wrapped around him, because he saw on his tactical that the Urumi had surged forward. She floated behind him and put her hands on his head, and he felt the electric feel of her semi-solid hologram touching his skin.

[They approach, Jason, and we must repel them. Now, my Duke, my friend, you will show them the power of the Generations,] she told him, with surprising vehemence. [Join with me. Together, we will protect our home.]

He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair, and opened himself to Cybi. The CBIM connected to his mind through direct communion, as he and Cybi joined minds, joined souls, became a single consciousness. The cameras and sensors scattered around the planet became his eyes, the pulsing of the power plant below became the beating of his heart, and his body became the computer core that pulsed with light behind the chair holding his flesh and blood body.

The combined being of Jason and Cybi opened its eyes and looked around, able to see everywhere around the planet and Kosigi in an instant, as sensor data and camera views were processed with the speed of the CBIM mainframe. In that eternal instant, Jason used his knowledge of military tactics to assess the situation. They were not in range yet. They watched as the Karinne fleet raced around the planet, even as the Urumi surged ahead, and then the mines activated and charged the Urumi fleet. There was a cacophony of detonations as the mines detonated just outside the shields of the Urumi ships, unleashing a torsion shockwave, a wrenching of space that would deal drastic structural damage to anything in the blast wave. As the light faded, the ships in the forefront of the advance were burning debris littering the path of the ships behind, which continued forward, plowing through the remnants of their fleetmates with their shields.

They spared a second to assess what was going on on the daytime side. Kosigi flared with light, as the GRAF cannon was charged. It was a torsion cannon much like the torsion weapons the Consortium used, but the difference was the GRAF used torsion to generate a beam of energy. GRAF stood for Gravometric Resonance Alternation Force, which used a harmonic torsion pattern in the cannon's core to focus and release a massive blast of pure kinetic force. What the cannon fired was, quite simply, pure kinetic energy. The advantage of the GRAF was that it had an unlimited effective range; as long as there was a physical straight path between the cannon and its target, it could strike it.

And that range was used. The GRAF fired, illuminating the surface of the moon as a white-hot bar of pure energy blasted forth, streaking across the thousands of miles between the moon and the attacking ships, and slammed into the very center of their formation. Much to Jason's eternal relief, he saw that the GRAF had *damaged* the ship it struck. The sustained pulse struck the ship's shields and brought them down, and then blasted right through the narrow bow section, out the back of the crescent, then slammed into the aft section and ripped a gaping hole in the vessel. The vessel was violently deflected in its forward course by the impact, spinning up and out of control, tumbling away. The light of the GRAF faded, and then slowly began to build again. The weapon could only fire about once every twenty seconds, and at the rate those ships closed, Jason and Cybi calculated they would get six more shots before Kosigi was in range for them to fire on the moon and try to disable the cannon.

But that was not their concern at the moment. They turned their attention back to the Urumi, as the satellite weapon platforms opened fire. A cloud of plasma missiles filled the sky, raging towards the enemy fleet, and the ships opened fire on the missiles to stop them from hitting. The entire Urumi fleet was swallowed up in a raging inferno of plasma detonations, as every single ship in the Urumi fleet was struck by missiles. As the plasma storm faded, though, it was apparent that the ships with shields had weathered the attack well, with minimal damage, but those ships whose shields had not been repaired before they arrived had been completely destroyed. The Urumi then returned fire, launching a salvo of missiles back towards the planet. The gun platforms opened fire on the missiles, destroying about half of them, but the survivors locked onto satellites in orbit around the planet and tried to destroy them.

He would have paid money to be on the bridge of one of those Urumi ships when they saw the brilliant, scintillating shields that flared into visibility around those satellites when the missiles hit them. The satellites wobbled in orbit from the explosive impact, but the shields held, and the platform engines returned them to their proper orbits.

Now the Urumi knew they had to close to use beam weapons to destroy the satellites, and they were going to open themselves up to the automated defenses to do it. They rushed forward, opening their formations as the slower or damaged ships were outpaced by the larger ones, but the faster ships found out quickly that rushing forward only made them the first targets.

For they had come in range of the particle beam platforms orbiting the planet.

Brilliant white lines of light erupted from the satellites, shearing into the lead ships with just as much power and efficiency as the *Steadfast* had shown in his attack. The lead ship, a battleship, was literally cut apart by a plethora of particle beams when it came in range, and the ships behind pulled up and fired those black beams at every source of origin of the particle beams. The beam platform shields bloomed into visibility, and the particle beams simply fired again as soon as they recharged, dissecting another ship that had just come into their range.

Jason and Cybi simply waited.

The Urumi ships came to a halt just outside the range of the particle beams, then they rushed forward in unison. The particle beams sliced into their formations, cutting 6 more ships apart and crippling a seventh, and they got close enough to fire their torsion weapons. Reddish beams of light struck the defense satellites and went right through the shields, as spatial warping damaged the weapons, either making them explode or rendering them inoperable.

Still they waited.

The Urumi surged forward into a chattering blast of pulse weapon fire, weathering a pounding from the incoming fire as the three command ships in the back began moving forward, the ships in front of them moving out of the way to give them a clear field of fire. Within the center of all three command ships, and growing light appeared, as the three ships prepared to fire massive-scale energy weapons against the planetary shield protecting the planet.

[Now.]

They struck. The combined mind of Jason and Cybi used the biogenic relays scattered all around the planet to attack the Urumi with talent. Jason's talent, boosted to exponential degrees by Cybi and the biogenic computers that merged with them, was unleashed on the Urumi in the form of a psychic cacophony, a mental scream that was so loud, so painful, that it incapacitated every single thing within the area they had attacked. Tens of thousands of serpentine Urumi aboard those ships all screamed in pain and fell to the floor, writhing, blood oozing out of their ear slits and muzzles. The ships no longer had any control, any guiding hands, and they continued on doing whatever they were doing when Jason and Cybi attacked them.

The three command ships, who had begun a firing sequence, were vulnerable. With no controllers to control those weapons, they charged, and charged, and charged. They continued to charge, long past the point where they should have fired. They continued to charge, even as their weapon systems overloaded and overheated, causing automated safety measures to kick in to prevent the ships from exploding.

The center ship shuddered, then its light suddenly flared, and then vanished as all power on the ship was disrupted by the safety systems, knocking out its power. The command ship on the left was the next to go dead, but the ship on the right's light suddenly began to dim. Someone on that ship had managed to fight through Jason and Cybi's attack enough to abort the charging sequence. But Jason and Cybi did not let up. They intensified their attack; clearly, if someone could still function over there, they weren't putting enough power behind it. The blood started pounding in Jason's ears, the power spiked in the core room as a high-pitched whine heralded the demand for more power, and more power, and more power. The generators reached 100%, and still Jason and Cybi maintained their crushing attack, tearing at the minds of the Urumi with their psychic scream, driving the sound of it through their very souls. The raw power and fury behind it was enough to drive the weak-willed among the Urumi insane, as Jason and Cybi attempted to do nothing less than kill the Urumi through the use of Jason's telepathic powers, augmented to exponential degrees by Cybi and the biogenic systems of Karis.

The attack served its own purpose. It incapacitated the Urumi for critical moments while the gun platforms redeployed, putting the pulse weapons in range of the attacking fleet.

But the hardware could not match the determination of the software. The generators kicked into emergency mode, robbing Jason and Cybi of the power they needed to kill, scaling back the assault from lethal, to crippling, to incapacitating, and then to highly disruptive. The telepathic members of the Urumi could shield against his attack, and through them the Urumi slowly started regaining some semblance of control over their vessels. But by then, it was too late. The redeployed gun batteries orbiting the planet were in range, and a shimmering arc of angry white balls of energy erupted from them, blasting into the Urumi fleet like a deadly avalanche. Dozens of ships were either outright destroyed or mangled so thoroughly they were dead in space, and dozens more, hammered by that relentless assault, were heavily damaged, listing, drifting out of formation as the kinetic energy introduced into them by the impacts and explosions knocked them out of formation.

[We need the generators back online.] Jason and Cybi thought in unison, for they could see the truth. When the remaining Urumi ships regained control, they would fire on the gun batteries, which would not survive their torsion cannons. The orbital weapons weren't doing enough damage, and with the planetary shield up, the ground-based weapons couldn't fire on the Urumi. The shield would stop it.

Then, it was a miracle.

They jumped in behind the Urumi fleet, twelve triangular Karinne vessels, and they were being led by the *Defiant*. They moved in a tight formation directly into the heart of the Urumi horde, and their particle beam cannons lit up the starry sky as they

attacked, striking at a fleet more than ten times their number with almost suicidal fearlessness, moving into the area of Jason's attack with impunity, for the Faey on board those ships were protecting their crews from the less-intense attack Jason was managing to maintain on them. Dozens of brilliant beams of white slammed into the three command ships, shearing deeply into their hearts, crippling them, then the ships drove through the formation of Urumi ships, firing on absolutely any ship they could hit. The Urumi crews were still under assault from Jason, still barely able to think because of the soul-shattering scream echoing through their brains, and their inability to react quickly was fatal.

The *Defiant* and *Washington* led the destroyers through the Urumi fleet, particle beams shearing, pulse weapons blasting, trying to do as much damage as possible before Jason's attack ended. They withered the center of the Urumi fleet as the orbital gun batteries continued to mercilessly hammer at the ships on the leading edge, but then the generators finally red-lined, and went offline. The core chamber went dark for a moment, and then emergency lights kicked on as the backup power took over powering the facility. Jason and Cybi were out of it until the main power plant cooled off, did a diagnostic, and put itself back online.

The Urumi ships burst into action. The Karinne ships in the middle of them were attacked from all sides by dark streaks of energy and reddish beams, and they turned and fled by going through the Urumi and running towards the planet. A destroyer was hit in the aft starboard, and then ship's lights went dead and the ship listed fatally to port, a slow spin that, if left on its own, would cause the ship to slam into the planetary shield. A volley of reddish beams pounded the *Defiant*, causing a rupture in the armor on its top, gouting black smoke and atmosphere into space. The ship seemed to become sluggish, but then all three particle beam projectors bloomed to life, eviscerating the heavy cruiser that moved to block the Karinne ships. The *Washington* swooped in over the injured cruiser like an angel of death, pulse cannons ripping through an Urumi destroyer that was moving in to fire on the *Defiant* and causing the entire ship to explode in a brilliant inferno, but then Jason saw one Urumi cruiser fire, not towards a Karinne ship, but on one of its own. Jason zoomed in and saw fighters pouring out of the destroyers, and realized the telepaths were attacking the Urumi within the vessels in the classic Faey tactic that utilized their greatest weapon.

Their telepathy.

It was total chaos. Any semblance of cohesive strategy broke down when the fighters came into the equation, as Faey assaulted Urumi with talent from close range from fighters, and the Urumi launched fighters to put a stop to it. Naval vessels fired on each other in a wild, chaotic melee, as the nimble Karinne vessels continued to push their way out of the Urumi formation towards the planet, but spreading out, breaking up, to make it harder for the Urumi to fire on them without risking hitting their own ships. Fighters danced in the space between the ships, weaving between pulse blasts, particle beams, black streaks and reddish beams from Urumi weapons, creating a complete brawl. The *Washington* turned on the last of the big ships, a heavy battleship, and raked it with particle beams in a continuous blitz. The *Aurora* and *Devenne* joined the cruiser, adding their single particle beams to the three of the cruiser, and the two destroyers and cruiser systematically tore the battleship apart. They didn't stop until someone hit something vital and caused the entire bow section of the battleship to explode in a hellish blast of reddish-green fire.

The Urumi ships seemed to flail about wildly, and Jason realized that they had crippled the chain of command. The remaining ships had no leaders, nobody telling them what to do, so they were losing their cohesiveness, fighting as a collection of ships rather than a coordinated task force. They wilted under a furious assault by the 10 remaining Karinne vessels capable of firing at them, for now the *Defiant* was listing, its lights flickering, and it was clearly out of the battle. The Urumi ships seemed to turn in wild, random directions, as two more of them exploded from relentless pounding from orbital pulse batteries and particle beams, and the remaining ships fled. The Karinne ships did not pursue, they instead rushed to rescue the crippled destroyer and the *Defiant*, grabbing them in towing beams and pulling them to safety as the 53 ships left of the Urumi attack fleet fled back towards deep space, trying to get far enough away to jump into hyperspace and flee back to Urumi space.

That side of the battle was won, so Jason and Cybi looked to the other side.

And they found hell.

The Karinne fleet had engaged the Consortium ships near the moon of Kosigi, whose surface was pockmarked with columns of hellish fire. The GRAF cannon was destroyed, as well as many surface batteries, but the remaining batteries still fired on any of the black ships that were in range, even as the Karinne fleet held a furious, frenzied defense against the Consortium vessels, chasing after them as they rushed towards the planet. Twisted, burning wreckage littered space around the pitched battle, and to Jason's horror, he saw that there were more Karinne ships littering that graveyard than Consortium ships. The battleship *Victory* was burning, slowly turning on its keel in space, clearly out of commission, and the *Aegis* had sustained heavy damage to its bow and port keel. Raptor fighters swarmed around the black ships of the Consortium, but the Consortium had no fighters of their own to fight them.

That advance slowed somewhat when the Consortium ships got within range of the orbital defense platforms, for they opened up on the attackers, pounding the lead ships, and Jason saw with some relief that these unknown ships were not invulnerable to Karinne weaponry. The particle beams sliced right through their shields and sheared through their armor, digging deep, crippling wounds in the black ships, and the pulse weapons punched into the sides of the ships and exploded, ripping savage holes in them. But they didn't stop advancing, even as the ships near the shield exploded from the crossfire between the defense platforms and the Karinne ships behind. A single Consortium ship managed to breach the perimeter, and Jason could only watch as it struck the planetary shield, but did not rebound off from it. He saw a sudden cloud of objects drop from its bow, and zooming in showed that they had launched robotic fighting vehicles that looked like twenty foot six-legged praying mantises, with scythe-like frontal arms. They looked oddly like a Kizzik. They entered the atmosphere, and Jason and Cybi could see that they were on a course to land on Kosiningi...but it was a moot point, for now that they were inside the shield, the ground-based weapons could fire on them. A barrage of missiles rose up from the planet surface and hammered into the landing craft, but much to Jason's shock, those landers survived the attack. A plasma bolt, plasma being the only weapon that had that kind of range in an atmosphere, streaked up and hit the lead robot squarely in the belly, but the robot's armor withstood the strike, just like their own armor. Those mecha continued a controlled descent, metal shields drawn up and covering areas of them, which opened like wings to reveal black metal weapons mounted to their backs. They descended confidently...until a squadron of Raptors intercepted them.

The lead Raptor fired pulse weapons from below, striking the lead mecha in the belly. A gaping, smoking hole appeared in the belly of the craft, it turned in the air, and then broke apart in the air friction. The Raptors unleashed a furious volley of pulse fire against the landing crafts as they tried to scatter away from the fighters, but the Raptors were built for high-G atmospheric maneuvering where the alien mecha were not, and that allowed them to systematically blow them out of the sky.

The ship that had launched those ground units exploded in a hellish blast when the heavy cruiser *Olympia* sheared through its primary power generation plant with a particle beam.

[Where is that power?] Jason demanded irritably.

[Patience, Jason. The maintenance robots are completing repairs. Until then, have faith in your people.]

Jason took stock. Though there were 17 Karinne ships out of commission out of a total force of 63, Cybi showed him that 163 Consortium vessels had been destroyed or crippled, many of them the victims of the Kosigi weapons. The Consortium had lost nearly a third of their fleet in their assault on Kosigi, because they had exposed themselves to the *hundreds* of particle beam and pulse weapon batteries on the moon's surface when they closed in to destroy the GRAF cannon. In the no-man's land where the Karinnes had no support, they had suffered significant casualties, but with the Consortium within range of the orbital guns, now they were the ones taking heavy casualties. Their ships had superior armor and shields compared to the Urumi vessels, but even that was not enough when put up against the Karinne's devastating particle beams and teryon pulse weapons. And Karinne shields were resistant to their dark matter guns, leaving their only recourse to use the torsion weapons, which had an inferior range compared to particle beams. They had to come into harm's way to deal damage, and they paid for it with lost ships. The Karinnes had seemed to work out that range, and were now actively running from Consortium ships, keeping them in range of their particle beams, but staying *out* of range of their torsion weapons. The change in tactics helped, but the KMS kept losing a ship to every three it defeated, and at that rate the entire fleet would be destroyed quickly.

[The crews of those ships are resistant to talent.] Cybi noted impassively as reports trickled in to Myri, which Cybi monitored. *[Our mindstrikers are having no effect.]*

[Get our power back on and we'll take a shot at them. I don't think they can resist us, since we don't work the same way the mindstrikers do.]

[True.]

Things changed quickly, however, when the Karinne fleet broke off, retreated back behind the orbital platforms and regrouped, right up against the shield. Consortium ships tried to chase them down, but they were driven back by the barrage of fire from the orbital platforms. That close to the shield, the Consortium had no choice but to come into the range of the orbital weapons in order to get in range of the ships. And more and more orbital batteries were getting there, en route from around the planet, adding more and more firepower, as well as the *Washington* and the 9 destroyers left that had ambushed the Urumi, having finally circumnavigated the planet and joined the Karinne fleet. It was a desperate stalling tactic, trying to make the Consortium back off, giving Myri and the general staff a critical moment to think things through and try to come up with something to salvage the situation, because it wasn't looking too good at the moment.

The Consortium still had 152 ships, where they were down to 46 ships. That was still a three to one advantage, with only the

orbital weapon platforms evening the odds. The Karinnes had superior firepower if the Consortium attempted to attack the planet or Kosigi, but so long as they just sat out there, out of range of Karinne weapons, there wasn't much they could do about it, not with such a huge disadvantage in numbers. The Consortium had had no choice when they went after the GRAF cannon on Kosigi, else the cannon would have just picked them off one by one until they go out of line of sight or retreated, and erred when they sacrificed several ships just to get one close enough to try to launch ground units, which were intercepted and destroyed before they got anywhere near the planet's surface.

Why had they done that, anyway? It didn't really seem to make much sense...unless it was nothing but a *test*.

Jason could do the math. Now that the GRAF cannon was destroyed, the Consortium could just sit back there and wait, maybe call in reinforcements. They had the advantage out away from the orbital weapons, and the Karinnes didn't have the numbers or firepower to drive them off.

The Consortium ships drew in, forming a tight, almost packed formation. The lights flickered, and the main power came back online, just as that formation charged straight ahead at full speed!

In seconds, Jason was again part of Cybi, and the two of them struck at the black ships charging them. They unleashed their power against the strange-minded beings within those ships, but found them to be resistant to the telepathic cacophony, very disciplined, very strong.

A fundamental truth hit them in that attack. These minds...they were *insectoid*. These ships may *not* be from the Consortium. These were not the minds of beings who existed as pure energy. These were carbon-based, and their thoughts were filled with hatred, a hatred so strong, so powerful that they could sense it as a palpable thing, a black aura around the minds within those ships.

Instead of resisting, the Karinne ships scrambled out of the way as the black vessels charged right through a withering storm of fire from the orbital platforms, their weapons firing in a concentrated arc before them, blasting away the platforms. Jason realized that the ships were trying to reach the shield, and Myri had wisely ordered her ships to get out of the way. The Karinne fleet raked the attackers with particle beams, but they did not fire back, or even try to dodge. Dozens of enemy ships were sheared apart, exploded, or listed out of their formation as they charged the gauntlet of orbital platform and ship fire. Of the 152 ships that had made that insane assault, only 77 survived to reach the shield. Those ships struck the shield, drove their bows through it, and then launched a dark, ominous cloud of surface attack units, descending towards the planet's surface like deadly rain.

Their landing craft deployed, the ships then turned and fled, again being hammered by Karinne ships and orbital weapon platforms.

"Prepare for a surface attack!" Myri's voice touched his ears. "They're heading for Kosiningi! Redeploy Gladiators to reinforce the island!"

Jason watched the alien ships. They lost even more from their fleet as they retreated back, but then the 66 survivors slowed to a stop and waited, outside the range of the orbital platforms. But they turned and redeployed when the Karinne fleet came screaming out from their protective nook near the shield, clearly more than willing to take on the alien fleet with the numbers they had now. The *Aegis* led the advance, its massive size shielding the smaller ships as a cloud of fighters darted ahead of the naval vessels.

The battle in the atmosphere was more of a duck shoot than a battle, but it was no less desperate. A swarm of Raptors attacked the mantis-like mecha as they descended, blowing them out of the sky, but there were too many for the Raptors to destroy before some of them reached the ground. They dropped through the clouds and slammed into sea, creating splashes hundreds of feet high, but mere moments later they appeared on the beach, scabbling forwards on their six legs as the cannons on their backs deployed.

And then the Gladiators were there.

They were led by a sleek black Gladiator, piloted by Sergeant Kyva, and they pinned the invaders down at the beach. Red pulses of light from torsion weapons sizzled in one direction, and blazing white bundles of teryon energy raced in the other. The Gladiators took cover behind a dune by the sea, firing over it and then ducking back down out of sight, but Kyva ghosted forward on her gravometric drive, coasting above the sand, and she was *amazing*. He'd never seen anyone pilot a mecha with such grace, skill, and artistry! She weaved between red bolts like a dancer, ducking, sliding, twisting, almost looking like a ballet dancer lost

in the glory of her expression, and she invaded the enemy formation *alone*. He thought it was suicide, but then she deployed the monomolecular blades from the forearms of her Gladiator, the last-ditch close combat weapon, and he realized what she was doing. She was in the middle of them, and she had the reflexes of a cat. Every mecha that fired on her missed, and most of them ended up shooting one of their own comrades. In such close quarters, using their weapons only did damage to themselves, and she danced within the center of them, her monomolecular blades ripping through their armor like paper. Robotic appendages flew with every lightning-fast slash of the Gladiator's arms. She slid out of the way of a red beam that struck the mantis she'd just dismembered, making it detonate, and then she returned fire from her forearm-mounted pulse cannon, blowing meter-wide holes through its entire body. The wreckage sagged to the sand, smoking and burning. She parried the slash of another mantis' scythe-like front appendage like a medieval swordfighter, sliced that appendage off, then stabbed the mantis through the body with her other blade. It dropped twitching to the sand, its legs quivering spasmodically, and Kyva fired a blast of pulse fire into the mecha that had come into view behind it as it fell. Another mecha turned to fire on her, but its entire front half exploded when a Raptor hit it from above with a pulse blast, and the remaining mantises tried to push in from the beach as more Raptors opened fire on them from above.

Other mantis craft landed on other parts of the island, but those who landed on solid earth, instead of attacking, instead leaned down and fired some kind of coherent energy beam from a plate in the chest of the mechas, which melted through the ground.

They were trying to burrow down into the bunker!

Myri realized that herself, almost immediately. "They're trying to reach the bunker!" she snapped. "*Stop them no matter what it takes!*" she screamed.

But Jason realized something. They were close. They were very close. He could see them, and he was connected to Cybi, who boosted his talent exponentially.

That included his *telekinesis*.

He struck like a hammer. One mantis mecha, who had landed right by the emergency response building holding Cybi's core, turned and moved towards the building, but then it stopped *dead*. The mecha shuddered, and then it dropped to the ground, smoke oozing from its open ports. Jason found that he couldn't affect the armor of those things, but he could shred them from the *inside*, attacking their much less armored interior workings.

He laid into the invaders like an avenging angel, focusing on attacking any mecha that was not under attack or was too close to the compound. Mantis fighting mechas dropped to the ground, destroyed from within, all over the island as Jason joined in the defense, using his vastly amplified telekinetic powers like the weapon they were. The Gladiator pilots seemed quite baffled by what was going on, as mecha they targeted just dropped dead of their own volition, with no visible indication of what was happening to them. "*Gladiator pilots, the Grand Duke is attacking the invaders with his telekinesis,*" Cybi called aloud, which was transmitted out on the command gravband frequency. "*Leave the smoking ones be, they have already been neutralized.*"

"*I knew I loved that man,*" Kyva mused from the beach, where she was now part of an element of 14 Gladiators that repelled the amphibious assault, as the mantis mecha tried to get off the sandy beach and onto solid ground. It seemed that they could not try to burrow in from underwater or from the beach; only the mecha that reached solid ground made the attempt.

It took nearly half an hour. Thousands of mantis mecha had reached the surface, and it was a pitched battle all over the island. Gladiators and Raptors attacked anything that moved, while Jason focused on destroying the mecha that got past them and had managed to burrow into the ground, killing them before they could reach the bunker and directly threaten him, Cybi, and his family and command staff. The mantis mecha gathered into defensive mobs and tried to cover the ones that were burrowing down into the ground, which was a fairly effective tactic. But it became apparent to them after about ten minutes that it was going to be impossible for them to reach the underground bunker so long as Jason could kill them before they could get close, and they were basically surrounded, trapped, and helpless. They had no aerial support, they had no way to retreat, and they were surrounded on all sides by savagely protective defenders, by Gladiator and Raptor pilots who were fighting with intense resolve, for they were defending their Grand Duke's very life. Not a single Faey or human among the defenders did not believe that the attack on Kosiningi was anything but a direct attempt to kill Jason Karinne.

The result were almost fanatical defenders who took awful chances, but were so angry that those daring assaults were actually successful. Kyva had to be the perfect example of that, for she was absolutely fearless, willing to attack a large mob of mantis mechas *by herself*. Any time Kyva showed up to attack a concentration of mantis mecha, that formation was quickly broken up and scattered from the sheer fury of her attack, her deadly aim, her uncanny combat skills, and her amazing reflexes to

avoid taking damage in return.

It took nearly thirty minutes, but in the end, as the barracks by the emergency building burned and firefighters and damage control dealt with several fires in the emergency response building itself, the last of the mantis mecha were destroyed, and a sensor sweep showed that the island was secured.

The defenders had beaten back the attack, but they all knew that had Jason Karinne not been there and been able to attack the enemy with his talent, they would have won this battle, but lost the bunker and everyone inside it, which would have been the most crushing defeat imaginable...the death of the Grand Duke and his family.

Jason turned his attention to space, and found a similar situation. The KMS had been engaged in combat with the invaders the entire time, and what was left of both fleets continued to do battle. There were only 31 Karinne ships left operational, but they had managed to take a much bigger bite out of the invaders, who only had 19 ships remaining. The *Aegis* was on fire and motionless in space, heavily damaged, but the battleship *Trelle's Gift*, the last of the large ships operational, rallied all the remaining ships around it as they pressed the attack. The black ships of the invaders were broken from their formation and trying to regroup, but the battleship drove into the center of them as the destroyers and cruisers pressed, forced them to spread out even more, until most of the remaining ships were isolated.

“We’ve got more ships coming out of hyperspace!” Myri said in fear, then she laughed. “They’re *Kimdori*! They’re coming to assist!”

Jason felt a wild surge of elation as an *armada* of Kimdori warships approached the planet at top speed. He then saw, to his horror, one of the enemy ships turn and accelerate, aiming its crescent bow right at the *Trelle's Gift*. It was going to ram!

The battleship saw it coming. Particle beams sheared through its aft section, causing its engines to explode, which blew the entire aft section apart. The bow and neck spun away from the explosion wildly, bouncing off the battleship’s shields. Jason saw *all* of the enemy ships turn and try to ram the Karinne vessels, in some kind of final, suicidal attempt to take as many Karinne ships with them as they could. Many of them were destroyed, but he gasped when he saw one of them ram the much smaller *Resolute*, driving the smaller ship in front of it like a bulldozer, but the *Resolute's* armor withstood the unbelievable force of the impact. The *Defiant*, which had somehow repaired itself enough to re-enter the battle, raked the ramming ship with its particle beams and pulse cannons, blowing it apart, which pushed the *Resolute* even further as the concussion of the explosion hit it. Another black ship tried to ram the *Resolute* from the other side, but a swarm of fighters pounded it with their weaponry, and they must have hit something vital, for the black vessel suddenly veered to port, veering away from the destroyer, as fire and a sudden explosion erupted from its aft section, just forward of its spike-like wing. The destroyer *San Diego* fired pulse weapons right into that gaping wound, which caused the entire aft section of the ship to erupt into a massive fireball, shattering the neck and bow section in a cataclysmic detonation.

One by one, Jason watched the KMS destroy the enemy craft as they tried to ram, until the last vessel was destroyed. Then there was a moment of silence, until Myri’s voice came in over the command channel.

“All forces stand down,” she called. “Begin damage control and recovery procedures.”

There came a cheer from the command center behind Myri, but everyone knew it wasn’t over yet. The battle was over, certainly, and they had won. But now came the painful chore of picking up the pieces, and finding out how many of their family they had lost.

When the core was returned to the surface from its hot hiding place in the planet’s mantle, there was a large procession there when the latches were in place and the door opened. Jyslin and his family rushed in and hugged him, and he made sure to kiss Jyslin and every Marine, child, and Symone at least twice as he let his relief they were well flood into him. He took Myri’s hand solemnly, then pulled her in and hugged her.

“How bad?” he asked simply.

“Not very bad,” she said with optimism. “We don’t have the information in yet, but what we do have in gives me some hope. We had twenty-six ships lost in total. Seven were completely destroyed, and nineteen are beyond hope of salvage. The most heavily damaged are going to spend a few months in drydock, but they can be returned to service. The Kimdori are helping

us tow our ships back to Kosigi to start repairs, and they've taken up defensive positions around the planet in case those bastards jump in another fleet."

"Casualties?"

"Light, given the ferocity of the battle," she answered. "They're still picking people up from space. Putting everyone in Crusaders made a *huge* difference, Jason. We had a little over a thousand killed, five times as many injured. The armor really, really made a difference. We had survivors from ships that were totally destroyed, because of the armor."

"That's why I did it," he said, both saddened to hear of a thousand deaths, but glad...because it could have been *much* worse.

"The emergency compound took some damage, but nothing we can't fix," she said. "I'll have the solid numbers for you as soon as we have a complete tally."

"And them?"

"No prisoners," she told him. "They're some kind of insectoid race, and it was clear that those that survived the battle killed themselves rather than be captured. We can probably salvage some of the technology from the debris, and we're looking for some intact computers so we can try to get some information on them. I've already got some teams out investigating."

"That sounds good," he said.

"Now then, your Grace. I want you and your people to return home, to Karsa," Myri told him. "There's been some damage here, and I'm afraid your vacation house was destroyed. Besides, I want to get you to a secure location, and Foxwood is secure enough."

"I can do that," he told her. "Did you tell Dahnai we made it?"

She nodded. "She jumped a fleet to us, but it won't get here for two days."

"Alright. I'll make a declaration when we get home, and lift martial law."

His children were quite animated and excited on the flight home, but Jason was quiet and pensive. A thousand dead. A *thousand*. He would recognize the names when he saw the roles, and each one would pain him. They were *his* people, his precious people, and they had died in battle to protect the house, and in a way, to protect him. Those aliens—he wasn't sure if they were Consortium or not, though they certainly were using the same weapons the Consortium sold the Urumi—had made a direct attempt on him, and his people had beaten them back. He felt...vulnerable now. The presence of the Dukal Guards in the dropship was actually a comfort, for with them nearby, he felt strangely safe, and he wouldn't let Jyslin and Rann get out of reach of him. He kept tight hold of her hand, and kept Rann on his lap, keeping his family close, as if their proximity reminded him that they were safe and well.

When he got home, the first thing he did was give an open address to the house. He told them that they had persevered, lifted martial law, and then gave an account of how things had unfolded. And much to the surprise of the people of House Karinne, the Grand Duke Karinne broke down in tears when he told them about the casualties. But then he wiped his eyes, told his people how *damn proud* he was of them, and assured them that the Kimdori fleet was protecting the planet, and they would be safe enough while the fleet put in for repairs.

If anything, the emotion the Grand Duke showed about the loss of his people made them even more loyal to him.

Once home, back in his study, he sat down and first contacted Zaa. She appeared as a hologram behind his chair, in the middle of the room, her hands behind her back, a look of concern on her face. "Cousin," she called. "Miaari already contacted me, and told me you prevailed. I am pleased that you are well."

"Did she tell you everything?"

Zaa nodded. "We have no contact with this race. They are unknown to us."

“Why didn’t you help us sooner?” he blurted out.

“I got the fleet there as quickly as I could, cousin,” she told him calmly. “When the second fleet arrived, Handmaiden Miaari called me. But I was unavailable when she called, and it took her nearly five minutes to get in touch with me. She explained the situation, and I mobilized *our* fleet to reinforce you, which, as you know, is not an instantaneous matter. I took them about ten minutes to organize and jump, and then they had to travel there. It takes nearly sixteen minutes of continuous hyperspace travel for them to reach Karis from Kimdori. It is a *long* way there from here, cousin.”

“*Sixteen minutes?*” he gasped in surprise.

She nodded. “It is usually done in stages, because of the dangers of that much hyperspace exposure to the crew, so in actuality it takes nearly thirty minutes to get there. The fleet only made one brief stop to relieve the crews from hyperspace exposure, so they arrived in twenty-two minutes. I ordered our fleet to assist as soon as I was warned of your predicament.”

“I didn’t know it takes that long. You always just seem to get here so fast,” he said in wonder.

“I am quite resistant to hyperspace exposure,” she smiled. “I, and many *individual* Kimdori, can tolerate such a long journey safely.”

“Well, I’m sorry then, Denmother,” he said contritely. “I didn’t mean to accuse you.”

“I am relieved to hear that, cousin,” she said honestly. “And be assured, I know it is a heart that mourns the loss of those you care for that spoke in anger, and I take no offense to it. But I am most pleased with your house, Jason. They protected Karis from a major threat with no outside assistance. You have truly come into your own.”

“Not without some deaths and a lot of damage,” he sighed.

“I know, but does the knowledge that your people will be *safe* not relieve you?”

“I, I guess it does,” he admitted. “We had our trial by fire, and we passed it.”

“Truly. I will look into the matter of these unknown creatures. That which is unknown to the Kimdori unsettles the Kimdori. We will find the truth of this matter.”

“You need to keep me posted.”

“We will. I will leave you now and see to this matter, personally.”

After speaking with Zaa, he contacted Dahnai. She looked almost emotionally relieved to see his face, sniffing and clapping her hands. “Thank *Trelle!*” she said explosively. “Your command staff told me you were okay, but I wanted to *see* you, love!” she called. “Are you alright?”

“I’m alright,” he told her.

“I have a fleet en route to Karis now, love,” she told him. “Are you going to be able to hold your defenses until they get there?”

“We’ll manage,” he told her. “It was a short, very nasty fight.”

“What happened?”

“They tried to kill *me*,” he told her bluntly. “They penetrated our defenses and landed fighting mecha on the planet, and it was abundantly clear that they were coming after me. My ground forces literally repelled them from my doorstep.”

“Oh Trelle!” she gasped. “Is everyone alright? Is Rann okay?”

“Everyone’s fine,” he said, “and thanks for asking. I really appreciate it, hon.”

“Hey, you’re family, and I happen to love you, you silly boy,” she told him with a glorious smile. “What kind of damage did you take?”

“It wasn’t pretty, but we’re still viable,” he told her. “Thank God, casualties were light, but my fleet got its ass pretty much well kicked. I don’t have a single ship that didn’t take damage of some kind, and I lost nearly half my fleet.”

“Well, I have an armada coming to defend you until you get your ships back in service,” she told him.

“We might have to negotiate about that,” he told her.

“Bull *SHIT* are we negotiating!” she shouted. “I don’t give a *damn* about your secrecy and your technology, you asshole! I am *not* going to give those Consortium bastards a *CHANCE* to hurt you again!”

Jason laughed as Dahnai’s face twisted in outrage, then she glared at him. “Well, it’s nice to be loved, but I’m not really going to need your ships, Dahnai. I have enough defense here to protect the planet.”

“When I get there, *I* will be the one to decide that,” she told him hotly. “I know you have some way to get back and forth between there and Draconis in real time, so come and pick me up, Jason! My fleet is coming, and I *will be there to greet them*. And make sure they *behave themselves*.”

“I take it you’re going to be serious about this?”

“Either you come get me or I’ll declare war on you!” she said with savage conviction.

Jason considered it, and decided that it might be for the best. Karis was compromised. There was no doubt about that now. And Dahnai knew from earlier that his ships had some way to move about in real time, so that wasn’t giving anything away either. Maybe, with the Empress herself here, it would keep the Faey on their best behavior.

One thing was for certain, though...he’d have to tell Zaa to pull her fleet out before they got here.

“It won’t be today, Dahnai,” he acquiesced. Would, uh, sixteen hours be alright? Well, it better be alright. It’s more of a ‘take it or leave it’ proposition. Right now, I just can’t spare anything to come after you.”

“I don’t like it, but I’ll live with it,” she said flintily.

It took a little doing with Zaa. He called her back and told her about what Dahnai had done, and she was *not* happy about it. “She cannot know of our involvement with you, yet the presence of her and her fleet will hamper our assistance in your recovery and jeopardize things,” she said, her hologram pacing back and forth in his study. “But there is nothing to be done about it. My fleet will assist with the recovery and salvage until they must leave, and then they will leave. You must convince Dahnai *not* to leave any ships or assistance, Jason, no matter how much she demands or how sincere she may be. To do so would only hinder you.”

He could agree with that.

From Foxwood, Jason monitored the clean-up and recovery. Myleena launched to start going over the wreckage of the enemy ships, both Urumi and the aliens, and Miaari and Tim went with her. Jason wanted to go, and so did Jyslin, but Aya gave him a withering glare when he brought it up, which cowed him into remaining at his house. But he wasn’t alone, that was for sure. After he left his study, everyone came to see him, and all five of his children were kept there by the Dukal Guard, keeping the entire Dukal family together so they could protect them or move them if another fleet appeared to threaten the planet. Myri checked in every half hour to give him updated reports on the progress, and Myleena kept in constant communion as she combed through the wreckage in a Gladiator, escorted by Sergeant Myka. He spent quite a bit of that time with someone on his lap, be it one of his children, his wife, or Symone, as they kept close to him. his children didn’t really understand what was going on, but they could tell that Jason was upset, so they kept close to him. Jyslin and Symone did fully understand what was going on, so they kept near him to comfort him as Myri kept updating the casualty lists, and Jason kept recognizing names, KMS personnel he knew

personally that were either dead or injured.

The diminutive Captain Travka, the Makati captain of the *Defiant*, was killed in battle. Captain Jeya of the *Steadfast* was injured. A torsion weapon went right through the bridge, and she was directly struck. It had ripped her left arm off, and she'd be in hospital a while as they grew her a new one. And they weren't the only ones. The captains of 17 of his ships were either dead or injured, people he knew personally, talked with on a regular basis.

So much damage, but again, he could only sigh in relief that it hadn't been much worse.

Over the course of the afternoon and into the night, Jason watched. The damaged ships were towed to Kosigi and put in drydock, where Kimdori crews joined in with his human and Faey workers to start repairs. Crews were on Kosigi as well, repairing the damage its surface suffered in the attack, but the base within the moon itself was undamaged, fortunately. Kimdori vessels began the formidable task of sweeping up all the wreckage, saving it so both they and Myleena could pore over it, to study it. While Myleena went over the alien technology, Songa performed autopsies on the insectoid crews, and the Kimdori towed in a crippled Urumi command ship, quite a prize, and took the surviving Urumi prisoners that were clinging to life aboard the wreckage of the ships that had been destroyed in the battle.

"It looks like we could salvage this thing," Tim called over a radio when Jason asked what was going on with him, Myleena, and Miaari. *"The only real damage is they blew out their main reactor and it fed back and blew out their entire power system. We have just about all of it, Jayce, even the crew. At least what's left of them."*

"What do you mean? I thought you said the ship's intact."

"Most of the crew is insane," he answered. *"I touched on their minds, and well over half of them are totally mad. I think they couldn't handle your attack. Anyway, after they went mad, they started fighting each other. That's where most of the damage came from. It was a ship full of insane maniacs, driven to violence by your attack on them, and they didn't give a damn about trying to shut down the overload and getting power back online. The sane ones just barricaded themselves into sections of the ship and tried to hang on."*

"Well, I'm not going to shed a tear," he said curtly. "You find any sane officers?"

"Yeah, we got the captain of this ship, he's sane. He's got some telepathic ability, so he managed to shield himself well enough."

"Take him to Miaari so she can arrange to have someone interrogate him. Have them tow the ship into orbit and weed out the sane from the insane, then drop them on one of the barren continents with enough food and water to last them a while, til we ship them back to the Collective."

"That's a pretty good idea. We won't have to worry about sticking them in jail cells. After all, if we dump them in a desert with food and water, where are they gonna go?"

"Exactly."

"Jason, can you go to a screen please?" Songa called over the link. Jason went back to his study and brought her up. She was covered in green gore, her gloves smeared in it up to her elbows.

"What is it, hon?"

"I'm done with the necroscopies on the enemy dead," she told him, as a human aide wiped her face for her. "They're not too exotic that it's anything to report about. They've got physiology I'd expect to see in an insectoid species of their size, and I found no microbes or diseases at all that they're carrying, which I thought was a bit odd. Just like Terran bees or ants, all of the bodies I've examined are female in gender, but they're also sterile, unable to reproduce. But, I did find two rather interesting things."

"What?"

"Well, first, these things are adapted to a low-G environment," she told him. "Their physiology is almost delicate in ways

that they wouldn't be if they matured in a normal gravity well. I don't think they could even survive more than a few hours in the Karis gravity well. They're like the Menoda that way."

"Yeah, that is a little weird," Jason agreed. "What's the other thing you found?"

She reached out of view, then pulled back a small silvery device. "One of these was implanted in the brains of every single one of them," she answered. "It's not working right now, none of them are, so I'm not too sure what they do. I sent one to Myleena so she can study it."

"I'll have her check it out. You should send a couple of them to the Kimdori as well."

"I'll make sure they get some," she promised.

He returned to the living room, where Rann and Kyri were playing a concentration game with Ayama that helped teach them the Faey alphabet, and sat down beside Jyslin. *What did Songa want?*

She reported on what she found out. He relayed to her what Songa had discovered. *I wonder what those devices do. Maybe those were why the Faey couldn't affect them with telepathy.*

That's possible. They could have been something as simple as implants to let them communicate with each other, too, or something that just lights up when they need light. Don't jump to conclusions until we know, she teased with a wink. Then she snuggled against him and sighed. *I'm so glad we came through it alright. I wasn't really worried until after it was over, though. They didn't even tell us that those things tried to dig down to the bunker until after the battle was done. When I heard that, I almost had a heart attack. That was the first time I really felt scared for Rann. And it was after it was over, of all times.*

I know how you'd feel, love.

By sunset, when Jason felt drained and exhausted, Myri had come to see him as Ayama made dinner for him and the family. She took a place at the table, sighed, and put her helmet on the floor by her chair. *Trelle, what a day,* she sent with mild understatement. *I have the final tallies and a full report on the damage and repairs needed, Jayce. I sent it to your panel.*

Thanks, Myri. You need to take a break.

I still have a lot to do yet, she shook her head. *As you can imagine, it's a mess back in the command room. We're trying to pick up the pieces and get things back to something that might someday be considered normal.*

I know how you feel. Everything changed today, he sent grimly. *We faced our first armed attack, and now we can't hide anymore. They know where we are, and we have to be ready for it.*

I know. I hope Kosigi gets that interdicator built.

It has complete priority, even over repairing the ships, Jason told her. *The Kimdori are lending us more workers to repair the ships so we can get both done at the same time. I'm not going to sleep well at night until that interdicator is up and running.*

Me either.

How long until the Imperial fleet gets here?

Thirty-one hours, she answered. *The officer in command of the Kimdori fleet already gave me his schedule for withdrawal. They're going to pull out in stages starting in about four hours and mass up near the blue sun on the far side, just at minimum hyperspace jump distance. That way they're a fast jump away if we need them.*

And the star's radiation will hide them from Faey sensors, Jason nodded in approval. *Only Kimdori or Jakkans could keep a fleet that close to the star,* he sent with an audible chuckle.

I swear to Trelle, they have one hell of a racial immunity, Myri declared with a grin.

How do things look for the future?

Well, I think we'll be alright, Myri told him. We didn't lose anything we can't replace equipment wise, and our casualties were almost miraculously low, thanks to all the cash you dished out putting all of us in Crusaders. We lost a few damn fine ship captains, though. They won't be easy to replace. On the bright side, we captured intact Consortium weapons and shield generators from that Urumi capital ship, and I think Myleena's tearing them apart as we speak to see how they work. That was a real prize, but forgive me if I don't like the price we had to pay to get them.

Amen, Jason agreed soberly. Stay for dinner?

She nodded. I haven't eaten since this morning.

Jason slept heavily that night, and awoke the next morning a little groggy, but feeling a little better. The rather wild night the night before hadn't given him real sleep, just exhaustion-induced sleep, and he made up for it with ten hours of deep sleep. He threw his legs over and rubbed his face, then used his interface to bring up the vidscreen on the wall, a screen he used very rarely. Given it was in his bedroom, he only allowed them to initiate contact to speak to him in emergencies. She's face appeared on it, and saluted to him in greeting. "What can I do for you, your Grace?"

"How are things?" he asked.

She gave him a slight smile. "Things are under control, your Grace. The Kimdori are withdrawing their forces, and are almost complete. The space around Karis has been largely cleared of debris, and the larger pieces have been placed in orbits near the Alpha Station so they have access to it. Repairs to Kosigi are on schedule, and our ships are currently under repair. The *Aegis* and *Trelle's Gift* had their engines repaired sufficiently to allow them to jump, and the Kimdori have taken them back to their docks to effect repairs. The *Dreamer* is in close orbit at Kosigi for repairs to its engines so it can jump out as well." Those ships were too big to fit through Kosigi's doors, so they had to either be fixed in space or taken back to the docks where the Kimdori built them. "Medical reports are favorable for all our injured. Generals Myri and Juma are off duty, currently sleeping. General Sioa is on Kosigi, General Navii is on the Kimdori flagship coordinating with them. And I am here," she completed with a slight smile. "And, your Grace."

"Yes?"

"As much as I enjoy getting to look at you naked, perhaps next time you should wait until you're fully awake before you call me?"

Jason looked down, then laughed ruefully. "I guess I could have put on a robe or something," he agreed.

"Oh, not for my benefit," she smiled. "These, unburdened, conversations are what one might call a perk for working the hours I do."

"You're a bad girl, Shey."

"We already established that fact last night, your Grace."

"So we did. I guess I'll let you go back to being bad."

"Of course, your Grace. I'll send you a detailed report about my evil activities as soon as I've completed them."

Jason laughed as Shey terminated the call. That woman had a very subtle sense of humor.

He put his elbows on his knees and considered things. He'd go get Dahnai today, in about five hours actually, and then probably spend the rest of her time here keeping her under control. Aya had already organized her visit, and which would probably be much to her eternal shock, she was going to be put up in the guest house out on the far side of the swimming pool. It was a cozy little five room house with the bedroom in the loft, where people who came to visit him but couldn't get home stayed overnight.

Aya wouldn't permit strangers to stay in his house, and that included the Empress. Despite the fact she was an Imperial Guard, she was attached to the *Grand Duke Karinne*, and in that role Aya could not consider Empress Dahnai to be safe enough to run around his house unescorted. After Dahnai was here, it was going to be touch and go. He was still trying to keep up on how things were going, and he'd most likely spend most of today driving his staff crazy with incessant calls and requests for information.

Jyslin stirred, then he felt her hand slide across his lower back. *Good morning, love. Sleep well?*

I slept like a rock, he answered.

She sat up and put her hands on his shoulders, then pulled him down. He let her lay him down with his head on her legs, and she looked down at him with a loving expression, stroking his hair. *You needed it. What did Shey say? I heard you talking to her as I was waking up.*

Not much, just her telling me where things stand. I forgot to put on a robe before calling, so she had to make a joke about that.

I'll make you Faey yet, she teased.

You're well on your way, he drawled. *You know that Dahnai's gonna really disrupt what's already pretty crazy*, he warned.

I expect her to try to dominate your time, love. She doesn't get to see you often, and I know she'll want to capitalize on the fact that you're finally bringing her to your home. You know, she sent slyly, this will be her first real chance to meet Symone, outside of an official setting.

I didn't think of that. I expect that should be amusing, he chuckled audibly. *Symone won't be afraid of her at all. That should be refreshing for Dahnai.*

All your girltoys gathered in one place. How will we ever decide how to share you, she teased, leaning over and kissing him playfully on the chin.

That's the last thing on my mind right now.

Well, you'd better get it into your mind. You know that Dahnai will not pass up this chance. I fully expect you to be sleeping over with her tonight, so much so that I'm spending tonight with Tim and Symone.

It's Tim's turn, eh?

Yeah, he's really looking forward to it, she winked. *So am I.*

Well, have fun.

Oh, we will. Symone already can't sit still at the thought of it. Last night before I came to bed, she caught me in the kitchen and kissed me. I almost thought you were kissing me for a minute, it was really hot. Then Ayama came in and caught us, she sent with a laugh. I thought I was gonna die of embarrassment, but she just winked at me and told us to carry on. And Symone did, she sent with a memory of the sensation of Symone grabbing her in all kinds of places. I swear, if we wouldn't have been in a house full of people, I think Symone would've sat me on the counter and went down on me right then and there. You have no idea how hard it was to come up here and go to sleep after that, she complained. *But I knew you were tired.*

You should have gone over to their place.

No, I didn't want to. You always sleep better when I'm here. I wanted you to have a good night's rest, and besides, there's always my trusty old Number Nine, she sent with a dirty undertone. *Ten minutes in the bathroom with a dildo fixed that problem.*

Did you have to dust it off first?

She laughed. *It was a little surprised to see me when I dug it out of the drawer, she winked. Between you and Tim, I haven't been without a partner when I'm bandy for like two years.*

I must have really been out of it if that didn't wake me up.

You were, but I felt the edges of you reaching out to me when I was close to coming, she told him. I think I triggered a sex dream for you.

If you did, I don't remember it, he told her. I'm a little jealous now.

Of a dildo? Oh, push off, Jayce! she sent with a laugh, grabbing a pillow and smacking him in the face with it.

Now I'll always wonder which one of us is better, he sent with mock regret, pushing the pillow away and looking up at her slyly.

The only thing you're missing is a variable speed setting remote control, she sent with a naughty grin.

Jason sputtered in laughter. *I totally forgot you had that. I haven't seen it in years. I guess I thought you threw it away.*

Baby, a girl never throws away her sex toys, Jyslin told him with twinkling eyes.

Jason grinned. *I guess that means you're stuck with me.*

I'd never throw you out either, but you do have one thing going for you over Number Nine.

What?

At least I don't have to worry about your PPG fading right at the good part.

Jason burst into laughter.

Bantering with his wife never failed to put him in a good mood. The clock told him that Rann would be up any time now, and in their house, that meant that he'd be barging into their room any time now. Rann didn't do it every day, but whenever he'd had an exciting day the day before, he did usually do it the next morning. Rann's habit of barging in on his parents had caused him to walk in on them quite a few times while they were having sex, and when he was having sex with Symone, and when Jyslin was having sex with Tim. But even at the tender age of five, Rann had something of a basic understanding of it, that it was something that mommies and daddies and very special friends of mommy and daddy did with each other, and that it while it was okay to barge in on them, it was also the right thing to do to leave them alone so they could finish. Nothing really upset Rann, and by then, Jason and Jyslin were used to Rann barging in on them. They certainly wouldn't continue having sex in front of him, but it also didn't send them diving behind the bed either. Sex acts were common fare on any channel on Faey vidy, and Faey didn't hide their children from it. So when Rann realized his parents were having sex, what they always called "private time," he knew to come back later.

And he was right on time. Rann opened the door and ran into the room, then came to a stop. "Private time?" he asked, seeing his parents in what, to him, would look like an unusual position. Unusual positions were private time in his mind.

"No, not private time, sweetie," Jyslin grinned. "Good morning!"

"Morning mommy!" he said enthusiastically, climbing up on the bed and sitting on his father's bare stomach. "Can we go see Cybi today?"

"You saw her yesterday, sweetie," Jyslin told him, leaning over and kissing him. "But someone really special is going to come visit today," she told him.

"Who?"

“Empress Dahnai,” she told him. “Remember her?”

“No, but Surin shows me pictures of her,” he said. “Isn’t she the mommy of the girl I’m gonna marry?”

“That’s right, she is,” Jyslin told him. “She’s coming to see us today, to make sure we’re all okay after what happened yesterday.”

“That’s nice of her,” he bubbled.

“I guess it is at that, kidlet,” Jason told him, bouncing him a little on his stomach, which made him giggle. “You’re gonna have to be extra-good for her, you know. She’s a very important lady. You know, top-button good.”

“I hate top-button good,” he pouted.

“I hate it too, believe me, kiddo,” Jason chuckled.

Rann climbed off his father’s stomach and crashed into Jyslin’s bare chest, making her breath escape her in a *whuff*. “Careful, sweetie,” she said a little breathlessly. “I wasn’t ready for that.”

“Sorry, mommy. Can we have french toast?”

“I’ll have to ask Ayama about that, sweetie,” she told him. “Hold on.” *Ayama, are you awake?*

Of course I am, my Lady. Is Rann up?

He’s up. He wants french toast. Do you have what you need for it?

I’m out of eggs. I can go get some if he can wait.

“I can wait, mommy.”

Jyslin and Jason both gave him a surprised look. “Rann! Did you hear that?” she asked quickly.

“Yes, mommy. Ayama said she’s out of eggs.” He gave a confused look, then looked around. “I didn’t hear it with my ears, though. It was like Ayama was talking in my head.”

Jyslin hugged Rann, bouncing him up and down in her lap. “Ohhh, that’s my big boy! You heard us *sending*, baby!”

“I did?”

“You did, honey! I’m so proud of you I could burst!”

“It sounded kinda funny,” he said seriously.

Jyslin laughed. “Well, you’ll get used to it,” she winked at him. “Now, since my Rann is becoming a big boy, we have to get him some breakfast! And after breakfast, you and me and daddy are going to sit down and talk about it. Remember what I told you about what would happen when you could hear sending?”

“Yeah, that I have to start new lessons and stuff, so I know what I’m doing.”

“Just so, sweetie,” she grinned.

“I don’t want to do new lessons.”

“You’ll *like* these lessons,” she told him.

“You will, kiddo. They’re very fun,” Jason agreed. “And you get to learn how to talk like the adults, too.”

“Does that mean I have to do private time?”

Jyslin snorted, then burst out laughing. “No, dear, not til you’re older.”

“Yay! Private time looks all icky!”

“You won’t think so when you’re older, son,” Jason chuckled. “Now go get dressed while Ayama goes and borrows some eggs from someone.”

“I get to talk like grown-ups!” he shouted in excitement as he jumped out of bed and ran out the door.

Jason put his head back in Jyslin’s lap. *They grow up so fast*, he lamented.

Now that bitch Yana can’t lord it up on me that her daughter’s talent is awake, Jyslin sent with surprising heat.

You are so competitive, he teased.

Of course I am. I’m Faey.

He’s his mother’s son, that’s for sure. Five years old, and his talent’s awakening.

He’s better than his mommy. I wasn’t active until I was seven. He beat me by two years, she sent with vast pride in her thoughts. *Everyone, Rann’s talent is starting to awaken*, Jyslin sent openly with impressive power, probably waking quite a few people up, given she had a range of a good twenty miles. *So send with care for the next few days, alright?*

Wow, and he’s only five! Congratulations, Jayce and Jyslin! Sheleese sent immediately, and it was followed by an onslaught of people adding to Sheleese’s congratulatory message.

Now that’s the son of a Marine! Myri added at the end.

I’ll start arranging the party, Surin sent privately to both Jason and Jyslin.

Oh, would you, Surin? Jyslin answered

It would be my pleasure. Despite his age, a child simply cannot have his talent awaken without a passing party.

A *passing party* was a Faey custom for children whose talent awakened. It was a celebration of a child beginning to mature into an adult, passing into a new phase of his or her life, though it usually was held for a child in his or her teenage years, also entering puberty. For normal children, it was something like a Jewish *bar mitzvah*, the celebration of adulthood, but Rann was not a normal child. Jason was fairly sure that Surin would arrange something like a birthday party for him, a grand and fun celebration that he and all the kids could enjoy, while the parents and adults celebrated the child’s stepping into the next level of Faey society. At one point in the party, when the parents introduced the child to the adults attending, it would be the first time that any adult other than the child’s parents would directly send to them.

What day would you like it on?

Any day will do, Surin. We’ll make sure to work around your schedule, Jason told him.

I’ll set it for Chiira afternoon, then, your Grace. May I borrow from petty cash?

Surin, you'll get a blank check, Jyslin declared.

No need to get quite that outlandish, my Lady, Surin sent with amusement. *I just need to buy a few things we don't have on Karis, that's all. I want it to be special for Rann.*

Like what?

Well, I thought we'd get them some of those inflatable jumping houses they use on Terra to play on in addition to the usual games and activities, he pondered.

As much as he bounces around? He'd be thrilled, Jason sent with an audible laugh. *But we can make those.*

No, I want to buy them, Surin said. *I want it to be a celebration, not extra work, not given how much work is facing us right now. Just let me handle it, your Grace.*

Alright, Surin. You can dip into petty cash all you need to.

I'll get to work on it right now.

Take all the time you need, Surin. Consider yourself on special party duty. That's your only concern.

I can handle the party and my other duties, Lady Jyslin, Surin sent with amusement. *Now stop trying to turn this into an Imperial Ball.*

Jyslin blushed, which made Jason laugh delightedly. *Busted!* Jason sent to both her and Surin.

I'm gonna bust you, buster, she sent with an ugly, snarky undertone. She took up the pillow and started beating him with it, causing him to cover his head with his arms and laugh like a little kid.

Jyslin was just too good to be true sometimes.

After breakfast, they sat down with Rann and explained things to him. Jason was impressed by Jyslin, because she was obviously ready to give him that speech. She explained how talent worked in ways Rann would understand, then explained what he would be learning in the coming days, being very particular to stress how important it was for him to learn how to close his mind.

“What happens if I don't?”

“Then everyone around will be able to hear what you're thinking,” she told him. “And you'll hear all the people thoughts of the people around you who don't know how to close their mind, and they'll be so loud that you'll have trouble hearing your own.”

“Oh. That doesn't sound good.”

“No, it's not,” she winked.

“Wait a second. I have to learn how to do this, right?”

“Right.”

“Doesn't that mean you could hear me thinking all this time?”

Rann was *sharp*, that was for sure. Jason had to suppress a laugh, and Jyslin gave him a withering glare. “We *could* have, sweetie, but we adults just tune you out,” she told him. “That's another thing we're going to teach you.”

Rann seemed to mull that over, scratching at his blond-orange hair. "That's how you knew I broke the lamp, isn't it?"

"That's right," she said with a sly smile.

"Oh, okay I guess. Why didn't you teach me to do it before now?"

"Because your mind isn't ready to do it the right way until your talent wakes up," she explained. "But just think," she said, leaning forward and whispering. "When you learn what we teach you, you'll be able to hear your brothers and sisters thinking. They won't be able to lie to you anymore, just the way we knew you were lying when you said you didn't break the lamp."

Rann's face took on a slightly evil grin, and Jason gave Jyslin a surprised look. "I will, won't I? They won't know how to do that! They'll never hide my Brody doll and tell me it's on the roof again!"

You just opened a can of worms, Jyslin, Jason sent with both amusement and surprise.

I'll make sure he doesn't abuse it, she winked.

"Well, it's about time for me to go," he said regretfully. "I have to go get armored up, then go pick up Dahnai."

"Oooh, can I go, daddy?" Rann asked excitedly.

Aya gave him a stern look and shook her head.

"I'm afraid not, kidlet," he told him with sincere regret, reaching over and ruffing his hair. "Miss Aya says no, and as you know, she's the boss when it comes to keeping you safe."

"Awww!" he complained.

Tell you what, Rann. While your daddy's picking up the Empress, why don't we go to the boardwalk? Aya offered, sending openly, and *not* sending in that special manner she usually used that allowed children to hear her, a type of open sending similar to the technique they used to allow the humans to hear their thoughts.

"The boardwalk? *Yay!*" he squealed in delight, jumping up and running towards the kitchen. "We're goin' to the boardwalk, Ayama, we're goin' to the boardwalk!"

"Just think, you won't need to do it the hard way anymore," Jyslin said to Aya with a wink.

Thank Trelle. That always gave me a headache, she grunted mentally. *Semari, pull out the cart, we're taking Rann to the boardwalk.*

The boardwalk was the proof that Karsa was a living, breathing city. It was an entertainment area like the old Atlantic City boardwalk back on Earth, a boardwalk filled with games, music, festive shops selling all kinds of colorful and useless trinkets, and a few small rides, mainly for kids. It was the place where the parents of Karsa brought their kids for some fun and entertainment, and luckily for Jason, the boardwalk was only about two miles from his beachfront compound, on the western edge of Karsa.

Ryn, Suri, report to the Duke's dropship. You're escorting him today.

On our way, commander, Ryn answered.

Myri, it's time for me to go. What have you got?

I have five destroyers, a cruiser, and a heavy cruiser that are repaired enough to do the job, she answered.

Have all of them readied to leave, Aya commanded. *There's still a threat that the Consortium might attack. I will not risk*

putting his Grace and my Empress in a single ship with no escort or protection.

Do it, Jason agreed. Aya's right. I'm not worried about me, but I will not leave Dahnai exposed like that. She needs a full escort.

I'll have them exit Kosigi in fifteen minutes.

Which heavy cruiser is it?

It's the Arabax.

Uh, you better tell Sevi to keep her mouth shut.

I'll make it abundantly clear to her that keeping her chair depends completely on not pissing off Dahnai.

That should work. I think she'd marry that ship if she could.

*I think she has sex with it, Myri sent flatly, which made several people in the house laugh. Captain Sevi's...attachment to her ship was well known in the KMS, so much so she turned down command of the *Trelle's Gift* to stay on the *Arabax*.*

After being ferried up, Jason got a look at the ships, and saw that just one day wasn't enough to make them look new. All of them showed scars from the battle, and the destroyer *Fuji* had an obvious patch that ran nearly seventy feet across its bow. But despite the signs of combat, all the ships were steady and strong in space, and looked more than capable of a short trip to Draconis.

They landed in the main bay of the *Arabax*, a heavy cruiser commanded by Sevi Avanne. Sevi was a discipline problem in the KMS because she had a mouth and didn't have enough self control to know when to keep it closed. But despite that, she was one hell of a good captain, and when the chips were down, a fellow couldn't be in better hands. She and the command staff of her ship greeted them in the landing bay. Sevi was a tall, rather flat-chested Faey woman with hair the color of pampas grass, kept in a short pixie style, and she was one of the rare Faey he knew with a tattoo. She'd got it on Terra, a swirling pattern tattooed on her right ear, from the lobe to the pointed tip. Jason always rather thought it made her look quite striking. She saluted him sharply, then hugged him when he stepped up. "It's good to see you in person, your Grace," she said honestly, speaking aloud for the benefit of one of her two human staff officers. The male, Patrick Abrams, was a human telapath, a Baron in the house. "Are your kids okay? Did they come through alright?"

"No problems at all," he said gently. "They didn't even know it was a battle."

"Thank Trelle," she said sincerely. "I have a crew doing what they can to convert one of the guest cabins to be suitable for her Imperial Majesty, but I'm afraid it won't be what she's used to," she apologized.

"Don't even bother doing that," Jason told her. "I'll take her to one of the normal guest cabins. I want her to know she's not quite so special when she's in *my* back yard."

Ryn and Suri gave him a surprised look, but Sevi just laughed delightedly. "We can do that," she winked. "Would you like to come to the bridge, your Grace? Or would you like to go to a cabin?"

"I'm kinda tired, and I need to call Myri, so you can put me in a cabin for now. Sorry."

"No offense taken, your Grace," she grinned. "I figured you might be too busy to grace us on the bridge while we jump. But I had to offer. We all know you love being on the bridge, butting your nose in our business."

"It's how I keep you girls honest," he told her blandly.

She laughed. "Take his Grace to a guest cabin, Lieutenant Abrams."

“Certainly, sir,” the human male said, stepping up. “If you’d follow me, your Grace?”

Jason, Ryn, and Suri followed the tall, rather handsome blond man as he took them through the passages of the ship. Jason knew this officer. He was the second officer on the *Arabax*, and had some very good scores. He was one of the officers currently under consideration for command...and with the battle costing them so many flag officers, he very well might get his chance.

It must be rather interesting for you on a ship with so many Faey, Ryn sent in the manner that allowed humans to hear her.

It’s interesting enough, Abrams sent in reply, which made Ryn miss a step. *I’m sorry to startle you. Everyone aboard knows I’m a telepath,* he grinned back at her. *I forgot to introduce myself.*

That’s one hell of a secret, she sent with a silent laugh.

It’s no secret, he scoffed.

A tall, handsome human telepath? You must be very popular.

Sometimes I wish I were gay, he sent with honesty, which made Suri and Ryn explode in voiceless laughter. *There aren’t many men serving on these ships as it is, so those of us who are usually have quite a few girls looking our way after a couple of weeks of exercises.*

I’m sure you don’t mind.

I didn’t at first, but it gets kind of silly after a while, he explained. *And they love to tease us, too. At the end of our last rotation, the engineers kept selling the passcode to my door to any girl who’d pay, so I installed a zapper on my keypanel. When the engineers came down and disabled it, I called them into a meeting and demanded half the profits. That just took all the fun out of it for them,* he sent with a chuckle. *My friend Wilson had a line of girls standing outside his door after he got off duty, just lined up as happy as you please, waiting their turn. It was all a big joke, though.*

It sounds funny to me.

Well, they learned the hard way you don’t piss off the guy who’s in control of the laundry. After the line stunt, every girl on the ship got back her underwear, two sizes too small.

Even Jason burst out in laughter after that one. *Now that’s revenge!* Jason sent admiringly.

Yeah. I thought it was pretty damn clever. Here we are, your Grace, he said, opening a door in the passage, showing a rather large guest cabin with a window on the far wall. *If you would, please strap in once you’re inside. The captain will be jumping any minute.*

We will.

I like him, Ryn sent cheekily as they entered and brought out the jump seats, which were recessed in the wall by the bed.

I think he has the right mettle to be in command, Jason pondered openly as Ryn helped him lock in. *He has a sense of humor, and that’ll help him deal with Faey, but he also has enough sense of authority to make them cut the bullshit and obey him.*

Is he in line?

He’s one of the ones under consideration. I think I’ll have a talk with Myri.

Jason talked with Myri about the repair progress as the ships prepared to jump, then brought up Abrams with her, telling him she needed to take a good look at him. The ship jumped moments later, and he continued his conference with Myri as the ships approached Draconis. He then called Dahnai, who appeared in her apartment, topless, with Kellin behind her handing something off to a maid. “Hey babes, we’re getting ready now,” she told him. “I’m bringing Kellin and Shya and my guards, but no one

else. I want Shya and Rann to get to know each other,” she grinned.

“That’s fine. We’re approaching Draconis now. We’ll let you come up in a dropship, just have your pilot approach the largest ship. Our traffic officer can guide you in.”

“I got a visual on them now,” she said, looking to her left. “Shit, babes, you weren’t kidding when you said *all* your ships were damaged.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Dahnai.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you topless because you’re getting ready, or just to show off your tits?”

She laughed, holding up a stained piece of cloth in her hand, which had been out of view. “Shya spilled *oye* juice on my shirt,” she explained. “She’s been bouncing all over the place since I told her she’s coming and none of her brothers and sisters are.” Shya came into view behind her, her platinum hair flying behind her as she ran across the room without outer robe, as one of the grooms chased behind her, shaking the robe in his hand and calling after her.

“I see,” Jason chuckled. “We should be there, in, oh, hold on.” *Sevi, how long?*

About fifteen minutes.

“Fifteen minutes.”

“We’ll be ready,” she said as a maid handed her a new shirt, and she shrugged it on. The maid started buttoning it up for her, but she slapped her hands away. “Oh, and here, just for you, babes,” she said, opening her shirt and thrusting her breasts out boldly.

Jason laughed. “Now that’s Dahnai,” he grinned. “See you in a bit.”

“We’ll be there.”

She’s gotten so big, Ryn sent, a bit wistfully.

She’s going to be a heartbreaker, Suri added. I could see it when she was born. She has her mother’s face.

She better not break my son’s heart, or I’ll throttle her, Jason sent forcefully, which made the two guards grin at him.

Jason and the two Imperial Guards were just part of the large, hastily assembled honor guard that met the Empress’ rather large dropship. They were all in their Class A’s, with Captain Sevi and her first officer, Commander Bralla, standing just behind Jason. The dropship came into the bay as the Raptors flying escort landed on each side of the dropship, and the hatch opened. Dahnai’s Imperial Guard, nearly 40 of them, marched out of the hatch, looked around, then nodded back to the ship and stood at attention. They saluted as Dahnai came out of the hatch and down the stairs, which caused everyone in the bay to snap to attention and salute the Empress of the Imperium. She wasn’t wearing robes like Kellin and Shya, she was wearing that simple button-down shirt and a pair of soft brown pants, with slippers on her feet. Jason bowed to her as she approached, and she just laughed and rapped the front of his armor. “So you’re *still* afraid of facing me without this,” she teased.

“I kinda didn’t bring any other clothes,” he admitted with a wry smile. “It was armor or standing here naked.”

We don’t allow his Grace to enter potentially dangerous situations without full protection, your Majesty, Ryn sent respectfully, bowing to her. And visiting you carries its own unique forms of danger.

Dahnai laughed loudly, then reached out and clapped her hand on Ryn’s armored shoulder. “I’ve missed you, Ryn,” she admitted. “I really regret attaching you to Rann’s guard.”

We miss you as well, your Majesty, Ryn sent with simple elegance.

“Your Highness,” Jason said, bowing to Kellin as he led Shya out by her hand. “How have you been?”

“Busy, your Grace,” he chuckled. “I’ve been taking correspondence courses through the Academy. They fill up my free time.”

Shya pulled free of Kellin’s hand and hugged Jason’s leg. “Unca’ Jason!” she said excitedly. “We gonna go see Ranny?”

“We are, your Highness,” Jason nodded, reaching down and taking her hands, then picking her up and kissing her on the cheek, which made her giggle. “Have you been good?”

“I’ve tried,” she said honestly, which made Dahnai laugh.

“*Try* being the key word there,” she added, taking Shya from Jason and bouncing her on her hip. Since Shya didn’t yet live with Dahnai, not until she was ten, Dahnai was very intimate with her when she did have her, liking to hold her and keep her close.

“Your Majesty, may I present Captain Sevi Avanne, commanding officer of the *Arabax*,” he said, motioning at Sevi. “And this is her first officer, Commander Bralla Aeyenne.”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Sevi said, saluting, then bowing very deeply to her.

“You look familiar to me,” Dahnai said critically, putting a finger on her chin. “Have we met?”

“Uh, n-no, your Majesty,” she stammered.

“I *know* I’ve seen you before,” she said persistently, looking her up and down. “Have you ever seen me in person before?”

“Yes, your Majesty, when you toured the *Aranno*. I was at the helm when they showed you the bridge.”

“Ah, I remember,” she nodded.

“I’m flattered you remember me, your Majesty,” Sevi said with sincere amazement.

“I remember because you looked about ready to wet yourself,” she winked.

Sevi blushed deeply.

“She’s come a long way since then,” Jason said, defending the honor of his captain. “She’s one of the best captains I have. That’s why she’s here.”

Sevi beamed at him.

“We have a guest cabin, Empress,” Jason told her. “We can catch up as Sevi takes us home.”

“Lead on, Jason,” she said with a dazzling smile.

The Imperial Guard escorted them through an empty passage to the guest cabin, which was close to the main landing bay so guests didn’t have to go far, and four guards took defensive positions in front of that door. Dahnai seemed a little underwhelmed when she was led into a very plain guest cabin, but Kellin didn’t seem to even notice. He took Shya from her and took her over to the table, setting her down in a chair and pointing out the large window, starting to name the continents of Draconis for her.

“Well, I see you like to keep me in my place outside of the public eye,” she said with a look at him.

“It keeps you grounded,” he said dryly as he motioned for her to take a seat on the couch facing the window. “You could do with a little humility now and again. It helps you keep your perspective.” She sat down beside him, and Shya ran over and climbed into her lap. Dahnai kissed her daughter on the cheek fondly as Kellin came over and sat on the chair by the couch.

“Alright, straight up, hon, how bad was it?”

“What I told you earlier,” he answered. “My people have cleaned up most of the mess and we’re working to repair the damage.”

“Did you capture any of them?”

“We got some of it, mainly an Urumi capital ship,” he answered. “We have quite a few Urumi prisoners to ship back to the Collective, but we didn’t take any of the others alive. When they realized they were going to lose, they tried to ram my ships. The ones that weren’t killed killed themselves. I’ll have Miaari make up a report you can take back with you to your intelligence people. We have to share some of this, you have to know about it.”

“I’m glad you realize that,” she told him seriously. “How are the kids? Did the attack scare them?”

“They never knew what happened,” he told her. “They were in an underground bunker, and they never saw any evidence there was any fighting.”

“Well, that’s good. “How long is it going to take you to get back up to strength?”

“It shouldn’t take too long,” he said after thinking about it moment. “To be honest, we won’t really need your fleet there, we can protect ourselves. The planetary defense grid came through without much damage at all, and they’re getting the ships back up as quick as they can.”

“I told you, babes, I won’t buy that until I see it myself and I’m satisfied you’re going to be alright,” she told him adamantly. “You can hold yourself apart from us all you want, but at the end of the day, you *are* part of the Imperium, and I *do* have a sacred duty to protect you. I will not leave any part of my empire hanging with its tits wagging in the breeze, just waiting for someone to come along and grab them.”

“Well, I appreciate that, hon. What are you doing about the Urumi?”

“I have a task force attacking Skralla as we speak, and they’ve already captured Aurigae,” she told him fiercely. “Most of their fleet is either destroyed or in hyperspace, retreating back to Collective space. I’m going to beat the shit out of their border systems, then mass my entire fleet in the Aurigae system and demand a peace treaty that forces them to give up Aurigae to us. I’ve already got a stargate en route to Aurigae.”

“Be careful.”

“Aurigae fell in two hours, and Skralla V surrendered without a fight,” she said dismissively. “They’re attacking Skralla IV right now. The system was totally undefended, all it had was planetary defenses.”

“You know, it makes you wonder what the Urumi were thinking,” Jason mused aloud. “They stripped all their defenses to attack us, then they turn around and retreat from Draconis and Arctus without firing a shot.”

“Maybe the Consortium promised them help, but when they broke their relations, they reneged and left the Urumi hanging.”

“Possible. But still, that’s odd,” Dahnai noted. “If the Consortium broke off with the Urumi, why did they attack *you*? And if they really were allied, why did they not attack Draconis and Arctus too?”

“They came after *me personally*, Dahnai,” Jason told her. “For some reason, the Consortium wanted to kill me.”

“You *are* a rather important person, babes,” she winked. “Seriously, you’re about the only person who can speak to half this

side of the galaxy, and they'll *listen* to you. Demir's sword, I certainly couldn't do that. Maybe this Consortium knew you have that kind of influence, and tried to kill you."

"I guess that's possible. Right now, though, just about anything is nothing but conjecture." He glanced at Kellin. "They tried to do the same thing to you, too. Or Kellin, more to the point."

"I still can't believe that," Kellin said.

"It doesn't make any sense at all," Dahnai said absently, tapping her chin with a finger. Shya reached out and tapped the other side of Dahnai's chin with her finger, which made her laugh and kiss her daughter on the cheek. "Why would they try to kill *Kellin*? If this assassin could get that close to us, why not target *me*? That would be much more effective. Kill me, and the Imperium goes bonkers."

"That's what doesn't make any sense," he agreed. "Near as we can figure, the Urumi or Trillane or whoever sent Rahne wanted to drive a wedge between you and me, but leave you in control of the Imperium."

"I'll have to ask Maeri about that," she said in a dangerous voice. "Clearly, we're missing some really big pieces of this puzzle. I just *do not* understand what was going on over there with the Urumi and this Consortium. There's too many things that just don't add up, don't make sense, and just plain old confuse the fuck out of me."

"I've been trying to figure it out for a few days now," he told her with a wry chuckle. "It doesn't get any easier over time, believe me."

"I do believe it's time for me to take a pretty significant contract out with the Denmother," Dahnai mused. "Oh, by the way, expect to have your people start returning home by the end of the month. Maeri submitted a schedule. I forwarded it to Secretary Kim for you."

"That's great news!" Jason sighed explosively.

"They'll be returned free of the conditioning Trillane put in them," she assured him. "They *better*. Maeri came a vulpar's whisker from losing her charter."

"Why didn't you take it, after everything she did?"

"Because it would have caused more chaos than it solved problems," she answered. "I'd have had to integrate Trillane loyalist commoners into other houses, and the Imperium doesn't need that kind of destabilizing influence right now. Keeping them all together and in a house that's now a social and political pariah keeps them under control."

He couldn't argue with that kind of logic, so he nodded.

"Oh, don't worry about Maeri getting off the spot this time," she said with narrowed eyes. "I raked her over the coals, and the whole Imperium knows what she did. If anyone in the *Siann* ever talks to her again, it'll be a miracle. Right now, all Trillane wants to do is slink into the deepest hole they can find and hope the Imperium forgets their treachery sometime in the next three hundred years."

"Punish her all you want, I'll just cheer you on," he told her bluntly.

Your Majesty, your Grace, we'll be jumping in a couple of minutes. Could you kindly strap in please? Sevi sent politely.

"Alright, let's get ready," Jason said as the guards outside entered the guest cabin, and Jason showed them where the jump chairs were. There weren't enough for everyone, only eight in the chamber, so the six guards in attendance decided among themselves which two would be using the chairs in another cabin. Ryn and one of Dahnai's guards left the chamber, and Jason watched as the guards expertly helped the Imperial family strap in, as Dahnai told Shya about hyperspace, and how it would be really crazy, but nothing she saw or heard would be real or could hurt her. The guards checked the Empress, then Kellin, then Shya, and then even checked him, then they locked themselves in themselves. *The Imperial family is strapped in and ready to jump*, the commander of the guards sent through the ship.

“Is it really like a dream when you’re awake?” Shya asked Kellin as Jason felt the ship turn.

“Yeah, it is, honeybear,” he told her. “I usually close my eyes. I don’t like it, really.”

“You big chicken! I’m gonna keep my eyes open!”

“You’re braver than me,” he told her, tightly closing his eyes.

“Someday you’re gonna have to explain how your ships can jump hyperspace in real time,” Dahnai told him, quite seriously.

“I guess you can always hope I will,” he told her evenly.

“Bastard.”

“Your one and only.”

After jumping, Dahnai demanded that she be given access to a screen and cameras so she could survey the system. He allowed it, and she scanned the area as Kellin stood behind the couch, his face quite rapt in wonder. “It looks almost the same as the pictures in the history books,” he breathed. “I can’t believe I’m looking at *Karis*.”

“To you, it’s history. To me, it’s home,” Jason told her, controlling the view, then zooming in. “That’s Karsa right there, the capital city. That’s where we’re going. I live on a house on the beach. It’s a little warm for me, but Jyslin won that little argument. Besides, I can tolerate the heat as long as I’m living by the sea.”

“I see your people have cleared the battle debris,” she noted.

“We have the bigger pieces in orbit by one of our research stations,” he told her, showing her the space station and the twisted wreckage parked in orbit near it.

“I hope you won’t keep all that hidden behind your wall,” she said dangerously.

“Dahnai, my oath makes me protect *our* technology. It has nothing to do with *theirs*. I’ll be giving you almost everything we learn about the technology the Consortium gave to the Urumi, because now that the Urumi have it, you’re going to *need* it.”

Dahnai gave him a bright, glorious smile. “Well, you just avoided about six days of nagging,” she told him with a wink.

“I’m *so* glad.”

Jason rode with Dahnai in her dropship, but *he* was the one flying it, as a squadron of Karinne Raptors joined the two Raptors that had come with the Empress on the trip down to the planet. Her dropship handled like a pregnant whale, and he was a little rusty flying by hand, so it was just a touch unsteady there when he brought it out of the bay. But by the time they entered an entry vector, the ship responded to him with delicate certainty. Dahnai was in the copilot’s chair to look out the windshield, much to her guard’s objections, and he pointed out landmarks and features to her as they descended to the planet. “That’s Karsa right there,” he said as the city came into view as they descended.

“There are *so many* people!” she said in surprise, looking at the capitol city of Karis, a block of civilization surrounded by green, on the only green continent on the planet. “Where did they all come from?”

“From the Imperium,” he told her. “I have Faey, Terrans, Makati, and Kizzik here. I even have a small tribe of Parri,” he added. “I had agents out in the Imperium, looking for the right kind of people who could come here and start something new. When they found them, people who didn’t mind rolling up their sleeves and wouldn’t be too worried about living isolated from the rest of civilization, I’d bring them here, grant them some land, and let them get to work. And every month, I bring more and more, as we reclaim the planet and make it green again. As soon as we finish terraforming a new section, people move in and get to work making it thrive. They build communities, businesses, schools, parks, they build everything they need, and then they make it live. *They* built all of that, Dahnai. Karis is a thriving economy now. I have industry, agriculture, art, entertainment, education,

research, everything you'd find on any other planet. You can go out into Karsa later, and you wouldn't know you're on a planet that's separate from civilization. The only difference is, we make almost everything we need here, by ourselves, for ourselves. Hell, we've even started trading with the Imperium now, through a series of shell companies and fronts that hides who we are from the rest of the Imperium. Down there, Dahnai, is the *true heart* of House Karinne. I'm much more proud of what you see below you than I am of anything else. Those people are what make me get out of bed and wonder what I can do today to make their lives better."

"You're a good man, Jason," she told him seriously. "And you've been busier than I thought you were."

"Maybe now you see that I wasn't kidding all those times I told you I was too busy," he said.

"I think I owe you some apologies," she winked.

"That's my house there," he said, pointing to starboard as they turned to make a landing.

"That? Jason, you live in a *closet!*" she protested.

"I'm a simple man, Dahnai. That house is all I need."

"Well, where am I staying? I don't think you have room for me in that thing!"

"If I live in a closet, then you can think of it as me stuffing you in a gown bag," he told her with a chuckle. "I have a little guest house behind the pool for people who stay over. It's a one bedroom cottage, but I'm sure we can work something out. I didn't really expect you to bring Shya. I think we can put her in with Rann."

"They need to get used to sleeping together anyway," Dahnai chuckled.

"Well, let's wait til they know what to do with each other before we start locking them in a room."

Dahnai laughed, then she sighed. "I feel like I'm back on Prius, stuck in that hotel," she complained.

"There's no room service here," he told her. "And I have only two servants who are usually too busy looking after the kids to be gophers. If you want it, go get it yourself."

"What?" she asked, looking scandalized.

"It's what I do, and you're on my planet," he told her evenly. "My planet, my rules. Welcome to being a *normal person*, Dahnai."

"I'm starting to hate this trip more and more," she sulked.

"Try it. You never know, you might find it's not all that bad," he chuckled.

"I *like* being waited on, thank you very much," she said frostily. "I *am* the Empress."

"Then you're in for a very rough couple of days," he told her straightly.

They landed lightly on the big pad behind the house, and a group approached the dropship, flanked by the Dukal Guard wearing Crusader armor that had been chrome plated, making them look very flashy and impressive. He saw Jyslin, Symone, Tim, Miaari, Myri, Kumi, Navii, Myleena, Ayama, Surin, and all of his children down there, all wearing formal dress robes or Class A uniforms, or in Tim's case, an elegant gray suit with a fedora. The Imperial Guard opened the hatch and marched out, surrounding the dropship, then the commander of them sent that it was secure of the Empress to disembark.

Jason led Dahnai out of the dropship, and she hesitated a moment on the last step, before stepping down onto the paved landing pad. "Well, now I can say I've visited *every* system in the Imperium," she smiled.

They stepped up to his friends and family, who all bowed to her, but Dahnai pressed forward and gave Jyslin a warm hug. “Jys! You need to call me more!” she complained.

“I’ve been very busy, Empress,” she said, hugging her back. “But it’s good to see you!”

“We have *so* much gossip to catch up on,” she promised.

“Jyslin,” Kellin said, giving her a chaste hug. “You’re looking well.”

“I’ve been doing good, Kellin. You still playing batchi?”

Kellin laughed. “I try, but the other teams are afraid to play physical. I guess they think that if they bruise me, Dahnai will have them arrested. That takes a lot of the fun out of it for me, half the fun was the checking and tackling.”

“He’s an animal on a batchi field,” Dahnai laughed. “You’d never think it, looking at him.”

“You remember Symone and Tim?” Jason asked.

Dahnai reached a hand out towards Symone. “So, you’re the other *amu dorai*,” she said. “We have to talk.”

“About Jason? Do you have a few extra months?”

Dahnai laughed. “Well, the sooner we start, the sooner we can start comparing,” she winked.

Oh yeah, Dahnai was Faey to the roots of her hair.

“There’s my Rann!” Dahnai said happily. “Come here and give me a kiss!”

Rann stepped forward shyly, and before Dahnai could reach down, Shya came out from behind her. She took his hand boldly, then kissed him on the lips. “Ranny!” she said happily. “Your hair changed!” she said in surprise, looking at his hair.

“It keeps changing color,” Jyslin said with a laugh. “It started out orange, then it turned red, now it seems to be going blond.”

“Are we getting married now, mama?” Shya asked, looking up at Dahnai.

“Not quite yet, baby,” she answered. “Not til you’re both twelve.”

“Can you stay until Chiira, Empress?” Jyslin asked. “Rann expressed, and we’re having his passing party.”

“He expressed, and he’s only *five*? Jyslin, I’m proud of you!” she said happily. “Congratulations!” She made a face. “I didn’t know, I didn’t bring any presents!” she groaned.

“Just being there is present enough,” Jyslin assured her.

“Oh, no, my son-in-law’s big day can’t go without presents,” she said adamantly. “I’ll have to get something.”

“You can go buy something in Karsa,” Jyslin shrugged. “Just don’t get too exotic, that’s all I ask.”

Dahnai scooped up Rann and spun him around. “Rann, I’m so proud of you!” she told him with a broad smile. “Only five years old! You really walked through Trelle’s hair!”

“Aww, it was nothing,” he said modestly. “But now I have to go do more lessons,” he complained.

Dahnai kissed him on the cheek. “Those are the grown-up lessons, which tells everyone how much of a little man you are, honey!” she told him. She put him down, then gave Navii a critical look. “So *this* is where you went, Navii!” she said in surprise.

“They made me quite an offer, your Majesty,” she answered. “I got to build a military from scratch. It was a very satisfying experience.”

“You said you were bringing people here, Jason,” she laughed. “I see you were raiding my military as much as my general population!”

“I was retired, your Majesty,” Navii said primly.

“But it seems you retired just to take this job,” she challenged.

“No, your Majesty. I retired in good faith from the Marines. His Grace worked *very* hard to lure me here. He can be very persuasive when he wants to be,” she said, giving him a slight smile.

“He can at that. You’re looking well, Miaari.”

“I enjoy an assignment that matters to me, that keeps me with friends,” she shrugged. “It makes me content.”

“I guess it would. You about ready to come back home, Myleena?”

Myleena flushed. “I *am* home, your Majesty,” she said simply, touching her gestalt deliberately. “This is my home. It always was.”

“Well, I can’t compete with that,” she said ruefully. “This is Eleri Trillane, isn’t it?”

“*Duchess* Eleri Karinne, your Majesty,” she corrected primly, bowing to Dahnai. “I’m the brains of this outfit. I keep this place in the black.”

“God help me, but she’s not lying. It’s a miracle we’re not using rocks tied to sticks.”

“Hey!”

After the Imperial Guard investigated the three house compound that made up the central compound of Jason’s house—his house, the cottage, the garage, and Tim and Symone’s place—they allowed her to move about the area freely. The Guard had something of a fight with Aya when they wanted to post guards inside Jason’s house, but that was *off limits*. His house was *not* patrolled by armed guards. The other guards patrolled the *outside* all they wanted, but there were no guards posted *inside*. There were guards in his house at all times, however, but not officially posted in defensive locations. They were the personal retinue that interacted with the Dukal family on a direct level, and they were commanded by Aya. They didn’t just defend the Grand Duke and his family, they also helped watch the kids, teach them, and helped the family in their daily routine.

Aya and the other Imperial Guards had a very heated debate about it, until Dahnai stepped in and forced a compromise. Her guards would establish a perimeter and control all movement on and off the grounds, but they’d leave the inside to Aya and her guards, who already had an established pattern and were fully aware of all the little nuances of the house and the people who lived in it. “Really, Sava, think about it. We’re the first visitors to Karis. I don’t think there’s much here to threaten me,” Dahnai told the commander of her guards with a laugh.

We are protecting you from all threats, even the ones the Karinnes themselves may pose, Sava sent flatly. And we can’t protect you if we can’t be there.

“Sava, Aya is an *Imperial Guard* as well. She might be attached to the Grand Duke right now, but she *is* one of you. When she pensions, she’ll go to the pensioner’s wing just like you will. She’s fully aware of things, and I’m sure she’ll keep me well protected.”

Well...alright, Sava acquiesced, but *very* reluctantly.

Once that little spat was settled, Dahnai complained quite a bit about the little cottage that Jason had put aside for her, but Kellin and Shya didn't seem to mind it at all. Dahnai gave her husband a withering glare when he looked around and said that it seemed quite cozy and comfortable, and Shya immediately moved into Rann's room, making herself at home. Rann didn't seem to mind her at all, and they were in there playing as Jason changed out of his armor and into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. Dahnai came to his door with Sava behind as he pulled the tee over his head and pulled it down. "It *is* a closet!" she complained. "There's nowhere to put my things!"

"Have them stow it in the garage," he told her. "Just take what you need and put it in the cottage."

"I need it all!"

"I really doubt that," he said dismissively. "All you really need is a couple of changes of clothes and your toiletries."

"You mean just pick *one or two* things to wear?" she asked, sounding scandalized.

"Do you *need* a full closet of clothes, Dahnai?"

"Yes! I may change my mind!"

"Then think ahead to what you *know* you'll want to wear, and keep it out."

"Babes, women just don't do it that way," she laughed.

"Well, go work it out," he told her.

"This is your room, eh?" she said, stepping in and looking around. "Well, I recognize that wall, but the rest of it is new to me," she chuckled. "I expected something, well...*bigger*."

"Bigger isn't my style, hon," he told her.

She came over and sat on the bed, putting her hands on it and bouncing a little bit. "I see you have a nice strong mattress," she said with a slight smile.

"It gets a lot of exercise."

She laughed. "I can imagine. I'm looking forward to doing it in *your* bed, babes. I'm not passing up a chance to spend the night with my *amu dorai*. So pick a night you can arrange it with Jys and let me know."

"Tonight's fine. Jys is gonna stay over with Tim and Symone tonight. She already kinda planned for this."

"I knew I liked that woman," Dahnai chuckled. "I'll send Vizzi to stay with Kellin in case he gets horny tonight. She likes him, and he thinks she's really hot. He's attracted to buff girls," she laughed. "And Vizzi's the most built guard in the palace."

"Well, look at how built his wife is, and you wouldn't be surprised what he finds attractive," Jason told her.

She smiled, flopping back onto the bed. "You know something?"

"What?"

"This isn't at all what I expected to find. But now that I look around, I realize that this is what I *should* have expected to find."

“Remember where I came from, Dahnai. This is who I am.”

“And that’s just fine with me.”

“I’m so glad you approve,” he said, sitting down and unfolding a pair of socks.

She laughed and slapped him on the side, then put her hand on his back and rubbed it as he put on his socks. “You wanna talk business now, or later?”

“You just got here, Dahnai. Let’s relax a while. We can go over business later. Wanna go down into Karsa so you can pick up a gift for Rann?”

“Sure, after I decide how I’m gonna set up that closet you put me in,” she complained.

“Just look at it as a chance to see how your common citizens live,” he told her blandly.

“You’re just ruining this trip for me.”

Having Dahnai around was both very disruptive and curiously pleasing.

To say she disrupted Karsa was an *understatement*. The Imperial Guard tried to cordon off blocks of the city where she went shopping, and the citizens of Karsa tried to swarm around to see her. It was a fracas there for a while, as she both shopped at quite a few stores and filled the trunk of the hovercar she came in, and did quite a bit of sightseeing. He showed her around the city, showing her the satellite college linked to the Academy, the business district, the Twin Lakes Park on the north side of town, and one of the new schools for the children that had come to Karis. He let her tour a moleculartronics board manufacturing plant, one of the businesses that sold its wares to the Imperium through Kumi’s front system, and then they ate cotton candy and played carnival games down on the boardwalk. Shya baited Rann into riding the loop-the-loop coaster on the strip, but she paid for it when they both staggered off and fought for space at a trash can so they could throw up.

After the tour, they returned home and just relaxed a while. Jason did keep getting constant reports from Myri about the state of repairs and the redeployment of remaining forces, and they started going through the medals and awards that would be given out for valorous acts during combat. Jason had already made it abundantly clear that Sergeant Kyva was getting the Dukal Medal of the Champion, the highest medal available, in recognition of her brazen, almost insane attack on the landing mecha during the land battle on Kosiningi. That single young lady was a very big reason why Jason and his family were still alive. What came with that medal was induction into the noble house with the title of Zarina, promotion to the rank of First Lieutenant (whether she liked it or not), a yearly stipend, and he decided as well that the black Gladiator she piloted in the battle would become *her property*. She would own it, and while the KMS would maintain it and upgrade it as necessary, it was hers to keep. She would also receive the Crystal Cross, the second-highest award, in conjunction with the 21 Gladiator pilots that had faced off against vastly superior numbers and initially held the invaders pinned down on the beach, which bought precious time for the reinforcements to arrive. The captains and crews of all the ships that attacked the Urumi by surprise while Jason tried to take them out with talent would be given the Crystal Cross as well, while the crews on board the KMS ships that attacked the last of the Consortium fleet would receive the Order of Sora, the third highest medal, and virtually everyone that participated in combat would receive both the valorous duty medal and the meritorious service award.

Kyva was going to walk out of that ceremony with four new medals on her chest, officer’s bars, a noble title, and her own personal Gladiator.

But with the honors also came the duties of tending to the fallen. Military funerals were scheduled, and Jason picked several at random to attend, on top of tending the funeral of Captain Travka and every other ship captain who had died in battle. Myri sent him the condolence letters, which he would read and sign personally, and he also had her schedule multiple visits with the survivors of the soldiers killed in battle. Those widows and children would never want for anything, Jason would make *damn sure* of that. No family whose members paid the ultimate price to defend House Karinne would ever face a day of hunger or want. Songa was making sure that the wounded were being well tended, and they were all favorable. She kept a detailed progress report on every one of her patients

Then they talked about promotions. Jason made sure to point out Patrick Abrams as a solid candidate for a destroyer command, and they went through the current captains to decide who was going to move up to replace those who had fallen. When they were done, six destroyer captains were moving up to cruisers, one cruiser captain was moving up to a heavy cruiser, six first officers were taking command of the ships on which they served, and two other officers were jumping over the first officer position to take command.

After they were done, he spent some time with Rann and Shya, who were playing with Kyri and Aran. It was almost funny watching those two. They knew they were going to be married, so Shya kept trying to boss Rann around, but Rann proved to her that she wasn't all that high and mighty when she was in *his* house. They did get along fairly well, though, he had to admit. Despite trying to be bossy, Shya was a good playmate, not even complaining when Rann beat her in a Faey child's game called *Seven Circles*, where the kids moved little rings up a notched pole after spinning a number wheel, trying to get their seven rings to the top first. Aya watched over them with quiet smiles as they moved on to playing with some of the dolls and stuffed animals Rann had. Rann had a broad spectrum of toys, because Faey women kept giving him dolls and things Jason would consider to be girl toys, like play kitchens, while Jason made sure he got the full range of boy's toys; construction sets, toy trucks, his own batchi stick and football, and the like. He had plenty of toys that both genders enjoyed too, like kites and painting sets. So, when Shya came over, at least they had plenty of toys.

Sometimes Jason felt that Rann had too many toys, but looking around the room, he saw that nearly half of them were actually his brothers and sisters' toys. They kept bringing them over when they played and left them behind.

Dinner was a huge affair, so big that Ayama couldn't do it all herself. She had to order out, and Dahnai was introduced to the joys of a Terran culinary delicacy...pizza. Ayama was looking at the prospects of trying to cook for Dahnai and her guards *and* all the people who kept coming over to visit Jason and meet the Empress, so she surrendered and called in a very large order to New Italy, run by a pair of bona fide Italian pizzeria owners, who'd run a pizzeria on Earth before coming to Karis. And their pizza *rocked*.

The table was only big enough for ten people, so ten lucky people were sitting while others filed in and out, attending what had become basically an unplanned party. Kids were screaming and running around, pizza boxes were stacked almost on every flat surface, and Faey chamber music droned in the background from the built-in speakers in the walls and ceiling on the first floor. Dahnai looked a little spooked, constantly looking around, keeping an eye on Shya, who was eating pizza in the living room with the other kids, as adults filched pieces from whichever box held their favorite. Dahnai wasn't used to the loud goings-on, and looked very out of place. But she kept smiling, chatting amiably, and willing to try what was put before her.

"Mmmph, wha' is thiff one?" she asked after taking a bite. "It's delithuff!"

"Pineapple and ham," Symone said after looking at the box. "I'm surprised that you've never had *pizza*, Empress Dahnai!"

"Just Dahnai," she said with a smile. "I don't think you guys would be too impressed with my title anyway. I certainly don't look like the Empress," she said with a face, pulling a string of cheese from the corner of her mouth.

That produced from laughs from the table. "What do you think of Karis, Dahnai?" Maya asked, looking around Vell, who was about to fight Ilia over the last piece of sausage pizza.

"I think it's incredible," she answered. "It got a little annoying that I couldn't open any doors, though. Jason won't explain how that works!"

"It's something best left unsaid, then," Maya said with a smile.

"Which of that pack is yours?"

"Aran, the boy with green hair," she said. "He's Jason's son. The two blond girls over there are my and Vell's girls, Sami and Yuri. "Sami, Yuri, come here and say hello to the Empress!"

The two girls came over holding pizza and tried to bow. "Hello, your Empress," Sami said.

"It's *your Majesty*," Yuri said critically, bumping her younger sister. "Hello, your Majesty," she said with a little bob.

“They’re very lovely.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

“Do you go to school here, or does your mom teach you?” Dahnai asked them.

“Oh, we go to school,” Yuri answered. “I’m in grade four, and Sami’s in grade two.”

“Grade four, eh? What do you do in grade four here on Karis?”

“We’re learning algebra, and we take Faey and history and computer classes,” Yuri answered.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s fun!” she said with more enthusiasm. “We got to go up and tour a ship last month, and it was really neat!”

“Oh really?” Dahnai said with bright eyes. “What did you do there?”

“We’re not allowed to say, your Majesty,” Yuri said with an apologetic bob. “It’s house stuff.”

“I see you teach them young,” Dahnai noted to Jason, who sat beside her.

“You shoulda seen that coming.”

“Well, are you coming to Rann’s passing party?”

“Yeah, school’s out til next week cause of the battle and stuff, so we can be there. But we haven’t bought a gift yet.”

“We’re doing that tomorrow, Yuri,” Maya assured her.

The two girls drifted off as Dahnai watched Kellin eat a slice of pizza, then laughed as he tried to figure out how to break the cheese strings in a dignified matter. “You know, why haven’t we ever heard of this stuff?” he asked, taking another, bigger bite. “It’s great!”

“It’s a Terran recipe, and they don’t serve much Terran food in the palace,” Jason answered.

“I think we have to go have a talk with the kitchen, love,” he noted to Dahnai.

“Hell yes,” she agreed with a chuckle, taking another bite of the pineapple and ham.

“Ayama makes some good pizza. I’ll have her give you the recipe to take home,” Jyslin offered.

“I think I’d like that.”

“When do you think you’ll be going back home, Empress?” Yana asked shyly.

“Not sure,” she answered between bites. “I wanna make sure that Karis is totally safe and secure first, and there’s quite a bit me and Jason have to talk about concerning the Consortium and what happened, too. I’m definitely staying for Rann’s passing party no matter what, though. Two days in that closet,” she grunted, which made them all laugh. “Don’t laugh, I’m not used to living in something that small!”

“We understand that, but it’s still funny,” Symone said cheekily.

“I have to say, though, I’m amazed. I knew you guys were here, but I was expecting a radiation dome or you living on a station or on the moon or something. Not trees, grass, and cities full of people!”

“There were some automated systems left after the attack that cleaned up the radiation,” Jason explained. “They also started the terraforming process, but they all failed centuries ago. When we came here, we just picked up where it left off. We’ll make Karis a living planet again,” he said with affirmation, to which everyone at the table nodded.

“And there are no bugs here,” Sheleese grinned.

“No animals at all except what we brought,” Jason added. “The automated systems only had plant seeds. It couldn’t do anything about animals.”

“Well, sounds like I won’t be worried about something biting me when I go for a swim at the beach,” Dahnai grinned. “I bought myself a nice bikini.”

“Bikini? Dahnai, if you use our beach, you go natural!” Symone told her. “Bikinis are just for going up and back!”

“It’s a tradition,” Maya chuckled.

“Well, far be it for me to buck tradition,” Dahnai said grandly.

“They’ve never explained that to me,” Jason noted to Dahnai.

“Explained what, hon?” Symone asked.

“Why you bother putting on a swimsuit when you just take them off when you get there,” he said.

“Because we have to look *good* coming back and forth, of course, and girls look good in bikinis,” she told him.

“It makes perfect sense to me,” Dahnai said with a nod.

“You’re the one that looks silly, Jason,” Min told him with a wink. “Sometimes he wears trunks, sometimes he doesn’t. When he doesn’t, he comes out naked with a towel over his shoulder,” she told Dahnai, leaning over the table. “Stops every girl on the beach when he does it.”

“I fully understand why,” she said in agreement.

“True, you’ve had up close and personal views of him, you’d know,” Symone giggled. “Jason’s got a big dick, Kellin, so we all have to stop and watch it swing when he walks,” she explained to Kellin, who laughed.

“I’ve had episodes like that myself,” he said. “Back before I married Dahnai, I played batchi in a fun league, and I scored quite a few goals because the defenders didn’t have their eyes on the ball,” he grinned. “I used to wear an oversized cup to keep them distracted.”

“Oh, they had their eyes on the ball, all right,” Symone bantered. “They were looking at the ones that matter more, that’s all.”

“Batchi? How many teeth did you lose?” Lyn asked.

“None, but I got banged around a lot,” he answered. “Most of them took offense to a boy playing a girl’s sport. They used to call my team the Tubers, at least until we started kicking their asses,” he said proudly.

“Kellin’s as strong as he looks,” Dahnai said proudly.

“What’s it like living in the palace?” Ilia asked him.

“It took me a while to get used to it. There’s *no privacy*, anywhere,” he said. “The Imperial Guard is always there, and there’s always maids, servants, and outside there’s flunkies and nobles and cameras *everywhere*. I’m from a very small house, and I wasn’t used to that. I’m like Jason, I never really had any servants when I was growing up, and then I go to a place with no door on the bathroom and a woman standing there watching me while I sit on the toilet. I think it took me two weeks to finally work up the nerve to take a dump,” he admitted, which caused a round of laughter. “But I got used to it, and besides, it was worth it,” he added, reaching out and putting his hand on Dahnai’s forearm. She leaned over and kissed him, then started licking the cheese off his chin, which made him gasp and laugh and try to push her away.

“Sounds like a culture shock, alright,” Ilia noted. “It took me a while to get used to being a noble, but here on the strip, it doesn’t really feel like it.”

“Strip?” Dahnai asked.

“We all live here on the beach,” she answered. “Jayce and the Marines and a few others, like the twins and Kumi. You know, the people close to him. It’s a little contained community where we’re all friends and all our kids can grow up together.”

“Ah, sounds like you’ve got something special here.”

“I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else,” she answered honestly.

“Me either,” Maya agreed. “It’s nice to know that my children will grow up in the best place in the Imperium, but also learn that just because there’s a wall separating our houses from the houses on the other side, it doesn’t make us any different from them.”

“Well, you’re a little different.”

“We’re all of us members of House Karinne,” she said simply. “That’s a tie that matters much more than noble titles and status and prestige. We’re not like any other house you’ve ever seen, Dahnai. Here, anyone on Karis can come to this house and talk to Jason, as long as he’s not busy. There may be a wall and guards here, but they’re not here to keep the people out. They’re basically here to make sure the kids don’t get in trouble.”

“Really?” Dahnai asked in surprise.

“More or less,” he answered. “Not many do, though. I tend to get most suggestions through Civnet, but sometimes people in Karsa will come over and talk to me in person, especially if they think it’s important.”

“I’m amazed your guards don’t have gray hair,” Dahnai chuckled.

“We’re pretty laid back here, Dahnai,” he shrugged. “This is a very isolated, very close community where we all see each other as friends and neighbors, not strangers. We’re very careful to only bring people here who can fit in with that mentality.”

“Well, this wouldn’t work in the Imperium.”

“We know it wouldn’t. We had the chance to create what we wanted, not take over what was left to us,” Jyslin agreed.

“Still, it’s pretty amazing that it works so well. The more people you have, the harder it is to keep that kind of small community feeling.”

“I’m very proud of my people,” Jason said with absolute sincerity.

After dinner and mingling in the spontaneous party, Jason brought Dahnai and Kellin into a more intimate setting, at least after they put the kids to bed. Rann and Shya were put in the same bed, and they snuggled up together in complete contentment. Once that was done, Dahnai and Kellin found themselves sitting in the living room watching in shock as Jason and Jyslin helped

Ayama and Surin clean up, that they would do *manual labor*, then sat down with them on the couch, with Symone, Tim, and Myleena in the chairs around the coffee table. That was the core of his family, for Myleena was his fellow Generation and almost like a sister because they shared so many interests and they were such good friends. Ayama distributed out glasses of wine to them, then patted Jason on the shoulder. “Will you need anything else, Jason? If not, me and Surin wanted to go to our room.”

“No, that’s fine, thanks Ayama,” he told her.

“It was nice to meet you, your Majesty,” she said, bowing to Dahnai. “Good night.”

“Night hon,” Jyslin said, and they all waved to her as she took her leave.

“She seems nice,” Dahnai noted.

“This house would fall apart if she wasn’t here,” Jyslin admitted with a laugh.

Ayama’s a friend much more than a servant, Jason sent, taking a sip of the wine, which was quite good. Miaari hired her for us. She was the perfect woman for the job.

Amen to that, Jyslin agreed. If you want to know who really runs this house, they’re in that room back behind the kitchen. Ayama and Surin keep everything under control and keep all of us on schedule.

Ayama always jokes that since I’m so busy with everything outside my front door, everything inside that door should be the last of my worries, Jason sent with a chuckle. She takes very good care of us.

Well, at least you know how to let servants pamper you, Dahnai winked.

Pamper? Dahnai, the only person that gets pampered in this house is Rann, she challenged. Ayama’s always yelling at us because we keep doing our own laundry and washing the dishes for her when she’s busy with the kids. The only job Jason gladly won’t do is mowing the lawn. He hates it.

I’m still waiting for you to invent a strain of grass that stops growing, Jason told Myleena.

I’ll put it on the board and we’ll take a look at it, she grinned in reply.

You really do things differently, Dahnai sent, her surprise evident in her thought.

It keeps us from getting big heads, Jason shrugged.

I meant to ask, what do you guys do? she asked. I’m sure Jason’s busy running the house, and Myleena is certainly doing research, but what else do you do?

Well, I’m an intelligence analyst, Tim answered. I work for Miaari.

I was trying to get into engineering before I married Jason, so I’m still studying. I work on Myleena’s staff.

She’s pretty good at it, too, Myleena complemented.

I’m kinda not doing anything at all, Symone laughed. I guess that’s why I’m always getting in trouble. I have way too much free time on my hands. I’m Jason’s sex toy when Jys is busy, but that’s about it.

That sounds like a fun job to me, Dahnai sent as she gave Jason a leering smile.

Oh, it is, believe me, Symone agreed with a nod. But we’re gonna give you some space tonight, Dahnai. We figured you haven’t seen him for a while, so he’s all yours.

I intend to take advantage of that, Dahnai assured her. I've already arranged for one of my guards to entertain Kellin tonight.

Jys is coming over to our place, and we're gonna threesome, Symone announced bluntly. I'm already getting wet at the thought of it.

It sounds like I'm going to to the wrong room, Dahnai noted, which made Symone burst out in laughter.

Hell, Dahnai, take Kellin with you. You haven't had good sex til you have your husband on one side and your amu dorai on the other. Just kneel there and let them bounce you back and forth, it's awesome.

Well, that does sound tempting, Dahnai sent honestly, but maybe we'll try that later. I'd like a chance to spend the night in Jason's bed for once, just me and him. There's always tomorrow, though, she said, giving Kellin a sultry look.

I'm still gonna be going at it tomorrow, Symone sent with a predatory smile, reaching over and cupping Jyslin's breast. Tim has great stamina, and we can always just lick each other while he's resting.

Jyslin pushed Symone's hand off her breast primly. Not in public, girl, Jyslin protested.

You never told me your wife and Symone are bi, Dahnai sent privately to Jason, her thoughts naughty and sly.

This is actually fairly new. Jys explained it, she said my attraction to Symone imprinted on her, and it happened to Symone too. She's still trying to get used to it, cause she's straight but she's having sexual feelings about another woman.

Ah, that does happen from time to time, Dahnai noted.

Myleena, though, wasn't quite so tactful. I didn't know you were bi, Jys.

I'm not, she sent with a slight blush. I imprinted from Jason.

Ohhh, Myleena sent with a nod.

That happened to my aunt, Kellin told them. She had some issues with it, but it worked out in the end.

What happened?

She moved my uncle's amu dorai into the guest house, he sent with a wink.

Well, I'm still getting used to it, Jyslin admitted with a slight flush. Our first attempt wasn't very...graceful. Neither of us had ever done something like that before.

Myleena laughed. I guess it wouldn't be, she agreed.

It's a little embarrassing, she confessed.

You certainly weren't very embarrassed when you were eating my pussy, Symone sent, with a slightly challenging tone.

Why would it be, Jys? Myleena sent. It happened, it's a natural thing. Nobody's thinking less of you because of it. In fact, I think it's beautiful. You get to experience everything that makes Jason love Symone first hand, not just through sending with him. It's always better when it's you doing it, not feeling what he's doing through sending.

I never thought of it that way, Jyslin admitted. I'm sorry, hon, I'm just not quite as quick as you are getting used to it, she apologized, putting her hand on Symone's leg.

That's alright, you'll be making it up to me very soon, Symone grinned lasciviously. In fact, I think you'll start making it up to me right now. Let's go back to my room and fuck, she sent graphically, standing up.

Well, that sounds like I'm being sent to my room, Tim sent with a laugh.

I wouldn't keep her waiting, Tim. From what I'm feeling under her thoughts, you wouldn't want to know what she'll do to you if you make her wait, Myleena winked.

Damn right, baby, Symone sent, grabbing Jyslin by the hand and pulling her to her feet.

Symone dragged Tim and Jyslin out with goodbyes, and the Imperial couple gave Jason light smiles after they left. "Symone seems...energetic," she noted.

"That's a tactful way to put it," Jason chuckled. "She's a very loving and affectionate woman, and that's just one way she shows it.

"You said she was brave. You weren't kidding at all."

"Not a bit," he nodded.

"Speaking of going, I need to head out, Jayce," Myleena said, putting her glass down on the coffee table. "I have some lab results to look over and some other stuff to do."

"Alright, see you in the morning," Jason told her.

"Good night, your Majesty, Kellin," she said.

"Night Myleena," they said in unison, and Myleena padded past Aya, who brought Jason a handpanel. He looked over the newest report from the command staff about repairs, and saw that everything was on schedule.

"Thanks Aya," he said as he handed it back, and she nodded and went back to the kitchen.

Dahnai gave Kellin a brief look, and Jason could sense right on the edge of his mind that they were sending privately...and Dahnai was being very strong about it. "Ah, well, I think I'll go settle in over in the closet," Kellin said with a smile at Jason. "I'll see you in the morning, love. Have fun," he said with a grin, then he leaned over and kissed Dahnai. She put her hand on his cheek and kissed him back, then she slapped him on the butt as he got up and left.

"Well, we seem to be alone," she said in a purring voice.

"Let me guess, Symone got to you."

"Guilty," she laughed. "So let's go have some fun."

"As long as you don't mind that I'm a little tired, I'm all yours for as long as I last."

"Why do you think I'm taking you to bed so early?"

Chapter 6

Chiira, 22 Shiaa, 4400 Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 20 November 2013, Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 22 Shiaa, year 1326 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Well, one thing was for sure.

Sex with Dahnai was no different in his bed than it was in hers.

He was a little tired though, so she was somewhat considerate of that, not expecting him at his rested best, but despite that, it was still just as good as it ever was. Five years had done nothing to dampen the attraction they shared, and their long periods apart made each conjugal visit a rekindling of that attraction and passion. Besides, Dahnai was an Empress, and that made her very bold and creative in bed, each session a chance for her to conquer her partner anew with her sensuality, her incredibly sexy body, and her passion.

And Jason just loved to be conquered by her.

It was sunrise, which was when Jason usually got up, but Dahnai was still asleep. She was snuggled up against his back, an arm thrown over him and tucked under his own. Even in sleep, she had a somewhat active mind, which was occasionally telepathically aware. That was both a function of her powerful talent and something of a trained condition that made her very sensitive to changes in her environment. It made her wake up if she sensed unknown active minds approaching her or close to her, and that made her a very light sleeper. She wasn't in an active phase right now, but she was maintaining something of a lingering touch on him that had yet to dissolve. Dahnai was a *very* forceful sender during sex, trying to invade the private realm reserved for him and Jyslin every single time, which made sex with her a telepathic wrestling match of sorts as he maintained the proper distance while she tried to wriggle through his barriers. She was a taker, just like any Empress, trying to take everything she wanted, despite however others may feel about it. He didn't hold it against her, though. That kind of strength and will was mandatory in someone who ruled over the violent and unpredictable Faey.

He reached out a little bit. Jyslin was asleep, as was Symone and Tim, but the very act of reaching out also stirred her, as she sensed his searching thought. Jason and Jyslin had any number of bonds between them, and they were both extremely sensitive to each other. He could sense her moods, could feel it when she was upset or angry, and any time she was emotionally charged, it induced a response in him. But, since he'd been busy himself last night, he didn't pay much attention to her, because he had his hands full.

Good morning, she sent privately to him, rather sleepily. His light touch to see if she was awake had actually woke her up.

I'm sorry, love, he apologized.

It's nothing.

How was it?

You know how it was, came the satisfied response. Tim really enjoyed it. Just to save your pride, he didn't last any longer than you did the first time. He came literally as he was penetrating me. At least you got it all the way into Symone before you popped.

Well, we just can't withstand it. You two are just too damn sexy.

You're such a tease, came the playful response. How was it?

Same as it ever is with Dahnai, he answered. She assaults me with her body and then tries to break into our private domain with her sending.

I felt it here and there. This was the first time you've fucked her with me nearby. She's really invasive, isn't she?

Yeah, but nothing I can't handle.

Thank Trelle you didn't imprint Dahnai on me, she sent with relief, but I think Symone may not have escaped that. I caught a couple of stray thoughts in her about those memories you shared with us of Dahnai naked, and it was getting her horny. You should warn her that Symone might be a little...grabby. Symone wasn't entirely straight to begin with, so she's much more receptive to the idea of attraction to other women.

I'll warn her.

Tim's starting to wake up. You mind if we have a little fun before coming over, or do we have plans?

Nothing that can't be postponed for a little fun, he answered.

Good. You know how much I love a sunrise session.

That's half the fun with you, love. I know when we go to sleep that we're only halfway done.

I know you love it, she sent coyly. Woop, Tim's up. Time to get my piece. Later, my love.

Enjoy.

*Jason figured that he should call in and see if things were still on schedule, so he tried to pry himself free of Dahnai. It caused her to stir, however, and she took a very firm grip on him. *I don't think so, she sent firmly. You are mine until I decide it's time to get up, and I'm not getting up.**

Good morning, he sent with an audible chuckle. Sleep well?

I like this mattress, she announced. Where did you buy it?

In Karsa. I'll give you the address of the store, they can deliver to you at the palace.

That's a deal, she affirmed.

I need to tell you something.

What?

Watch Symone, he warned. Jyslin just told me that she thinks she may have been imprinted with you. And Symone is not afraid of you at all. She was very tentative with Jyslin because they're so close, but you're a stranger, and she'll be very bold. She may be very grabby with you. She might even proposition you.

No problem, Dahnai shrugged. I'm not gay, but I'm not above letting a girl get me off either. If she wants to taste the Imperial pussy, she's more than welcome to. As long as she realizes it's going to be a one way encounter, not an issue.

Make sure you stress that if it happens.

I will. Now, let's talk business.

This isn't a good time to talk business, he told her evenly. It's a little distracting.

No, we're going to talk business, lover, she sent seductively.

Oh, well, now that I don't mind.

They got into some pretty serious business discussion, to the point where they'd just begun intercourse, when the door banged open and Rann and Shya both ran into the room. "Daddy!" Rann said, a bit scandalized. "Private time with the Empress? Mommy's gonna smack you!"

"Your mommy knows what we're doing," Jason said to him, a bit tartly. "Now out."

Dahnai laughed helplessly. "Oh, Trelle. For years the guards kept people out of my room when I have sex, and I finally get caught in the act by my own daughter!"

"That's what we're gonna be doing when we're older," Shya told Rann, throwing her arms around him possessively.

"I think it looks icky, but daddy says I won't think so when I'm older," he told her, in a rather clinical voice.

"This is not a lesson," Jason said dangerously. "Now out."

They filed out, and Dahnai laughed again. "Can you lock your door?" she asked.

"It doesn't have a lock. If you want to keep going, you better be ready for the chance that might happen again."

She gave him a sly look. "It's worth the risk," she told him.

They weren't exactly caught in the act, but Jyslin did come into the room just moments after they finished, while Dahnai was still feeling quite snuggly and affectionate. She was wearing a thigh-length robe, which she shed immediately upon closing the door, displaying her gorgeous body. "Morning," she told them. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Morning Jys," Dahnai said, waving to her. "Did you have fun last night?"

"I just finished having fun," she said with a wink. "That's why I need a shower. I'm a morning girl."

"Me too," she said with a nod. "Our kids walked in on us!"

"Rann does that all the time," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, walking towards the bathroom.

I'm not used to that, it was almost embarrassing, she sent when Jyslin went into the bathroom and out of sight.

You get used to it, Jyslin told her. Did he warn you about Symone?

Yeah, it's not a problem. I can handle it.

Good. I didn't want it to be a surprise.

Well, I appreciate that.

While Jyslin was showering, Dahnai decided that a little more snuggling would bolster her to get up, then she finally decided to sit up and stretch. *I hope Kellin wasn't too lonely last night. He won't sleep with Vizzi, just fuck her, and he's not used to sleeping alone in a bed.*

I'm sure he's fine, Jason told her. He must not be awake yet, so clearly he managed to get to sleep by himself alright.

She climbed over him and got out of bed, and he had to just stop a moment and appreciate how *awesome* she looked. She worked out religiously, so she was very muscular, muscle that enhanced her feminine beauty to maximum effect. Deltoid muscles caused a sleek curve down to her narrow waist, giving her a killer silhouette, which was only enhanced by her naturally wide hips and long, long legs. Dahnai was graced with a great body even without all the working out, with wide hips, long legs, and fairly large breasts, but the muscle on her just made those attributes even more attractive. Dahnai was the only woman he'd ever seen that made ripped abdominal muscles *sexy* on a woman. Jyslin padded out with a towel around her, but she took it off to start drying her hair.

“Done with the shower, Jys?”

“All yours,” she answered, but she too took a moment to look Dahnai up and down. It was the first time that Jyslin had seen Dahnai naked in person.

“Go ahead, appreciate it,” Dahnai said outrageously, turning and striking a little pose for Jyslin, which made her laugh sheepishly.

“I'm just seeing where I need more work,” Jyslin winked. “Jason goes on and on about your body. Sometimes it makes me feel fat and ugly.”

“Oh *please*,” Jason protested scornfully, throwing a pillow at her.

She dodged the pillow with a laugh, and Dahnai walked towards the bathroom. “Towels inside?”

“In the closet on your left,” Jyslin answered.

“Can I borrow your shampoo, Jys? I didn't bring anything with me up here, it's all in that closet he put me in.”

“Sure, second rack.”

Jyslin sat on the edge of the bed, and Jason sat up behind her and dried her hair for her. *You need a shower too*, she sent critically. *Go jump in with Dahnai.*

She mussed me?

She really mussed you.

Alright.

Jason joined Dahnai in the shower, which had room for four people since it doubled as the washing tub, then Jyslin helped Dahnai dry her gorgeous mane of bronze-colored hair as Jason got dressed. The rest of the neighborhood also started getting going, as Jason heard Ayama open send to Rann, asking him to come down to the kitchen and tell her what he wanted for breakfast. Symone sent a tentative sending to see who was up, and Maya asked to come over for breakfast because she was out of milk. *Is the Empress awake, Jason?* Ayama asked.

I'm awake, Dahnai answered cheekily.

What would you like for breakfast, your Majesty?

Surprise me, she answered.

You never tell Ayama that, Jason warned. *She takes all kinds of liberties. Just pick something, and keep it normal,* Jason warned.

Yes, your Grace. Spoilsport, she added, which made Dahnai explode into laughter.

“Would she really have—“

“Yes,” Jason and Jyslin answered in unison. “Ayama is all business, but she has an *evil* sense of humor,” Jyslin added.

“The last time someone said that to her, she put a bowl of sand in front of them,” Jason told Dahnai, which made her explode into laughter yet again.

I think I could learn to like living here, Dahnai sent to Jason with a smile.

After breakfast, a rather large one given that Maya, Vell, and their kids were there, Jason and Dahnai got down to *real* business. They sat down in his study, which was in secure mode to keep their discussion secret, and went over everything that happened in the battle in great detail—or as much detail as he could reveal without breaching Karinne secrecy. They then spent nearly two hours discussing what the Consortium had done, how it made no sense, and discussing what might happen in the future. The discussion widened when Tim and Miaari came into the study, Miaari wearing a memory band and carrying a handpanel. The first thing she did was contact his gestalt and download a series of datafiles into it, and she handed Dahnai the handpanel. She nodded to Tim, he returned the study into secure mode.

“This is a detailed account of everything we have learned so far from the wreckage,” she said, “and also the preliminary intelligence gathered from the Urumi captain we have in custody.”

“What did you learn from him?”

“Not much more than we have pieced together, but we did pick up one interesting bit of information,” she answered. “It seems that he overheard a confrontation between the Queen and the Consortium representative. He related that the Consortium wanted the *entire* Urumi fleet to attack Karis, but the Collective was very resistant to that idea, because it is a six day jump to Karis from Collective space, where it is only a three day jump to Draconis. They were afraid that the Imperium would retaliate before they could get their fleet back to defend their border systems. In that respect, they were correct.”

“Damn right they were correct,” Dahnai said aggressively.

“When he was leaving, the Consortium was offering their own ships to defend Urumi territory, which the Queen seemed to not prefer.”

“Who could blame her,” Tim noted. “I wouldn’t like a mysterious ally to park a fleet of ships in my territory when my entire fleet wasn’t there to oppose them if they attacked.”

“True,” Dahnai nodded.

“The captain wasn’t there long enough to hear the compromise that caused the Urumi fleet to split up, nor does he know what caused the Consortium to abandon contact with the Collective, but it does make one thing very clear.”

“The Consortium specifically tried to destroy House Karinne,” Tim concluded. “And they had some pretty detailed intelligence about us to do it.”

“If they’d have jumped their entire fleet, it would have been ugly,” Jason grunted. “But, given that Dahnai can get her fleet here faster than them, they’d have faced more than just us, and I would have welcomed that assistance. So splitting up the fleet to distract Dahnai did make sense. But why did the Consortium try to get the Urumi to do that?”

“Maybe they *wanted* the Urumi’s fleet to get wiped out,” Tim speculated. “Make them easy pickings for either themselves or someone else.”

“That is a curious concept,” Miaari said, as she started pacing back and forth. “Consider. The Consortium enters an alliance with the Urumi, but secretly have no intention of keeping it. They goad them into a war with the government that contains their true target, which is House Karinne, and arm them with weapons and technology they will need to be *effective* in that battle, but not *superior* in that battle. Without that technology, the Urumi are little more than targets of leisure for the Karinne and militarily inferior to the superior numbers of the Imperial naval forces that will oppose them. They attempt to get the Urumi to commit a considerable portion of their resources into the attack, which would be met with heavy resistance. The end result would, naturally, be the loss of a large part of their naval fleet.” She turned around to look out the darkened window, her tail swishing behind her. “After the battle, given the assumption that they were victorious and what we saw in the attack on Karis was the large extent of military Consortium craft which were available to make the attack, the Consortium turns on the Urumi, which have been severely weakened by the battle. They defeat the Urumi, recover the technology they sold to them, then leave them at the mercy of their neighbors, for they will have accomplished their objective.”

“Killing us,” Jason grunted.

“It does have a kind of logic,” Dahnai agreed after thinking a moment. “So, with the Urumi not going by that plan, what does that mean if Miaari is right?”

“That the Consortium is bringing another fleet to attack us, or the Urumi, or both,” Miaari concluded in a grim voice. “Given that we have no contact or knowledge of this Consortium, and they can move their ships through hyperspace in real time, we must assume they are coming from a vast distance, and thus were not available in the previous battle. They had a timetable which was disrupted when we ferreted out their plans and exposed them publicly, which introduced them to the Kimdori in a very rude fashion,” she said with a crooked smile, looking back at them. “As we have no knowledge of them, they must have had no knowledge of us. This created a dilemma for them. I do not believe that the Consortium was *ready* to make this attack,” she explained. “The manner in which the plan was set up hints that they were going to allow the Urumi and the Faey to engage in war, and take time fully plunging both sides into that war, before making their move on Karis. The war over Trillane’s insurrection would have taken time to fully develop, and that would give this Consortium time to complete the movements of their forces and be in a favorable position when the time came to attack Karis. That would explain another issue, actually. It seemed curious that this Consortium, who is technologically superior to the Urumi, was *depending* on them to help them accomplish their objective. If they must move their ships across a vast distance to engage in battle with Karinne, then it is more logical for them to enlist the assistance of a local government that would be willing to enter war with the Imperium, using what resources they have available to them here as best they can.”

Tim picked up where Miaari left off. “So, the Kimdori nose out what they’re doing and expose things, and it totally fucks—ah, excuse my language, your Majesty.”

“I’m not a prissy, Tim,” she grinned. “So, they *fuck up* the Consortium, then what?”

“It forces them to gamble,” he continues. “They decide they have to take their shot at Karinne *now*, because the other governments might interfere and spread the Urumi too thin to be of any use to them. They try to get the Urumi to commit to an all-out attack, which they refuse, so they compromise. The Urumi pin down the Empress by sending a fleet at Draconis, they send a small diversion to Arctus to make it look like they’re gonna pay the Trillanes back for backstabbing them, which gives what Consortium ships are here a shot at Karis without Dahnai moving to help.”

“Well, put that way, it does explain some of the confusing holes we were seeing,” Jason agreed. “But what about the attack on Kellin?”

“That is an issue that still remains uncertain,” Miaari admitted. “I cannot see the value of attacking Prince Kellin over the Empress. We need more information, and we may get some.”

“I contracted with the Denmother to dig as deep as she can,” Dahnai told Jason. “She promised to put a large number of Kimdori on it. I want *answers*.”

“And we will discover them,” Miaari said simply.

“Well, that does sound quite logical,” Dahnai mused, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. “When we look at it the way Miaari explained, it fits together. Jason’s search for his people put the Kimdori in the right place to stumble across the Consortium and their plan, and in what was absolutely fucking brilliant, you expose them *publicly*,” she said, giving Jason a very approving look. “The Alliance and all the others find out what’s going on, and that totally screws the Consortium. They don’t have enough of their own ships here to take Karis on their own, and they were depending on me being bogged down in a war with the Urumi to let them slip by and hit Karis without us being able to do anything about it. But then they have no choice, so they stampede the Urumi into attacking, then backstab them and leave *after* the Urumi launched the fleet and couldn’t call them back, because the Urumi either didn’t trust them or wouldn’t commit their entire fleet to attack Karis.”

“That or they were simply no more use to the Consortium,” Miaari noted, turning around, putting a furry hand on the white band on her front that marked her as a Handmaiden.

“Well, I think we should go with this theory,” Jason said. “It makes much more sense than anything else.”

“I will report our theories to the Denmother,” Miaari nodded.

“That was *your* theory, Miaari,” Dahnai noted. “Make sure you tell her that. She’ll be proud of you.”

“I would not presume to do such a thing,” she said self-effacingly, waving a hand negligently.

Now you see why I love working for her, Tim sent with a grin. *She has quite a mind.*

“Okay, so, now what?” Jason asked.

“We prepare for war,” Miaari stated bluntly. “The Consortium is coming, Jason. They have tried to destroy us, and it would be foolish to believe that they will not try again. And now that they know we are aware of them, they will not be so coy or deceptive the next time.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he sighed, then he leaned back in his chair. “But, we have a major advantage here. When we get the interdicator going, they won’t be able to get anywhere near us.”

“What is that?” Dahnai asked.

“It’s something from my ancestors,” he told her. “It’s a device that prevents any ship from entering a system using hyperspace. When we finish building it and get it online, they won’t get any closer than a light year. And from *that* far away, we’ll see them coming and have plenty of time to get ready.”

“*That’s* why you bought a stargate!” she gasped. “It’ll work even through this interdicator!”

He nodded. “We just have to make sure that the other end of the gate is heavily defended, and we’re golden. The Consortium won’t be able to attack us without a few month’s warning.”

“Jason. Darling. We have *got* to talk about that interdicator,” she said, licking her lips. “If I had one of those in every Imperial system, we’d be fucking *untouchable*.”

“We might discuss it,” Jason answered. “If we can work out some kind of deal that keeps your people away from it, and lets us build and operate it in a secure way so we defend our technology, we might be able to hammer out a deal.”

“You bring me any contract you want,” she declared, “and I’ll *sign it*.”

Miaari’s look showed him that *she* wasn’t to bright on that idea, but Jason figured it was because the Kimdori might have a little trouble keeping an eye on things if they couldn’t move about the Imperium on their own. But, it was a fair trade in Jason’s eyes. He didn’t see much danger in giving Dahnai something *defensive*, that would only protect the Imperium without giving her a

way to use it as a weapon. And it was also a way he could keep a throttle on her. By threatening to turn off the interditors, he could bully her into doing what he wanted. If she decided to declare war on a neighbor, thinking that they couldn't touch her own territory in return, Jason would be there to disabuse her of that notion *very quickly*.

He loved Dahnai, but he wasn't stupid enough to trust her *that* much.

"I'll bring you something," he said mildly. "I have to talk to Myleena first, though, to work out how we could do it."

"Alright, I need to talk to Lorna," Dahnai said. "I need to fill her in and get some advice from her on how ready we'd be if the Consortium widened it to a general war against the entire Imperium."

"It sounds like a good time to take a break," Jason agreed. "It's about lunch time anyway."

"Wanna go to the beach before the fleet gets here?" Dahnai asked. "We still have about five hours or so."

"Sounds good to me," he nodded.

Jason spent lunch sifting through the technical data Miaari put in his gestalt, which was considerable. The tech team had gone into overdrive on analyzing Consortium technology, and what was the biggest tidbit in that was Myleena's report on those brain implants in the insectoids.

They were a combination of communication and mind control.

They allowed those insects an almost telepathic-like ability to communicate, a radio in their heads, but they also could affect the minds into which they were implanted. Odds were, that sense of abject hatred in every mind he touched when he tried to attack them was from that device, hazing over their minds with hate and rage to spur them to fight, even to the point where they would commit suicide in kamikaze attacks when it was clear they'd lost, trying to take the Karinnes with them into death. That was very interesting, but it also showed him that these insects were *naturally* extremely resistant to telepathy. In a way, that was very bad news, because telepathy was the primary weapon of the Faey Imperium.

Surprisingly, the Consortium used *plasma* as a power source, just like the Imperium and many other races, but they had learned how to *broadcast* that plasma power to remote units, without a PPG. Now *that* was new, something either of them had ever seen before, and that was how the implants in the insectoid's brains were powered.

After lunch, they went to the beach. *Everyone* was there as well, making another party of sorts out of it, and Dahnai was almost devilishly happy to join in with the tradition that the private beach of the Grand Duke Karinne was a nude beach. Jason himself partook of that tradition, since he had to admit, he rather liked sitting naked on the beach. Jyslin had really converted him in that regard, for he felt it entirely natural to sit there in his beach chair, where everyone who bothered to look could see all his business. Dahnai planted her chair right by Jason and Jyslin, and wasted no time exhibiting her sculpted perfection to everyone on the beach by shedding her skimpy black bikini and sitting down with a handreader, holding some reports that Lorna had sent to her, so she could go over them while sunbathing.

"You'll like Karis," Jyslin told her with a grin. "The sun here is blue, just like home, so you can have a good bask without burning in half an hour, like on planets with yellow and white stars."

"Good," she nodded as she shifted a bit in her chair. "Too bad the sun here doesn't turn *you* blue," she said, giving Jason an evil smile.

"Thank God for small favors," he said mildly.

Jason saw that Jyslin was right to warn them. After a while, Kellin, who was helping the kids build a sand castle down by the water, got Dahnai into helping out, and it was really interesting to watch her interact with the kids. Dahnai loved kids, and it showed as she bantered with them, smiling and laughing, being a very accessible and interesting adult that was genuinely interested in them. Symone joined them, and they sat there sending to each other while helping, no doubt that promised discussion about Jason. Jason watched them a while, went back to his gestalt, then Jyslin nudged him and pointed.

Symone looked furtively to her left, then to her right. Then she reached out and put her hand on Dahnai's shoulder in a casual way, but then her hand slid down. And it slid down some more, and then a little more, then she slid it over Dahnai's breast. Dahnai made no move that showed she was aware of that contact, but Symone didn't stop. Her hand ghosted slowly down, over Dahnai's muscled stomach, then quite deliberately stroked over Dahnai's trimmed triangle of pubic hair, her fingers slipping down over the crown of Dahnai's pubic bone and disappearing between her legs.

Now *that* was rather brazen. Symone felt Dahnai up right on the beach.

Dahnai didn't jump or jerk or make any outward appearance that Symone had her fingers on her genitals. She just made a single sending, which she deigned to open to Jason as well as Symone. *Either let go of me, or we go back to the house and I let you get it out of your system.*

Symone looked startled, but she licked her lips and glanced around. *You wanna?*

As long as you understand I'm not gay. Don't expect anything in return.

I can live with that. What can I do?

Anything you want that doesn't involve me touching you back.

Can we kiss?

No.

Well, can I kiss you?

Not on the face. Anywhere else is just fine.

Alright. Let's borrow Jayce and Jyslin's room.

And so, Dahnai got up and went back to the house. Symone waited all of thirty seconds, and got up and followed her.

How long do you figure?

I'd give them about half an hour, Jason noted, then he went back to going over the data in his gestalt.

It was actually more like twenty minutes. Dahnai returned and sat in her chair, then picked up her handpanel quite calmly, as if nothing had happened.

Well, that didn't take long, Jyslin sent with a naughty tilt.

It doesn't take long when it's one way, she answered without even the slightest hint of embarrassment. *I can say one thing.*

What?

She needs more practice. I've gotten better head from virgins.

Jyslin exploded into laughter, leaning over Jason and looking at her. *Well, she's still new to being into girls, so just give her time.*

I'm sure you can fix that, Jyslin, Dahnai sent, adding an imagined image of Jyslin allowing Symone to give her oral sex, which made Jyslin blush furiously, her whole face turning dark purple.

Ah, Dahnai, Jyslin sent, looking down.

What?

You're glistening a little, she said, pointing down.

Thanks, she nodded, taking her towel and drying off some moisture from her pubic hair and vulva. I guess I coulda left it, and let everyone think I was getting wet just sitting next to Jayce. You know, bolster his reputation, she sent with a wink at them.

That or make everyone think that you don't wipe after you pee, Jason added dryly.

Jyslin and Dahnai exploded into laughter.

Symone sauntered over with her chair and planted it by Dahnai, then flopped down. *Hi, she sent with deceptive mildness.*

Is it out of your system? Dahnai asked bluntly.

For now, she admitted. You've got a fantastic body, Dahnai. I really liked getting to taste it.

Thank you. I've worked very hard on it.

It shows. Umm, can we do it again later?

Maybe. After you get more practice, she sent, which made Symone flush.

Well, you wanna threesome with me and Jayce sometime?

Dahnai lowered her handpanel and looked at her. *We might do that, she stated. I'm starting to feel a bit left out here, given I'm the other woman and I live on another planet. You guys have been doing all kinds of fun things without me, she sent, looking Jason in the eye and grinning. I'll need to get to know you better first, though, and let Kellin get to know you. Kellin would have to approve if I take up with someone other than Jason, even if it's a threesome with his amu dorai.*

Really? Well, time to fix that, Symone stated, standing up. She went back to where Kellin was with the kids, sat down on her knees beside him, and engaged him in sending.

In mere moments, she had him laughing and pushing at her playfully, then she took a bucket of water and dumped it over his head, which made all the kids squeal in delight.

And that is Symone, Jason sent to Dahnai with mild amusement. She's impossible not to like. You're getting to see her unload both barrels of that charm on Kellin.

He's certainly enjoying being charmed, Dahnai agreed as he splashed a different bucket of water on her, but then she turned and bulled him to the sand, on top of him. Maybe a little too much, she added with a slightly dangerous, jealous undertone when Symone perched herself on top of him, pushing his shoulders down into the sand. The fact that both of them were naked, and Symone was in the right position to almost make it look like they were having intercourse, wasn't lost on Dahnai. No doubt Symone had something rather interesting pressing up against her at that moment. But then she screamed out "Get 'im!," and the kids started running to the sea to fill buckets to pour over Kellin's head while Symone held him down.

Trust me, Symone's not doing anything with Kellin she hasn't done with Vell, Jyslin assured Dahnai.

Those two have done about everything but have sex, Jason laughed.

Kellin struggled under Symone as the kids started inundating him with saltwater, throwing bucket after bucket on both him and Symone, then he laughed and put his hands over his face in surrender. She let him up, touched him on the arm and noted in an open sending he was caked in sand, he noted she was too, and they ran down and jumped into the ocean to clean up.

See? Symone's just getting to know him, and that's her way, Jason remarked. By the time they come out to dry off, Kellin

will think she's his best friend.

That was about the way it went. They swam for a while, then she held his hand as they came out, going right back to the sand castle and sitting down to help the kids finish it. *When she's done charming Kellin out of his last two credits, she'll come and do the same to you,* Jason surmised to the Empress.

I'll see it coming.

That will not matter in any way whatsoever, Jason warned her. *Be ready for it all you want, when she comes for you, you will fall to her.*

That sounds like a bet to me.

It's your money.

By the time they wrapped up on the beach and decided it was about time to get ready for the arrival of the fleet, Kellin had a new best friend, Symone had Dahnai eating out of her hand, and Jason was richer fifty credits.

To say that Admiral Jaenne Meralle was startled was an *understatement*.

When the fleet arrived, nearly a thousand ships of every class, The first transmission they received, before they could even take sensor sweeps of the system to assess its condition, was the Empress. She was clearly already here, having beaten them to the planet by some utterly unknown way, standing side by side with the Grand Duke Karinne and ordering them to hold their position some distance from the planet, *not to use sensors of any kind*, and await further orders. The Admiral complied, naturally, but did request to be allowed to see the Empress in person.

That afternoon was when the real confrontation began. When Jason asked Dahnai to send the fleet back, she refused *vociferously*. Jason could appreciate her concern for him and the house, but she was absolutely dead set against leaving Karis, in her mind, completely undefended and just begging to be attacked. He tried reason, he tried force, he even tried yelling and screaming, but Dahnai would not budge.

After a solid hour of argument, he finally sat her down, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked down into her eyes. *Alright Dahnai, it comes down to this. Do you trust me?* he asked with absolute intensity, staring right into her eyes.

What—

Nothing but yes or no. Look into your heart and soul, Dahnai, then look me in the eyes and answer that question. Do you trust me?

She was silent for a long moment, keeping her eyes lowered, then she looked up at him. *I trust you.*

Then trust me now. Send the fleet back. I promise you, we'll be alright. Can you do that, despite your fear, and trust me to make sure it happens?

I hate you sometimes, she accused, slapping his hands off her shoulders and standing up, keeping her back to him. Then she shook her head, making her bronze hair sway in a very lovely manner, and looked back over her shoulder at him. *I'll do it. But if something happens to Karis and I didn't have my fleet here to stop it, I'm gonna punch you.*

I'll let you punch me all you want, he nodded.

Alright. Jaenne wants to see me in person, and I think that's best. If I give her the order to withdraw over gravband, she might not believe it. Can you arrange for her to come down?

I'll send a dropship for her. Let her know it's coming, and she has to come alone.

I will.

Jaenne Meralle was a very, very tall Faey, only an inch shorter than Dahnai, with jet black hair that was pulled back severely from her face and done up into a braid that trailed down her back. Faey with black hair were *very* rare, and the fact that she was quite lovely probably made her a heartbreaker when she was younger. She was middle-aged as Faey went, but still had a youthful vigor about her. She seemed a bit startled to be brought down to what looked to her to be a neighborhood populated by blue-collar Faey commoners, but the fact that the Empress was standing on the pad to meet her dropship made it clear she was brought to the right place.

"Your Majesty," she said with a sharp salute. "How did you get here before us?"

"Magic," she said with a wink. "I want you to go back to the fleet and send them home."

"How many are we leaving in defense of the planet?"

She glanced at Jason. "None. The Grand Duke convinced me the planet is adequately defended. So go ahead and return to Draconis, where they'll have new orders for you."

"I'm not too happy with this idea, your Majesty," she said bluntly. "This planet has no defenses that we can see, at all. I do *not* want to leave you here without protection."

"This planet is full of surprises, Jaenne," Dahnai told her. "The fact that we're standing here talking on it without our flesh melting off our bones should be a good example."

"We *were* wondering about that," Jaenne said with a slight smile.

"So accept my orders, Admiral. Trust me, I'll be just fine."

She nodded. "Do you want me to return with any orders for command?"

"Actually, there is something you can do," she said, glancing at one of her guards. "Bring me that handpanel Javari," she ordered. The guard bowed and rushed off. "I'm sending you back with a handpanel holding quite a bit of technical data concerning the weapons and equipment the Urumi and the Consortium were using. Take it to Black Ops and they'll get to work on analyzing it."

"I'll deliver it personally, your Majesty," she said with a nod.

"Don't let it out of your sight, Admiral."

"I'll keep it in my bra, your Majesty," she said with a straight face, which made Dahnai laugh.

And just like that, the fleet problem was solved. After Jaenne had possession of the data to take back with her, she returned to her ship, and the entire fleet turned around and jumped back to Makan, a trip that would take them two days.

"You'll probably beat her back to Draconis, Dahnai," Jason noted as they watched her leave.

"No. I'll be here a few more days, hon. There's a few more things I want to see, and besides, I'm enjoying my time here. Would you mind?"

"Not at all," he said immediately.

The next day, during Rann's passing party, she showered him with *sixteen* presents and worked her way into his circle of friends. She circulated with his friends and family and basically wormed her way into their lives, moving from group to group and talking with them in easygoing, casual tones, which made them relax a little after a while. They all were a bit edgy around her, but she calmed them down quickly when it became clear she wasn't trying to drag any secrets out of them. She simply got to know them, that was all, and she made quite a few friendships. She and Vell particularly hit it off very well, since Vell was a scholar and teacher by profession, and Dahnai was a history nut. Vell, Dahnai, and Kellin spent over an hour standing over the punchbowl talking about history, which really aggravated Maya.

Jason rather liked having her around. His friends got to see the woman under the crown, and they saw that it was much more than her body that attracted him to her.

She certainly got *very* personal with them. That night, she decided that Symone had something of an idea, and initiated herself into the idea of sharing with her *amu dorai*. She brought Jason and Kellin to her bed in the guest house, which neither Jason nor Kellin minded. They were very good friends, so the idea of sharing the woman they loved between them at the same time was quite appealing.

He didn't sleep over with them, though. He returned home well after midnight, after they were done, coming back to Jyslin, who was in bed but not asleep, reading some technical manuals Myleena assigned to her. She looked up at him as he sat down in bed and gave him a slight smile. *Well?*

Well what?

Was it better or worse that threesomes with Tim?

More tentative, he answered as he took off his robe and slid into bed with her. *Kellin was nervous, but Dahnai wasn't. Kellin got over it after a while, though. Dahnai knows all his buttons.*

She'd better after five years, she sent impishly.

Yah, true. What's that?

Some of the data on the dark matter weapon. It's pretty weird.

How so?

It seems, well, almost Karinne, she explained, holding it out to her. *Look at this circuit schematic. Does that look familiar?*

Looks like a Tyka Bridge.

That's what Myleena thinks too.

Well, some of this tech does come close to what ours does. Maybe they just figured out the same things the Karinnes did.

Yah, but, well, it's weird.

I can't argue with that.

They were awakened early that morning in a usual way, but not by the usual person. Jason felt someone get into bed, which woke him up. "It's not even five, go back to bed Rann," he grunted, rolling over.

"And I thought you said you were morning people."

Jason sat up and turned on the light with his gestalt, and found Dahnai sitting there, nude, arm over him as she grinned down at them. "Dahnai? What are you doing here?"

“Getting my second wind,” she grinned wantonly, pulling the covers down. “It’s time to try it from the other side,” she told him. “As one of two instead of the center of attention.”

Make her go back to bed, Jyslin ordered from beside him.

Dahnai then cheated. Outrageously. She assaulted Jyslin with detailed and graphic memories she had of the night before, the most debased, debauched, graphic visual and tactile memories Dahnai could dish out. And since Dahnai was actually a very strong telepath, she could put a bandwidth into her sending that only someone of Jyslin’s telepathic calibre could fully absorb and appreciate. It was a very dirty trick, but it *worked*, because Jyslin, like almost all Faey, were susceptible to that kind of graphic telepathic contact getting them sexually aroused. It quite simply *could not* be ignored. Jyslin rolled over and glared murderously at Dahnai, then sighed and laughed helplessly. *That was a cheap shot!*

Well, are you in the mood now? I don’t want to fuck him in your bed and with you in it, with you over there just waiting for us to finish. I want to share him with you.

I will get you for this, woman, Jyslin sent with an ugly tone, but she did throw off the covers and sit up. *And I get him first.*

Fair enough.

Gee, I wonder if someone is going to ask me if I’m in the mood, Jason noted absently.

Your wife and amu dorai are horny. You’re in the mood, Dahnai declared bluntly.

Jason laughed as she dropped down on top of him and kissed him.

After a very fun, if brief, interlude with them, they managed to get done before Rann and Shya barged in, almost expectant, grinning as they rushed in. But they looked crestfallen when they found their mothers and Jason laying in bed, Dahnai on her stomach laying across Jason and Jyslin’s legs, as Jyslin read from a handpanel, Jason played with Dahnai’s hair, and Dahnai kicked one foot back and forth as she traced circles on the sheet with her finger. “Go make sure all your toys are packed, girl,” Dahnai told Shya. “We’re leaving this afternoon.”

“Aww, I wanna stay!” Shya protested.

“I have an empire to run, little lady, and as much fun as I’ve had here, we need to get back. There’s a lot to do,” she told her daughter bluntly.

Ah, so that’s why she was so insistent, Jyslin sent privately to Jason.

It makes sense.

“Aww,” Shya said, stamping her foot.

Jason.

Yeah Dahnai?

Get some rest. I’m not done with you yet. She looked back at him. *After lunch, we give Symone her turn. Once I get that taken care of, it’ll be time for me to go home.*

You’re hanging around just for sex?

No, I’m hanging around to get the same as what my amu dorai gives his other women, she answered. *We may be on opposite sides of the Imperium, but I do love you, Jason. I want what you’ve given Jyslin and Symone. All of it. You threesome with them. I want the same. I want to leave this planet knowing I’m on equal footing with them, that you’ve given me everything you’ve given them.*

Well, that's a good reason, Jyslin sent to him with a slight smile. *She just wants to be included, love. It's hard to be the odd woman out when she knows we live with you, and she only gets you when business brings you her way.*

Hell, why not just have all three of you in bed, he sent, a little flippantly. *That way it's all equal.*

Jyslin and Dahnai looked at each other, then looked at him.

Why do I get the feeling I shouldn't have said that?

Okay, we leave tomorrow morning, Dahnai amended.

Jason groaned. He paid for it, though, when both women hauled off and whacked him with pillows, which Rann and Shya thought was hilarious.

Symone, when she found out, couldn't sit still. Dahnai informed her she'd be coming to a threesome with her and Jason later that day during breakfast, in the same tone Jason might use to ask Vell over to watch football and drink beer. After that, Symone was *glued* to Dahnai. She stayed with her all morning, talking with her, hanging out with her, basically making sure that when Dahnai was ready, she was *there*. One of the few times when she wasn't with Dahnai, she was out on the patio with Jason, as he and Myleena went over some of the curious similarities she'd found between Karinne and Consortium technology.

What's her problem? Myleena sent privately, glancing at Symone, who was fidgeting.

Something personal, he answered.

Dahnai's invite to threesome with you and her?

Who told you about that?

Jyslin. I guess I'm family enough to share family business, she winked.

I'm gonna beat that woman. But yes, that's what it is. Symone got imprinted with Dahnai.

Ah. Not a shock given she's so weak in talent, and you're so strong. So that's where those two went yesterday. Hmm, I didn't know Dahnai is bi.

She's not. She just let Symone have her fun.

I wouldn't do that. The only mouth that's gonna touch my pussy will be a man's, she snorted audibly.

Dahnai said all you have to do is close your eyes and pretend it's a guy.

Yeah, until you reach down and grab a hand full of a woman's hair.

I guess Dahnai's good at pretending. You shoulda heard her when she propositioned Symone. She made it sound like a business arrangement, laying down the rules and telling her she couldn't kiss her on the face and shit like that. I guess to Dahnai, it was just business. Dahnai got all the pleasure, and all Symone got was to give it.

She's the Empress, Jason. She's used to being the one getting and not giving. I have no doubt she has servants back in her palace that go down on her whenever she wants it, and odds are a couple of them are girls.

If you two are done gossiping about me, Symone sent privately to him, a little tartly.

No, I don't think we're done yet, he replied blandly. Sometimes he forgot that Symone could hear private sending, and nobody knew that secret but him, not even Jyslin. It was not his secret to reveal, it was hers. *Eh, I guess if Symone got something*

out of it, though, it wasn't all one-sided, he sent to Myleena. And in a way, it was big of Dahnai to give her that much. She coulda just said no.

That's true, Myleena agreed.

I got plenty out of it yesterday, Symone sent to him after he finished with Myleena. I got to put my mouth on a pussy you've fucked, she sent nastily, trying to get a charge out of him.

Then it was good for both of you, he sent simply.

And when I get you two, I'm gonna put my mouth on that pussy while you fuck it, she added, looking him right in the eyes as she reached down and put her hand in his pants, fondling him.

I'm so glad you're planning this out, he told her dryly. Are you going to hand out a schedule?

Asshole, she jibed, smacking him on the shoulder, but she was grinning.

You'll have to reach in a bit further to reach that, Symone, he told her, quite seriously.

She burst into helpless laughter.

After lunch, Dahnai sent Shya and Rann with Kellin into Karsa, then reached her hand out to Symone. Let's go, she announced.

Hold on, I have to go get our schedule, Symone sent with a wink at Jason.

She led them up to his room, and Symone was out of her shorts and bikini top before Jason even closed the door. "Hurry up, I'm horny," she complained as Dahnai grabbed the tail of the tee shirt she'd bought in Karsa. Symone helped her pull it over her head, then bent down and started working on Dahnai before she could even get her clothes off, her mouth glued to Dahnai's breast, her hands pushing down her pants urgently.

"You're gonna sprain something if you don't calm down a little, Symone," Jason warned as Symone grabbed Dahnai's bare butt with both hands and squeezed. Dahnai tossed her top on the floor and put her hands on Symone's shoulders, but didn't push her away, letting her enjoy herself.

Shut up and get naked, Symone demanded. And I meant it, baby. I want Dahnai to sit on your cock so I can lick her pussy while you fuck her.

Alright, I'm horny now, Dahnai sent ruefully. Trelle's garland, she's dirty, she sent privately to Jason.

You have no idea.

Symone helped her step out of her pants, then walked her back to the bed and pushed her into it. Jason was about to join them, but his panel beeped, and a glance at the screen showed that it was Cybi calling. That was odd, usually Cybi just contacted him. He stepped over and turned it on, and found Cybi's face staring at him through it. [That's a strange way to contact me.]

[I didn't want the Empress to seem like something was amiss. The Scimitar will soon be en route back to Karis. It should be back in five hours, if she remains on schedule. Meya reports that she has news.]

[What news?]

[She did not say. She did say, though, that it was good news.]

[That could be almost anything.]

[Shall I contact her and demand a more detailed account?]

[Uh, Cybi, I don't want Meya coming back with Dahnai here. Can you get in touch with her and tell her she has to wait until tomorrow?]

[I will warn her. Do you wish to tell her?]

[No, I can't. Right now I think I'd get murdered if I tried to leave this room.] he added, glancing over at the bed, where Symone was already getting a head start. Dahnai had told her no kissing her on the face, and wouldn't touch her, but that didn't dissuade Symone in the slightest. She was splayed on top of the Empress, kissing her breasts as her hand rubbed Dahnai's genitals, masturbating her.

[Very well,] Cybi communed, maybe a touch amused.

[Don't start.]

[I would never dream of it.]

After a highly erotic and sexually charged couple of hours, Jason laid in bed with Symone and Dahnai and wondered what Meya's good news was. Well, if it was good news, then she must have found something concerning the fate of the lost crew. They were all long dead by now, after more than a thousand years, but there was always a chance that they had descendents out there somewhere. There *were* both men and women on that ship, since it was a scientific scout vessel. If that wasn't it, perhaps she found where they had gone, and maybe had recovered some technology or devices that were unknown to the new Karinnes.

Anything was possible.

Symone poked him in the ribs. "What?"

I said, we have to invite Dahnai over more often, she repeated.

Sorry, I was thinking about something.

Don't you dare think about business right now, Symone threatened. *You didn't think business when you had her and Jys in bed!*

We barely had any time, Jason said. *You've already had a good hour more than Jyslin had.*

Well, she can get it back tonight, Symone all but purred, reaching over and fondling Dahnai's breast brazenly. *I'm already getting wet at the thought of it.*

Don't look at me, Dahnai warned. *I'm not going to do anything about that for you.*

I think you three are being a little bit ridiculous, he sent churlishly. *I mean, I love you, don't get me wrong, but this idea that you have to all three have me in bed at the same time is silly. Dahnai got what she wanted, she got to be part of everything you and Jys get to do with me. We should leave it at that and be happy with it.*

Why Jason, don't you want us? Dahnai sent in mock surprise.

Push off, woman, he retorted, smacking her shoulder. *You've been wearing me out for days now, and now I get to look forward to the idea of trying to have sex with all three of you one after another. I'm not sure I can make it through that.*

I think we can agree that you don't have to come in all three of us, Dahnai sent with a grin. *You can just take turns fucking us til you come. We can always compete to see which of us gets you off.*

Oooh, we can play “who makes Jason horniest,” Symone sent mischievously. We can kneel down side by side on the bed and he can just go right down the line, or lay him down and take turns sitting on his cock.

Now you’re giving her ideas, Jason accused Dahnai. Giving Symone ideas is bad.

That’s not giving her ideas. Inviting you three and Tim over to my place sometime for a good old fashioned orgy is giving her ideas. I think I could give Kellin free reign to fuck Jyslin and Symone for a night, if they’re interested in him, that is. If not, I’ll take care of it. And I’ll admit, I think Tim is sexy. I wouldn’t mind laying under that hunk of man, not at all.

“Oooooohhhhh,” Symone breathed, her eyes brightening. I like that idea!

You would, Jason told her flatly.

Well, Kellin already knows Jyslin, and I’ve gotten to be pretty good friends with him while he’s been here. Can you ask him, Dahnai?

Sure.

I’m starting to hate you, Dahnai, Jason sent privately to her.

A girl has to get her revenge somehow, and leaving you with a super-horny amu dorai, still flush with new and erotic escapades fresh in her memory, that is gonna be a wild woman for a while is just one of the little ways I get to say goodbye.

Bitch.

I love it when you call me names, she sent dryly, reaching over and patting him on the cheek.

It wasn’t quite as bad as he feared it would be, but he also felt like a piece of meat.

The night with Jyslin and Symone and Dahnai was as erotic as he felt it would be, but they were also somewhat considerate of the fact they’d been working him pretty hard. They passed him around like a toy, and he had to admit, that part was *fantastic*. All three of the women he’d share a bed with in that bed with him at the same time, all within reach, taking turns making love to him in their own unique ways. From Dahnai’s forcefulness to Symone’s vigor to Jyslin’s sultry sensuality, he had it all in one package, and for one night, he was satisfied almost every sexual desire a man could have.

But that was all it was, a single night of satisfying desires, not only his own. Symone was sure to get as much of Dahnai as she could before she left, and she was all over whichever woman wasn’t engaged with Jason. When it was Symone’s turn with him, Dahnai and Jyslin basically rested. Even after Jason was spent and exhausted, dead asleep, Symone went on, performing sex on Dahnai for *hours*, nearly anything she could do to her that didn’t involve Dahnai touching her in return, who was perfectly content to lay there and let her do it for as long as she wanted. When Jyslin churlishly told her to go to sleep, she replied that since Dahnai was going home, she had to get as much Dahnai as she could so she could tide herself over until the promised orgy.

Jason was gonna kill Dahnai for giving her that idea.

In the morning, things went back to the way they were, back to normal. Dahnai and Kellin packed up and prepared to go home, and after a breakfast of pancakes prepared by Ayama, Jason told her it was time to go.

Dahnai broke her own rules, which surprised Jason. When she said goodbye to Symone, she kissed her dead on the lips. And it was *not* chaste. In fact, it was so sensual that after all the goodbyes were said, Symone grabbed Jyslin and Tim and dragged them upstairs urgently.

God, Dahnai was an *evil* woman. She did that on purpose!

Jason took Dahnai home, riding on the *Abarax* once again, and talked business while they were en route. Jason promised to work up a contract about the interditors, and they agreed to share whatever the Karinnes and Black Ops discovered about the Consortium technology, through the Academy. They'd send all their data to the Academy, where they could combine their efforts and work in unison to unlock every secret the technology had to hide. Once they were at Draconis, though, he told her that that was where they would part.

"Aw, come down to the palace, hon."

"No, you won't let me out," he said with a wink.

"Well, you're right about that," she grinned. She stepped up and gave him a long, passionate kiss. "I'll call you soon, okay?"

"Remember," he said, putting a finger on her lips meaningfully.

"Always," she assured him with a gentle smile.

"It was a wonderful experience, Jason," Kellin said, shaking his hand.

"It was nice to have you, Kellin," he said. "I'm sorry if I stole her from you there for a while."

"You made her happy, Jason. How could I *ever* be angry about that?"

"You're a good man, Kellin Merrane."

"Coming from you, that's one hell of a complement, Jason," he smiled.

He picked up Shya and kissed her. "You be good for your mommy," he ordered.

"I'll try," she promised. "And remember, Unca' Jason," she said, putting her finger on his lips.

"That's right," he said around her finger, then putting his finger over her own lips, which made her giggle. "Remember, little lady, what the Kimdori say. They say *a secret unspoken remains a secret*. What you saw, what you did, it must remain a secret. You can't talk to anyone about it, even your own mommy and daddy Kellin, unless they tell you that you may. That's what it means to have a secret. You must lock it in here," he touched her temple, "and in here," he touched her chest, over her heart, "and never give it away."

"I'll keep your secret, Unca' Jason," she promised. "Cause mommy said if I ever said a word, she wouldn't let me marry Ranny."

"Now that's quite a threat," Jason said, giving Dahnai a sly smile.

"It's about the only thing that'll work," Dahnai admitted. "Rann's the only thing I can take away from her."

Dahnai's guards and Raptor pilots climbed into her dropship and the fighters, and she sighed and gave him a second, shorter kiss. "Goodbye, Jason," she told him. "Keep in touch, alright?"

"You have my number now, Dahnai. I'm only a call away."

"I know. Call me when you have that contract ready."

He watched them board their dropship, and sighed a little when the hatch closed. He couldn't deny it. He loved that woman. She was something very, very special.

He returned home and got down to the serious business at hand, not all of it good. He changed into a black suit, Jyslin and Rann put on the white robe of mourning, and they attended the funeral of Captain Travka. Travka was Makati, and they had very specific death rituals. His body was cremated with wooden effigies of his parents, and the ashes were placed on a stand, around which they conducted the funeral. During Makati funerals, people didn't mourn what was lost, they rejoiced that Travka would join his deity, the Earthmother, and no one was allowed to cry. It was still rather somber, especially for Jason, but he put on his best face and did what Travka would have wanted, got up and told jokes and funny stories about him when it was his turn to give a eulogy. Once the funeral was complete, they left the chapel of Trelle, opened the urn, and spread his ashes in the dark soil of an empty flower garden, so his body might nourish the soil and strengthen the ties of nature. Once the ashes were spread, gardeners began to plant flowers.

Jason, his guards, and his family piled into the hovercar and started home after that sober duty, but he was interrupted. "*Jason, Meya has just called in. The Scimitar is in Karis space, and will land at the pier in thirty minutes. She has requested you meet the ship. She has something she wants you to see,*" Cybi's voice came in over the communicator in the car, so Jyslin would also hear.

"Alright. We'll change and meet her there."

The pier was on the far side of the strip from Karsa. It was built, more or less, just so the *Scimitar* could land very close to his house, but it fell into disuse when they returned the scout ship to service doing what it was meant to do. Before that, it was more or less Jason's personal transport. Anymore, the only thing they used the pier for was a boat launch and a place to dive. Jason changed into jeans and a tee and walked out with Jyslin and Rann, with his four guards in attendance, and they saw the sleek ship descend as they were strolling down the beach. It settled up to the end of the pier as Jason and the others started down it, and Meya had the hatch open by the time they got there. "Me ya!" he called as she stepped out. She took his hand, then hugged him warmly. "What is this news that Cybi was talking about?"

She grinned at him. "I'll show you," she said, looking back to the ship. *Come on, Myri.*

Jason looked into the hatch and saw Myri and Zeya, one of the Faey Generations, leading a third person out. When they got to the hatch, Jason got a good look at this third Faey.

He *did not know her.*

She was tall and thin, with burnished gold hair that was thick and tied back by two tiny braids that contained the rest of that thick wealth. Her eyes too were gold, and though she was wearing a Karinne duty uniform, he could see that she was quite burly beneath it, given from the width of her shoulders and the corded nature of her wrists.

"Jason, may we present Aura, Chieftess of the *Karinne*," Meya said, giving him a brilliant smile. "She's waited a *long* time to meet you."

"They *survived!*" Jason gasped. "Well, I'd like to welcome you here, Aura," Jason told her. "Even though I know I don't look it, I'm Grand Duke Jason Karinne."

"Mistress Meya explained the, conditions of your rise, my Duke," she said in archaic, accented Faey, bowing to him. Only Jason's encyclopedic knowledge of the Faey language let him understand her. *Might we speak thusly, your Grace? I find it, difficult, to speak aloud among you. Your accent and use of words is quite strange.*

It's just fine, he answered her, taking her hand. *Do you know who you are and where you came from?*

She nodded. *Our history has been kept. We know we are the descendents of the survivors of the House Karinne, who escaped when the Imperium betrayed them. I was quite amazed to see this, ship, come out of the sky,* she sent in wonder, looking behind her. *It's something out of our history. The devices that our ancestors brought failed long ago, but we survived as best we could.*

I can imagine. Aura, this is my wife, Jyslin, and our son, Rann.

It's an honor, my Lady, Aura said, bowing to Jyslin. *And an honor to meet you, my Lord,* she added, kneeling down and touching Rann on the face gently, sending so Rann could hear her.

“It’s alright, lady, I can hear grown-up sending,” he told her.

Truly? she asked in surprise, looking up to Jason.

He nodded. *Our son is very talented.*

Truly, you are the heir of Karinne, she smiled at him. *It was said that the nobles of our house were of the utmost power in talent.*

Please, come with me. I’d like to talk with you, Aura. Would you like something to eat?

That would be fine, your Grace.

Please, call me Jason. I’m not one for formality.

Jason, she corrected with a smile.

Aura seemed a little overwhelmed when he brought her home. She sat at the dinner table staring at everything around her, and was quite taken with handling the metal silverware. *It was so amazing to fly on the ship. Everything was just as our ancestors wrote,* she mused, picking up the plate Ayama put before her. *It was like stepping into our very history!*

Aura, Jason began as he sat down. *How many are you?*

About a thousand total, she answered. *We live in a large island off the main continent, having fled there when the Gruug discovered us. They think us to be demons or monsters, and they tried to kill us. But they can’t get across the sea to us, they lack the technology, where we could build ships using the skills taught to us by our ancestors. The island supports us, and we survive.*

Wow, Jason breathed. *How did you survive?*

The Firstcomers were skilled in surviving, and they thrived on Exile, she told him.

Exile?

The name of the world, so we would never forget what it was, she explained.

Ah.

They taught our ancestors how to survive, and the lessons passed down to us. After the devices they brought all failed, they taught the ancestors simpler ways, simpler weapons. But they kept everything in books, and it’s the duty of every child to read the books and know where they came from, so we never forget. We thought we were the last of the Karinnes, she told him steadily. *And then that ship comes out of the sky! It caused quite a panic,* she admitted. *But there were pictures of it in the books of the ancestors, so we knew it was from our house. Lady Meya and Lady Myra represented the ship, and explained that they were searching for us. My Duke, do you truly mean to offer us a place in the house?*

Aura, you are Karinnes. *This is your home, and as you said yourself, you live in exile. We will bring you home, if that’s what you want.*

That is what I want, she sent adamantly. *As to others, I don’t know. Some think Exile to be home, but I want to see our history through more than just the books. I want to fly in those wonderful ships,* she sent, wonder and wistfulness shimmering through her thoughts.

Now, Aura, tell him about the others, Meya prompted. “Listen to this, Jason. This makes it all fit.”

The others? Ah, yes. The ancestors wrote of them, my Duke. Before the devices our ancestors brought failed, there were other ships they saw, but they weren’t Karinne ships. So they fled the camp they made when they landed and hid from them,

fearing they were Imperial ships that had come to kill them. But they weren't Imperial, they were something else. The histories say that a group of ancestors were captured by them, and the ones who took them looked like gigantic insects, led by a strange creature made of pure light. They took our ancestors into their ship, looted the camp, and they left and never returned. They even took the small ships the Firstcomers used to get to Exile. After that, our ancestors abandoned the camp and fled far away.

Jason leaned back as Meya beamed at him. Insects, and a being made of light. The insectoids and the energy being.

The Consortium.

The Consortium had captured Karinnes. That *did* make it fit. That was why Consortium technology looked so...familiar. They captured Karinne technology, including the dropships they'd used to get to the planet, then they took it apart, learned how it worked. Oh, he was fairly certain that they didn't get *all* their technology from the Karinnes, but it would have been enough for them to build on what they learned and develop similar technology to the Karinnes. But it fit. It did truly fit.

That was how they knew about Karis. Because they had Firstcomer prisoners.

That was why their technology seemed similar in some ways. They adapted what they took from Exile and expanded on it.

That might even be why the Consortium attacked, to capture more Karinne technology.

And when Jason built the Academy and announced to the galaxy that the Karinnes were back, it took a few years for it to spread far enough for the Consortium to hear, since the nebula where the scout ship had been hidden for all those years was *literally* halfway across the galaxy. But when they did, they came to either destroy House Karinne or take what they didn't get the first time.

Jason looked Meya in the eyes, and she winked at him. *I'm glad you told us to stay out there, Jayce. We found them two days ago. If we'd have come home when we wanted to, we'd have missed them completely.*

Aura, he sent with vast respect, *you just answered several very nagging questions. We were attacked by those others just days ago, but we defeated them and drove them away.*

Truly?

He nodded.

We couldn't figure out where they came from or how they knew about us. They seemed to know more than they could ever learn just by watching. Ayama, could you have Miaari come?

I'll call her, your Grace.

Surin brought spaghetti and steamed *kaba* nuts, putting a plate down in place of the one he took from in front of Aura, then handing the other to Jason. She watched Jason eat, then picked up her fork and mimicked him gracefully enough to not make a mess. Her eyes widened when she took her first bite, and then slurped up a stray noodle. *This is incredible, what is it called?*

Spaghetti.

I see you have kaba nuts too, she noted. *Our ancestors brought them with us.*

Miaari joined them when they were about halfway through dinner, as Jason listened as Aura describe her people. They lived what he might call an 1800's technological existence. They were actually capable of much more, but they lacked the raw materials to produce more complicated technology. They could make gunpowder, but lacked iron ore to smelt steel to make guns. They could generate electricity, and in fact used it using hand-stranded silver wire made from substantial silver deposits on their island... but they had a limited use for it. They used electricity for lights, but little else, for they lacked rubber and other compounds to build more complicated devices. They were quite ingenious with what they *could* make or build, though. Since they could make gunpowder but couldn't make firearms, they had adapted by making explosive arrowheads and sling stones, and they were quite adept and making various kinds of explosives and medicines. Their knowledge of chemistry, biology, and physics were quite

profound, thanks to the books they retained, and they used those skills to adapt to what resources they had available to thrive on their island home.

Miaari put her hand on his neck, and they shared. Her eyes widened when she discovered what Aura told Jason, and she nodded knowingly. Aura was staring at Miaari in shock. *She is a cousin?* she asked in surprise.

She's a Kimdori. If that's a cousin, then yes.

Extraordinary! she sent with excitement. "I am honored beyond words to meet one of our cousins, Handmaiden," she said in horribly accented Kimdori.

"The honor is mine, Lady Aura," Miaari said simply, reaching out and putting her hand on Aura's neck. "I am Miaari. I serve the Grand Duke by being the emissary between House Karinne and my people. You have quite a knowledge of my people, my Lady, to speak our language and know that I am a Handmaiden."

"Knowledge of our esteemed cousins was not only a duty, but a privilege to learn," she said with a nod.

Is she a Generation? Jyslin asked. *You're the only one Miaari calls "cousin."*

No, but most Karinnes called the Kimdori "cousin" as a matter of tradition, Jason answered. *According to Cybi's records, there were no Generations on that ship. These are all descendents of the unaltered members of the house, and the commoners that manned the ship. Remember, love, most nobles in Karinne knew about the Generations program, and back before they were destroyed, they held the Kimdori in very high respect.* Jason had to avoid certain fundamental truths, of which even Jyslin was not aware. The connection between the Kimdori and the Generations was still the greatest of secrets. Only Generations knew that secret.

"Jason has imparted to me that your ancestors encountered those who attacked us here, long ago. This is vital information that brings much into clearer view, Lady Aura. I thank you for bringing it to us."

"I am happy to help, cousin," she said with a flush.

"I will inform the Denmother of this immediately," she announced, and she touched Jason on the neck briefly before rushing out.

Now, on to a much more important matter, Jason sent lightly.

What is that, your Grace?

Dessert. If you liked the spaghetti I think you're gonna love apple pie.

Introducing Aura to Cybi was *very* interesting. For one, it was the first time he got to see Rahne since she came to Karis, for Rahne was still under Cybi's tutelage, being telepathically educated and prepared to become a *normal* member of Karis society. They wouldn't keep Rahne with his family during the battle, Aya had put her foot down over that potential security risk, but once the battle was over, she was brought back from the shelter in Karsa in which they'd put her. He was escorted by his usual guards, Aya, Ryn, Shen, and Suri, with Aura padding along with them with both curiosity and nervousness tinging her thoughts, when Rahne came out of the main doors to Cybi's core. Jason took her hands fondly, then kissed her on the cheek. *Aura, I'd like to introduce Rahne. She's new to Karis too. She's been taking instruction from Cybi because she lost her memory.*

Lady Rahne, Aura sent with a bow.

Dinna' call me Lady, if ye'd please, she sent, her brogue maintaining even through her thought. *Where did they bring you from?*

Exile, she answered.

Aura is from a group of Karinnes we didn't know about, who hid after the war, Jason explained. *Meya and Myra found*

them.

Well, welcome home, Aura, Rahne told her. Go on in, Cybi's waiting to see ye.

Inside, the holographic projection of Cybi hovered in the center of the circular room, by the crystal spire that was her core. She floated towards Aura as she entered, but Aura dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "The living computer!" she gasped aloud. "I greet you, most honored, and bid welcome to you from the Exiled."

"Stand, please," Cybi asked, which Aura obeyed. *"I am pleased beyond measure to see you, Aura Karinne. To know that there were more Karinnes hidden in the galaxy brings me hope that soon the house will be complete once more."* She ghosted up to her and put her golden holographic hands on each side of Aura Karinne's face. Aura looked about ready to jump out of her skin. *"I beg of you, tell me how many more are there?"*

"Just over one thousand," she answered.

"Jason, we must bring them home," she told him.

"I'll have the *Abarax* go pick them up," he promised. "He's big enough to carry a thousand people. As soon as we work things out, and Aura feels ready for another ride in a ship, we'll go."

"Can we go *now*?" she asked excitedly.

Jason laughed. "Not quite right *now*," he said. "Let's sit down and work out how we're going to do this, Aura. After all, once we get them back home, where do we put them? What do we do with them?"

She looked about to open her mouth, then laughed and nodded. "Yes, we must be *ready*, so all their questions can be answered," she agreed.

They did that, right there in the core room. Using a holographic map of the southern half of the continent, they decided what to do. There was a newly built town about sixty miles north of Karsa that hadn't been populated yet, one of the construction projects the Kimdori left behind. It was big enough to hold a thousand people, easily, empty houses that were sealed in bioplas, just waiting for when the Karinne Land Authority issued land grants to new immigrants to take up residence. The town was already set up with utilities and ready to go.

That was where they would bring the exiled Karinnes, along with quite a few people who would volunteer to help teach them about modern Karinne technology. They had historical knowledge of the technology they used to possess, but no practical skill with it.

"It's all set up, Aura. I'll arrange to have supplies brought in for your people and get some volunteers in to help you adapt to living here."

"Will you teach me to fly a ship?" she asked, her voice filled with wonder.

"You're asking the right person," Cybi smile. *"The Grand Duke is quite an expert in flying ships. There is nothing that flies that he cannot operate."*

Jason laughed. "I'd be happy to teach you, Aura. Personally. There's some other things you'll need to learn first, but when you're ready, I'll be there for you."

I believe I will love coming home, Aura sent with a beautiful smile.

Miaari entered the core room, and to his surprise, Zaa was with her. Jason stood respectfully, then bowed to the Denmother. Aura, not sure what was going on, also bowed, though she wasn't quite sure who she was bowing to, or why. "Denmother," Jason said, holding his hands out to her.

"Cousin, is this her?" she asked, taking his hands and looking at Aura.

“Denmother, this is Aura, Chieftess of the Karinnes in exile,” Jason introduced.

“Child, we have searched for you for a thousand years,” Zaa said, putting her hand on the neck of the woman, whose face was awed. “It relieves me beyond measure that we have found you. Where were they?” she asked Cybi.

Cybi motioned to her right, where a map of the galaxy appeared. “*The Scimitar reports that they were found here,*” she said as a yellow blip appeared on the very edge of the the galaxy, about halfway around from Earth to the left as they looked at it. The image zoomed in, showing a six planet system orbiting a yellow star. The second planet started to flash, then zoomed in again to show an island off the southeast coast of a large irregular continent, about half the size of the Japanese island of Kyushu from the look of it.”

“Ah, that is quite a hyperspace jump from the nebula where the *Scimitar* was hidden. We had not yet expanded our search area to include that sector.”

“That’s probably why Meya found them. They were working off the charts you gave us of what you’d explored. They just kept going.”

“Have you started making arrangements for them to return?”

Jason nodded. “We have a plan.”

“Good. Jason, my children have cracked the Urumi security. We now have a complete view of the Consortium. Handmaiden Miaari’s theories were correct in assuming they were from a great distance. They are from *Andromeda*.”

“Andromeda? Another *galaxy*?” Jason gasped. “They jumped hyperspace across *galaxies*? How did they survive it?”

“It is slightly more than that. According to what the Urumi learned from them, they are from Andromeda, but long ago they sent a colonizing force to this galaxy, but returned home in failure. Judging from what Handmaiden has told me, I would assume that that colonizing force stumbled across *them*,” she said, pointing at Aura, “then they returned to Andromeda with that technology to study it, possibly fearing they had come to a galaxy where the inhabitants were vastly more advanced than them. When word spread through the galaxy that the Karinnes returned, somehow the Consortium learned of it, and decided to return to our galaxy to attempt to capture the rest of the Karinne secrets. They spoke of one secret in particular, Jason,” she said intensely, then she reached up and put her hand on her neck. Through Kimdori sharing, she imparted to him exactly what they were after.

The Generations Program.

Jason felt his heart sink. The Consortium had learned of the Program through the Karinnes they captured, and now the Urumi knew at least *something* about it. Zaa imparted to him that the Consortium told the Urumi that the Karinnes had genetically engineered their telepathic power, and had built computers that were telepathically aware, and the Consortium wanted those secrets.

The Karinnes had bridged the gap between man and machine, and they were the only ones to ever accomplish it. But now there were others out in the galaxy that knew Karinne’s greatest secret, and they wanted that secret for themselves. Jason had to accept what he’d been dreading for five years at that point.

They would be coming. They would be coming for that secret.

“I was to present this to you when we had a little more information and some corroboration, but when Handmaiden Miaari told me of this discovery, I had to come see her in person. And since we are together, I felt giving you at least what we knew would be prudent. There will be more refined information coming, as my children comb through the Urumi computer network to seek out every truth.”

“I, thank you, Denmother,” he said grimly. He looked at Cybi, and she had a concerned look on her face when he commended Zaa’s discovery to her.

Now more than ever, getting that interdictor built was *critical*. With the interdictor up, the only way in or out would be a

stargate, which they could turn off to make the system only reachable by a year-long flight through space at sub-light speed...and that was if they could move at the speed of light.

He knew then. Karis had to be completely self sufficient. They had to be able to survive as if they were the last life in the universe, where they needed no materials or assistance from the outside. If it came to it, Karis would have to be completely separated from the rest of the universe to protect its secrets.

They had a lot of work to do.

He gave Zaa a long, serious look, and she nodded. "The only mystery left is why they tried to kill Kellin instead of Dahnai."

"It was ordered by the Consortium," Zaa answered. "For some reason, they wanted to keep Dahnai on the throne. My best guess is they wanted discord between you and Dahnai, but wanted to keep Dahnai in power. The why of it is still a mystery, but it will present itself in time."

Rahne flushed and looked away. She knew that *she* was to be the assassin.

"It is not your fault, my child," Zaa told her gently, putting her hand on her shoulder. "What you were no longer matters. You now get to choose who you *want* to be. And if that is not who you want to be, walk away from the past and never look back."

Rahne nodded, looking at Jason.

[Jason, that is a matter for a later time,] Cybi told him. [We will worry about it later. For now, rejoice that the long-lost children of the house have been recovered. If you brood, Aura will believe you are not happy to see her. Don't give her that impression.]

He gave her a grateful nod. She was right. He could worry later. Right now was a time to celebrate.

"Aura," he said. "How do you think your people will like living here?"

"I think that many will love it, some will tolerate it, some will wish for what they left behind, and some will not come with us."

"Well, now that we know where they are, we can make sure we take care of them," Jason assured her. "Even if they want to stay on Exile, we'll make sure they're just fine."

"That would pleasure me, your Grace."

"That would *please* you," he corrected as Rahne giggled. "The way you said it would be, ah, rather personal."

She blushed a rather pleasing shade of violet. "I apologize. Your accent is so strange, but I would speak so as not to offend our cousins."

"That is alright, child," Zaa said with a slight smile.

Jason returned with Aura and Rahne to his house, and Aura spent the afternoon meeting his friends and family. Zaa attended, sitting at the kitchen table with Miaari hovering near her, taking turns putting Jason's children on her lap and talking with them, one by one. Aura seemed quite overwhelmed by it all, but she also seemed quite happy to be there, and excited about the thought that her people would soon be coming home.

Meya and Myra sidled up and sat down on either side of him, leaning on the table, staring at him from both sides. He glanced at each of them. *What?*

We leave for a month, and boy, have you been a naughty boy, Myra sent with a mean smile. Jys and Symone and Empress Dahnai, all at the same time? We want details. Lots and lots of details.

Life can often be full of bitter disappointments.

Oh, we already got Symone's side of it. We want yours, Meya told him.

I'm gonna strangle that girl.

Push off, Jason. We'll get what we're after, it's just a matter of time. Then they leaned in and kissed him, one on each cheek, which made Jason laugh helplessly.

God help me, I've missed you two.

You better miss us, Myra sent teasingly. *But we need your help.*

With what?

While we were gone, Kumi broke into our houses and filled them with crash foam. From the basement to the attic.

She didn't!

Yeah, it's a fucking mess. So, it's about time for revenge.

Revenge, you say? Jason grinned, looking at the twins in turn. *It's gonna take some doing to top the last one.*

Oh, we'll think of something, Meya winked. *You in?*

When it comes to making Kumi scream, I'm always in.

Good.

Jason put Aura up in the guest house, showing her around, and then he gave her an interface. *This is—*

I know what these are, your Grace, she told him, putting it on her face. *They're part of the histories we read. Does it truly work as our ancestors wrote?*

Just think to the interface what you want something to do, and it tells the machine to do it. Like so. I'll turn off the lights. The lights turned off, plunging them into darkness. *Now you turn them on.*

Lights, she sent, but she must have put something to the interface, for the lights did wink back on.

You don't have to send out loud of course, just thinking at the interface does the tricks.

It is truly right out of our history! she sent in wonder, then she impulsively leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. *Thank you, your Grace! May I keep it?*

It's all yours. That interface works everything, Aura. The lights will turn on and off, and when you need water from the kitchen, the faucet will give it to you, however hot or cold you want. And when you need to go to the bathroom, it even flushes the toilet.

That took some getting used to, she admitted. *I wasn't on the ship long enough to do anything, so when I finally had to relieve myself, it was here. Your wife was kind enough to help me.*

I had Ayama bring you some clothes, they should be folded on the bed. There's soap and shampoo in the bathroom for you.

What are those?

He explained what those were, then explained how the shower worked to her. *Now if you need anything, just send. The guards will be listening for you, and they'll come and help if you ask them.*

If I get hungry, where do I go?

Come to my house. If Ayama's not awake, the guards will help you make something to eat. Now I wake up early, so expect to be up and about not long after sunrise. We're going to go get your people tomorrow.

I can't wait.

Me either.

Goodnight, my Duke.

Goodnight, Aura. Sleep well.

Jason was indeed up with the sun, which really disappointed Rann. When he came bounding into the room, Jyslin was still asleep, but Jason was sitting at his desk, on his panel, sending Dahnai a message that the interdicator contract would be delayed a few days because of unexpected house business that came up.

The interdicator...he wouldn't feel safe until it was online. The stargate they bought was now in orbit around the planet, and he had a crew to operate and maintain it already in place. The gate on the other side was already in place, and the two gates were now linked up, but it wasn't ready for traffic yet. The quasar was a high-radiation area, and it was going to take some extensive preparation to get it ready so humans and Faey, and about anyone not Jakkan or Kimdori, could jump in without getting fried. That radiation was both a danger and blessing, for the quasar's high radiation and intense gravometric field would hide the gate from any long-range sensor, protecting the back door into the Karis system once the interdicator was online. There was a huge fleet of Kimdori ships swarming all over the Karis system, patrolling in readiness in case another Consortium fleet appeared to attack, and until his own fleet was repaired and the interdicator was online, they were going to depend on them.

Even if the Consortium *did* appear, they'd find a fleet of Kimdori warships waiting for them, ships that were being armed with *Karinne* technology. Jason had ordered the weapons on the orbital platforms taken off and armed on Kimdori ships, so they would have a powerful edge if the Consortium attacked. It did not surprise him at all that they had the plans and ability to build *Karinne* weapons, but they did not, *because they had made an oath not to do so*. That proved their amazing discipline and adherence to their promises, that they would not break their oath to build weapons that may make a decisive difference in battle, just as it amazed him that they hadn't built biogenic computers to replace their failing biogenic parts after *Karinne* was destroyed. All because they gave their word.

It sometimes surprised him that the Kimdori kept that fleet, because the Kimdori had never been in war with anyone, *ever*. Their oaths forbade it. Even back when Jason had first taken the house, the Kimdori would only man his ships under the direct orders of a non-Kimdori, so they maintained their strict oaths not to initiate war. But they did, Zaa confided, keep a fleet of about one thousand ships, where they basically stayed in the home system and protected it in case someone tried to invade. That was all they did. Virtually that entire fleet was protecting Karis now, though. That was all they were allowed to do, for their oaths didn't permit them to get involved with other races in such a manner. The only reason they were here and may engage in war with the Consortium was because Jason was *related* to them, and he had lost his ability to protect himself. They had no choice but to defend him now, to prevent the house of *Karinne* from being destroyed a second time. They were defending their own, and that allowed them to break their oaths of non-aggression.

It was looking good, but still, he wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until that interdicator was online. Then he'd build more and install them in Imperium systems, to protect Dahnai from a Consortium attack. They had an interest in her as well, and now he knew why.

If they knew about the Generations program, then they knew they needed *Faey* or *humans* to serve as the link between man and machine. And the only place one could find *Faey* or humans in the universe were in the Imperium.

The Consortium would have designs on the Imperium as well as on Karis. Karis, they wanted to conquer, but the Imperium, they wanted to *control*. That could very well be why they tried to kill Kellin, a step in their plan to somehow gain control of Dahnai and bring the Imperium under their dominion.

He'd have to tighten security around Earth. Earth couldn't have an interdicator because of the Academy, but the Consortium might decide to try to engineer humans to be Generations. Humans and Faey were virtually identical, with only very minor differences in their DNA, and Jason and Rahne *proved* that humans could indeed be Generations.

No. Wait. They had sent *Rahne* to kill Kellin. Could Rahne be *engineered*? An artificial Generation?

No, no, no. If the Consortium could indeed engineer Generations from scratch, then *they would never have allowed the Urumi to send the humans they had back to the Trillanes*.

Yes. That was true. So the Consortium needed *Faey*.

So...if that was true, then did the Consortium even *know* that they had held a Generation in their hands, and let her slip through their fingers? After all, there was no way to distinguish a Generation from a normal telepath without a DNA scan, and *only if you knew what to look for*. And the Karinnes they abducted from the Exiled were *not* Generations. They had no way to know what to look for. They knew what they needed, but they needed more to know how to find them, or how to engineer them. That was why they wanted the Generation Program data that was on Karis.

Yes, that seemed logical. The Consortium wanted the Generations, and in the mother of all ironies, they had *had* one...and let her slip away without ever knowing exactly what they had.

He realized it then, it hit him like a hammer. The Consortium wanted the secrets of the Generations. They had exiled Karinnes, who would know about the CBIMs. They knew exactly where to go, exactly what to do.

They didn't attack Karis to kill Jason.

They tried to capture *Cybi*.

That was just another reason to make Karis impregnable. *Cybi* was the *soul* of House Karinne, and he would do *anything* to protect her. She mattered more than everyone. His friends, his family, even himself. *Cybi* was the most important thing on Karis, and he would defend her to the death, with his last breath, if he had to.

"You need to go get dressed, kiddo," Jason told his son. "You're going to spend today with Maya."

"Aww, I wanna go with you!" he complained.

"Sorry, kiddo. I had to twist Aya's arm to get to go myself. But you won't be alone. Mom will be with you."

"So you're gonna go bring back Miss Aura's people?"

He nodded, glancing at the clock. "In fact, I need to get dressed too. We're leaving in like half an hour, and it takes me a good ten to get my armor on."

He got up and put his Crusader armor on, then woke Jyslin up with a kiss. *I'm going to go, love. Take care.*

Be careful, love.

I'll have my babysitters with me. They'll keep me out of trouble.

They better, she grinned.

After a few english muffins with Aura and the twins, they gathered up their guards and walked out to the landing pad. Aura

looked excited at the idea of flying in ships again, and Aya marched 16 guards into the dropship in front of them. She was taking a large contingent, because they were going into unknown and possibly dangerous territory.

“We are going to fly,” Aura said aloud, putting her hands to her chest. She was wearing a black tee shirt and blue jeans, what Ayama had laid out for her, and she looked completely *normal*, like any other Karinne woman on the planet.

Which was a wonderful thought.

They had a lot of work ahead. The Exiled needed to be integrated into Karinne society, and they had to shore up their defenses in the face of the threat of a government in *another galaxy*, but they would make it. Jason had every faith in his people and their resolve.

Come what may, they’d stand strong.

Let’s go get our people, Jason said. It’s time for them to come home.

Amen.

*And thus ends the story
of the Insurrection.*

*In the next short story,
Unification, the
House Karinne brings
the Exiled descendents of the
house home, discovers that there
can be growing pains in such
a combining of cultures, and
prepares both itself and
the Imperium for the threat
of the Consortium.*

They are coming.

And, as always, there will

be other stories to tell.

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